

STRUGGLING, CLOSED AND CLOSING CHURCHES RESEARCH PROJECT

Report



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1 This report presents the findings of a research project conducted during 2019. It set out to understand and evaluate the role of the Church Buildings Council in how it supports dioceses and the Church Commissioners with churches that are being considered for closure or going through the closure process. It is intended to aid understanding of closure, outcomes and timescales. It seeks to **show the impact that the Council's work has had in giving advice on previous and ongoing cases** and provide a basis for making policy for the work of the Cathedral and Church Buildings Division and its strategic role with closed and closing churches.
- 2 **The subject matter is 'struggling churches', defined as that category of church buildings** which, for one reason or another or for a combination of reasons, are in difficulty and where there is a concern as to their sustainability as local centres of worship and mission. Their communities may as a result decide to set in motion the closure process or to embark on a process of more or less radical change in order to maintain regular public worship in them.
- 3 The Church Buildings Council (CBC) engages with these cases either as part of its general service on open churches, sometimes providing advice in the form of a Survey Report at a relatively early stage, or, more often, under the statutory process for closure, which requires that the Council provides a Church Buildings Report.
- 4 **The research project involved a statistical analysis of the Council's casework** over the period 2004-18 and a survey of dioceses and other stakeholders in the process. The statistical work made use of data held by CBC and other departments of the National Church Institutions. This has demonstrated that the Church has high-quality sources of data and well-resourced systems to maintain and present them. There is a need to establish common data standards in some areas to ensure that the information is as comprehensive and useful as it could be. There is scope to make more effective use of the systems already in place. Both elements of the survey demonstrated that there was a need for improvement **in the Council's engagement** with the stakeholders in its service.
- 5 The Council issues an average of 37 reports each year, the majority of which are Church Buildings Reports. Of these, currently just under half result in closure within five years. In other words, where a report is requested, closure is far from inevitable. There is generally a time lag between the report and the implementation of closure.

The analysis of reports issued 2004-18 revealed the following patterns:

- 6 Geographical distribution - Struggling churches are more likely to be found in the north of England and London than they are in the Midlands and

even more so than in the south of England outside London. Actual closures follow the same pattern except that London no longer counters the north-south trend. Small dioceses, in terms of their stock of consecrated churches, would appear to be somewhat more resilient than the rest in respect of the incidence of struggling churches and actual closures.

- 7 Population - The smallest parishes in population terms produce disproportionately few struggling churches and actual closures. Those that do occur in very small parishes tend to be in those which are smaller than the deanery average. Among parishes which are somewhat larger but still below the national average population, the same patterns are evident but those with more than one church are much more prevalent. The largest parishes produce disproportionately many struggling churches and closures. They typically have populations above the deanery average and more than one church, often several. Whether it arises from historic provision of chapels of ease or pastoral reorganisation in recent times, parishes with more than one church appear to invite rationalisation, especially in populous areas. Parishes with more than 10,000 people per church scarcely ever consider closure and scarcely ever close.
- 8 Deprivation - Churches in the most deprived parishes in the country are far more likely to struggle than those in less deprived areas and even more likely to close. They are also more likely to struggle or to close than the less deprived parishes in their deanery. Churches in the least deprived parishes are very unlikely to be considered for closure or to go on to close.
- 9 Urban vs rural - The available data do not offer a conclusive picture but suggest that struggling churches are more likely to be urban than rural.
- 10 Listing status - Listed churches are less likely to struggle than unlisted churches. The higher the listing grade, the less likely is the church to struggle. The stock of grade IIs is being considered for closure at a considerably faster rate than are grade I and II* churches and unlisted churches are being considered even faster than that. The same pattern is true of closures but the disparity between grade I listed churches and the unlisted ones is even wider. As a result of this pattern of closures, the Church of England estate is becoming more concentratedly listed and yet more so in the higher grades.
- 11 Historical period - Victorian and Edwardian churches formed just over half the caseload of struggling churches over the survey period. Medieval churches made up about a fifth and modern churches slightly less than a fifth. These proportions were broadly the same for actual closures.
- 12 Architect - **In the absence of a reasonably comprehensive list of architects'** church work, it is not possible to characterise present casework trends. Such a list would be possible to assemble as a framework for assessing cases as they arise.

The stakeholder survey revealed the following themes:

- 13 Dioceses consider the lack of people making use of a church to be the most prevalent underlying cause for a church to struggle, closely followed by the lack of volunteers. Unaffordable repairs and maintenance concerns are all cited by a majority of dioceses as well. Security is not reported as a cause of churches struggling.
- 14 Few dioceses cite strategic reviews as the basis for considering closure. Purely local factors or rationalisation of multi-church parishes and benefices appear to be the main reasons for closure to be considered. The system appears to be reactive rather than proactive. The strategic review model has yet to show its full potential but there is some indication that more dioceses intend to use it in the next few years.
- 15 Take-up of Survey Reports has been limited. Clearly, there is less experience of this parallel non-statutory service, but dioceses indicate that they expect it to be a useful tool in the future.
- 16 There is a strong tendency for dioceses to have made up their mind about closure in advance of requesting a report in all or most cases. This represents a majority of those who expressed a view but a minority of participants in the survey overall. A PCC resolution to close is cited by most as the origin of all or most of the cases.
- 17 **Some dioceses consider the CBC's report to be a formality and the building-related and heritage issues to be marginal, at least in respect of the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee's (DMPC's) decision.** However, the majority are broadly positive about what CBC can supply, with significant support for an objective and independent view from outside the diocese and for practical advice about complementary or new uses.
- 18 Secondary users of the reports (Diocesan Advisory Committees and outside organisations with an interest in the closure process focussed on the heritage and historic buildings issues) were broadly satisfied with the reports, though some needed more specialist information fully to serve their specialist interest.
- 19 There is general support for the scope and content of the reports currently offered. There is also general buy-in to the significance ratings in use. However, there is some lack of recognition of the process as a whole and of the interests of other stakeholders, hence different aspects of the service are highly rated by some and not others, depending on their role.
- 20 The survey of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons indicated broad support for the sharing of the reports with the secondary users. Amongst the secondary

users there was no suggestion that there are any other organisations not currently included which should be.

21 Overall, just under half of the struggling churches which initiate the statutory process and seek a report close within five years. The majority of closures do not settle the future of the building at the same time and this is handled as a separate process. There is a wide spread of outcomes of closure: broadly sensitive new uses or vesting for preservation account for around 60% of disposals compared to more interventionist uses or demolition. There is a need for greater understanding of what the process entails and what the likely outcomes are for parishes and others embarking on the process.

22 Recommendations are made for:

- Improving the sharing and consistency of data within the NCIs;
- Further research on some aspects, especially the relationship of struggling churches to deprivation;
- Earlier engagement with struggling churches to explore options for sustainable worship use;
- Earlier engagement with dioceses in cases which go on to trigger the statutory closure process;
- Greater take-up of strategic review tools at diocesan or deanery level;
- **Improving the understanding of CBC's service on struggling churches** amongst users and stakeholders;
- Streamlining parts of the process, including the use of the Church Heritage Record, and to involve others in the gathering of information and the preparation of reports.

BRIEF

- 1 In October 2018, responding to the pressing need to address a number of policy questions raised by the Statutory Advisory Committee (SAC) of the Church Buildings Council (CBC) during 2017-18, the Director of the Cathedral and Church Buildings Division made resource available for a temporary research post to assess the issues relating to closed and closing churches, including the response to struggling and vulnerable churches which may or may not initiate the closure process. This was reported to SAC (*Schedule of policy initiatives*, October 2018, paper SAC(18)38) and welcomed by the committee.
- 2 In December 2018, CBC noted the brief for the research project (CBC(18)200) and welcomed the initiative. Guy Braithwaite was seconded for three months to undertake the research. Nick Chapple was recruited to backfill his role on a temporary basis.
- 3 The overall brief was defined as follows: to understand and evaluate the role of the Church Buildings Council in how it supports dioceses and the Church Commissioners with churches that are being considered for closure or going through the closure process. This will aid understanding of closure, outcomes and timescales. This will be expressed through a report to show the impact **that the Council's work has had in giving advice on previous and ongoing** cases and provide a basis for making policy for the work of the division and its strategic role with closed and closing churches.¹
- 4 The intended outcomes were defined as follows:
 - a) We will understand what proportion of PM (sic) reports are used to help make a decision about closure. This may give us ideas of other information which churches requesting PM reports could use in determining whether closure is right for them, including links to diocesan strategies where these exist.
 - b) We will see patterns in closure decisions as these relate to listing status, period of church, type of locality (urban, suburban, rural etc) and can assess these against national and diocesan growth priority areas.
 - c) We will be able to think about how our strategic initiatives, such as Festival Churches and Major Churches designations, are part of supporting churches to remain open, where it is strategically and pastorally right for them to do so.
 - d) **We will have a better idea of how the 'policy and precedents' approach developed by the Council would lend itself to the SAC's role in giving early advice on churches planned for closure.**²

¹ Job Summary (adapted slightly) in *Church Buildings Officer – Research Secondment* job description p1

² Brief as laid out in *Process improvements for closed and closing churches* (CBC(18)200), paragraphs 13-16

- 5 At its March 2019 meeting, CBC noted progress on the project (*Progress report* CBC(19)26). The Division was planning to follow the research with a stakeholder survey on its service to dioceses relating to struggling churches and those considering closure. It was agreed to bring this forward so that the feedback from users of the service could inform the conclusions and recommendations of the report.

- 6 In order to allow adequate time for a survey of dioceses and then a separate survey of other stakeholders, it was also agreed to **spread the three months'** work of the research secondment over five months, with casework duties alongside. A draft report bringing this and the other agreed strands of the project together was timetabled for CBC in July 2019.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 The subject of this study is struggling churches. This is meant in the sense of the church building and, specifically, those church buildings where there is a concern as to their sustainability as local centres of worship and mission. The **term ‘struggling church’ is far from perfect. It seeks to encapsulate without euphemism or judgement something which is problematic for those with the responsibility for pastoral provision and the church building, often as not distressing for members of congregations and concerning to wider Church institutions.** It attempts to cover something that may look very different from place to place, have a variety of causes and invite multifarious solutions or none at all. As a presenting issue for CBC, it is that category of church buildings which, for one reason or another or for a combination of reasons, are in difficulty and whose communities may as a result decide to set in motion the closure process or to embark on a process of more or less radical change in order to maintain regular public worship in them.

- 2 Until relatively recently, the CBC did not have any specific workstream to address these churches until their predicament crystallised either into a proposal for positive change or, more often, a resolution to close. That reflects the fact that the formal mechanisms of the Church for its worship buildings **are very much arranged around these processes: it isn’t casework unless it falls under the Faculty Jurisdiction Measure or the Mission and Pastoral Measure.** That has changed in recent years and the Division has made itself available to respond with officer advice on heritage management and change, governance, fundraising and the green agenda in cases which are neither consultations prior to submission for faculty nor closure cases as such. This draws on a range of policy initiatives, many of which the Council has devised or partnered in and enthusiastically promoted. In some cases, the response has had a tangible output in the form of non-statutory Survey Reports or Conservation Management Plans; a few have been included in funded schemes which the Council has been involved in or received grant from one of the grant schemes it administers. The approach has generally been to suggest possible options or identify opportunities for a secure future in worship use in **line with the Division’s overall strategy of Open and Sustainable churches.**

- 3 **The Council’s work in this area responds to its remit as set out in the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure 2007 S55-57 but in particular S55(2):**
‘The Council shall have power to give information and advice, whether or not requested to do so
 - a. to any person or body having, within the Church of England, either nationally or within a diocese or part thereof or a parish or any other area, responsibility for or functions relating to the use, care, conservation, repair, planning, design and development of churches on such matters either generally or in relation to particular buildings;
 - b. to any person or body other than one within the Church of England having responsibility for or functions relating to the matters referred to

in paragraph (a) above in relation to particular buildings therein mentioned; and

- c. to any person or body having responsibility for or functions relating to the matters referred to in paragraph (a) above in relation to particular places used for Christian worship by Churches other than the Church of **England.**'

Taken with S(5), which interprets 'church' to include contents and churchyards, the Council's remit is defined quite broadly to cover both church buildings in a holistic sense and the way in which their congregations and wider communities engage with them.

- 4 Of course the Division does not work in isolation. Dioceses offer the main support network for churches and operate a variety of initiatives to encourage **and foster the life of churches. Some have a wider reach, such as Hereford's** suite of resources under the *Crossing the Threshold* banner³. Some have won external help, for example under **Historic England's** longstanding funding stream for support officers. Two dioceses, Manchester and St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, currently have funding under a pilot scheme from HM Government in line with the recommendations of the 2017 Taylor Review. At national level, the Church coordinates and resources policy initiatives and provides structural funding and funding for time-limited projects to nurture growth and revival in various ways. The funding plans for the forthcoming triennium (2020-2) have recently been announced and provide for a significant increase in discretionary spending.
- 5 How far all these initiatives from different branches of the Church add up to a coordinated package specifically *for* struggling churches is debatable. This paper invites others to contribute perspectives on this broad subject.
- 6 An upbeat attitude accentuating the scope for turning struggling churches around is not always the appropriate response. Every case must be assessed on its merits. Setting unrealistic expectations where they are not warranted **will not help anyone's cause.**
- 7 The closure process is regulated by the Mission and Pastoral Measure 2011 (MPM). It provides for the making of pastoral church buildings schemes, that is to say schemes containing a declaration of closure for regular public worship. Proposals for closure are normally initiated by a PCC resolution to close, though in most cases this will follow much discussion and reflection within the congregation and informal consultation within the community. The resolution is submitted to the Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committee (DMPC) to consider before making a recommendation to the bishop.
- 8 The process under the Measure deals only with those buildings consecrated for the purpose of public worship. There are a number of building licensed for

³ <https://www.hereford.anglican.org/Crossingthethresholdtoolkit/>

Anglican worship which are not consecrated. Any closures and disposals of these unconsecrated places of worship do not follow the process under the Measure and are outside the scope of this study.

- 9 When a DMPC is considering **the future of a church in such cases, the CBC's** role is to prepare a report on the historic, architectural and aesthetic interest of the building and its contents and, where there is one, the churchyard. The Council also assesses the potential for change to the building that would **facilitate its continued use for worship if it were to remain open. The Council's** role here is set out in the Measure⁴.
- 10 Actual and potential closures need to be considered within the broader missional and pastoral context, including trends in other forms of reorganisation (ie to benefice and parish structures and to the deployment of resources), as well as the rise in the number of fresh expressions of Church and new worshipping communities. The long-term trend is a decline in the number of benefices and full-time stipendiary clergy. Closures account for a relatively small proportion of the schemes for pastoral reorganisation in any given year.⁵

Case study: a church in Sunderland



South Hylton, St Mary (Diocese of Durham)

⁴ MPM 2011 S23(6-7)

⁵ For example, as a result of reorganisation completed during 2018, there was a net reduction of 82 benefices, reflecting the continuing decline in the number of full-time stipendiary clergy (over the last five years the net reduction is 350, over ten years it is 664 and over fifteen years it is 1,008). Closures accounted for only 18 of the 177 pastoral reorganisation schemes made by the Commissioners in 2018 (and half of these also included other forms of reorganisation).

This church exemplifies several of the themes in this report. It serves a parish population of 3,650 people, very close to the national average. With a deprivation index of 2,270, it falls into the second most deprived 10% of communities in the country. It is on an attractive corner site in a tight-knit suburb of Sunderland and is the most significant historic building in the area (grade II listed, by *Charles Hodgson Fowler*, 1879-80). CBC approved a Church Buildings Report in June 2019. The church closed for regular public worship by a scheme made on 6 June 2019.

