

CHURCH BUILDINGS COUNCIL
Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CHAIRS AND SECRETARIES OF THE
DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEES FOR THE CARE OF CHURCHES

Minutes of the 61st Annual Meeting, held in the Dunkenhalgh Hotel, Clayton-
Moors, Accrington, BB5 5JP, on 10 September 2019

The Chair was taken by Jennie Page CBE, Chair of the CBC. Officers of the Council were in attendance.

1. PRAYERS AND OPENING ADDRESS

The Rt Revd Julian Henderson, Bishop of Blackburn, led prayers and welcomed the Conference to the Diocese. In his opening address, he outlined the history of the diocese, the challenges it faces and the ways in which it was responding. This introduced the theme of the proceedings: healthy churches renewing communities.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the 60th Annual Meeting were approved.

3. INTRODUCTION

The Chair, Jennie Page, commenced proceedings by thanking the Bishop of Blackburn for his welcome and the conference sponsors for making the event possible. She began by outlining the progress on the strategy on Buildings for Mission. The last year had seen the increasing primacy of buildings as part of the lifecycle of a church and its communities; this was of course a clear part of the Church Buildings Review in 2015, but at a national level it had taken several years of groundwork to get to a point where these could be articulated not just in philosophical terms, but in practical ones.

One practical outcome of this was the very welcome attendance at this conference of those involved with DMPCs. A number of DMPCs were chaired by bishops, or others whose diaries were extremely busy, so it was gratifying to see those who had made the time to come. She trusted it would be a valuable experience.

The 'lifecycle' approach meant looking at what a) the worshipping community and b) the other communities within a parish, needed from their church and from their church buildings, depending on where they were at in the overall life of their ministry and mission. Of course the historical significance of the building (of which the history of its worshipping communities is a huge part) remained protected, as always, under the Ecclesiastical Exemption. But we had to recognise that for many inside the church, a simple historical analysis was neither a familiar language, nor a satisfactory one when it appeared to be used to prevent or disrupt plans for change.

The Faculty System was only one part of our work, albeit an important one. Its use to facilitate the operation of the Ecclesiastical Exemption had defined the Church of England's approach to its buildings for decades. This wasn't a criticism of the system as a whole, and certainly not of the dedicated Chancellors and Registrars, many of whom offered fantastic service to the Church and were repositories of fantastic knowledge. But seeing buildings only through a planning lens missed the point. Even un-adapted, unmodernised, they still had a profound place in the landscape of England. Unlocked, open, and offering welcome and comfort (as well as maybe a loo or a cup of tea) this place became even more firmly entrenched. Although some had potential to become local post offices, shops, cafes, or to run farmers markets, host doctor's surgeries, and all the rest, we knew thousands won't want or need, or be able, to do this. That shouldn't mean they were seen as less valuable or less important.

Instead of an oppositional harm vs benefit approach that sometimes came into play in the Faculty System, the lifecycle approach looked at what was happening now in the context of the whole life of the church and its buildings. The history and heritage of buildings was evidentially a big part of their missional potential – something cathedrals and major churches, with their visitor-focused offers, understood very well. So too was the peace of old churches, and their rootedness in place. So this approach in no way did down the importance of heritage. Rather it contextualised it, asking how that heritage fitted into the life of the church today. For some this would mean sweeping physical changes to allow the history to continue. For some it would mean support to become a Festival Church, with fewer formal services but greater opportunities for the 'secular' community to develop the agenda. For some it would mean closure so that the building could be carefully disposed of, hopefully releasing funds for the work of the Church.

Strategic planning, be it at diocesan, deanery, benefice, or any other level, was a key plank of this approach, as the Conference would be discussing later that afternoon. The key was not to have a plan for buildings that could be added to the diocesan 'strategy folder, but to have buildings included within other planning, such as mission and growth strategies. Because buildings were a fundamental part of the Church of England, and because we didn't have any large-scale proposals to move away from a parish-based, locally-organised system of pastoral provision, the buildings would continue to be a presenting factor. Ignoring them, as some dioceses had found to their cost, was not a long-term strategy.

This approach to church buildings was not an invention of the National Church Institutions, but a result of conversations with all of you, with archdeacons, bishops, and others. It came together for organisational purposes under the Buildings for Mission Renewal and Reform strand, which was featured on p.8 of the Annual Report, where the four broad strands it would be developing were described.

