

We will pick up your VAT bill, Chancellor tells the Church

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Places of worship have been singled out for preferential treatment following the removal of the zero VAT rating concession for alterations to listed buildings announced in the budget.

A concerted campaign by churches has led to the Chancellor agreeing to set aside £30 million per annum to compensate places of worship for the extra VAT resulting from the withdrawal of the concession. The government's offer is on top of £12m already provided to the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme (LPWGS). No equivalent money is to be made available to listed secular buildings.

The Church of England has welcomed the government offer to fund alterations and repairs to the Church's 12,500 listed buildings.

The National Secular society, while accepting listed churches are important cultural icons, has argued that they should not be singled out for preferential treatment.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society said: "Places of worship should take their share of the pain, or some more money found for secular buildings."

This view was echoed by Shadow culture secretary Harriet Harman. While welcoming the £30 million, she said: "This Government's U-turn is a victory for the campaign by churches and local communities against a wrong-headed proposal in the shambolic Budget.

"But it won't help the National Trust, all the museums, galleries, theatres, libraries and community centres that are in listed buildings, and which are important for heritage, tourism and local communities."

Mr Porteous Wood said: "Like Harriet Harman, we believe secular listed buildings deserve relief rather than being once more denied privileges meted out to listed places of worship.

"We do not share the prevalent view that churches deserve special concessions denied to other listed buildings. The Church Commissioners assets' total around £3 billion, mostly in prime investment properties earning juicy returns. And many cathedrals charge very hefty entrance fees. Places of worship already receive vast sums from government, lottery and many other grant making bodies. And very substantial sums should be being generated from the sale of the many redundant churches without architectural merit."

It seems clear from the comments being made by church representatives that the ultimate aim is for the state to take over complete responsibility for the upkeep of churches. The wife of the Dean of Wakefield, Pamela Greener, said that the £30 million did not provide a long-term solution, and called for further discussions. "It would be churlish not to welcome the Government's increased funding, following their shock Budget tax raid on the nation's heritage," said told the *Church Times*. "So, although I am grateful to the Chancellor and his team for listening to the outcry they provoked, I urge the Church not to build its house upon the sand of the Listed Places of Worship Scheme —

which is not based in law and therefore has an insecure future."

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