METHODOLOGY

Analysis of casework

- 1 A statistical analysis of past and recent casework forms a major part of assembling the evidence base for addressing research outcomes (a) and (b). It is important that this has a long enough perspective to provide some reliable information about patterns and outcomes, in particular the relative proportions of struggling churches from a given period that proceeded to closure or that remained open for worship, to set against recent experience, where many of the cases with which officers have engaged will not yet have reached a conclusion. The timescales involved are acknowledged by all to be long: it normally takes a number of years for a struggling church to resolve on closure and then for the formal process to be implemented, the church to be marketed and a new use implemented on site. With this in mind, a span of fifteen years 2004-18 has been chosen, which provides a substantial block of cases which have had an outcome as well as picking up recent cases where the **Council's initiatives** (see research outcome (c) above) and other strategic initiatives at diocesan and national level may have had an effect. For the analysis of likely outcomes within five years, only cases in the ten years 2004-13 have been counted to ensure that the figures are not skewed by cases which have yet to work through the closure and disposal process. For the other analyses, the whole sample is relevant.
- 2 Part of the challenge in this statistical and quantitative element of the research is the fact that the necessary data has been assembled from various sources spread across several departments and databases. Data standards and parameters can vary between them, for example in the way that churches and other places of worship in use are categorised. Assembling a reliable database has proved a useful exercise in identifying the scope of data held in different places and aspects where systems could be better linked. In particular, it has helped to identify future improvements to the Church Heritage Record and opportunities where it might be the basis for streamlining some aspects of the **Division's work on closed and closing churches**.
- 3 Data has been assembled from a variety of sources to enable an analysis of relevant casework covering the fifteen-year period 2004-18:
 - material from **CCB's** records: various casework lists, CCC⁶ and CBC agendas, individual reports etc;
 - the Church Heritage Record (hereafter CHR) and Online Faculty System (OFS);

⁶ The Council for the Care of Churches (CCC), which operated until May 2008, at which point it was replaced by the Church Buildings Council as established under the Dioceses, Pastoral and Mission Measure, 2007.

- the database populating the Church of England Parish Map (CoEPM) system published by the Research and Statistics team (R&S)⁷: data on population, deprivation and the nature of the environment of the church (degree of urbanisation);
 - the casework management system maintained by the Church Commissioners' Closed Churches team⁸.
- 4 The CCB Digital Projects and Outreach Officer⁹ has combined this material and provided tools enabling analysis, including comparisons across the whole datasets of open consecrated churches. The merging of datasets has thrown up some basic practical difficulties. All the datasets used have varied in the naming of certain churches and parishes: the legal name of either is quite often different to the name by which church and parish are known locally or in other contexts. The primary means of matching one record to another is the six-figure church code - the unique identifier allocated by R&S to all worshipping congregations and used as a proxy code for the buildings they worship in. The code is used in the CoEPM, the CHR/OFS and the **Commissioners' database**. In many cases, it has proved difficult to find the correct church code for cases where the available record lacks it and uses a colloquial name for the church and parish.
- 5 For a variety of comparisons, the cases in this sample are set against the total 'estate', ie all the churches open for public worship in the Church of England in England. For this, the study has gone by the corpus of churches recorded on the CHR, excluding the 53 in the diocese of Sodor and Man and the 43 in the Channel Islands (diocese of Winchester). This gives 17,620 in total. The following caveats should be borne in mind:
- The 42 cathedrals are included; although they are not covered by the process laid down in the 2011 Measure (except in respect of the parish church status that 17 of them possess in addition to being cathedrals) and it is inconceivable that any of them would ever close, they are relevant to the subject matter of the study as they form part of the overall frontline estate for mission and worship;
 - CHR records only three churches classified as licensed places of worship, ie those which are unconsecrated and function as Anglican places of worship solely by virtue of a license. This will include at least some of the **100 or so Bishop's Mission Order initiatives**. The data held by R&S which forms the basis of the CoEPM is likewise lacking in this category and, as a result, R&S has yet to allocate them church codes. It has so far not been possible to locate a centrally aggregated list of licensed places of worship which might then be used to populate the

⁷ The author is grateful to Simeon Christian and Ken Eames of R&S for supplying the data and explaining the context.

⁸ The author is grateful to Andrea Mulkeen and Matthew Crowe of the Pastoral and Closed Churches team for supplying the data and explaining the context.

⁹ Dr James Miles. His help and insights have been invaluable.

CHR and CoEPM. Nor are there figures readily available for new church buildings.

- CHR (in common with CoEPM) lacks a number of churches and chapels which have a status other than parish church or chapel of ease, such as peculiars, armed forces chapels, Oxford and Cambridge college and other university and school chapels, except those that have opted to come under the Faculty Jurisdiction. Many of these, and the variety of worship or prayer spaces in hospitals, prisons, airports etc, are licensed but not consecrated. For those which are, as with cathedrals, they do not fall within the ambit of the 2011 Measure but, unlike cathedrals, their specialised functions and membership places many of them outside the frontline estate for mission and worship and they tend not to have a call on the resources of the diocese, so their absence from the statistics is not critical for the present study. However, for the benefit of other interests, it would be better if they were recorded on the CHR and CoEPM, with a suitable indicator which would enable them to be excluded from reports and analyses where they are not relevant.
- It has not been possible to take account of the potential discrepancies arising from the sharing of churches by more than one congregation or the temporary or permanent transfer of congregations to other venues (as noted above, the church code is, strictly speaking, allocated to worshipping congregations rather than to church buildings). Such discrepancies are unlikely to affect the present study given that the sample addresses cases at a stage when their congregations have not vacated the building (or at least not for good), so the code will be a reliable indicator. To the extent that potential discrepancies may confuse aspects of the wider work of CBC (and other building-oriented departments), there may be value in establishing a coding structure that can reliably signify the building for all time and the association of the building with the congregation at a point in time. Such an initiative would need to be managed and curated, so there would be a resource implication.
- The study does not take account of fresh expressions of Church, more than half of which take place in venues other than consecrated churches. Research undertaken by the Church Army Research Unit (CARU) covering around half the country suggests that about 45% meet in churches, 15-20% meet in church halls, 5-10% meet in the church and hall, and about 30% meet in other venues. The figures for the sample dioceses suggest there must be several thousand such groups across the country. The model is a flexible one and the nature of tenure in the non-church venues is unlikely to undermine the focus of a study of more or less permanent church buildings.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Lings, G *The Day of Small Things: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England* (CARU, November 2016) available at <https://www.churcharmy.org/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=204265>

Recommendation 1 - jointly with R&S, the Church Commissioners and other interested departments within the NCIs to

- a. agree a protocol for the use of the church code to enable church buildings to be distinguished from worshipping congregations; and*
- b. to seek a means of obtaining accurate and regularly updated data on the location, name and status of licensed places of worship and peculiars and institutional chapels and to include them in internal and public-facing datasets where appropriate.*

- 6 Caveats also apply to the CoEPM data¹¹. Population statistics are based on the UK census data (2001 and 2011) with interim estimates issued by the Office for National Statistics (2018, 2017, 2016, 2014, 2009, 2008, 2004). Census data is **aggregated, at the lowest level, by ‘output areas’**. These do not map straightforwardly onto ecclesiastical parishes¹²; as a result, a certain degree of approximation is necessary to arrive at the CoEPM parish population figures. A similar pragmatism applies to the deprivation figures, which derive from the English Indices of Deprivation prepared by DCLG (last edition issued 2015; interim estimates also issued) and are broken down by ward which also require some manipulation to apply them to ecclesiastical parishes. Historic CoEPM datasets are available for both population and deprivation but can only be accessed by means of an indicator of the parish boundaries at the time in question, which may not always still be accessible. The data on the degree of urbanisation is based on a land parcel generally smaller than the parish and therefore cannot be said to characterise the parish reliably. For example, the church might be situated in a village which has a degree of urban-ness rather greater than the parish as a whole.
- 7 **There are caveats too regarding the Commissioners’ database. The indicator for the nature of the land use (urban, rural etc) is based on officers’** pragmatic judgement, not on any scientific categorisation or official indicator. The architect field may not be comprehensive.
- 8 The Church has high-quality sources of data and well-resourced systems to maintain and present them. There is a need to establish common data standards in some areas to ensure that the information is as comprehensive and useful as it could be. There is scope to make more effective use of the systems already in place.
- 9 The available data has been analysed to establish whether any of the chosen factors (geographical distribution, population, deprivation, urban/rural, listing status, historical period, principal architect) correlate to the incidence of struggling churches and/or actual closures. Each of the factors has been analysed separately, though some have proved not to be capable of statistical

¹¹ See <https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=67bce0ed36dd4ee0af7a16bc079aa09a>

¹² For census geography, see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/censusgeography>. As at 28 June 2019, there are 12,443 ecclesiastical parishes in England.

treatment. Even for the ones that are, there are distinct limitations to an approach where factors are considered in isolation from each other as it does not take account of the way that factors interact. A combined analysis considering all the statistically viable factors together has not been attempted in the present study but it would be feasible, using a multivariate logistic regression model. This would enable the interaction of factors to be better understood and, in particular, adjust for those which might appear to be causal or instrumental but are in fact secondary or symptomatic. Such a model could also incorporate other factors: pastoral, financial etc (see *Research findings* para 14 and Recommendation 3 below). Such factors might include the status of the building (eg whether parish church, chapel of ease etc), size of congregation, financial strength of church/parish. R&S holds relevant data for these. CHR data on the physical size of the church and whether it is a Major Parish Church, and Historic England data on Heritage at Risk could be included. It may also be relevant to include a control sample of churches which are not identified as struggling.

- 10 The research parameters would usefully include those churches which were the subject of reports but which did not go on to close to establish why that was the case. The impact of fresh expressions of Church, which in many cases take place in venues other than a consecrated church, could also be explored.

Stakeholder survey

Survey 1

- 11 The first stage of the survey¹³ was addressed to those who might be described **as the primary users of CBC's service in this area: the secretaries of Diocesan Mission and Pastoral Committees (DMPCs)**¹⁴, the bodies which commission and receive Church Buildings Reports as required by the Measure¹⁵, and archdeacons, who are normally the main channel of liaison between a parish and the diocese in cases where the parish is struggling or contemplating closure. Archdeacons are ex officio members of the DMPC. The survey sought to investigate perceptions of the factors or preconditions that might cause churches to struggle, the context in which dioceses considered potential closure cases and their assessment of the value and usefulness of the service provided by CBC, ie the provision of Church Buildings Reports on churches being considered under the 2011 Measure and Survey Reports on those whose future is being assessed without recourse to the statutory process.

¹³ The author is grateful to Bev Botting of R&S for her help in devising the two surveys.

¹⁴ This is the name of the committee as defined in the Measure (MPM 2011 S2(1)) but there is some variation in nomenclature on the ground. In some cases, the secretary of the relevant committee is the Pastoral Secretary; in eleven cases the DAC and DMPC Secretary roles are held by the same post in a dual role. DMPC Secretary is here used as the generic term.

¹⁵ See S21(7). Besides the DMPC, the Measure stipulates that the report should be sent to the Church Commissioners and the Diocesan Board of Finance. In practice, the DMPC Secretary is asked to pass the report on to the DBF but, judging by the lack of any substantive contact or feedback from DBFs, they would appear to have no active interest at this stage of the process.

Respondents were asked to draw on their experience of cases where reports had been received by the DMPC during their time in post (and therefore as members of the committee).

- 12 The first stage of the survey was launched at the beginning of April 2019 (to DMPC Secretaries) and after Easter (to archdeacons), allowing, after a reminder message and deadline extension, eight weeks and five weeks respectively for responses. In practice, the survey remained open for somewhat longer and two further responses were received after the stated closing date; these have been included in the analysis. The survey results were anonymised so that no responses or comments would be attributed to a specific person. Job or office title and diocese were recorded to enable the extent of the coverage of the survey to be gauged and for broad comparisons to be made between the responses of the two subject groups.
- 13 In all, responses were received from 30 of the 40 DMPC secretaries (75%) and 24 of the 130¹⁶ archdeacons (18%), a total of 54 out of 170 potential respondents (32%). Responses were received from 31 out of the 40 dioceses (78%). Clearly the subject matter of the survey, whilst squarely within the remit of archdeacons, represents a relatively small element of their multiple responsibilities. Engagement with around one fifth of them is therefore perhaps a reasonable outcome, even though buildings matters are key to their role. Allowing for some vacancies and transitional arrangements among DMPC secretaries, a showing of three quarters is satisfactory. Nevertheless, given that the CBC has a statutory role within the closure process and all dioceses face an acknowledged challenge in terms of their historic estate of open churches, an overall outcome in which nine out of forty dioceses did not **reply at all suggests that CBC's service is not considered** central.
- 14 Among the respondents, length of time in role varied considerably, with the result that some had seen as many as 15 or 20+ cases in their time, others just one or none at all.
- 15 It is hoped that better and more regular liaison with DMPC secretaries can be fostered. To this end, and to explore the nature of the crossover between DMPCs and DACs, they have been invited to the DAC conference this year. If successful, this may become a regular event. As archdeacons are such an important link between parishes and the diocese in building-related matters, a means of regular engagement with them is called for.

Recommendation 2: to seek constructive engagement with DMPC secretaries and archdeacons through:

- a. *providing a follow up to the survey to communicate the main findings once this report has been approved;*

¹⁶ ie all the archdeacons in the Church of England, excluding those appointed to the armed forces and prisons but not corrected for vacancies at the time of the survey.

- b. *improving liaison with DMPC secretaries and providing a platform for discussion on matters of common concern, in the first place at the 2019 DAC/DMPC conference;*
- c. *in consultation with the archdeacons' National Executive Officer, ensuring regular liaison with them on matters of common concern;*
- d. *exploring with them the scope for using Church Buildings Reports and Survey Reports as part of constructive engagement with struggling churches and how CBC's service might be improved.*

16 Church Commissioners receive a copy of Church Buildings Reports at the same time as the DMPCs. Their views were sought via a meeting rather than the online survey.

Survey 2

- 17 The second stage of the survey was addressed to those organisations to which Church Buildings Reports are circulated on the basis that they have an interest in the closure process focussed on the heritage and historic buildings issues: the Churches Conservation Trust, the Friends of Friendless Churches, the National Churches Trust, Historic England, the National Amenity Societies (Ancient Monuments Society, Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Georgian Group, Victorian Society, Twentieth Century Society, Council for British Archaeology) and some thirteen specialist interest groups¹⁷. These **bodies might be described as the secondary users of CBC's service. The survey** sought their assessment of the value and usefulness of Church Buildings Reports.
- 18 The second stage of the survey was launched at the beginning of June, allowing just under four weeks for responses. The survey results were anonymised so that no responses or comments would be attributed to a specific person. Job title and organisation were recorded to enable the extent of the coverage of the survey to be gauged and for broad comparisons to be made where the remit of the subject organisation had a bearing.
- 19 In all, 33 responses were received. This included 12 from DAC Secretaries or their equivalents (30%) and six from other members of DAC staff or Committee chairs, with the result that 15 of the 40 dioceses responded (38%).

¹⁷ These bodies are as follows: Antiquarian Horological Society, British Institute of Organ Studies, Central Council of Church Bells, Church Monuments Society, Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Ely Stained Glass Museum, Keltek Trust, London Stained Glass Repository, Monumental Brass Society, Pevsner **Architectural Guides**, **SAVE Britain's Heritage**, **UK National Inventory of War Memorials**, War Memorials Trust. Their interest in the process is discussed under *Research findings* from para 109. They do not receive Church Buildings Reports in cases where the diocese has requested confidentiality; nor do they receive Survey Reports, which are designed to be confidential to the parish and diocesan staff.

