

Building volunteers: a survey of church building volunteers in the Diocese of Ely

Holly Isted



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The cover photo shows a group exploring repairs to the lead roof whilst on a scaffolding tour at St Peter and St Paul's church, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire in 2021. The major repairs project, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, took nearly five years and was managed by a small team of church volunteers. (Photo: Neill Robinson neillrobinson.com)

About the author

Holly Isted joined the Diocese of Ely as the Historic Church Buildings Support Officer thanks to a partnership arrangement with Historic England. Holly works with those churches where heritage is considered to be most at risk, and as a result, the church is listed on Historic England's 'Heritage at Risk Register'.

Her work focuses on assisting parishes in understanding, managing, maintaining and making the best use of their buildings, with an emphasis on community consultation, heritage engagement activities and grant applications. Holly also organises training events, open to all churches in the Diocese, on topics such as maintenance, bid writing, open and welcome churches and heritage interpretation. She is also helping Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust to promote Ride and Stride.

Holly is a qualified secondary school teacher with a degree in Heritage Conservation, and over the last decade she has combined these skills to become a specialist in Heritage Learning and Interpretation. She has worked for museums, the National Trust and most recently The Churches Conservation Trust, creating and delivering a number of activity and engagement programmes, including three major projects supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (formerly the Heritage Lottery Fund).

Away from work Holly enjoys calligraphy, yoga and walking along the riverbank near her home in Guyhirn.

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The following are the text and slides of a talk given to the annual HRBA 'Big Update' on 27 April 2022.

The full report can be downloaded from the Diocese of Ely's website:
<https://www.elydiocese.org/parish-support/church-buildings/>

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For some years I have been part of a small group of Support Officers spread over the country, partly funded by Historic England, each working within a diocese or other defined area to support Places of Worship.

I help churches in the Diocese of Ely. This is in the East of England covering Cambridgeshire, a large part of West Norfolk, and south Peterborough. There are 334 churches, 43% of which are Grade I listed and 40% Grade II*.

Of particular interest in my role are the 28 churches which are on the Heritage at Risk Register (HARR) and an additional 36 which have been highlighted by the Diocese as being vulnerable to significant deterioration.

What led to the survey

My role is to help the people who look after church buildings. To be effective at this I need to understand my clients, but very early on I realised there was a serious lack of information about church volunteers. And although I was speaking to people regularly, most of my work was with buildings on the HARR so there was a good chance that my perception of things was a little skewed.

So when my contract was extended in April 2021, I decided to make it part of my role to survey volunteers in the Diocese.

The aims of the survey project are set out in the box. Whilst aimed at volunteers, paid staff including clergy were encouraged to take part where appropriate, and a few did so.

AIMS OF THE SURVEY PROJECT

Gather baseline data on volunteers involved in the care of church buildings including role types, age, length of service etc...

Capture the first-hand experience of volunteers

Explore the nature and 'health' of local volunteering at churches within the Diocese of Ely

Carry out a skills audit

Identify training and support needs and preferences

Highlight concerns and aspirations for the future

'a serious lack of
information about
church volunteers'

Survey respondents

The survey, *Building Volunteers*, was available as an online questionnaire from June until August 2021. The survey itself was received very positively, with some commenting that they were grateful for the opportunity to be heard.

140 people took part in the survey, representing 113 parishes, which is just over a third of parishes in the Diocese of Ely and just over a third of churches (including ungraded buildings). The responses were spread fairly evenly across the Diocese and the different conditions of buildings. Of those who responded, 30 were selected to take part in follow-up interviews.

The roles they held are shown in Fig. 1 – many had more than one role. Church buildings are predominately looked after by volunteers through the role of Churchwarden, and in some cases by the Fabric Officer, and these were easily the two most common roles represented in the survey.

An important finding, though not a surprise, was that the majority of volunteers are aged over 65 years old (Fig. 2, opposite). Despite most being retired, almost all those interviewed had numerous *other* volunteering commitments as well as families to look after. Young people and middle-aged people are less inclined or able to take on these roles.

It's also important to point out that most of our church volunteers have more than one role within the church, so they are busy people, perhaps more so than is often appreciated.

'most volunteers are aged 65 or over'

Who takes care of our church buildings?



Role(s) Held at Church

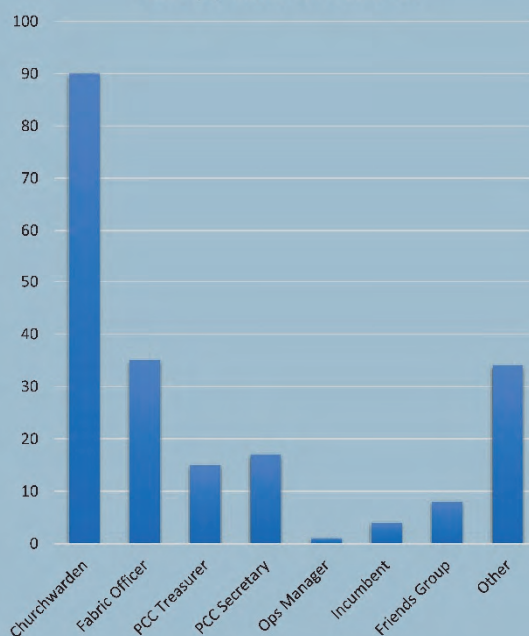


Fig. 1. Number of respondents holding each role at their church. Many respondents held more than one role. The role of Churchwarden was held by 90 respondents out of the total of 140.

