

Church of England or Chancellor of the Exchequer: who's setting the agenda?

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NSS treasurer Ed Moore writes on the blurred lines between church and state when it comes to taxpayer funding for church repairs, and the vast sums of money being sent from the Treasury to the Church of England.

It can be hard, viewed from afar, to try and work out the relationship between the Church of England and the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The government has debts of £1,620bn while the church has assets of over £20bn: What explains the continued flow of money from taxpayer to church? Is the chancellor setting the agenda based on solid facts of need and a good return on investment or is he simply handing over whatever the church demands?

Government funding of the church has been a fact for centuries but recent announcements point to a speeding up of the flow of taxpayer money and in the specific area of church building financing we're beginning to see some evidence of who is leading. The facts point to the church now being firmly in control of policy.

The document to start from is the 13th October 2015 [report](#) from the Church Buildings Review Group of the Church of England:

... the Church of England has today published a report and launched a consultation on proposals to improve the support for its 16,000 church buildings. The report comes from the Church Buildings review group, which was chaired by the Bishop of Worcester, the Rt Revd Dr John Inge.

It contains many interesting facts and several very specific recommendations, all in helpfully numbered paragraphs. We'll start with;

46. ... In view of all the other necessary expenditure that local congregations have to finance out of voluntary giving - contributing to the cost of paid clergy and other church workers, heating, maintaining and insuring churches and church halls, running a range of church and community based activities - the responsibility of caring for so many historic buildings is onerous.

Would the Church of England rather not have to maintain all their buildings?

*125. ... over recent decades there has been an increasing recognition that the Church of England **cannot be expected to** shoulder the burden of caring for many of the country's most important buildings - - without significant, ongoing help.*

Would rather not and indeed cannot be expected to? It would be interesting to know who accepts that the organisation owning 16,000 properties should not have to pay for them. I only own one property and know that I need to pay for repairs, if I can't afford these I have to sell up. Is the church different? They obviously think so, for even among the pleas for help they praise how much money they've already persuaded the government to hand over:

48. Over recent years the Church of England has been successful in securing additional external assistance for keeping its 12,300 listed buildings in good repair:

... the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme ... Currently **up to £42 million** a year is available through this route. Because it has the largest number of historic buildings the Church of England is the single largest beneficiary.

The Heritage Lottery Fund provides grants.... Currently **£25 million** is provided each year in England, ... Up to 15% of awards may be spent on development work.

The First World War Centenary Cathedral Fabric Repair Fund providing **£20 million** was announced in the March 2014 Budget. ...

The Government also announced in 2014 a special Church Roofs Fund, to be managed by the National Heritage Memorial Fund. Initially of £15 million, this was increased in the March 2015 budget by a further £40m ...

After stating they don't like repairing buildings, they shouldn't be expected to pay for it and in fact already do well in not paying for them we come to the specific recommendations (or to put it bluntly – demands) starting with:

127. *The Church of England can be grateful for the significant help that has been provided in a variety of ways over recent years, as paragraphs 46-47 make clear. What is required now is some assurance that this help will be sustained. **Early confirmation that the listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme will continue at a realistic level of funding beyond next April is the most immediate need.***

How does the chancellor respond? The church report was [published in October](#) 2015, at lightning speed the chancellor replied:

Chancellor announces continued support for listed churches

25 November 2015

Chancellor today awards vital funding packages for listed places of worship

All listed places of worship will still be eligible to apply for a grant from a pot of £42 million announced by Chancellor George Osborne today.

In less than a month, at a time of record debt and a large budget deficit the chancellor found £42m pounds. Was a business case put forward? Was a return on investment study referenced? Nobody says.

As successful as this request was it pales besides the really big ask, namely a complete review of government payment for church property.

209. In the light of these we offer the following specific recommendations:

1. Church and Government representatives should explore ways in which more assured financial support for listed cathedrals and church buildings can be provided for in the long term. (Paragraphs 46-48 and 125-128).

In detail:

128. Thereafter we believe that Church and Government representatives should explore ways in which more assured support for listed cathedrals and church buildings can be provided for the long term so that the clergy and lay people responsible for them do not have to spend disproportionate time, energy and resource on fabric issues to the detriment of their wider mission and ministry, and so that the future of these buildings, which are everyone's heritage, can be assured.

Gobsmacking. Suddenly churches are 'everyone's heritage' not church assets and we all should pay for them because the church is busy on other things. How would the chancellor respond to this, a complete change of the approach to church funding? Would it be ignored, rejected, a judicial enquiry, a parliamentary committee appointed? No.