13 of the 23 other organisations¹⁸ (57%) responded. Taken together, a total of 28 out of 63 of the sampled organisations responded (44%). Six responses were incomplete, including five of the DAC contributions, and a further two were from unspecified sources and offered nothing that could be taken into account. Overall, this represents a lesser engagement on the part of the secondary stakeholders than was seen amongst the primary users.

20 Both elements of the survey demonstrated that there was a need for **improvement in the Council's engagement with the stakeholders in its service.**

¹⁸ Some organisations were represented by two or three members but these statistics count DACs and organisations rather than individuals. However, the analysis of the content of survey results counts individual responses separately.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Casework activity in the last 15 years

- 1 **The study focussed on the Division’s casework in respect of struggling churches during the period 2004-18.** More precisely, it covers:
 - churches for which the diocese sought a Church Buildings Report (prior to November 2014 known as a Pastoral Measure Report or PM Report) under the 1983¹⁹ or 2011 Measures in response to a resolution to invoke the closure process or a similar request from the PCC;
 - churches for which the parish, archdeacon or diocese sought a Survey Report to inform discussion of the church’s future without invoking the statutory process²⁰

where the report was approved by the CCC or CBC between 01/01/04 and 31/12/18²¹.

- 2 In a few instances, reports were updated or rewritten, either to convert a Survey Report to a PM or Church Buildings Report in response to a formal proposal to consider closure or to take account of changed circumstances some time after the issue of an earlier report. Cases where the revision was substantive, and the updated report was endorsed by the Council, have been treated as separate reports for the purposes of this study.
- 3 In general, the turnaround between the receipt of the request and its approval by the Council has been relatively quick: a matter of weeks or a few months, so **the Council approval date is not far astray from the point at which a parish’s desire to consider its future is acted on by the diocese**²².

<i>CCC/CBC casework 2004-18: reports issued</i>	
PM/Church Buildings Reports	495
Survey reports	57
<i>Total</i>	552
<i>Average per annum</i>	37

- 4 The annual throughput has varied somewhat over the study period, but the overall pattern appears to be cyclical, with peaks in the years around 2005 (that year producing 56 reports) and 2013 (45 reports) and troughs in between (30 in 2010; 23 in 2017)²³. This cyclical pattern is still evident when Survey

¹⁹ Pastoral Measure 1983.

²⁰ A service offered from 2007 onwards.

²¹ Including seven Survey Reports and one PM Report which do not appear on the Council agendas but which presumably were **approved by Chairman’s action**.

²² 2018-19 has seen a somewhat longer turnaround, though the gap is now being closed.

²³ On a longer timeframe, the average is 51 reports per annum over the fifty years that reports have been produced since the Pastoral Measure 1968. It should be borne in mind that, in the early years, the CCC was responding to considerable pent-up demand for reports which had built up prior to the implementation of the system established by the Measure.

Reports are excluded. On their own, the pattern of Survey Reports is more erratic but that is because the sample is smaller and most of them arise from grouped requests covering a number of churches in a single area.

- 5 The current trend is upwards, with 37 reports approved during 2019 and requests received towards the end of the year indicating continuing strong demand.
- 6 No causality for a cycle of seven or eight years has been discerned; the pattern may be coincidental.
- 7 This study also takes account of actual closures. The table below shows all cases where a scheme or order closing a church for public worship became effective during the study period.

<i>Church closures 2004-18</i>	
Schemes for closure only	224
Schemes for closure and disposal	105
S66 orders (church not used since 1964)	11
<i>Total</i>	340
<i>Average per annum</i>	23

- 8 The number of closures per year were somewhat uneven over the study period, varying between 12 and 35. Unlike the reports, no obvious pattern is discernable. Given that it may be some considerable time after the substantive decision to activate closure and the making of the scheme to implement it that the closure becomes legally effective, there may be an underlying pattern which is being obscured by factors unrelated to the circumstances which led to closure.
- 9 It is important to bear in mind that the figures for reports produced by the CCC and CBC in the fifteen years from 2004 to 2018 cannot straightforwardly be compared to those for closures over the same period because there is a time lag between the issuing of the Church Buildings Report and the confirmation of the scheme for closure, and between the closure scheme being made and its becoming effective. Both gaps can be as long as a number of years – the PM Report for Thorpe Constantine, St Constantine (Diocese of Lichfield) was issued in October 1990 but the scheme providing for closure was not made until 15 March 1995 and did not become effective until 1 December 2014, in all a process taking 24 years. Such extremes are rare but the timescales involved are long enough that it is necessary to think of the two workstreams working on distinct timetables. Of the 340 closures effected during 2004-18, as many as 82 concerned churches for which a report had been issued by CCC before 1 January 2004²⁴.

²⁴ A further nine concerned ruins which, not being subject to the MPM 2011, were formally closed for worship without the need for the diocese to obtain a Church Buildings Report

- 10 Whilst a direct comparison of the whole of the two sets of data is not possible, the two fifteen year blocks of casework should each, when taken in aggregate and thereby smoothing peaks and troughs, give an indication of the normal throughput of the system. On this basis, the statistics for reports issued and closures effected over the last fifteen years suggest that there have been considerably more reports written than churches closed: just under half as many again (495 reports, excluding Survey Reports, compared to 340 closures). Put another way, CBC produced 1.46 reports for every closure over the same period. This can be compared to the total throughput since the present process, broadly speaking, began in 1969, which shows that there have been 1.25 reports for every closure (2469 reports, excluding Survey Reports, compared to 1,974 closures, 1969-2018). This suggests that closure has, over time, become less of a certainty. The trend would suggest less clearcut candidates coming forward and greater scope for different outcomes. In some **cases, the Council's advice may help clarify the value** of the asset or suggest constructive ideas for a sustainable future. This is discussed in more detail below (*The value and effectiveness of CBC's advice*, para 93 onwards).
- 11 One worthwhile direct comparison between the two datasets can be made. This is in respect of the likely outcome within five years of a report being produced. Of the 357 churches for which reports (excluding Survey Reports) were issued between 2004 and 2013, 173 of them went on to close within five years: a conversion rate of 48%²⁵. This suggests that the decision to close was by no means a foregone conclusion at the time CBC was involved. Put in the same terms as the comparisons in the preceding paragraph, CBC produced 2.06 reports for every church which closed within five years. It would appear from this that the trend is for closure to become less likely as the outcome of the statutory process. However, there are significant caveats to be borne in mind. Some cases will for necessary reasons take longer than five years to reach a conclusion. Moreover, within the ten years 2004-13, there is no discernable pattern suggestive of a decline in the conversion rate²⁶.
- 12 The Council issues an average of 37 reports each year, the majority of which are Church Buildings Reports. Of these, currently just under half result in closure within five years. In other words, where a report is requested, closure is far from inevitable. There is generally a time lag between the report and the implementation of closure.

Characterising struggling churches and potential closures

- 13 Research objective (b) seeks to identify patterns in closure decisions – and by implication amongst struggling churches more generally - as these relate to

²⁵ PM and Church Buildings Reports only. Only an approximate analysis has been possible so far: 5 years may be as much as 5 years 11 months.

²⁶ The five-year conversion rate fluctuates year on year between 30 and 66%.

listing status, period of church, type of locality (urban, suburban, rural etc). The stakeholder survey of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons sought to measure and compare the underlying causes prompting consideration of closure and the immediate triggers for requesting a Church Buildings Report.

- 14 In attempting to characterise struggling churches and potential closures, the focus in this study is on building-specific and heritage-related matters, as that is the core remit of the CBC and the subject matter of its reports, and on those circumstantial factors about the environment or context of the church which may be said to be objectively definable and for which data is readily available. The Council recognises that building-specific issues are only part of the context in which church communities might assess their future and consider closure. In many cases, heritage considerations may figure only as a minor factor in the decision about closure. This research has not sought to assess pastoral or financial issues except insofar as survey respondents were invited to rate their importance against building-related issues as factors or triggers for the consideration of closure. This study generally and the survey of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons specifically have given due regard to the role of churches as centres for mission and worship. Others within the NCIs or individual dioceses are invited to contribute relevant information or to conduct parallel studies on pastoral, financial and other factors which would help towards a more holistic understanding of struggling and closing churches. Better still would be for a joint study which took account of all the factors which are acknowledged to be relevant. Bearing in mind the complexity of the interaction between diverse factors, such a study would need to apply a suitable statistical model to ensure that the interaction of factors is properly understood and in particular to correct for those which might appear to be causal or instrumental but are in fact secondary or symptomatic (see *Methodology*, para 9).

Recommendation 3 – to invite other departments within the NCIs:

- a) to comment, especially on pastoral, financial and other factors alongside building-related ones; and*
- b) to supply relevant data for a joint study that would help towards a more holistic understanding of struggling and closing churches.*

- 15 The casework sample from the period 2004-18 has been compared to available data held elsewhere to assess whether it is possible to characterise struggling churches and potential closures. The characteristics in question have been divided into two groups: the nature of the environment or context of the church and the nature of the building itself.
- 16 Where a pattern can be identified amongst any of the indicators studied, it is necessary to consider how far they are statistically valid and to what extent they are circumstantial, causal or symptomatic of other factors. Understanding causal and circumstantial factors better is clearly of relevance to strategic planning and to help target resources for CCB and for dioceses and

NCIs. Non-causal factors may also be helpful for CCB to understand which **aspects of the Church's heritage are** most threatened.

The environment or context of the church

Geographical distribution

- 17 **The Division's casework has been analysed according to ecclesiastical** province, diocese and government region, also taking into account the size of **each diocese's stock** of consecrated churches.
- 18 The incidence of cases from diocese to diocese is not even. Geographical distribution would appear to be a significant factor. The fifteen dioceses generating the fewest reports (Church Buildings Reports and Survey Reports) over the study period were all in Canterbury province, with the exception of Sheffield and Newcastle (an outlier with only one report over the fifteen years). Of these, the ten quietest dioceses produced only 36 cases between them, accounting for around 1.2% of their combined stock of consecrated churches. The ten busiest dioceses, six of them in York province, produced 284 reports between them – just over half the total. At the top of the list was Manchester, with no fewer than 41 reports, just over 10% of its entire stock of consecrated churches.
- 19 Looked at from a regional perspective, the three busiest regions were the North West (reports on 6.4% of its stock), Yorkshire (4.4%) and London (3.5%), followed by the North East, East Midlands, West Midlands, South East, South West and East of England (2.0% of its stock)²⁷. In broad terms, this suggests that churches are more vulnerable the further north they are; only London reversing the trend. Seen from another perspective, it may suggest a greater willingness in those regions to consider and address provision or overprovision of church buildings.
- 20 Size of diocese, in terms of total number of churches, appears only to be a significant factor towards the smaller end of the scale. Of the ten smallest dioceses, five were also in the lowest ten in terms of the proportion of their stock seeking reports. Small dioceses would appear to be somewhat more resilient than the rest. Amongst medium-sized and large dioceses, there does not appear to be a pattern. The ten largest dioceses included three of the busiest in terms of proportion of their stock seeking reports but also three of the quietest. In total, these ten accounted for 6,847 churches between them and had 191 reports, some 2.8% of their combined stock. This is very close to both the median (2.7%) and the modal percentage (around 2.7%) in the distribution across dioceses. In other words, taken together they were very typical of the whole sample.

²⁷ Dioceses mapped approximately onto government regions.

- 21 Discounting the Survey Reports does not appear to affect these underlying patterns to any significant degree. Only Worcester, Norwich and Canterbury, with a high proportion of Survey Reports among their totals, change places to any marked degree in the rankings, but not to an extent that affects any of the findings outlined above.
- 22 These patterns are similar in the statistics for closures²⁸ over the same period. The fifteen dioceses generating the fewest closures as a proportion of their total stock over the study period were all in Canterbury province, with the exception of Newcastle. The ten quietest dioceses produced only 15 closures between them, four of them with none at all, accounting for around 0.3% of their combined stock of consecrated churches. The ten busiest dioceses on this measure, seven of them in York province, produced 126 closures between them – half the total – accounting for 3% of their combined stock of churches. At the top of the list was Manchester, with no fewer than 26 closures, 6.4% of its stock.
- 23 If closures are examined region by region, the tendency for churches to be more vulnerable the further north they are is again evident, with London no longer countering the trend.
- 24 Struggling churches are more likely to be found in the north of England and London than they are in the Midlands and even more so than in the south of England outside London. Actual closures follow the same pattern except that London no longer counters the north-south trend. Small dioceses, in terms of their stock of consecrated churches, would appear to be somewhat more resilient than the rest in respect of the incidence of struggling churches and actual closures.
- 25 Before deriving any firm conclusions from these findings, it would be useful to refine the figures on the basis of the distribution of licensed places of worship and non-parochial consecrated churches which nevertheless contribute to mission in their locality (about which data is lacking: see *Methodology* above).

Population

- 26 Historic population data is available for around two thirds of the sample of cases (391 out of 552 cases). The gaps arise from the lack of a reliable record of the parish boundaries at the time the report was issued; only with this can the relevant iteration of the population data be brought to bear. Whilst the size of the sample is affected, this shortcoming is not related to the level of population and so cannot be said to skew the validity of the records which are available²⁹.

²⁸ The sample is limited to closures in cases where the report was issued after 01/01/04.

²⁹ The limitations of the base data are discussed under *Methodology* above.

- 27 For each church for which the data is available, the parish population has been compared to the number of churches in the parish. Both parish population and population per church in the parish have been compared to the national distribution of population by parish. These are placed in deciles representing the 10% smallest parishes by population, the next smallest 10% and so on³⁰. In addition, average population per parish by deanery and average population per church per parish by deanery has been calculated for comparison.
- 28 There is a marked correlation in the data at both ends of the population distribution. Fewer struggling churches were found in smaller parishes: only 5% of the sample was in the smallest 10% of parishes (up to 181 inhabitants; 21 out of 391 cases) and 7% in the next smallest decile (182 to 336 inhabitants; 29 out of 391 cases). In all these cases, the parish was smaller than the deanery average and in all but two the church was the only church in the parish. Taken as a whole, the bottom half of the population distribution by parish produced only 31% of the reports (up to 1,591 inhabitants; 123 out of 391 cases). This suggests that, on its own, sparsity of population does not make for a struggling church but, where the community is smaller than those nearby, it will be more vulnerable than its neighbours.
- 29 Meanwhile, larger parishes produced more struggling churches. 19% of reports arose in the largest decile (more than 10,964 inhabitants; 73 out of 391 cases). All of these were larger than the deanery average and almost all of them were parishes with more than one church (61 out of 73 cases), some of them with six or more. The next most populous decile of parishes showed the same tendency but to a considerably lesser extent, producing 13% of the cases (7,619 to 10,964 inhabitants; 50 out of 391 cases) of which two thirds were larger than the deanery average (34 out of 50) and just under half had more than one church (21 out of 50). This suggests that the largest parishes are the most vulnerable if they have more than one church. Whether it arises from historic provision of chapels of ease or pastoral reorganisation in recent times, parishes with more than one church appear to invite rationalisation.
- 30 The figures for actual closures reproduce these patterns, accentuating them somewhat at the smaller end of the population scale. Only 2% of closures occurred in the smallest decile (3 out of 135 closures where the population figures were available) and 8% in the next smallest (11 out of 135). The smaller 50% of parishes produced 28% of the closures (38 out of 135). Meanwhile, the largest decile had 17% of the closures and the next largest 13% (23 and 17 respectively out of 135).
- 31 If the multi-church factor is taken out of the equation, then populous parishes do not appear to be vulnerable at all. Only 3% of struggling churches were in parishes with more than 10,964 inhabitants – the threshold of the top decile –

³⁰ All parishes excluding those parish units associated with closed churches and extra-parochial places.

for every church (12 out of 390 cases). Only 2% of closures were in such parishes (3 out of 135).

