

Should taxpayers be paying for the Church's leaking roofs?

Posted: Fri, 20 Mar 2015 by [Keith Porteous Wood](#)

Keith Porteous Wood argues that with the Church Commissioners sitting on a £4bn surplus, the Church of England should not be receiving additional public funds for fixing church roofs, and it should concede changes to the law on Chancel Repair Liability without compensation.

In this week's budget the Government allocated a further £40 million funding to support "vital" roof repairs in Listed Places of Worship over the next two years.

The lion's share of this money will go to the Church of England as it is [responsible](#) for maintaining 45% of the grade I listed buildings in the country and the majority of all parish churches are grade II or higher.

Few would feel that our finest architectural heritage should fall into terminal disrepair. An inevitable consequence of the continuing decline in church attendance is that there are far fewer in the congregations to shoulder the repair burden. When they are unable to do so, who else should pay and under what circumstances?

The stated purpose of the Church Commissioners is "to produce money to support the Church of England's work across the country", which surely should include such repairs.

The Lib Dem peer Lord Avebury has written to the Chancellor to make sure he is aware that the Commissioners' [investments stand at over £6bn](#), around £4bn in excess of the amount required to meet the future obligations on clergy pensions", which is their other principal obligation.

He has [also noted](#) the state already contributes hugely to the upkeep of churches through gift aid worth some £84 million; the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme worth £42 million; the National Heritage Memorial Fund, currently funding repairs to Winchester Cathedral costing £14 million and of York Minster at £18.3 million; further grants to cathedrals recently announced worth £8 million; Heritage Lottery Fund grants to churches of £300 million in the 10 years to 2004, the lion's share to the Church of England; and the £15 million already announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer for repairs to church roofs and rainwater pipes under the Listed Places of Worship Roof Repair Fund.

By making these payments, the Chancellor adds to the hardship caused by the huge cuts to public services already made and being contemplated, which is inexcusable given the Church has a surplus of £4bn in the kitty.

Meanwhile, the Church has expressed its unwillingness to concede any changes in the law on Chancel Repair Liability (CRL), under which landowners can still become liable to pay for repairs to an ancient Anglican church, even though this is not mentioned in the deeds.

The Church says it will only contemplate changes in return for Government compensation which neither Lord Avebury nor the National Secular Society believe is justifiable.

In his letter, Lord Avebury asked that any payments such as the £40 million allocated in the

Budget, should be regarded as counting towards any future compensation, without conceding that any would be due.

This seems fair enough. Since the infamous Aston Cantlow case the Church has not been seeking to enforce the recovery of CRL through the courts, so that abolition would not diminish their likely future income, but they continue to insist that they would only agree to it if they are paid unspecified compensation.

It is surely incongruous for them to hold a financial Sword of Damocles over the heads of private householders when they are already receiving such large sums from the taxpayer.

The Children's Society's chief executive, Matthew Reed, said: "With extra money available to the Chancellor, it is hugely disappointing that the Government has yet again failed to make extra funding available to protect children from sexual abuse, and to create a register of missing children".

Keith Porteous Wood

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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