

NSS calls for moratorium on Government funding of cathedrals

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Following concerns raised by the National Secular Society, the UK spending watchdog has concluded that "improvements" were needed in the process the Government used to award vast sums of public money for cathedral repairs.

The National Audit Office criticisms related to assessing the extent to which the Church could fund the repairs without recourse to these grants, and a failure to provide agreed annual reports. The NSS is calling for these concerns to be resolved before any further funds are released.

The NSS wrote to the National Audit Office to highlight concerns about the Government's award of around £221 million since 2014 for repairs to places of worship, the vast majority to the Church of England. Cathedrals have received £40 million for repairs under the 'First World War Centenary Cathedral Repair Fund'.

The NSS said it recognised the need to maintain the country's architectural heritage, but sounded the alarm after conducting research revealing the cathedrals' substantial wealth. It asked the spending watchdog to investigate whether the cathedrals had demonstrated genuine financial need. Even excluding the massive funds at church and parish level, the CofE has estimated assets comfortably exceeding £10bn.

After investigating the grant process, the Audit Office has identified "a number of areas for improvement in the governance, operation and oversight of the Fund" which it has subsequently reported to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The NAO has told them that there were "improvements that could have been made to bolster the process".

In response to the NSS's concerns about cathedrals' substantial wealth not being taken into account, the NAO acknowledged that it had "not seen evidence that sufficient information about the liquidity of cathedrals' investments was available to allow those assets to be assessed in determining their financial need." It also revealed, disturbingly, that "financial need is assessed less strictly" than necessity and heritage significance. The NSS will be pressing the DCMS to establish who authorised financial need to be assessed more laxly than the other criteria, and with what authority.

Despite the taxpayers' enormous generosity to the Church, the Church so far has shown no inclination to honour the minimal obligation of completing year-end reports for the Fund that it undertook in writing as part of grant agreement. The NAO requested these but they were not provided.

The Church has said it will be lobbying the government for another fund similar to the First World War Centenary scheme. The NSS has urged that any further funds be made conditional on the completion of outstanding reports for the current scheme and a convincing demonstration that the improvement in the governance, operation and oversight of the Fund called for by the NAO are put in place.

NSS Executive director Keith Porteous Wood wrote to the DCMS about these "disturbing shortfalls" and asking what steps had been taken by the DCMS to secure the required reports.

Mr Wood said: "We hope that the scrutiny of the National Audit Office will ensure that in future public money is only used to pay for the upkeep of the Church's historic and architecturally significant buildings where there is a demonstrable need for the state to step in and do so."

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