In the next six months the plan was to come to those present to ask for input on developing strands of work under these themes. The work was to be jointly supervised by the Chair, and Dr Eve Poole, Third Church Estates Commissioner, with input from the CFCE, CCT, and Diocesan Secretaries Liaison Group.

The Chair turned to funding. The situation has become steadily worse for many churches since the summary execution of GPOW in 2017. The lack of a multi-year government spending review had severely limited our chances to represent to government on the importance of replacing it.

However, we had been encouraged by the so-far success of the Taylor Review pilot projects in Suffolk and Manchester. Although these were not trialling the major grants scheme Taylor suggested, they were trialling all other aspects, and across all faiths and denominations. Page 5 of the Annual Report set out more, and the conference would be having a further update. The government had remained very engaged with these pilots, and officials at DCMS were keen to use the evaluation work as evidence for future decision-making.

Despite very short timescales, we had also made a bid to the one-year spending review announced the previous week. Although this did not get us any capital funding, the Chair was pleased to announce that the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme had been extended for the period of the new spending round, so it was secure until March 2021, a year longer than it had been. The Places of Worship protective security funding scheme was also to be doubled in the coming year, to help churches at risk of hate crime to put in security measures. In addition, DCMS officials had invited us to have a longer conversation with them about capital funding needs, in preparation for an anticipated multi-year spending review in 2020. This was a strong position to be in, even if a further wait for funding was frustrating.

The Chair summarised the current work of the CBC. Much of what she had already described was the work of the Cathedral and Church Buildings Division as a whole. The divide between this and the work of the Church Buildings Council was not a firm one, as both officers and members tended to work across the portfolio. However there were some things the CBC had specifically sought to do this year, and would seek to do in the coming months.

The accessibility agenda, on which CBC member Bill Braviner had written so eloquently in the conference booklet, was one the Church was coming to far too late. Accessibility was an easy word to say but a hard thing to do; and not just because of listed building constraints. The Chair noted that Bill would be addressing the conference on the subject and appealed to all present to understand the depth of the issue, and the importance of doing what we can, as quickly as we can. The CBC would in the next year be working with the Diocesan Disability Advisers and others to produce some guidance on this key issue, and seeking to ‘normalise’ the inclusion of accessibility criteria in its advice.

The CBC was also looking at how it could better support major churches and major projects. The Division was always working with and through the DACs for this, and she hoped that all would see the benefits of early, shared advice on our biggest churches and most ambitious building projects. This echoed something of how the CFCE worked; there was no substitute for early advice. This had resource implications, but with the Division’s new Cathedral and Major Churches Officer, Rosie Smith, and the newly created Major Churches Network, CBC was dedicated to putting in this extra support.

Last but certainly not least, the CBC was consciously looking at how it could build on last year’s conference, joint with the Diocesan Environmental Officers, to embed environmental issues in its work. The climate emergency was not something we could ignore, even if we accepted that we also could not solve it. However, care for creation was a distinct Christian purpose, so helping our church buildings and land to be as energy efficient as possible, to minimise their carbon footprint, to maintain and increase biodiversity in their churchyards, was more important now than ever. Our new Open and Sustainable Churches Officer, Catherine Ross, was taking the lead on this, but it would be part of the role of every member of staff and member of the CBC (and, we hope, DACs) to consider these issues.

The Chair concluded by thanking all for attending, for continuing to support churches, and for their help in defining what it was we should be doing. She hoped the annual report showed a fair representation of what CBC had been doing and, even more, she hoped it aligned with what DACs and DMPCs thought we should be doing, both as a National Church department, and as Church Buildings Council. If not, she appealed to those present to ‘speak now or forever hold your peace’.

4. REVIEW OF THE YEAR

Becky Clark, Director of Churches and Cathedrals, introduced the members of staff present and welcomed colleagues from Historic England, the Institute of Conservation (ICON), the Victorian Society, the SPAB and the Church Commissioners Pastoral and Closed Churches Department. She then gave some operational news.

Work on developing and implementing the strategy on church buildings was being coordinated by the recently-formed Strategic Church Buildings Support Group, which was convened jointly by the Church Buildings Division and the Pastoral and Closed Churches Department and had representation from the CCT and dioceses. There was currently a vacancy for the lead bishop role on church buildings.

The Online Faculty System continued to be developed and the great majority of dioceses were now signed up to it. The functionality would need to be adapted to take account of the forthcoming changes to the Faculty Rules. It would be necessary to maintain twin systems temporarily after the new Rules go live on 1 April 2020. It would be advantageous if, in the period leading up to then, parishes could be encouraged to hold off initiating applications until 1 April. The user group would be consulted on the system changes. Dr James Miles, Digital Projects and Outreach Manager, would be touring the country to explain the workflow changes.