- 32 The distribution of population across ecclesiastical parishes is very wide, from communities of fewer than 100 souls to urban concentrations of 20,000 or more. A different perspective on population is provided by using a simple average as a benchmark. A baseline figure of 3,150 for the average population per Church of England church has been calculated as a simple mean based of the 2017 estimate of 55,619,400 for the whole population of England (projected from the 2011 census total of 53,012,456³¹) divided by 17,620 churches.
- 33 Approximately two thirds of the parishes in the country are below the benchmark average population (the maximum population in the sixth decile is 2,872). Yet only 41% of struggling churches were found in parishes of up to 3,150 inhabitants (162 out of 391). Strikingly, in 83% of these cases, the population was less than the average of parishes in the deanery (134 cases out of 162). 34% of these cases concerned parishes with more than one church (55 out of 162). One such is the Asterby Group in the Lincolnshire Wolds, a parish with no fewer than nine churches and only 1,319 people between them.

Case study: a multi-church parish



Biscathorpe, St Helen, in the Asterby group parish (Diocese of Lincoln).

³¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demography_of_England A more in-depth assessment of projected population is to be found via the Office for National Statistics <https://www.ons.gov.uk/>

The Asterby group is a parish with nine churches in the Diocese of Lincoln. There were ten until 2011, when Market Stainton, St Michael, closed. A PM Report had been issued in September 2010, following a Survey Report of April 2009. It has suffered lead theft and declining condition but a residential conversion has recently been agreed. A PM Report was issued for Biscathorpe, St Helen, in July 2014 and revised in October 2018. The multi-church structure of the Asterby group is a result of pastoral reorganisation against a background of extreme rural depopulation which originated in part, at least, in the medieval period. Indeed sparsity of population may well be the norm for the area across its history. The village of Biscathorpe was deserted, probably in the C14, and never reoccupied. There is now no more than a farmstead and a holiday cottage in the vicinity of the church

34 The pattern is the same where actual closures are concerned³². 36% of them were in parishes of up to 3,150 inhabitants (49 out of 135). In 76% of these, the population was less than the deanery average (37 out of 49).

35 The smallest parishes in population terms produce disproportionately few struggling churches and actual closures. Those that do occur in very small parishes tend to be in those which are smaller than the deanery average. Among parishes which are somewhat larger but still below the national average population, the same patterns are evident but those with more than one church are much more prevalent. The largest parishes produce disproportionately many struggling churches and closures. They typically have populations above the deanery average and more than one church, often several. Whether it arises from historic provision of chapels of ease or pastoral reorganisation in recent times, parishes with more than one church appear to invite rationalisation, especially in populous areas. Parishes with more than 10,000 people per church scarcely ever consider closure and scarcely ever close.

36 Before deriving any firm conclusions from these findings, a number of related and contextual factors should be considered. It would be useful to refine the figures to distinguish between parish churches and chapels of ease. It would be helpful too to look at the distribution of licensed places of worship and non-parochial consecrated churches which nevertheless contribute to mission in their locality (about which data is lacking: see *Methodology* above). Also, since census data on professed faith is available, it would be possible to adjust the statistics accordingly, if that was considered useful or appropriate.

37 Further analysis may indicate more precisely the relationship between population per church and incidence of closure considerations. This may indicate a population ceiling above which, barring special factors, vulnerability is likely to be negligible. This would appear to be somewhere

³² The sample is limited to closures in cases where the report was issued after 01/01/04.

below 10,000, but probably approaching that number. Parishes below the national average of 3,150 are less vulnerable than the rest, even at the low extreme (populations in the low hundreds). Many rural parishes will fall into this group. There is no doubt that many rural communities face challenges in respect of the pool of potential worshippers, volunteers and supporters (see also para 73 below). Nevertheless, they must be resilient given that so many remain open and in use and so few come forward for consideration of closure. It may be possible to establish a link between that resilience and the nature of the locality, in the sense of remoteness from urban centres and lack of other amenities and public buildings nearby. A remote rural church may be the sole public building for the area and a key aspect of identity. This is less likely to have the same effect in an urban setting; if so, it would suggest that, in population terms, the concept of an optimal population to support a church will be different in an urban setting compared to the countryside.

Deprivation

- 38 Historic deprivation data is available for around 70% of the sample of cases (393 out of 552 cases). The gaps arise from the lack of a reliable record of the parish boundaries at the time the report was issued; only with this can the relevant iteration of the deprivation data be brought to bear. Whilst the size of the sample is affected, this shortcoming is not related to the level of deprivation and so cannot be said to skew the validity of the records which are available.
- 39 For each church for which the datum is available, the index of multiple deprivation (IMD) at the time the report was issued is expressed as a percentage. 0% represents the most deprived parish, 100% the least. This enables churches to be conveniently grouped for comparison in deciles (10% bands). It also enables them to be compared to the average IMD in the relevant deanery.
- 40 There is a very marked correlation in the data. 33% of struggling churches which sought a report were in the most deprived 10% of parishes in the country (130 out of the 393 cases for which the data was available). A further 17% were in the next most deprived 10% of parishes (65 out of 393). This means that half the sample (195 out of 393) was in the most deprived 20% of parishes and that the tendency becomes more marked at the extreme end of the deprivation scale. In 97% of the cases in the two most deprived deciles where the comparator datum was available, the parish was more deprived than the deanery average (185 out of 191 cases). The figures are scarcely affected if Survey Reports are excluded.
- 41 The converse is also very marked. Only 8% of cases for which a report was sought were in the least deprived 20% of parishes (32 out of 393 cases).

- 42 The pattern is yet more marked in cases which did proceed to closure. 40% of closures were in the most deprived 10% of parishes in the country (54 out of 136 cases for which the data was available). A further 15% were in the next most deprived 10% (21 out of 136). However, in nine of these cases the closure scheme provided for the demolition of the existing church and the provision of a new one³³; if these are discounted then it might be said that 52% of closures without a straight replacement were in the most deprived 20% of parishes (66 out of 127). This means that over half the sample for which the data was available was in the most deprived 20% of parishes and that the likelihood of closure became more marked at the extreme end of the deprivation scale. In 95% of the cases in the two most deprived deciles, the parish was more deprived than the deanery average (63 out of 66 cases, again excluding the cases where there was a straight replacement).
- 43 The converse is again strongly marked. Only 9% of the closures were in the least deprived 20% of parishes (11 out of 127 cases, again excluding the cases where there was a straight replacement).
- 44 Among the closures in the most deprived 20% of parishes where no replacement church was provided under the scheme, only 23% were in parishes with no more than 3,150 inhabitants per church (17 out of 74 cases where the population data was also available). More populous and deprived parishes are more likely to close.
- 45 In summary, churches in the most deprived parishes in the country are far more likely to struggle than those in less deprived areas and even more likely to close. They are also more likely to struggle or to close than the less deprived parishes in their deanery. Churches in the least deprived parishes are very unlikely to be considered for closure or to go on to close.
- 46 Before deriving any firm conclusions from these findings, a number of related and contextual factors should be considered. It would be useful to know if deprived parishes tend to be more or less heavily provided with licensed places of worship and non-parochial consecrated churches which nevertheless contribute to mission in their locality (about which data is lacking: see *Methodology* above) than less deprived parishes. Likewise, other means of serving mission and worship which take the place of more traditional church buildings may be more or less prevalent³⁴. The statistics might be adjusted for these factors. As a result, the findings may prove to be less stark.

³³ Under S58 of the MPM 2011 or, before then, S46 of the Pastoral Measure, 1983.

³⁴ One such is Bryn, St Peter (Diocese of Liverpool), illustrated on p1. The parish has an IMD of 2,616 out of 12,443. The church was built 1960-1 (unlisted, *Edmund Kirby and Sons*). Worship ceased in 2016, owing to the poor condition of the building, which is now considered uneconomic to repair. A Church Buildings Report was issued in 2017. A scheme has recently been made providing for the church to be demolished, the proceeds going to the provision of a new church elsewhere in the benefice area. The PCC has piloted leading its mission from a shop unit on a nearby housing estate.

47 Further analysis may enable a more nuanced picture of the association between deprivation and the likelihood of closure.

Recommendation 4: to invite other relevant departments within the NCIs to comment on these preliminary findings and to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the relationship between deprivation and struggling and closing churches.

Case study: Churches on the front line of deprivation



Middlesbrough Easterside, St Agnes (Diocese of York)

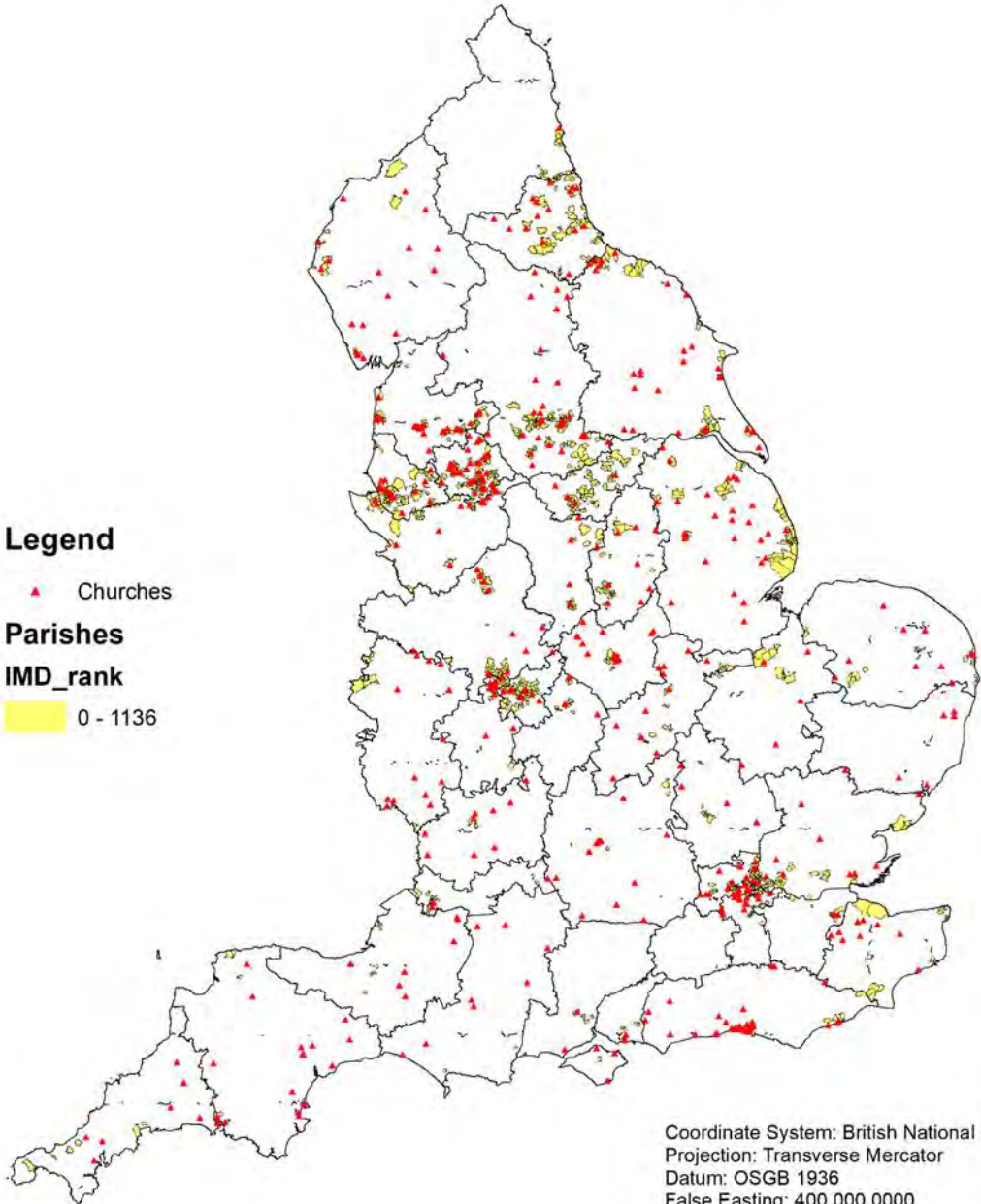


Pennywell, St Thomas and St Oswald (Diocese of Durham)

Both of these are postwar housing estate churches in parishes amongst the 10% most deprived in the country. Easterside (IMD 547 out of 12,443) had a PM Report in 2011 but only now is closure being actively considered. The adventurous building (unlisted, *Mortimer and Partners*, 1965-6) faces the need for a major roof repair. Pennywell (525 out of 12,443), a rather more conventional brick structure of c1985 (unlisted; architect unknown), replacing a temporary church of 1951, is not threatened and continues to provide vital mission in challenging circumstances. The windows facing the street were blocked following an arson attack. The teenager responsible for that now attends a youth group at the church.

The maps below illustrate the distribution of parishes in the bottom decile of deprivation and those for which a report was produced during the study period (a) nationally and (b) for part of the NW region containing three dioceses with a varied mix of urban and rural parishes.

Location of PM churches and parishes that fall within the bottom 10% of deprivation



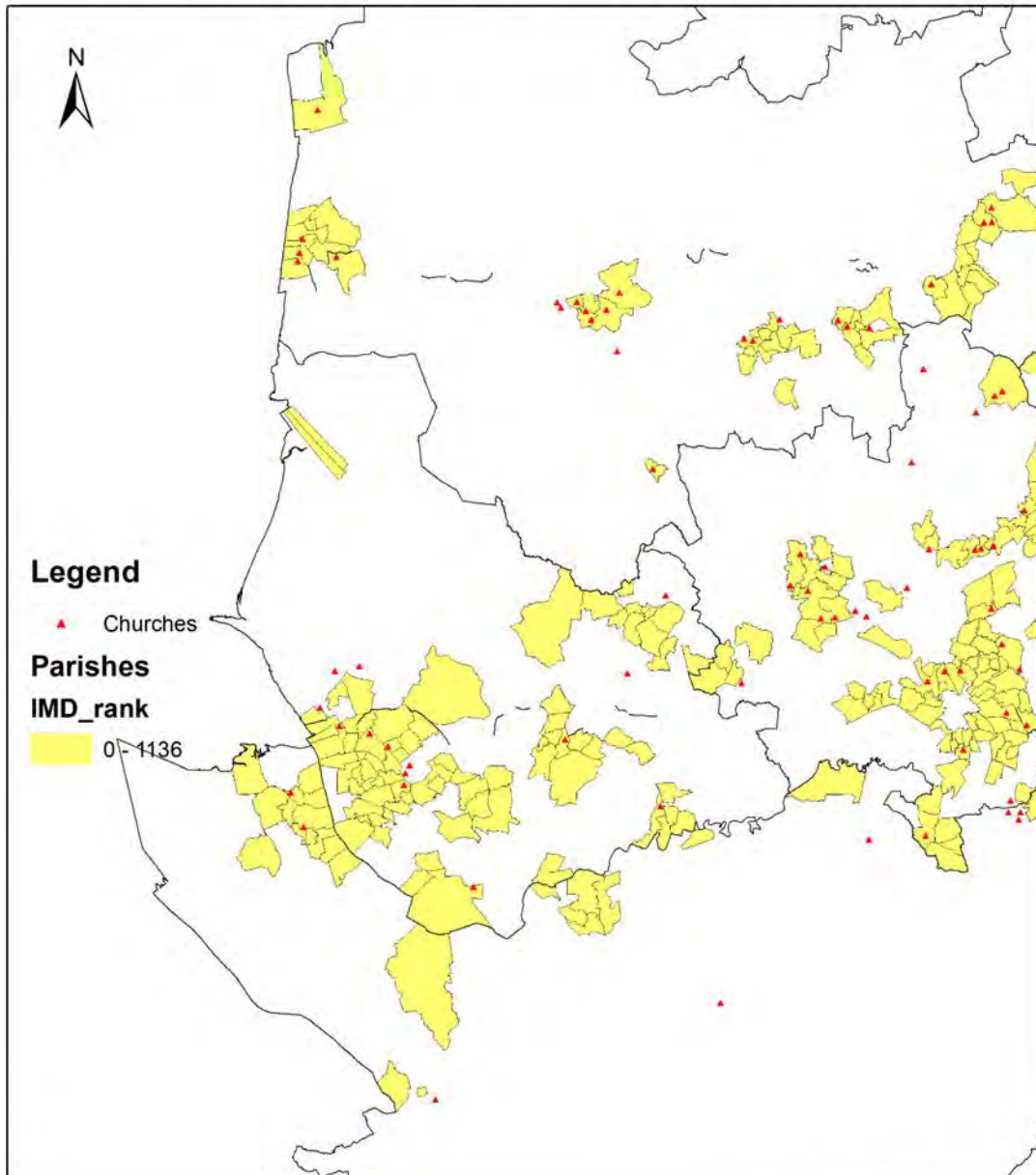
Legend

- ▲ Churches
- Parishes
- IMD_rank
- 0 - 1136

Coordinate System: British National Grid
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: OSGB 1936
False Easting: 400,000.0000
False Northing: -100,000.0000
Central Meridian: -2.0000
Scale Factor: 0.9996
Latitude Of Origin: 49.0000
Units: Meter