Five months later on March 16th the 2016 budget contained a small yet surprising item:

2.254 First World War Centenary cathedral repairs fund and English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review A review into sustaining England's churches and cathedrals will be set up to assess maintenance and repair pressures and examine how the sector can become more financially sustainable.

So without warning or preamble the government announced they would review the financial health of the Church of England buildings (and provide some more money of course). This wouldn't make any sense unless you'd read the Church Buildings Review in which case it made perfect sense. The government would review the property arrangements of a non-government organisation whose staff had just completed a review. Why? The church demanded, the chancellor bowed to the pressure.

The reason for setting up a taskforce and holding a government review was [explained in some depth](#), most of which readers of the Church Building Review would be familiar with.

English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review

The Church of England, responsible for over a third of England's grade I listed buildings, has recently conducted a major review of the stewardship of its cathedrals and 16,000 church buildings (75% of which are listed).

The task force will be charged with:

Exploring new models of financing repairs and maintenance of churches and cathedrals, including reviewing existing maintenance costs and repairs funding from lottery and central government grants. ...

Consulting with stakeholders including: Church of England, church-goers, charities, local residents and business on ideas for uses of listed buildings for purposes beyond worship and current barriers that prevent these and how to generate revenue from these.

It's interesting to note the direct references to the original church review, acknowledging who is driving the process. But what would the process be? One MP asked that very question:

On 5th September 2016 the Second Church Estates Commissioner, Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP, answered a written question from Mark Hendrick MP about churches in the Diocese of Blackburn and the English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review.

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston): To ask the right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, which churches and personnel in Preston and the rest of the Diocese of Blackburn have participated in the English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review.

Mrs Caroline Spelman: The Cathedral and Church Buildings Division of the Church of England is engaging with the 'English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review' centrally on behalf of all the Anglican Cathedrals and Parish Churches in England. Engagement is currently at an early stage. Four workshops are being held in churches this month (September) to help inform a document that will then be widely consulted upon.

So the Church Buildings Division, the very people who produced the initial report would speak for all 16,000 churches. Local residents, businesses and other interested parties would get just four meetings, which were quietly announced by the DCMS and indeed held before Mrs Spelman had replied.

English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review

24 August 2016 (Luton); 1 September (Stoke); 5 September (Durham); 15 September (Hereford): all 13.30-16.30

...

As part of its initial evidence gathering, the Review would like to hear from people in local communities about how these iconic buildings are currently being used and what steps could be taken to further open these buildings up to wider community use. The workshops will provide an opportunity to:

** hear more about innovative uses of church buildings - from exhibition venues to internet cafes & Pilates classes to farmer's markets, citizens advice bureau and community cinemas;*

** discuss how you could get involved and inform Government thinking in this area.*

None in London.

None in the South-East.

None in the South-West.

Being an interested party I asked to attend the Luton event, which was cancelled due to lack of attendees. It was rescheduled to September 6th then cancelled again for the same reason. Only three workshops were therefore held in total.

The NSS asked for a copy of the slides being used at the workshops, to see what format and framing the DCMS was using. These proved enlightening but not in the way expected. The workshop would have been run by Dr David Knight of the Cathedral and Church Buildings Division of the Church of England, the same division who wrote the original report. Not the DCMS.

More information on the sustainability review should apparently be published within weeks and I'm curious to see what happens next. The evidence so far suggests the church will still be setting the agenda. So far we've had:

* The church asks for the Places of Worship Grant to be extended and the chancellor announces this.

* The church asks for a review into sustainability of church buildings and the chancellor announces this.

* The sustainability taskforce allows the church buildings team to speak for all churches and allows them to also run the DCMS workshops.

I don't know what the next announcement will be, but I don't think it will unfavourable to the church. I'd hope the government apply some rigour to the review and make some unpalatable truths be swallowed but I'm not hopeful. In fact the church buildings team are probably hoping to speed through the process of extracting more cash from the government with as little fuss as possible. After all they'll want to concentrate on much more exciting projects such as the new eight storey [Lambeth Palace Library](#) which they can afford and don't find onerous:

The scheme is funded by the Church Commissioners and if planning permission is granted, the new library could be ready in 2020.

"The plans for the new Lambeth Palace Library are exciting," said the Most Revd Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury.

Much more interesting than repairing old churches. Will the library be "everyone's heritage"? No, but we will be allowed on one floor apparently. Many thanks.

Ed Moore

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