5. FEEDBACK ON THE ANNUAL REPORT

The Chair and Director opened the session to comments from the floor and invited responses to two questions: was CCB doing the right things? What were the gaps and what was not needed?

Liz Kitch (Senior Church Buildings Officer, Diocese of Oxford) indicated that she would like to see more policy documents on a wider range of issues. Guidance notes on practical subjects was missing, and therefore fell to dioceses to provide, though there was little capacity. She suggested looking across the diocesan guidance available to inform national guidance. There was a need for national coordination and for a central repository of guidance – was this a role for OFS?

David Hodge (Deputy Chancellor of the Diocese of Blackburn and Chancellor of the Diocese of Oxford) called for a practice note on potentially dangerous memorials. He suggested that there would be much value in comparing notes between dioceses.

Kate Andrew (Assistant Church Buildings Officer, Diocese of Worcester) commented on the difficulty of finding practical advice on maintenance in her previous role on the SPAB Faith in Maintenance project in Herefordshire and Worcestershire. She considered the Google group for DACs (administered by the Gloucester DAC team) to be a useful

tool. There was a clearing-house role for CBC, but it should not always be necessary for CBC to produce ‘uber guidance’.

Simon Pugh-Jones (Chair, Bristol DAC) was concerned that the global climate emergency was not adequately reflected in the annual report. He accepted that the Church of England could not solve the problem alone but there a major contribution had been made via the Transition Pathway Initiative in which the Church had such a leading role.

Edmund Harris (Care of Churches Officer, Diocese of Canterbury) hoped that the forthcoming changes to the OFS would be accompanied by careful guidance to help users avoid pitfalls, bugs etc.

Catherine Gray (DAC Secretary, Diocese of Portsmouth) noted how difficult it was to track the multiple involvements in faculty casework. She was also concerned at the large cost of data storage.

Nigel Sherratt (DAC & DMPC Secretary, Diocese of Derby) was disappointed that the faculty process was tied to forms lifted from the paper process. There was a missed opportunity for a genuinely electronic process. In Derby, hardcopy forms still had to be sent for signature (others present agreed). **Dr Joseph Elders** (Head of Church Buildings Strategy) confirmed that the statutory position meant that there was no leeway given on forms being reproduced. However, the signature could be electronic and he acknowledged that the guidance could be more explicit that a ‘wet signature’ was not needed. He confirmed also that the OFS was not an archive; completed forms would go into the OFS/CHR but the wider question of the system maintaining an archival record demanded a funded proposal.

Mark Ireland (Archdeacon of Blackburn) noted that the categories under list B were illustrative not definitive. The guidance could helpfully make clear that it did not need to be specifically mentioned to be covered. He recounted a cautionary tale about an accessibility grabrail which proved to need a full faculty application rather than falling under list B. In reply, David Knight (Senior Church Buildings Officer, CCB) confirmed that the Rules only allowed for specifics; there were no catch-alls but the Dean of the Arches was clear that if something is much like what was stated in the lists then it should pass. There is some more freedom on accessibility in the changes due to go live next April.

Pat Evemy (Assistant Church Buildings Officer, Diocese of Worcester) noted that there was much guidance from CBC on strategic planning; in theory it was a proactive process but the lack of resource at diocesan level meant that it was often necessary to react to circumstances.

The time for the above discussion in the agenda was welcomed.

6. PRESENTATIONS FROM STAFF AND GUEST SPEAKERS

The conference was pleased to hear presentations on the following subjects and welcomed the guest speakers.

Introduction to strategic planning and round table groups

Peter Wagon, Pastoral Team Manager, Pastoral and Closed Churches, Church

Commissioners

Dr Joseph Elders, Head of Church Buildings Strategy, Cathedral and Church Buildings Division

A view on strategic planning from the host diocese

Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn

Following the presentations on strategic planning, the subject was discussed in round table groups and feedback then given to the floor on the specific question: How are buildings part of strategic planning for mission in your diocese?

Report on Exeter rural churches project, Diocese of Exeter

Marian Carson, Director of Operations, Churches Conservation Trust – formerly of Growing the Rural Church Project

The Chair declared the Annual Meeting closed and invited delegates to join together in evening prayer in the Oak Room.

Copies of the core conference documents can be found online at:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/church-resources/churchcare/churchcare-events>