1 cm = 30 km

Location of PM churches and parishes in Manchester, Liverpool and Chester that fall within the bottom 10% of deprivation



1 cm = 4 km

Coordinate System: British National Grid
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: OSGB 1936
False Easting: 400,000.0000
False Northing: -100,000.0000
Central Meridian: -2.0000
Scale Factor: 0.9996
Latitude Of Origin: 49.0000
Units: Meter

Urban vs rural

- 48 Data on the nature of the environs of the churches in the sample have been drawn from two sources. The CoEPM includes an indicator for the degree of urbanisation of the land parcel in which the church stands. This is based on a more tightly defined locality or land parcel than the ecclesiastical parish. The immediate surroundings of the church, even in a village, may in many cases suggest a degree of urbanisation which is not a true reflection of the parish as a whole. Conversely, there may be cases where the church is relatively isolated from a more or less concentrated settlement. As a result, while the data characterises the immediate locality of the church, it does not give an indication of the context of the church more fully in its parish as a whole. To have both elements would enable an understanding of the general character of the parish and whether there is a marked contrast between the character of the land parcel in which the church stands and that of the rest of the parish.
- 49 **Another perspective is provided by the data from the Commissioners'** database. This characterises the context according to seven categories: city centre, inner city, council estate, suburban or urban fringe, separate town, commuter rural, other rural. This is a useful concept but it derives from an expedient judgement rather than being based on any systematic analysis or dataset. It is likely that several of the categories will overlap. Moreover, it is not clear whether the categories refer to the parish as a whole or the immediate locality of the church.
- 50 With these caveats acknowledged, the data does show a marked emphasis on urban churches. 70% of the churches considered for closure where the CoEPM data was available were characterised as more than 90% urban (174 out of 249 cases). Only 20% might be characterised as rural, being no more than 50% urban (51 out of 249). This does not tally **well with the Commissioners' data**, which suggests 42% of closures were of rural churches.
- 51 **The available data do not offer a conclusive picture but suggest that struggling churches are more likely to be urban than rural.**
- 52 Further investigation may suggest a means of characterising parishes more consistently and holistically to enable a more nuanced picture of the association between the nature of the local environment and the propensity to struggle.

The nature of the building

Listing status

- 53 Listing data is available for all cases in the sample and has a high degree of accuracy as the CHR dataset is regularly updated by reference to the Historic

England source data (National Heritage List for England, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>).

- 54 **The Church of England’s stock of churches has a very high preponderance of listed churches, especially grades I and II*.** Listing status and grade is clearly correlated both to the incidence of struggling churches and to actual closures. The table below shows the headline statistics.

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Reports 2004-18</i>	<i>Reports as % of stock</i>	<i>Closures 2004-18³⁵</i>	<i>Closures as % of stock</i>
I	4355	63	1.4	13	0.5
II*	4365	91	2.1	44	1.3
II	3874	164	4.2	70	3.5
Unlisted	5026	234	4.7	121	2.4
<i>Total</i>	<i>17,620</i>	<i>552</i>	<i>3.1</i>	<i>248</i>	

- 55 Amongst all the struggling churches for which a report was issued, grade I and II* churches represented a smaller proportion than their share of the whole collection of churches held by the Church of England. They form 25% each of the stock of churches but only 11% and 16% respectively of the reports. Grade II churches, by contrast, were above par in that they formed a larger proportion of struggling churches (30% of the reports issued) than their 22% share of all Church of England churches. The figures for unlisted churches were even more markedly above par, accounting for 42% of reports against a 29% share of the churches. The pattern is the same for actual closures, with the extremes extended so that grade I churches form an even smaller share of the closures (5%) and unlisted churches an even greater share of them (49%).

- 56 Listed churches are less likely to struggle than unlisted churches. The higher the listing grade, the less likely is the church to struggle. The stock of grade IIs is being considered for closure at a considerably faster rate than are grade I and II* churches and unlisted churches are being considered even faster than that. The same pattern is true of closures but the disparity between grade I listed churches and the unlisted ones is even wider. As a result of this pattern of closures, the Church of England estate is becoming more concentratedly listed and yet more so in the higher grades.

- 57 This might suggest that historic or architectural significance as reflected in listing is one component of robustness if it could be said that parishes and dioceses are more likely to keep them in use as a means of protecting them. More pragmatic motivations may be in play, for example if the difficulty of closing and repurposing them, and the small returns to be gained, are discouraging closure or deferring it. Contingent factors are likely to be important. A key one of these has been the availability of external funding for repairs and maintenance during the period under investigation: Repair Grants

³⁵ All closures, ie not just those resulting from cases arising after 01/01/14.

for Places of Worship in England (RGPOW, funded by English Heritage and Heritage Lottery Fund³⁶, 2002-13), Grants for Places of Worship (GPOW, funded by Heritage Lottery Fund, 2013-17), Listed Places of Worship grant scheme (LPOW, funded by DCMS, 2001 to date), LPOW Roof repair fund (funded by HM Treasury/DCMS, 2015 and 2016), the Wolfson Foundation (fabric repair grants administered by CBC, 2000-19), National Church Trust (NCT, formerly Historic Churches Preservation Trust, various schemes, 1953 to date) – all for listed churches.

Historical period

- 58 Data from the CHR on the predominant historical period is available for 80% of the sample cases (444 out of 552 cases). For most of the listed buildings, this derives from the Historic England National Heritage List for England (NHLE) list entry. Five of the HE period categories are relevant (see below). For the unlisted churches, the CHR records a predominant period using the HE categories for consistency, the information deriving from the CBC report³⁷.
- 59 As most churches include fabric from more than one building campaign, often from more than one era, a single era indicator is in many cases a matter of simplification. For example, most medieval churches reflect at least one restoration or reordering from the Victorian period, often taking a broadly interventionist approach which left a considerable mark on the medieval fabric. Rather more complex building histories are not uncommon, with successive additions and rebuildings during the medieval period followed by reordering in the early modern period overlain with further reordering in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is therefore not an area where assigning simple period categories is straightforward.
- 60 Notwithstanding this fundamental challenge, the data available provides a starting point for assessing the relative proportions of struggling churches and those actually closing. Taken together, the listed and unlisted churches among the 444 cases with a period category break down almost exactly in proportion **to the overall stock of listed and unlisted churches in the Church's estate**. The available data is therefore representative. This is set out in the table below.

³⁶ Now, respectively, Historic England (HE) and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF).

³⁷ Extracts of key summaries and details from almost all the reports approved by CBC since 2008 have been logged on the CHR.

<i>Predominant historical period of struggling churches and closures, 2004-18 (where data available)</i>				
<i>Period</i>	<i>Reports</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Closures</i>	<i>%</i>
Early Medieval (pre 1066)	4	1	1	1
Medieval (1066 to 1540)	103	23	30	17
Post Medieval (1540 to 1837)	30	7	13	7
Victorian/Pre-WWI (1837 to 1914)	241	54	110	61
Modern (1914 to Present)	66	15	27	15
<i>Total</i>	<i>444</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>181</i>	<i>100</i>

- 61 Predominantly medieval churches form around a quarter of those for which a report was provided. According to the published criteria for listing, a predominantly medieval building will normally be listed at the higher grades. As the proportion indicated here is rather higher than the proportion of grade I and II* churches among the reports issued, it appears that the categorisation is rather more inclusive when it comes to churches with at least some medieval fabric.
- 62 Even more striking is the heavy preponderance of reports towards the Victorian and Edwardian cohort, accounting for just over half the cases. This corresponds with officer experience and anecdotal evidence. A variety of factors may be at work here. The reign of Victoria saw the most concentrated period of church building and rebuilding since the Middle Ages. Not only was the existing estate substantially augmented or replaced, there was a major campaign of church planting, including many in quite marginal areas in the sense of sparse population or pre-existing strength in nonconformity. Such churches may only ever have been necessary or viable at the peak of attendance and Anglican revival. The present condition of the fabric may also be relevant. It is commonly said, glibly but perhaps with some truth, that the present generation has seen the maturing of Victorian churches to the point that major elements of the structure, especially the roof coverings, are now in need of major repair or replacement having lasted largely intact until now.
- 63 Noteworthy too is the fact that the most recent century of church building is quite strongly represented. This is an area with least coverage by the listing programme and perhaps the least well understood and appreciated in terms of research and published scholarship. The churches of this period may well be more vulnerable as a result.
- 64 Victorian and Edwardian churches formed just over half the caseload of struggling churches over the survey period. Medieval churches made up about

a fifth and modern churches slightly less than a fifth. These proportions were broadly the same for actual closures.

Architect

- 65 The idea of primary authorship is a not a straightforward matter, especially for buildings built before the C17 and for churches in general, given their longevity and the succession of rebuilding, alteration, embellishment and reordering that so many of them exhibit. In any case, the authorship of a church, whether primary or otherwise, is unlikely to be a causal factor in respect of closure or potential closure unless it were the case that a particular architect built badly. Though non-causal, authorship might nevertheless be worthwhile to interrogate in case the work of particular architects or groups of architects was disproportionately threatened. This is a difficult subject on which to assemble data in a reliable or convenient way. The NHLE has the most substantial dataset and whilst it has a searchable directory of architects and designers mentioned in the list entries, it does not assign primary authorship to individual listed buildings. Likewise, the records held on the CHR may include architects and designers but only for those entries where CBC reports have been summarised and logged or where individuals have been associated to the record. As a result, the entries do not consistently **record an architect's authorship and may not** be easily distinguished from records of other professional involvement, for example on the part of a QI consultant architect. For all these reasons, the present study has not attempted an analysis of the NHLE or CHR data.
- 66 Much material is of course now available through the rich architectural history scholarship of recent decades. Major survey studies have been published in recent years, for example the late Dr **Terry Friedman's** *The Eighteenth-Century Church in Britain*³⁸, as have monographs on individual architects, **such as Michael Hall's** *George Frederick Bodley and the Later Gothic Revival in Britain and America*³⁹. However, this material is not available in such a way that it might easily be corralled to enable systematic or comparative analysis. In any case, it remains the case that monographs are still lacking even on some major ecclesiastical architects such as Sir Charles Barry, GE Street and Ewan Christian. Second rank but highly competent architects are often also poorly covered, even though their work almost certainly merits study and may be a faster diminishing resource than that of their better-known contemporaries. One particular area of necessary coverage are the nineteenth and twentieth century diocesan architects who carved out significant practices attracting much design work as well as advisory work for their diocese. One such was Charles Hodgson Fowler, diocesan architect for Durham (see illustration and notes on p11; his work is represented by four churches on the list noted in para 68 below).

³⁸ Yale (New Haven and London), 2011

³⁹ Yale (New Haven and London), 2014

- 67 **The Commissioners' database does record an architect** against each case where a designer was identified by the case officer, and this information is available for all closure cases which came into effect between 2004 and 2018. The rationale would appear to be that the primary designer is recorded or, in cases where a medieval or post-medieval church has been restored or remodelled, the designer of those later interventions.
- 68 **The Commissioners' information for the period 2004-18** has been used to assemble a list of churches and their identified architects where the disposal scheme provided for demolition or conversion to a potentially interventionist new use (Storage, Light industrial, Office or shopping, Residential). This gives an idea of the sharp end of the process.
- 69 Beyond this limited exercise, it is not feasible to attempt to characterise potential or actual closures from the evidence currently available in a way that could be usefully applied to a benchmark of the wider corpus of Church of England churches. This would require a reasonably comprehensive list of churches and their primary architects, assembling which is no easy task in itself. Even then, it would be very hard to assess such a list statistically, bearing in mind the gaps in knowledge as to attribution and the disparity between different architects in respect of how prolific they were and the degree of survival of their work, quite apart from the question of how to measure the quality and significance of their oeuvre and of individual works within it. Nevertheless, were it possible to produce a list, there would then be a framework within which future casework might be assessed from the point of view of **the vulnerability of a given architect's work**.

Recommendation 5: to explore with Historic England and others the scope for a project assigning a principal designer role, or a suitable hierarchy where multiple designers are identified, to all the Church of England records within the NHLE as the basis for assessing threat-led casework and, in particular, devising a watchlist for possibly under-protected architects.

- 70 In the meantime, struggling churches casework will continue to throw up at least some cases where it will be hard to place the church in question in context in terms of its **architect's surviving work or the wider achievement of the movement or period from which it dates**. What is a practical expedient in these circumstances? As recently piloted, the report might attempt a rapid **appraisal of an architect's work if a reliable study or monograph is not available**.
- 71 In the absence of a reasonably comprehensive list of **architects' church work, it is not possible to characterise present casework trends**. Such a list would be possible to assemble as a framework for assessing cases as they arise.

Diocesan perceptions of struggling churches

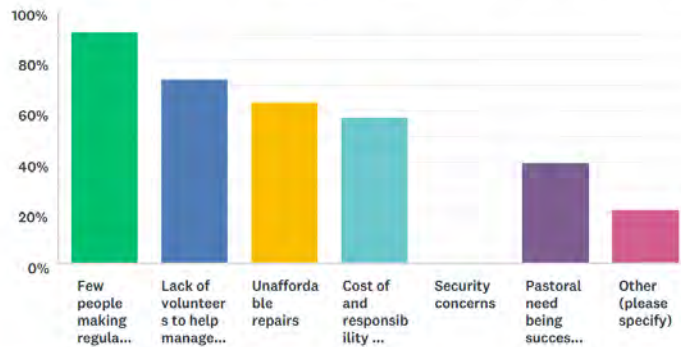
- 72 The stakeholder survey of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons provides a diocesan perspective on the underlying causes prompting consideration of closure and the immediate triggers for requesting a Church Buildings Report. It puts building-specific factors in context alongside pastoral and financial ones but does not drill down into the specifics of the latter - for example, attendance and membership, wider mission, parish share and finance, clergy provision and support etc. These are outside the scope of this study.
- 73 DMPC secretaries and archdeacons were asked to indicate the underlying causes prompting requests for reports during their time in post. More than one option could be selected where different cases arose from different causes or where more than one cause was relevant in a given case. The list of causes **and the respondents' answers** are summarised in the table below. All but two respondents who answered the question cited a range of reasons. 91% of them indicate few people making use of the church in all or some cases, as might be expected (30 out of 33 responses; survey 1, Q6). Not far behind was the lack of volunteers to help manage the building and its activities (including PCC officers), which was cited by 73% of respondents (24 out of 33). It is striking that both of these are people-related issues. In a freetext comment on one of **the other questions, one archdeacon referred to a lack of volunteers 'in an arena which is fast becoming over-regulated'**⁴⁰. Besides these causes, unaffordable repairs and maintenance concerns were also cited by a majority of respondents as well. No-one cited security concerns as a causal factor for considering closure. Given the prevalence of lead and copper theft over the last decade, it may be that respondents bracketed this under the unaffordable repairs heading rather than as a security issue. A major metal theft may well be an immediate trigger for considering closure as opposed to an underlying cause⁴¹.

