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Changing liturgical practices, and the diversifying uses of cathedral buildings, may make a cathedral Chapter want to make changes to how their cathedral is furnished.

We can help you weigh your options.

Download our guidance

- [Liturgical Furnishings in English Cathedrals](#)



Introduction

Fundamental Issues

Decisions as to whether existing liturgical furnishings should be retained, relocated, stored or disposed-of revolve around two principal issues.

The first of these is how changes in liturgical needs and thinking impact upon the use of the cathedral as a sacred space. The other is the heritage significance of the objects concerned and of their wider setting.

The future of objects retired from use must also be considered: methods of storage, accessibility for future reuse, and options for disposal all have conservation and financial implications.

In planning changes to liturgical furnishings, a Chapter should consider the implications for the entire building. The reconfiguration and siting of items of furniture and liturgical foci should always be sensitive to the architectural lines and character of the building.

Proposals affecting liturgical furnishings should always be developed in the context of the cathedral's [Liturgical Plan](#) and if no such plan exists then one should be produced as a necessary precursor to any reordering proposal.

Making sure all your policies and plans are consistent

Any proposals for change should have robust justification and be informed by a detailed understanding of the significance of the objects or fabric affected, underpinned by the following documents:

- Liturgical plan
- Cathedral inventory
- [Conservation management plan](#)
- Access audit
- Visitor engagement plan
- Arts policy

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A framework for decision-making

Shifting styles of worship

Ways of worship come and go. In twenty or fifty years' time our successors might wish to reverse not only the additions, but also the removals or relocations, of pieces of liturgical furniture that we have made within our cathedrals. As we consider changes to meet our current needs, we must therefore take care not to make changes that would unreasonably preclude either new developments or the reinstatement of older arrangements.

The font and the altar should be visible foci of the liturgical action. Large cathedrals with multiple chapels may well contain more than one font, but it may be confusing to have two fonts within a single liturgical space such as the nave. Similarly, if an altar in a cathedral is to be moved or replaced then it is not liturgically justifiable to retain two altars within the same liturgical space.

Some cathedrals have seen radical changes, with almost all of the furniture being cleared. Such proposals must be weighed carefully: a sweeping reordering is not an easy option for the disposal of unwanted furniture; neither, though, is an installation of enduring value solely because it is historical.

Visitor interpretation is an increasingly relevant consideration for cathedrals as they embrace the different ways in which people encounter and experience their buildings. There may sometimes be a tension between the arrangement of furnishings for directly liturgical purposes and the presentation of a cathedral in the way that may have the greatest appeal for tourist visitors.

The significance of specific items of furniture

Changes to liturgical furnishings must be considered in the context of a robust and objective assessment of their significance. Criteria might include:

- The architectural and aesthetic significance of a piece of furniture or set of furnishings. Items might be of higher significance if they formed part of a significant phase of development, had a significant designer, or display a high quality of materials or finish. The impact of removing, relocating or replacing an object upon the wider architectural character of a cathedral should not be overlooked.
- The historical significance of an item in the context of its cathedral and local area, and possibly beyond. The location of an item of furniture may help to indicate how the building would have been used in the past or to explain the location of other nearby features (for instance, a font beside a window depicting baptism). An item may be associated with a notable individual or event.
- The communal value of an item of furniture or group of furnishings, including their significance to local and individual memory and identity. The communal value of an item may include its impact upon the worshipping life of the cathedral – which may not always be positive.

Advice on significance may be sought from your [Fabric Advisory Committee](#), the [Cathedrals Fabric Commission](#), [Historic England](#), and the [national amenity societies](#). In some cases, a report by an independent expert may be also be valuable.

Inventories

Every cathedral must have an inventory of the items in its ownership or custody that are of historical, archaeological, architectural or artistic significance. An inventory is a valuable tool for the management of a cathedral's collections.

Permission to alter, lend or dispose of any item on the cathedral inventory must be obtained from the [Fabric Advisory Committee](#) or, in the case of items of outstanding interest, from the [Cathedrals Fabric Commission](#).

