

As part of its Reform and Renewal programme, which was debated in the General Synod in February, the Church of England has today published a report and launched a consultation on proposals to improve the support for its 16,000 church buildings.

The report comes from the Church Buildings review group, which was chaired by the Bishop of Worcester, the Rt Revd Dr John Inge. It constitutes the first attempt in many years to undertake a comprehensive review of the Church of England's stewardship of its church buildings and includes a wide range of statistics, a substantial theological reflection and a survey of various initiatives being taken in individual dioceses. The report goes on to identify a number of principles that should shape the Church's approach and makes some specific recommendations.

The review notes that more than three quarters of the Church of England's churches are listed, and the Church of England is responsible for nearly half of the grade I listed buildings in England. More than half of churches are in rural areas (where 17% of the population lives) and more than 90% of these are listed.

Welcoming the opening of the consultation, Bishop John said:

"Our 16,000 church buildings are a visible sign of ongoing Christian faith in communities throughout England as well as being an unparalleled part of our country's heritage. This report looks at how we can best support the thousands of local volunteers who care deeply for and about churches and offer wonderful service to their communities using their churches.

"We believe that - apart from growing the church - there is no single solution to the challenges posed by our extensive responsibility for part of the nation's heritage. We hope therefore that this work will be a catalyst for discussion about how churches can be better cared for and used for the common good."

A copy of the six principles recommended by the group and the recommendations are available below. The consultation period runs until Friday 29 January and will include a debate at the first meeting of the new General Synod in November.

Notes

[Read the report](#)

Principles

- For so long as a building has a contribution to make to the mission of the Church of England and remains open for worship, the legal responsibility for it should normally remain at parish level, and where that is not possible, at diocesan level. Local ownership- in every sense of the word- is generally to be preferred to other alternatives, not least because it will continue to facilitate wider community support for what is often the most significant historical building in the locality.
- What is understood by 'open for worship' has evolved over time depending on local contexts and will need to evolve further for some buildings over the coming years. Legislation needs to facilitate this.
- More generally, the overall legislative framework governing the use and management of church buildings needs to be simpler, less prescriptive and less burdensome for laity and clergy. There needs to be more flexibility to reflect the wide diversity of local situations.
- Dioceses need to integrate thinking about their church buildings with their mission and ministry planning. Regular diocesan strategic reviews, taking account of diocesan and deanery plans, mission action plans and parish audits are important for ensuring that buildings issues are given their proper weight- neither dominating nor being overlooked or regarded as a specialist subject.
- Over the centuries it has never been either possible or desirable to retain all church buildings. There have always been and will continue to be circumstances where closure is the right option. In those cases the process needs to be managed sensitively but efficiently, with more focused effort than now on seeking alternative uses.
- The work undertaken nationally to support parishes and dioceses in their stewardship of buildings needs to be reshaped at member and staff level to provide a sharper focus, pool expertise and facilitate greater strategic thinking.

Recommendations

1. Church and Government representatives should explore ways in which more assured financial support for listed cathedrals and church buildings can be provided for in the long term. (Paragraphs 46-48 and 125-128).
2. In order to facilitate new, creative models of managing and caring for buildings and free up clergy and laity for mission and ministry the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure 1956 should be amended to enable a PCC - with diocesan consent - to formally transfer its care

and maintenance liability to another body. (Paragraphs 129-136).

3. Guidance on legal models relating to the use of open church buildings should be more widely disseminated in order to promote good practice in enabling such wider use. (Paragraph 137-140 and Appendix 3).
4. The next phase of the Simplification Agenda, in looking to reduce 'red tape' affecting parish and benefice structure and organisation, should, as proposed, review governance requirements with a view to relieving pressures on clergy and laity and freeing up energy and resources for mission. (Paragraphs 141-146).
5. The Simplification Group's recommendation to amend Canon B 14A to facilitate 'Festival Churches', while proposing further work on their role and how mission and evangelism are developed in the surrounding communities, should be implemented. Additionally, the Church Buildings Council should work with dioceses pioneering this concept to identify and promote good practice in caring for such buildings. A grouping such as an Association of Festival Churches may also offer a beneficial means of supporting such initiatives. (Paragraphs 147-152).
6. Regular diocesan church building reviews or audits should be incorporated into each diocese's vision and strategy, as well as forming an integral part of deanery Mission Action Planning. Dioceses need to see the strategic importance of investment to address buildings issues, drawing in as much outside help as can be secured. (Paragraphs 153-156).
7. While closed church buildings should continue to vest in Diocesan Boards of Finance until their future is settled, any Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee should be able to transfer all of their use-seeking functions for closed churches to the Church Commissioners, with the latter's consent. (Paragraphs 157-171).
8. Staff in Church House involved in all aspects of church buildings including cathedrals and chancels should be brought together to form a single staff team, with the relevant staff (excluding those working regionally) based in one location within Church House. (Paragraphs 172-188).
9. A new statutory Commission (perhaps entitled the Church Buildings Commission for England) should be established to take an oversight of the Church of England's stewardship of its church buildings and enable a more strategic view to be taken of priorities and resource allocation. This would replace the present Church Buildings Council including its Statutory Advisory Committee, and the Church Commissioners' Church Buildings (Uses and Disposals) Committee. While no changes in the responsibilities of the Church Commissioners in relation to church buildings issues are proposed, the new body, for some purposes, would act as a committee of the Commissioners. (Paragraphs 183-203).
10. The current powers and responsibilities of the Churches Conservation Trust work well and should not be changed. (Paragraphs 204-207).

The consultation period is now open and will close on the Friday 29th January 2016 at 5pm. Comments should be sent to

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The church buildings review was set up jointly by the Archbishops' Council and Church Commissioners and carried out as part of the *Optimizing the role of the NCIs*, which made recommendations about the ways in which the National Church Institutions (NCIs) can be more effective.

The Church Buildings Review Group was made up of the following members:

- The Rt Revd John Inge, Bishop of Worcester (lead bishop for cathedrals and church buildings) (Chair)
- The Rt Hon Sir Tony Baldry (Church Buildings Council Chair; former Second Church Estates Commissioner)
- James Halsall (DAC Secretary for the Diocese of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich)
- The Ven Christine Hardman (former Archbishops' Council member and Bishop-designate of Newcastle)
- Andrew Mackie (Third Church Estates Commissioner; Chair of Pastoral and Church Buildings (Uses and Disposals) Committees)
- Jennie Page CBE (Vice Chair of the Cathedrals Fabric Commission)
- Ian Watmore (Church Commissioner and member of the Church Buildings (Uses and Disposals) Committee).

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