

# Reducing bishops in House of Lords 'inevitable', says CofE paper

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The Church of England is open to reducing the number of bishops in a reformed House of Lords but not scrapping them entirely, a briefing suggests.

The confidential briefing paper, published in [Church Times](#), says there is a consensus among bishops in the House of Lords that reform of the House is "inevitable" and that the CofE "should seek to shape" reforms that will "impinge" on bishops.

This implies "a reduction in the number of Lords Spiritual", the briefing says.

The Lords Spiritual are members of the [bishops' bench](#) in the House of Lords. The bishops' bench consists of 26 Church of England bishops who are automatically appointed to the House. The UK is unique among Western democracies in giving representatives of religious groups automatic seats in its legislature.

The Bishopric of Manchester Act (1847) set the number of Bishops entitled to sit in the House of Lords at 26.

The confidential briefing by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Bishop of London was presented to the bishops' membership body, the House of Bishops, in September. It draws on interviews with "key stakeholders", including all 42 diocesan bishops.

The briefing outlines proposed changes to the CofE's management to address a number of challenges faced by the church, including funding. Two thirds of dioceses are operating on deficit budgets and the majority of dioceses are not capable of sustaining themselves without "more mutual and central funding".

The briefing says the proposals align with calls for a "simpler, humbler and bolder church" that must be "prepared to accept radical change".

However, the briefing does not recommend the complete abolition of the bishops' bench. It says the Lords Spiritual provide "high value" in being able to bring CofE "values and influence" in the public square. It also says there is a "strong case to put further resource" into the Church of England's parliamentary unit to "provide adequate support" for the bishops.

The briefing also refers to "tension" between bishops managing a "national role" and leading a diocese.

NSS head of policy and research Megan Manson said: "While reducing the number of bishops in the House of Lords would be welcome, it's clear the CofE has no intention of scrapping the bishops' bench entirely and ending its disproportionate influence in our democracy.

"The Church says it wants to be simpler and humbler. But increasing funding for the bishops' bench, as the briefing suggest, is entirely at odds with goal. A humble church is not one that seeks to impose its religion on society by wielding parliamentary power.

"The Church recognises the tensions in trying to serve local Anglican communities and acting as the state religion. It also says it needs to accept radical change.

"An obvious radical change which would eliminate those tensions and help it dedicate its resources to its own parishioners would be to disentangle church from state. And this should start with the complete withdrawal of bishops appointed to our legislature."

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