⁴⁰ Research by Dr Nigel Walter suggests that 'the perceived complexity of the conservation system contributes to communities who lack professional skills and confidence to detach from their buildings'.

⁴¹ For underlying causes, see next para 74; a replacement cost of £120-170,000 following a theft of copper roof coverings was cited as an exacerbating factor to the difficult situation of the parish in a recent request for a Church Buildings Report.

Q6 In these cases, what were the underlying causes that prompted the request for the reports? (Tick all that apply)

Answered: 33 Skipped: 21



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Few people making regular use of the church	90.91% 30
Lack of volunteers to help manage the building and its activities (including PCC officers)	72.73% 24
Unaffordable repairs	63.64% 21
Cost of and responsibility for ongoing maintenance	57.58% 19
Security concerns	0.00% 0
Pastoral need being successfully fulfilled elsewhere	39.39% 13
Other (please specify)	21.21% 7
Total Respondents: 33	

74 In a similar vein, the immediate triggers for requesting a report clustered round broadly the same issues of local management: loss of key volunteer(s), financial difficulties and urgent fabric problems. These factors were all cited by around two thirds of the respondents who answered the question (21, 22 and 19 out of 33 respectively; survey 1, Q10), as shown in the table below. Clergy provision was cited by only three respondents. One DMPC secretary in a very rural diocese wrote:

‘An interregnum can make life more difficult for a PCC facing hard decisions, but is not usually a trigger in itself.’

21% of respondents cited underuse of the building (freetext answers given under ‘Other’), even though this is hard to characterise as an immediate trigger rather than an underlying cause.

Q10 In cases where local factors were relevant, what were the immediate triggers for requesting a report? (Tick all that apply)

Answered: 33 Skipped: 21



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Interregnum	6.06%	2
Difficulty in recruiting clergy	6.06%	2
Loss of key volunteer(s)	63.64%	21
Financial difficulties	66.67%	22
Urgent fabric problem(s)	57.58%	19
Other (please specify if appropriate)	36.36%	12
Total Respondents: 33		

75 Both these survey questions, like the others in the survey exploring the context for seeking the report and making the decision, were skipped by a large proportion of respondents (39%, ie 21 out of 54; survey 1, Q6 and Q10), suggesting a considerable degree of caution or uncertainty.

76 Respondents were asked to rank the relevant factors that apply to the consideration of closure; these were defined as pastoral considerations, building-specific issues, financial matters and other matters (with an **opportunity to define ‘other’**). 59% of respondents who gave an answer placed pastoral considerations first (19 out of 32; survey 1, Q8). This is in line with the statutory position, in that closure must serve the better provision for the cure of souls. Worthy of note, then, that other factors, especially financial, are placed first by almost half the respondents (financial matters: 6 out of 32; building-specific issues: 3 out of 32; other matters: 4 out of 32; making up the other 41%). Some DMPC secretaries queried the appropriateness of ranking such factors at all, on the basis that they tend to be interlinked⁴². The primacy of pastoral considerations was more clear-cut among them than it was archdeacons (68% and 50% respectively). One DMPC secretary commented, having placed pastoral considerations first, financial matters second and building-specific issues third:

‘What I mean by this is that it is almost always the building which prompts consideration of closure, but any buildings issues can be coped

⁴² 43% of all respondents (23 out of 54) did not offer a ranking at all.

with if there are people in the parish who have the capacity and the **support to deal with those issues.**'

- 77 Dioceses consider the lack of people making use of a church to be the most prevalent underlying cause for a church to struggle, closely followed by the lack of volunteers. Unaffordable repairs and maintenance concerns are all cited by a majority of dioceses as well. Security is not reported as a cause of churches struggling.

The context for decision-making: diocesan and national strategy

- 78 Research objective (a) seeks to identify other information which churches requesting reports could use in determining whether closure is right for them, including links to diocesan strategies where these exist. This might include diocesan strategies in the sense of planned frameworks for assessing current and future needs for churches but it might also include initiatives for promoting and supporting church life and mission – from evangelism to energy efficiency. Research objective (b) seeks to assess closure decisions against national and diocesan growth priority areas. This was opened out somewhat in the stakeholder survey aimed at DMPC Secretaries and archdeacons to investigate the context for decision-making at the diocesan level more generally in the sense of any strategic framework which has been brought to bear.

- 79 A strategic approach to planning the future of church provision at diocesan or sub-diocesan level has been encouraged for some years now. The Church Buildings Review which was chaired by the Rt Reverend Dr John Inge, Bishop of Worcester, set out the overarching concept in its final report of January 2016:

‘Dioceses need to integrate thinking about their church buildings with their mission and ministry planning. Regular diocesan strategic reviews, taking account of diocesan and deanery plans, mission action plans and parish audits are important for ensuring that buildings issues are given their proper weight- neither dominating nor being overlooked or regarded as a specialist subject.’

CBC has promoted the concept widely and has supplied a spreadsheet-based analytical tool which collates centrally-held data and enables dioceses to add their own data and weightings. It is adaptable for reviews at sub-diocesan level, dovetailing neatly with the deanery-level review initiative promoted by the Church Commissioners and given statutory underpinning in the 2011 Measure.

- 80 External support for aspects of this work has been given in the past. English Heritage (now Historic England) supplied funding for this work in two strands: one via the Historic Environment Commissions research grants scheme for area-wide surveys of church building stock, the other via the regional capacity building scheme for diocesan support officers, part of whose

brief – at least in some cases – **was to assess the diocese’s churches with a view to prioritising investment and raising awareness of heritage issues.**

- 81 Reviews on a more ad hoc basis have also been used. Recent experience on the ground in geographically large rural multi-parish benefices or multi-church parishes have been the subject of ad hoc reviews. The immediate stimulus for these appears to have been the appointment of a new incumbent. The underlying cause may well be the result of pastoral reorganisation itself. One respondent to the stakeholder survey noted that **the diocese’s move to mission and ministry based groupings of churches was ‘causing some to question the pastoral need for all the buildings. Also, a number of parishes which have more than one building are hitting resource challenges meaning they are having to ask the difficult question.’**

Case study: a rural multi-parish benefice



Frosterley, St Michael and All Angels (Diocese of Durham)

Frosterley is one of six parishes in the benefice of Upper Weardale. The local topography is such that the benefice area is isolated and self-contained. There are six churches, three of them listed, serving parish populations ranging between 150 and 2,100. A seventh church, Rookhope St John the Evangelist, closed in 2014 and a disposal for residential conversion was agreed in 2016. In its report on Frosterley in 2018, the Council suggested a review of all the churches in the benefice **to inform the decision on St Michael’s.**

- 82 All the above, from diocesan strategic reviews down to benefice-level reviews might be characterised as exercises in rationalisation. In a few other cases, thematic or area-based reviews were undertaken with CBC input where a

particular threat was identified. For example, in 2008-9, the Council endorsed **reports on seven churches threatened by the Government's airport expansion** agenda. These have proved particularly useful to the dioceses involved in negotiating mitigations where expansion affecting the churches was approved.

83 There is no national collation of strategic review work undertaken by dioceses. As a result, comprehensive data is not available but it would appear that the take-up of the idea has been slow and far from universal. This is backed up by the results of the survey of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons. Respondents were asked to indicate the context for seeking reports during their time in post; more than one option could be selected where different cases arose from different contexts. Only 25% of respondents who answered the question cited a diocesan- or deanery-level review as the context for requesting reports during their time in post (8 out of 32 responses; survey 1, Q9). Diocesan reviews were cited in Norwich, Gloucester, Chelmsford and Sheffield; deanery reviews in Carlisle, Gloucester, Blackburn and Durham – one fifth of dioceses in all. Judging by the length of time in post of the relevant respondents, most of these reviews are recent in origin (under way sometime in the last two years). 28% of respondents cited a benefice review or assessment or some other area-based review or programme (9 out of 32, all but one of them benefice level, and therefore relatively small in scope). It is noteworthy that this question, like the others in the survey exploring the context for seeking the report and making the decision, was skipped by a large proportion of respondents (22 out of 54), suggesting a considerable degree of caution or uncertainty, or a lack of traction of the concept. A large majority of respondents who answered the question cited local factors (ie specific to the parish or the particular building) as the context for requesting all reports or some of them during their time in post (94%: 30 out of 32 responses).

84 It is striking that the potential of a strategic approach has yet to be properly exploited by dioceses. Many indicate no intention to do so in the near future. Among those respondents who stated that they intended to seek reports from CBC in the next two to three years, 45% gave no indication of any strategic framework (15 out of 33; survey 1, Q11). A further 30% suggested some sort of framework but only in the vaguest terms (10 out of 33). More encouragingly, 24% stated clearly that some sort of wide-area strategic approach will be used in the near future (8 out of 33): Chelmsford, Durham, Leeds, Norwich, Salisbury, Sheffield, St Albans and St Edmundsbury and Ipswich. Three of these referred specifically to diocesan or deanery reviews, three more to some other geographical units of some scale. Added to those respondents who cited cases arising from strategic reviews at diocesan or deanery level during their time in post, a total of 11 of the 31 dioceses that participated in the survey have applied such an approach in the recent past or intend to do so in the near future.

Recommendation 6 - CBC to revise its guidance on Church Buildings Reports to include encouragement to dioceses to undertake strategic reviews to inform requests for reports.

- 85 Reviews at a benefice level may well be pragmatic but the evidence, albeit anecdotal, suggests that they are reactive. A new incumbent faced with multiple churches may understandably be inclined to reduce their burden but the closure and disposal of one or more churches in this way may not be the most pressing matters for the deanery, the archdeaconry or the diocese to address and may not fit with wider long term needs and opportunities.

Recommendation 7 – CBC to

(a) revise its guidance on Church Buildings Reports to include specific encouragement to dioceses that closures predicated on a review at benefice or similarly small-area level, whether formal or informal, should be considered in a wider framework, either at deanery or diocesan level; and

(b) include in individual reports, where appropriate, a recommendation that closures predicated on a review at benefice or similarly small-area level should be considered in a wider framework, either at deanery or diocesan level, before final consideration by the DMPC.

- 86 The survey responses suggest that a major proportion of cases arise from local factors rather than any sort of strategic or area review. This is consistent with anecdotal evidence and the experience of staff engaged in preparing reports. Whilst a strategic approach is to be preferred to a reactive approach, and should continue to be promoted, it may be unrealistic to expect that there will never be cases arising from purely local and case-specific situations. Moreover, a well-framed strategic review or deanery review represents a considerable investment of time and effort to carry out and keep up to date. Nevertheless, where cases arise in the absence of a strategic framework, there may be a danger that transient factors override the intrinsic long term potential of a church.

Recommendation 8 – CBC to

(a) revise its guidance on Church Buildings Reports to include specific encouragement to dioceses that closures predicated on local factors should be considered in a wider framework, either at deanery or diocesan level; and

(b) include in individual reports, where appropriate, a recommendation that closures predicated on local factors should be considered in a wider framework, either at deanery or diocesan level, before final consideration by the DMPC.

- 87 Few dioceses cite strategic reviews as the basis for considering closure. Purely local factors or rationalisation of multi-church parishes and benefices appear

to be the main reasons for closure to be considered. The system appears to be reactive rather than proactive. The strategic review model has yet to show its full potential but there is some indication that more dioceses intend to use it in the next few years.

88 Since 2006, the Division has offered Survey Reports for churches where there is a desire to consider future options without recourse to triggering the statutory process. To date, 57 such reports have been produced, some of which have subsequently been converted to Church Buildings Reports if the formal closure process was initiated. These are, by their nature, proactive but the circumstances that generate them may be distinct from the core subject matter and priorities of a strategic review.

89 Respondents reported little experience of the use of Survey Reports. Those few that did mostly considered them to have been useful (six out of eight respondents) but were cautious about giving a view as to whether the parish had found them useful. However, there was a much more enthusiastic response to the idea of using them in the future: 36 respondents thought they would be useful in the future (86% of those who answered the question; survey 1, Q24).

90 Take-up of Survey Reports has been limited. Clearly, there is less experience of this parallel non-statutory service, but dioceses indicate that they expect it to be a useful tool in the future.

The value and effectiveness of **CBC's advice**

The primary users

91 Research objective (a) seeks to understand what proportion of Church Buildings Reports are used to help make a decision about closure and whether there is any other information which churches requesting reports could use in determining whether closure is right for them, including links to diocesan strategies where these exist. In addition, the stakeholder survey sought to determine how far users find the present service effective and fit for purpose.

92 In one sense, all Church Buildings reports are used to help make a decision about closure since the diocese is obliged to obtain a report from CBC before making a recommendation to the bishop to refuse or accept a proposal on the part of a parish to close a church (MPM 2011, S21(6)). This statutory requirement appears to be universally observed: the research has thrown up no evidence of a closure being implemented without a report having been provided beforehand.

93 While a report is therefore always provided, the survey of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons indicated that, in many cases, it was not sought early enough for it to influence a decision. Two thirds of respondents who answered the

question stated that the diocese had formed a view that closure was the right outcome in all or most cases by the time the report was requested (21 of 33 answers; survey 1, Q7). However, this question, like the others in the survey exploring the context for seeking the report and making the decision, was skipped by a large proportion of respondents (21 out of 54; survey 1, Q7), suggesting a considerable degree of caution or uncertainty. The DMPC secretaries were more likely to give an answer (21 out of 30) than the archdeacons (12 out of 24) but were rather less inclined to the view that the issue was normally settled in advance (11 out of 21 responses compared to 10 out of 12 for the archdeacons). None of the archdeacons who answered considered that the diocese had yet to reach a settled view when the report was requested. This suggests a more cut-and-dried mindset on the part of archdeacons – perhaps the best-placed of all at diocesan level to assess the viability of churches on the ground. While the relatively small number of responses from archdeacons cannot be said to be statistically definitive, it does suggest a more single-minded attitude on their part which is likely to translate to a strong impact on the business of DMPCs.