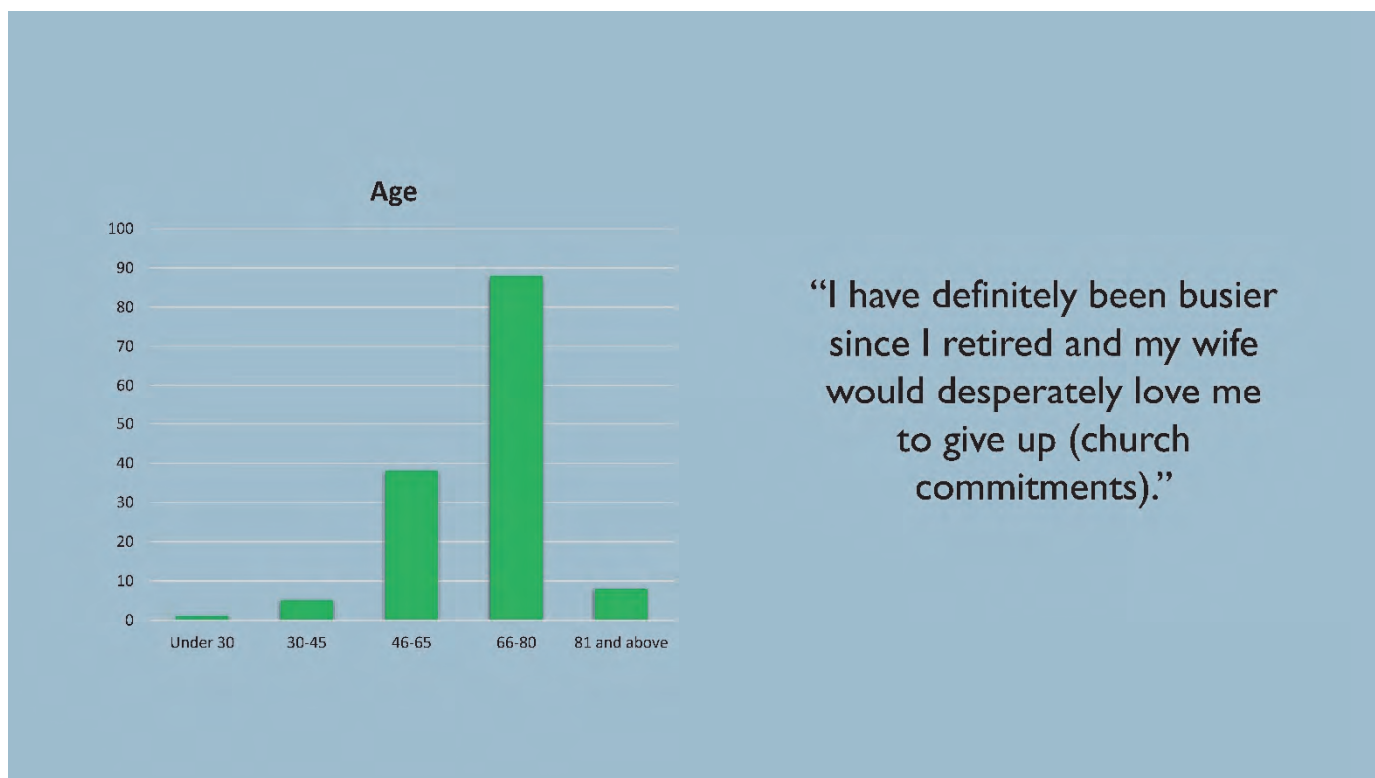


Fig. 2. Number of respondents to the survey in each age range. Nearly 90 respondents out of 140 were in the age bracket 66–80.

Today's lack of volunteers

Whilst most of the parishes surveyed did have two Churchwardens, 88% of respondents stated that they were not confident that a replacement could be found if they were to step down.

Although the survey, carried out in mid 2021, didn't specifically look at the impact of Covid, anecdotally it does not yet appear (Spring 2022) to have significantly affected volunteer numbers, although we know *some* have stepped down as a result. The concern for many parish churches is that Covid has just added to the challenges that already existed and we could be heading for a crisis of capacity.

There isn't a single, simple explanation for the lack of volunteers, but it does seem to be linked to the nature of volunteering within the Church, the type of roles and the way in which volunteers are recruited and coordinated.

The word 'volunteer'

To start with, the word 'volunteer' was found to be a bit unsatisfying, as the comments illustrate (see box overleaf). The Churchwarden who commented that 'he struggled to see the motivation to serve the parish as a volunteer matter' went on to suggest he 'would be more comfortable with another description, perhaps Self-Supporting Parish Worker?' Duty, faith, a gentle coercion to take on roles and even guilt were frequently cited as motivating factors.

