

NSS calls for UK's public spending watchdog to investigate state handouts to churches

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The National Audit Office has been asked to scrutinise the significant sums of public money that the Government has handed out to wealthy religious organisations.

The National Secular Society has called on the UK's public spending watchdog to investigate Government spending on places of worship – arguing that millions of pounds of taxpayers' money is being handed to wealthy institutions without justification.

Since 2014 the Government has allocated around £221 million to repairing places of worship, with the vast majority of the money going to the Church of England – which has estimated assets of over £20bn.

In a letter to the National Audit Office, the NSS says vast sums of money are being sent from the Treasury to the Church of England without sufficient checks, accusing the Department for Culture Media and Sport of a "lack of accountability".

Since 2014, the DCMS has allocated £40 million to cathedral repairs as part of the 'First World War Centenary Cathedral Repairs Fund'. Responsibility for administering the fund has been handed to the Church of England's Archbishops' Council. The fund was intended to cover "necessary works to the fabric of Anglican and Catholic cathedral buildings and structures in England, which will keep the buildings wind-proof and weather-tight, safe and open." Under the scheme, cathedrals are supposed to demonstrate financial need.

However, grants handed out so far include £200,000 for a new sound system at Hereford Cathedral and payments totalling over £1 million pounds to Salisbury Cathedral, despite the Cathedral already having assets of over £43 million pounds and the diocese in which it is situated having a pool of assets totalling £112 million pounds.

In total, 85 payments have been made to the Church of England despite Anglican cathedrals sitting on combined assets of over £1 billion pounds.

In addition, over £6.5 million pounds of public money has been handed over to Britain's Roman Catholic cathedrals.

Keith Porteous Wood, NSS executive Director, said:

"We don't question the need to preserve these historic and architecturally significant buildings, but we do question whether public money is being spent appropriately. Religious organisations are responsible for maintaining their buildings and we believe public money should only be used to pay for the upkeep of these buildings where there is a demonstrable need to do so.

"The Church of England has the capacity to maintain its buildings so should not be handed public money which is spent without proper oversight, particularly in this time of austerity when those most in need are facing significant cuts to essential services."

In 2012 the Second Church Estates Commissioner Sir Tony Baldry MP [said](#), "The Chancellor of the Exchequer has been incredibly generous towards the Church."

More recently Simon Jenkins argued in the *Spectator* that "business is booming" in England's cathedrals. "Cathedral turnover of £220 million has almost doubled in a decade," he wrote.

Faith and communities minister Lord Nick Bourne recently began a year-long tour of all 42 of England's cathedrals.

The First World War Centenary Cathedral Repairs Fund represents only a fraction of the public money handed to the Church of England for keeping its buildings in good repair. In addition, up to £42 million a year is available through the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme; The Heritage Lottery Fund provides grants of around £25 million annually; and £25 million has been set aside this year for the Listed Places of Worship Roof Repair Fund.

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