- 94 In many cases, the view of the diocese was a straightforward endorsement of **the parish's chosen course of action. The survey of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons** sought an indication of the circumstances that prompted the request for a Church Buildings Report; more than one option could be selected where different cases arose from different circumstances. 82% of respondents who answered the question cited a PCC resolution to close as the origin of some or all of the cases which arose during their time in post (27 out of 33 respondents; survey 1, Q5) while 36% cited a less formal decision by the PCC in some cases. By contrast, only 27% indicated that during their time in post there had been cases where the report request was initiated centrally, ie by the archdeacon or diocese (12 out of 33 respondents). Whilst again this question was skipped by a large proportion of respondents (21 out of 54), the responses received do suggest a preponderance of parishes initiating the process with a clear readiness to close or a serious willingness to contemplate it, even if the way had been prepared by the archdeacon or diocese.
- 95 Another perspective on this is provided by the statistics on actual closures. Among the cases where a report was issued between 2004 and 2018 and a scheme was subsequently made for closure, some 18% became effective within a year **of CBC's report being issued** (43 out of 244 cases). In an assuredly slow process, any case with such a rapid turnaround may well be suggestive of a diocese whose mind was made up by the time the report was requested. Figures are not available for cases which might have appeared cut-and-dried but which were not recommended for closure by the Committee, not accepted by the bishop or did not result in a closure scheme being made for whatever reason.
- 96 Whilst there appears, then, to be a constituency which does not see the report as necessary to the decision-making, others are more cautious or unwilling to

commit to an early view. Of the respondents who answered the question, just over one third stated that the diocese had formed a view that closure was the right outcome in some cases (only) or none at all by the time the report was requested (12 out of 33 answers; survey 1, Q7). If these respondents are added to those who did not commit to an answer, some 61% of survey participants might be said not to consider closure to be generally a foregone conclusion (12 answers plus 21 not recording an answer out of 54 participants). For those, there is room for the report to play its maximum role in the decision-making. Moreover, taken in the round, the responses – or lack of response - to this question are suggestive of a difference of perception among dioceses either of the role of the DMPC or the nature of the cases which come before it (in the sense of their maturity or readiness for a major change of direction). And regarding the circumstances which prompted the request for a report, half the respondents who answered the question reported at least some cases which were not foregone conclusions and arose from a desire on the part of the PCC to assess options, one of which may be closure (17 out of 33).

97 There is a strong tendency for dioceses to have made up their mind about closure in advance of requesting a report in all or most cases. This represents a majority of those who expressed a view but a minority of participants in the survey overall. A PCC resolution to close is cited by most as the origin of all or most of the cases.

98 It is not easy to tell how far the report influences the decision-making process. Of the 357 churches for which a report was issued between 2004 and 2013, 48% went on to close within five years⁴³ but this statistic is hard to contextualise. For the 52% which did not close, it is not clear how many were recommended and agreed for closure but stalled for some reason or how many were not recommended or approved and what the reasons were. Granted the overarching policy preference that churches remain in use, there will nevertheless be churches coming forward for consideration of closure which are no longer viable. Deterring closure is not always the right or reasonable policy and the numbers avoiding it should therefore not necessarily be regarded as the measure of success. Nor is it possible to determine a baseline of likely closures **against which the efficacy of CBC's reports might be judged**. What counts is that there should be a genuine opportunity for a struggling church and its diocese to consider the scope for the building to remain in worship use before it is too late for constructive options to be realistically considered and that CBC should be invited to report in a timely way. In this regard, the feedback from the survey of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons does offer some insight as it investigates what they found useful. Of the freetext responses to the question as to what the diocese is looking for in a report, 71% were broadly positive about what CBC can supply (29 out of 41 responses; survey 1, Q12), with significant support for an objective and

⁴³ See para 11 and note 25. 82 other closures were made effective in that period but they related to churches for which a report had been issued before 1/1/2004

independent view from outside the diocese (12 responses) and for practical advice about complementary or new uses (8 responses). One DMPC Secretary wrote:

‘The level of detailed information all in one place is extremely helpful, as is the expertise and intelligence always shown. Parishes respond very positively to the reports. It would be great if some additional resources could be put into the department responsible for producing them as they do such a great job but need more resources in order to be able to produce reports more quickly; and I imagine this is not the only diocese anticipating an increase in the number of closures in future, so **the workload is likely to increase.’**

An archdeacon wrote:

‘Whether there is any point in fighting for a building which nobody appears to want to keep. any creative thinking about possible alternative uses. increasingly we may need to judge between keeping building a or building b - an **external view might be helpful’**

99 Meanwhile, 29% saw little or no value in the report (12 out of 41 responses; survey 1, Q12), amongst whom the strongest viewpoints were that it is a mere formality of legal necessity (7 responses) or replicates what is already known to the diocese (4 responses, though two of them welcomed the details on contents). One archdeacon shared this view but offered a more expansive view:

‘I’m not sure we would ask for a Church Buildings Report at the point required in the formal process under the Mission and Pastoral Measure if it were not a statutory requirement. The contents do not really impact on whether a closure proceeds or not and we already know much of the information contained in the report. However, it is useful to have the views of someone more remote from the situation who is not "The Diocese" as this appears more disinterested. It's also useful to have all the information listed in Parts 1 & 2 collated and easily accessible and the items ticked below (in Qus 13 & 15 [ie certain elements of the report format]) are helpful and informative, particularly the contents information. The information regarding potential for change is more **relevant once a building has closed and is in the ‘use-seeking’ period.’**

100 Even at its most militant, the view that the CBC should not demur from the assumption in favour of closure is understandable given that so often a **DMPC is responding to a PCC’s resolution to close. In such circumstances, the** Committee may feel it has little room to take a different view. The strong views outlined above do suggest that there is nevertheless value in an independent view form outside the diocese and in some specific elements of the report. The report may contribute to better decisions, as opposed to different decisions. The availability of this input before a formal decision is important as it is a fundamental aspect of the Measure that, after this point, the process is predicated on implementing that decision.

101 The Measure does not indicate the nature of the decision-making process or the specific purpose of the Church Buildings Report. Whilst the report is, for the most part, an objective assessment of the heritage interest of the church as found (as laid down in S21(7)(a to c)), the section appraising the potential for continued use for public worship (S21(7)(d)) takes a more expansive line and adopts a broadly positive stance. Such a stance can be inferred as the intention of the Measure in its stipulation that the report should include: **‘any information or advice which the Council thinks appropriate to give concerning possible architectural or structural changes in each church mentioned in the notice ... in the event that the church is not ... closed, concerning any such changes which would facilitate its use for purposes which are consistent with use for regular public worship’** (S21(7)(d)). There is much that CBC can bring to bear here from its wider work with open churches. Most cases offer some prospects and the scope for a constructive discussion. Occasionally this can be somewhat strained where the church appears too marginal or its problems too great to offer any prospect of a continuation or resumption of worship use. Nevertheless, unlikely turnarounds do happen, so there is a value to continuing to offer options and suggest opportunities even if tempered with a degree of caution.

102 A number of responses to the survey indicated that the CBC’s advice on the sustainability and the scope for change to facilitate continued worship use was valued. Indeed, of the 19 elements of the report, it was the third most popular, cited as useful by 83% of respondents (33 out of 40; survey 1, Q13). The relative value of different elements of the report is discussed further in the next section.

103 Overall, it would appear that respondents took distinctly different stances on the purpose and value of the report. To some, it was a mere legal **formality and had no bearing on the Committee’s decision-making process**; indeed, there is some resistance to the idea that the CBC should offer a view **that was construed as counter to the DMPC’s**. To others, it offered a useful perspective from an independent viewpoint, either on the issue at hand for the Committee to consider (whether to recommend closure) or on how the asset should be handled thereafter (how sustainable change might be made to enable continued worship use or how the church might find a complementary or **new use) or both. Even those respondents who were positive about CBC’s** service did not indicate a close understanding of its place within the process – for example some welcomed advice on alternative uses (ie uses other than mission or worship) even though that is purposely excluded from the report and is offered only to the Commissioners at the next stage whether after closure or immediately before it. These varied views may in part reflect somewhat different roles taken by certain DMPCs but it may also derive in **part from a somewhat hazy understanding of CBC’s role and remit in the area** of struggling churches and potential closures (see *Introduction* above). This is clearly a key area for improvement.

Recommendation 9: to make clearer the role of CBC and the purpose of the Church Buildings Report and to communicate this to DMPC secretaries and archdeacons with a view to earlier consultation.

104 The report may influence the process in other ways than purely on the decision as to whether the DMPC recommends closure. It clearly has a role in offering advice on the scope for change that would facilitate continued worship use. For those cases which do proceed to closure, the report, although not explicitly addressing the issue of future use, should have much material of benefit to dioceses in considering the nature of suitable new uses and their likely impact on the building, its contents and churchyard. CBC should clearly position the report as something which promotes better closure decisions, not different decisions.

105 **Some consider the CBC's report to be a formality and the building-related and heritage issues to be marginal, at least in respect of the DMPC's decision.** However, the majority are broadly positive about what CBC can supply, with significant support for an objective and independent view from outside the diocese and for practical advice about complementary or new uses.

106 More fundamentally, if consultation were to be shifted upstream to a point where parishes have yet to resolve to close, then it should be possible for CBC to offer advice without the constraints and assumptions of the statutory process. There is already a mechanism for this via the Survey Report but the resulting document is hard to distinguish from a Church Buildings Report and, after a decade, take-up has been slow. Respondents to the survey who answered the relevant question were for the most part content with the format (84%, 31 out of 37; survey 1, Q25). However, a lighter-touch model may be more suited to certain circumstances. This has been recently piloted by the CCB Head of Church Buildings Strategy in the form of Options Appraisals, a short-form report modelled on the part 1 of the existing Church Buildings Report, but intended to be a more flexible tool. There may be other worthwhile approaches. Such advice may in many cases be best treated as part of **CBC's mainstream casework advice** on open churches.

Recommendation 10: to promote to DMPC secretaries and archdeacons the use of Options Appraisals and Survey Reports and to explore further the scope for different approaches and formats.

The secondary users

107 Amongst secondary users of the Church Buildings Reports (DACs and outside organisations with an interest in the closure process focussed on the heritage and historic buildings issues), two thirds of respondents considered that they provided an adequate basis for fulfilling their interest (16 out of 24 responses; survey 2, Q6). A further 30% (7 out of 24) considered that they partly served their purposes. The freetext responses suggest that, where they

were less satisfied it was due to the reports not providing the specialist detail that they sought on their subject area, for example adequate photographs of stained glass (a skilled job to photograph well) or details of organ stops and console/pedal arrangements. Only one respondent was entirely dissatisfied.

108 Only 30% of respondents indicated that they made use of the report for purposes other than to fulfil their specialist interest in the closure process (7 out of 24 responses; survey 2, Q8).

109 Secondary users of the reports (DACs and outside organisations with an interest in the closure process focussed on the heritage and historic buildings issues) were broadly satisfied with the reports, though some needed more specialist information fully to serve their specialist interest.

Practicalities: scope, content, format and distribution of the report

Scope, content and format

110 Overall, survey responses on the content and format of the reports themselves indicate much that is positive and supportive of a specialist and independent viewpoint about church buildings, furnishings and churchyards and the scope for sustainable change to them.

111 Amongst the primary audience of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons, four elements of the report received an approval rating of over three quarters of respondents:

- Overall assessment of significance (from part 1): 88%;
- Assessment of sustainability and potential for change (part 1): 83%;
- Key message from the Church Buildings Council (part 1): 78%;
- Appraisal of architectural interest (part 2): 86%.

It is noteworthy that all of these are judgement-based as opposed to the descriptive, collative or narrative elements found elsewhere in the report. This endorses CBC as a source of specialist expertise in this area. The lowest ratings, tending between 35% and 50%, were for elements – some of them mundane - which record the church as found, such as the utilities and facilities, physical access etc. Whilst not so useful for the primary users, these elements tend to assist the CBC officer in developing a holistic understanding of the church and, in particular, enable desk-based casework to be undertaken subsequently – typically when the case is referred to the Statutory Advisory Committee (SAC) for early advice, advice on plans etc by the Church Commissioners in the course of the use-seeking period for closed churches.

112 The secondary users had a largely similar view. They rated the same elements highly except for the key message, which clearly is aimed squarely at influencing the DMPC. The assessments of significance and sustainability received approval ratings of over 90% and the architectural appraisal 86%.

The detailed descriptions of the building (77%) and the furnishings (68%) were the next highest placed. This no doubt reflects the interests of the national amenity societies and the specialist societies respectively, as well as the DACs, some of which may have an involvement in subsequent stages of the closure process which will draw on these elements.

113 Both sets of responses are understandably rooted in the **participants'** particular interests. In general, there was a lack of awareness that the report might serve several purposes at different stages of the process. This makes for quite a complex set of requirements:

- A comprehensive briefing for CBC enabling it to take a view on the significance of the church and the assessment of sustainability and potential for change;
- A comprehensive briefing for the DMPC enabling it to reach a decision on a closure proposal with a good understanding of the significance of the church and a measured assessment of sustainability and the scope for change that might facilitate continued worship use;
- A comprehensive briefing for the diocese and Commissioners on which to base consideration of potential alternative uses;
- The basis for SAC to frame early advice to the Church Commissioners to assist them in considering the scope for and impact of structural changes, additions, demolitions and development in the curtilage and disposals or transfers of furnishings should they be proposed as part of a new use;
- A detailed description of particular elements to enable organisations with an interest in the closure process focussed on the heritage and historic buildings issues to fulfil their interests;
- A record of the church before closure and disposal where no better record exists.

114 There is a need to improve the way in which the advice as issued sets out this context while still speaking directly to the needs of each set of recipients.

115 Both sets of responses indicated buy-in to the significance ratings (survey 1 83%, survey 2 73%) though a few preferred other systems or scales of **significance. One DMPC and DAC secretary wrote: 'The ratings are understood - please don't change them.'** **Another DAC secretary wrote 'Not contextualised enough or integrated sufficiently with other conservation thinking (e.g. Historic England's Conservation Principles). Easily misunderstood by non-specialists.'**⁴⁴

116 Most respondents were content with the present arrangement of the report in two parts, the first of which can serve as an executive summary (90%, survey 1, and 86%, survey 2). Photographs were considered useful by most and essential by some.

⁴⁴ Most reports produced since 2017 have used HE Conservation Principles as an explicit framework for discussing and analysing significance.

117 There is general support for the scope and content of the reports currently offered. There is also general buy-in to the significance ratings in use. However, there is some lack of recognition of the process as a whole and of the interests of other stakeholders, hence different aspects of the service are highly rated by some and not others, depending on their role.

118 In two recent cases, dioceses requesting reports have offered material in a **'report-ready' form to aid CBC's preparation work**. This is distinct from the background information requested to support requests (QIR, any other reports on the fabric or contents, Terrier and Inventory, church guide or leaflet). For those dioceses with the capacity to contribute in this way, there are opportunities to streamline the process. It may be possible to involve others in the process, such as the Art Society (formerly NADFAS) and other specialist interest groups. Well-informed input from dioceses and elsewhere is welcome. Nevertheless, it must still fall to CBC to reach its own view about the significance of the asset, the sustainability of the church and the scope for change. The process calls for a specialist, national and independent assessment of the church.

119 There are opportunities too to explore electronic delivery via the CHR. One option would be to digitise the format for the Church Property Register and Terrier and Inventory via the CHR or an alternative system which would allow for convenient data transfer to the CHR.

Recommendation 11: in the light of this report and further analysis of the survey results, review the scope, content and format of the report to:

- a. Ensure that all users of it have an adequate understanding of its various purposes;*
- b. Explore ways of streamlining the preparation of reports and involving others where they can contribute to the preparation of reports;*
- c. Explore the scope for electronic delivery.*

Distribution and dissemination

120 The Church Buildings Report, once approved by CBC, is submitted to the DMPC Secretary by email, with copies to the incumbent or other main local contact (in many cases one of the churchwardens) and the Church Commissioners Closed Churches Team. The Commissioners make no active use of the report at this stage, though it gives them advance notice of potential closures. The Measure calls for a copy to be sent to the Diocesan Board of Finance (DBF) but, in practice, the DMPC Secretary is asked to forward it to the DBF Secretary.

121 Reports are subsequently made available to the secondary users (see *Methodology* para 17 above). Between 2008 and 2018 this was done by means

of a password-controlled webpage on the Churchcare website. This ceased on the transfer of Churchcare content to the main Church of England website. Dropbox is currently being used until a long-term platform is devised. Reports, other than those kept confidential at the request of the diocese, are uploaded after the following CBC meeting, giving the diocese the opportunity to raise any matters of fact before the report is shared.