If a cathedral does not yet have a working inventory it should assume that permission is required to alter, lend or dispose of any historic item in its ownership or custody unless or until its Fabric Advisory Committee and/or the Cathedrals Fabric Commission determines otherwise.

[Storage of retired items](#)

The following principles should guide decisions on the storage or disposal of significant liturgical furnishings:

- The relocation of redundant furnishings within the cathedral or into storage on site will usually be the preferable outcome in conservation terms. Any other course of action will need clear and convincing justification in the context of a robust options appraisal.
- In cases where relocation or storage on site is not an option, the [Cathedrals Fabric Commission](#) can help to identify suitable off-site storage options.
- Deposition in a museum may be appropriate in some cases. This is likely to mean donating the item to the museum in question (as museums are increasingly reluctant to accept items on long-term loan) but a [deed of gift](#) can be used to ensure that, should the museum ever wish to dispose of it, it would first be offered back to the cathedral.
- Another option may be the appropriate reuse of redundant furniture within another listed church. Your local [Diocesan Advisory Committee](#) can help you to begin by contacting churches in your diocese, failing which the [Cathedral and Church Buildings Division](#) can help you alert churches nationwide.
- It is usually desirable that significant objects from cathedrals should remain publicly accessible even if they leave the cathedral's possession, and sale to a private individual will therefore generally only be acceptable where other options have been exhausted.
- The destruction of any significant item (which would include the reuse of its materials for another purpose) will rarely be considered acceptable, and only ever as a last resort.

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Preparing an application

Any proposals for change should be informed by a suite of documents that take a holistic view of the use and future development of the cathedral, and which should be prepared independently of any specific application.

In the case of proposals affecting liturgical furnishings, the relevant documents are likely to be the cathedral's Inventory, Liturgical Plan and Collections Management Policy (which should include a Disposals Policy). Sections of the cathedral's [Conservation Management Plan](#) and Visitor Engagement Plan may also be of relevance. If it is proposed to commission additional or replacement liturgical furnishings this should be undertaken in line with a cathedral's Arts Policy.

When considering changes to liturgical furnishings, the first step will be to assess their significance. You should consult your [Fabric Advisory Committee](#) at this stage, and may also wish to seek additional expert advice.

Alongside an assessment of significance, you should also review the use of the item(s) in the day-to-day life and worship of the cathedral, with particular reference to the cathedral's Liturgical Plan. You should try to make this an objective review of pros and cons, rather than an argument for a particular course of action.

If these assessments lead to a conclusion that removal of an item is liturgically desirable, and justifiable in terms of impact on significance, you should appraise your options for reuse, storage and disposal of the item.

These documents should then be presented to your Fabric Advisory Committee, and in the case of items of outstanding significance, to the Cathedrals Fabric Commission, for advice. You may also wish to consult [Historic England](#) and the [national amenity societies](#) at this stage.

Once options have been fully explored, an application to the relevant body for the removal of the item from the cathedral for storage, loan or disposal should be made.

Permission to alter, lend or dispose of any item on the cathedral inventory must be obtained from the [Fabric Advisory Committee](#) or, in the case of items of outstanding interest, from the [Cathedrals Fabric Commission](#).

Items that are fixed to or permanently situated in a cathedral (such as a font, pulpit or cathedra) are considered part of the fabric of the building, and their removal or relocation therefore requires approval from the Fabric Advisory Committee or Cathedrals Fabric Commission. Moveable items, such as vestments or candlesticks, may be relocated without formal approval, but any new permanent location should be recorded on the cathedral inventory.

Further advice on making an application is available [here](#)

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Further Information

The Liturgy and Liturgical Furnishings Working Group can offer advice on proposals affecting liturgical furnishings and on the preparation of a liturgical plan. The Group is formed of members of the Cathedrals Fabric Commission, the Church Buildings Council, and other experts. To consult the Group please contact the [Commission's Secretariat](#).

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GUIDANCE ON MAKING AN APPLICATION

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