

from **The Historic Religious Buildings Alliance**
a group within The Heritage Alliance

We bring together those working for a secure future
for historic religious buildings

Tracey Crouch, MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Sport, Tourism
and Heritage
DCMS, 100 Parliament St
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Dear Ms Crouch

CANCELLATION OF HLF GRANTS FOR PLACES OF WORSHIP SCHEME

I am writing as Chair of the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance (HRBA), an independently-funded group within The Heritage Alliance. The members of the HRBA include faith groups and charitable trusts who between them maintain almost all listed religious buildings in the United Kingdom.

To put this in context, there are about 20,000 listed religious buildings in the UK, of which some 60% are owned by the Church of England, with most of the remainder being churches owned by other Christian denominations and charitable trusts. A small number are owned by other faith groups, and our membership includes Jewish and Muslim representatives. About half of these buildings in the UK are designated at the higher grades of listing.

I write because with **two concerns about the recent HLF decision to close the Grants for Places of Worship Scheme (GPOW)**, of which we first heard two weeks ago.

PROCESS

The first concern regards process. The way that the decision to close GPOW appears to have been made by HLF, unilaterally and with no consultation, make us unsure whether in changing policy in this way HLF has properly carried out its obligations to Government to take into account 'its assessment of the needs of the national heritage and their priorities for addressing them', and 'the need to involve the public and local communities in making policies, setting priorities, and distributing money' (*Policy Directions to the Heritage Lottery Fund*).

Our letter of 24 March to HLF says more about this, and is attached. Under the circumstances we think there is a strong case for the announcement by HLF of this change to be delayed until full consultation has taken place.

HLF have stated in their briefing note that this change is being made inter alia on strategic grounds. This sudden change of strategic emphasis without consultation is disconcerting, particularly as GPOW has been in place throughout the current Strategic Framework (SF4). You will

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understand that it has left us concerned about HLF's assumptions as it plans the forthcoming consultation for SF5. Are you able to assure us that there will be no prior assumption by the Board about the appropriate way of dealing with the repair needs of listed places of worship as it embarks on consultation for SF5?

SUBSTANCE

The second concern is one of substance. The closure of this grant scheme (with its budget of £30m) profoundly alters the funding landscape for an important part of the UK's heritage. It takes away the only pot of public money designed for and explicitly dedicated to the support of unusually large repairs to listed places of worship. Normal repairs are, of course, paid from the pockets of each congregation.

We assume that the Government's ongoing English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review was consulted on this change before the decision was made by the HLF Board, and would be grateful if you could confirm this. That Review will no doubt provide you with an assessment of the impact of the closure on Church of England churches, though the closure will, of course, affect places of worship of all faith groups and denominations across the UK.

It is too early for us to have reached a fully-considered view of the effect of the change. Our instinct is that through withdrawing a tailored scheme to provide public funding for very major repairs there will be a drift, accelerating gradually, towards the loss of a significant part of our built heritage. The likely mechanism is that some congregations will fail to carry out major repairs due to the lack of appropriately focused public funding when most needed, and then the ever-mounting repair needs will discourage potential new volunteers from becoming engaged, leading over time to disheartened congregations walking away from a worrying liability. (We know this sometimes happens now, but fortunately only rarely.)

Certainly such a dramatic shift in the public funding of a significant part of our national built heritage requires careful thought and co-ordination and we think the decision is not one best made by an arm's length public body acting without consultation.

We appreciate that this is not an easy matter on which to set and then execute public policy, but would ask you to look afresh at the need for dedicated funding designed for and dedicated to major repairs to listed places of worship. The public intensely dislike it when an ancient church is closed, and it would be a pity to have more of this happening through lack of joined up thinking.

Yours sincerely

Trevor Cooper
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Attachment: HRBA letter to HLF, 24 March 2017