122 Survey Reports are issued solely to the diocese and parish. They are not made available to secondary users.

123 The survey of DMPC secretaries and archdeacons indicated broad support for the sharing of the reports with the secondary users. Amongst the secondary users there was no suggestion that there are any other organisations not currently included which should be.

124 It is a core objective of the Church Heritage Record (CHR) to populate entries with information from Church Buildings Reports and Survey Reports. So far, material from just over half the reports produced since 1998 has been transferred to the CHR. This covers the factual and descriptive elements of the reports and a small selection of photographs. It does not extend to the significance ratings or the assessment of sustainability and potential for change. The Division has received a grant offer for the digitisation of all legacy Pastoral Measure Reports issued before this time (ie 1970-1998) and the transfer of information to the CHR. This project, and the transfer of the material from reports already available electronically, will make the content of the reports available to churches and the wider public in an easily accessible form. It will also make the earlier reports more easily available for current casework use and for analysis of trends. In addition, the project brief is likely to include recording a principal architect/designer where the report records one (see paras 65-71 above). With a resource of 2,500 reports, this initiative will mean that almost 15% of the churches covered by the CHR will benefit from high quality information covering all aspects of the building fabric, churchyard and furnishings.

125 Full publication of the reports is not envisaged. The Church of England Records Centre currently applies a 20-year embargo to external requests to release reports. This is in line with the standard default period for unpublished archival material or grey literature. The Division is considering reducing this to five years.

Closure process outcomes

126 Research objective (a) seeks to identify other information which churches requesting reports could use in determining whether closure is right for them, including links to diocesan strategies where these exist.

127 The range of information which will be relevant to churches considering closure is very wide given that local circumstances and the nature of the opportunities open to parishes for sustainable use will vary considerably. A key aspect of preparing the assessment of sustainability is gaining a sense of those local factors and opportunities and considering them in the light of initiatives seen elsewhere or, where the prospect is entirely new, of appraising them on a principles basis. It is important to signpost relevant resources and organisations and, where appropriate, potential sources of grant. The **Division's pages on the Church of England website** have much relevant material. Other sources of information are outlined at the beginning of this report (*Introduction* para 4).

128 Given that reports are requested via the DMPC, it is likely that relevant diocesan strategies will already have been signposted and considered. The proposal for closure may well flow from the working out of a strategy at diocesan or deanery level. As discussed earlier in this report, the take-up of the strategic review model is far from universal (paras 78-90 above). Where it has been used, it is essential that parishes have an adequate understanding of it. It is also important that parishes have the opportunity to engage in the strategic planning process. The tendency to a top-down approach will contribute to a parish feeling **'done unto'**.

129 It is a reasonable expectation that churches opting to initiate the closure process should have an understanding of what it entails, how long it takes and what the likely outcomes are. This would help congregations understand whether it is right for them. The process is explained at high level on the Church of England webpages, with much more detail via links to the 2011 Measure and Code of Practice⁴⁵. Middle ground between summary and detail is provided in the leaflet *What happens when a church closes?*⁴⁶ This explains the process **from a parish's perspective, so it fulfils the need for** helping churches understand what closure entails. However, it does not cover the likely timescales and outcomes to help churches to reach a view on whether closure is right for them.

130 What are the likely timescales? There are no hard and fast rules about this. The timescale will be influenced by many factors, some of them specific to the case in question. The formal process following a PCC resolution is likely to be affected by the level of consultation which has taken place beforehand. Even very thorough advance consultation may not forestall objections (representations against draft schemes for closure) which must be given due consideration by the Commissioners, sometimes in the form of a public hearing. Where the objection has merit, the process will be further delayed or cease altogether: since 2007, there have been seven cases where the Commissioners have either referred the scheme back to the Diocese for

⁴⁵ <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/parish-reorganisation-and-closed-church-buildings>

⁴⁶ https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/what_happens_when_a_church_building_closes%20pamphlet_2019_version.pdf

further consideration or decided it should not proceed. It is sometimes under threat of closure that communities (especially non-church communities) find their voice and object and, in some cases, find a sustainable use for the church. Besides these factors, there are practical or technical issues which may cause delay. For example, a scheme may be held up while access/reverter/title issues are resolved (as of September 2019, six or seven such schemes published between 2007-2017 had not yet been made for this reason). Occasionally, title investigation reveals that the building is not consecrated, so a closure scheme is not required to enable disposal. In single-stage schemes (for both closure and settling the future of the building) closure will not usually be brought into effect until contracts are exchanged with the buyer (around half a dozen such schemes at any one time will be at this stage).

131 Based on the analysis discussed in the foregoing sections, parishes embarking on the process can expect to find that 18% of them will have closed within a year, while a further 30% will have closed after five years. A few will close after an even longer period; further analysis is needed to determine a percentage based on current patterns. That means almost half will remain open.

132 Of those that close, around 72% will need to go through a further process before the future use of the church building is decided. The remaining 28% will have their future settled at the same time as closure, though this proportion is probably increasing⁴⁷.

133 What are the likely outcomes? This is summarised in the two tables below.

<i>Closed churches: schemes for disposals etc 2004-18</i>	
Vesting in the CCT	18
Alternative use	207
Demolition	47
<i>Total</i>	<i>272</i>
<i>Average per annum</i>	<i>18</i>

134 Disposals can be broken down in more detail.

<i>Disposals: 2004-18</i>	
Vesting in the CCT	18
Monument (ie preservation by other bodies)	19
Parochial or ecclesiastical	25
Private and school chapel	2
Worship by other Christian bodies	49

⁴⁷ In 2018, around 40% of closure schemes settled the future of the building at the same time. This approach is favoured by the Commissioners wherever possible.

Civic, cultural or community	29
Arts, crafts, music and drama	4
Educational	11
Storage	2
Light industrial	2
Office or shopping	7
Sports	1
Residential	56
Demolition	47
<i>Total</i>	<i>272</i>

Notes

- Six of the disposals agreed were not implemented and a different use was subsequently agreed; these cases are counted twice in the figures above;
- In one case, the church was partly demolished and partly put to a new use (parochial or ecclesiastical); this case is counted among the latter;
- There were five cases in which the scheme provided for a new use for the existing church and a new church to be built or converted from another building elsewhere in the benefice area;
- Of the demolitions, 19 were under schemes providing for a new church to be built on the site or built or converted from another building elsewhere in the benefice area.

135 Breaking these figures down into broad categories gives the following outcomes:

- 14% - vesting in the CCT or preservation by the Friends of Friendless Churches and other bodies (NB it is striking that the number of vestings in the CCT was roughly equal to disposals for monument use to other preservation bodies);
- 30% worship or related ecclesiastical use;
- 16% civic, cultural, community or educational;
- 4% commercial/business;
- 21% residential
- 17% demolition

136 Overall, just under half of the struggling churches which initiate the statutory process and seek a report close within five years. The majority of closures do not settle the future of the building at the same time and this is handled as a separate process. There is a wide spread of outcomes of closure: broadly sensitive new uses or vesting for preservation account for around 60% of disposals compared to more interventionist uses or demolition. There is a need for greater understanding of what the process entails and what the likely outcomes are for parishes and others embarking on the process.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 - jointly with R&S, the Church Commissioners and other interested departments within the NCIs to

- a) agree a protocol for the use of the church code to enable church buildings to be distinguished from worshipping congregations; and*
- b) to seek a means of obtaining accurate and regularly updated data on the location, name and status of licensed places of worship and peculiars and institutional chapels and to include them in internal and public-facing datasets where appropriate.*

Recommendation 2: to seek constructive engagement with DMPC secretaries and archdeacons through:

- a) providing a follow up to the survey to communicate the main findings once this report has been approved;*
- b) improving liaison with DMPC secretaries and providing a platform for discussion on matters of common concern, in the first place at the 2019 DAC/DMPC conference;*
- c) in consultation with the archdeacons' National Executive Officer, ensuring regular liaison with them on matters of common concern*
- d) exploring with them the scope for using Church Buildings Reports and Survey Reports as part of constructive engagement with struggling churches **and how CBC's service might be improved.***

Recommendation 3 – to invite other departments within the NCIs:

- a) to comment, especially on pastoral, financial and other factors alongside building-related ones; and*
- b) to supply relevant data for a joint study that would help towards a more holistic understanding of struggling and closing churches.*

Recommendation 4: to invite other relevant departments within the NCIs to comment on these preliminary findings and to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the relationship between deprivation and struggling and closing churches.

Recommendation 5: to explore with Historic England and others the scope for a project assigning a principal designer role, or a suitable hierarchy where multiple designers are identified, to all the Church of England records within the NHLE as the basis for assessing threat-led casework and, in particular, devising a watchlist for possibly under-protected architects.

Recommendation 6 - CBC to revise its guidance on Church Buildings Reports to include encouragement to dioceses to undertake strategic reviews to inform requests for reports.

Recommendation 7 – CBC to

(a) revise its guidance on Church Buildings Reports to include specific encouragement to dioceses that closures predicated on a review at benefice or similarly small-area level, whether formal or informal, should be considered in a wider framework, either at deanery or diocesan level; and (b) include in individual reports, where appropriate, a recommendation that closures predicated on a review at benefice or similarly small-area level should be considered in a wider framework, either at deanery or diocesan level, before final consideration by the DMPC.

Recommendation 8 – CBC to

(a) revise its guidance on Church Buildings Reports to include specific encouragement to dioceses that closures predicated on local factors should be considered in a wider framework, either at deanery or diocesan level; and (b) include in individual reports, where appropriate, a recommendation that closures predicated on local factors should be considered in a wider framework, either at deanery or diocesan level, before final consideration by the DMPC.

Recommendation 9: to make clearer the role of CBC and the purpose of the Church Buildings Report and to communicate this to DMPC secretaries and archdeacons with a view to earlier consultation.

Recommendation 10: to promote to DMPC secretaries and archdeacons the use of Options Appraisals and Survey Reports and to explore further the scope for different approaches and formats.

Recommendation 11: in the light of this report and further analysis of the survey results, review the scope, content and format of the report to:

- a) Ensure that all users of it have an adequate understanding of its various purposes;*
- b) Explore ways of streamlining the preparation of reports and involving others where they can contribute to the preparation of reports;*
- c) Explore the scope for electronic delivery.*

CONCLUSION

- 1 The Church is going through a major rationalisation of its church building stock. Since 1969, 2,500 reports have been produced by the CCC/CBC on an estate of 17-20,000 churches. Just under 2,000 closures have taken place over the same period⁴⁸. This has been conducted piecemeal rather than in a concerted manner. Nevertheless, the outcome is a major one. After fifty years of operation, the system has generated closures of around 10% of the frontline estate. Nothing of this order to reduce the building stock has occurred since the sixteenth century.
- 2 The piecemeal nature of this reduction has been driven partly by the reactive and laborious way the legislation is framed but partly also by the way in which the process is managed and resourced. Permanent members of staff and permanent committees operate a system with a more or less steady throughput of cases. **It is ‘business as usual’**. The system, no doubt because of the fundamental legal framework of the parish church, is designed to respond to individual cases rather than act in a more global way. As a result, although strategic approaches have been devised and piloted, they have not been used in a thoroughgoing way and their potential remains far from fully realised. Current allocation of resources at diocesan and national level prevents this.
- 3 This begs the question as to what a strategic approach at diocesan level should be based on. What is the ideal or correct number and distribution of churches in a diocese? What factors make churches fit the strategy? It appears that some dioceses (or sizeable areas within them) have gone through a more or less thoroughgoing review leading to a substantial number of closures during the past fifteen years. Much could be learnt from this experience. It may be possible to derive a set of principles on which a sustainable parochial church network could be planned.
- 4 There may be scope to improve and streamline the process at a day-to-day level. There may also be scope to share principles derived from previous reviews and boost the take-up of the strategic planning approach. Were that to happen, it may throw up even greater issues and present a sudden onset of cases to handle. There should be a contingency plan for this.
- 5 More importantly, it would be helpful if there was an overall vision for the historic churches of the Church of England so that any practical improvements to the process and any investment in more strategic management of the estate were solidly within a clear understanding of the role and value of historic churches in the long term.

⁴⁸ A total of 1,974 closures schemes made and 566 orders, 1969-2018. Source: Monckton, L, *CHURCHES AND CLOSURE IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, A Summary Report* (English Heritage 2010, see <https://www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/hrba/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/churches-and-closure-in-cofe-mar-2010.pdf>), augmented with data for 2010-18 from the present study.

- 6 This study has found that, as a result of the composition of churches being considered for closure and those actually closing, the Church of England estate is gradually becoming more concentrated on listed churches and more so in the higher grades.
- 7 **While this means that the best of the Church's ecclesiastical built heritage is** being kept, the disposal of grade II and unlisted churches will have an impact on the richness and diversity of church architecture remaining in use and may inadvertently threaten as yet underappreciated aspects of it.
- 8 Various factors may account for the relative tenacity of grade I and grade II* churches. In the last generation, one of these must surely have been the availability of external funding for the repair of historic churches. However, given the withdrawal of the largest source with a guaranteed budget – the National **Lottery Heritage Fund's** Grants for Places of Worship (GPOW) - the beneficial impact of this factor is likely to diminish, in which case it is likely that a greater proportion of listed churches, or simply more churches altogether (with a higher share of listed ones, especially higher grades), will consider closure. At the same time, the scope for rationalising the estate by disposing of the least significant churches may soon run out of suitable candidates.
- 9 This study has addressed the subject from the perspective of struggling churches and how CBC seeks to support them. The closure process, with or without a strategic planning initiative in advance, is not a system for helping struggling churches, even though what might loosely be described as a support service has grown up around it. Indeed the process under the Measure is predicated on closure – cases which do not proceed to that outcome being, as it were, abortive or incomplete. If support for struggling churches is agreed to be needed, then it seems clear that that service would be better applied at an earlier stage, before a closure-oriented process is initiated, and would be an activity organised for the desired outcome rather than as a challenge to closure. It would perhaps ideally be seen as part of **CBC's – and DACs'** - Open Churches casework. This begs questions about resourcing and prioritisation. Whilst such a service may not be obliged to make choices, it will expend effort which may in time not lead to a sustainable use in worship. How far does this matter? How should it relate to diocesan strategies which do address the size of the estate?
- 10 To make best use of the resource available, it is important to understand the factors causing churches to struggle. This report has considered some of them and identified some patterns which deserve attention. There appears to be a concentration of struggling churches in areas of marked deprivation – the very places which may be missional priorities. Meanwhile, somewhat counter-intuitively, the smallest communities in population terms tend to be more resilient and generate fewer struggling churches. The availability of volunteers

to help manage church buildings and their activities is generally perceived to be crucial. These factors need further study to verify what is properly causal. Only some factors will be capable of any realistic solution; the impact of wider socio-economic change, migration and demography will be insoluble.

- 11 The parish church system would appear to have a very large degree of natural or intrinsic resilience, such that many churches withstand major challenges and long periods of decline. Many experience a resurgence or retrenchment. The life of a parish church tends to move in generational timeframes rather than shorter periods as would be the case in other sectors and walks of life.
- 12 Nevertheless, the challenges facing churches should not be underestimated and the continuing run of casework through the system indicates a major structural change taking place in slow motion. If it goes on in this manner for another generation, or if it accelerates in any significant way, then a challenge of a different order will be faced. This might be seen in historical terms, comparable to other major events or movements in the long history of the Church. Such a perspective may help focus the minds of leaders and policymakers on the pressing need to address an issue which may fairly be described as a matter of national significance.