'the word 'volunteer' was found to be a bit unsatisfying'

THE NOTION OF BEING A 'VOLUNTEER'

'I struggle to see the motivation to serve the parish as a volunteer matter. Is the outworking of one's faith in any parish responsibility a volunteer matter?'

'I don't really see it as volunteering though. It is part of my duty as a Christian and as part of the community.'

'Committing on an emotional and religious level. It's more of a service than just volunteering to do a specific role/thing.'

'I joined out of community guilt. There weren't any Churchwardens (hadn't been for two years). It is clearly difficult to run a church without a Churchwarden.'

The reasons for volunteering are analysed more systematically in Fig. 3, opposite. What came through strongly in both the survey and the subsequent interviews was that, whilst no-one disagreed that they were carrying out a voluntary role, they felt it was very different to volunteering within other organisations, because it was so strongly connected to faith and a sense of duty to serve. I'm not saying that people aren't motivated to volunteer for other organisations to 'serve' their local community, but there is something deeper about volunteering in the church, particularly for a person of faith.

TOP 5 REASONS FOR VOLUNTEERING	
86%	To do my bit to help the church
51%	Social aspect – friendship and sense of community
39%	There was no-one else to do it and someone had to
35%	It makes me feel happier and more fulfilled
34%	I have a long connection with the church and felt it was my turn

Fig. 3. The top five reasons for volunteering. Respondents could choose more than one reason. The overwhelmingly most popular reason was 'to do my bit to help the church'.

‘people did comment on the many positive aspects of their work’

Positive aspects of the work

People did comment on the many positive aspects of their work (first box below) including making a difference, being part of a community and part of history, the enjoyment and sense of place an historic church building provides, and the sense of purpose and structure volunteering provided, particularly during Covid. Nevertheless, the sense of duty and obligation did make it into the top 5 reasons why people volunteered, in particular, ‘there was no-one else to do it and someone had to’.

Obligations and duty

‘people end up taking on too much . . .’

It’s worth talking about obligation and duty a little more (second box below). It is a great strength in many ways for organisations to have people volunteering out of a sense of duty and obligation, as people just get on with it and make do. When there are enough resources, money, people, time, expertise etc, this has and can work well. But where there aren’t resources – and we know many of our churches, particularly rural ones are struggling – this becomes a problem for individuals; people end up taking on too much and are unable to give tasks up or step down due to that sense of obligation, duty, guilt. It’s also not as easy to leave a voluntary role within a church because it is part of your life/your family and you still know and see everyone. You may need to move away to really be able to step down.

POSITIVE ASPECTS OF VOLUNTEERING

Making a difference and feeling appreciated
 Knowing the building will be kept in a good condition
 Serving God and the community
 Being part of a team
 Seeing the building being used and kept open and welcoming
 Community and fellowship
 Being in a peaceful, quite place
 Privilege of working with an historic listed building
 Meeting a range of people
 Sense of purpose and structure (particularly during Covid)
 Continuity – being part of history and continuing the life of the church

OBLIGATIONS

‘You get into jobs, stumble in and then it’s ‘sticky’, you can’t get out of them.’
 ‘When I said I might do this (step back) next year it didn’t go down well...You don’t really leave though, not completely as the church is part of your life/your family.’
 ‘When you leave a role in the church people still have your contact details and you still know and see everyone, so you still end up helping. It is very hard to just give up unless you move away.’

“Churchwarden
is only part of
what I do at the
church, I have
about 26 other
jobs.”

- Grounds Keeper/maintenance of churchyard
- Safeguarding Officer
- Organist
- ALM Worship Leader
- Cleaning Rota Manager
- Electoral Role Officer
- PCC Member
- General church volunteer
- Odd Job Man
- Tower Captain
- Lead on grant applications
- Gift Aid Officer
- Reader
- Sound Engineer
- Lead on working parties
- Parish Magazine Editor
- Member of Fabric Committee
- Parish Administrator
- Clerk of Works
- Lead on development projects
- Key Holder – open the church up for visitors

Fig. 4. Some of the roles taken by volunteers, many of them informal or unofficial. Many respondents had more than one such role.

‘the survey also highlighted the large number of things which volunteers do’

The survey also highlighted the large number of things which volunteers do, particularly people over the age of 65 (Fig. 4), some of which I am sure wouldn’t be allowed in other organisations (Health and Safety, potentially job substitution) and contributions which just aren’t recognised (financial and practical). One Churchwarden spoke about leaping from one side of the tower to another, whilst another described not being able to move and downsize from a four-bedroom house due to all the things he stored for the church (box below).

COMMENTING ON THE JOB OF CHURCHWARDEN

‘I do quite a bit, climb the tower and other spiral staircases, no Health and Safety, precarious access, ladders etc... but you can’t do much about that.’

‘We are facing an interregnum soon which I know will lead me to taking on more tasks. I was going to retire, but the church can’t lose a Churchwarden and Vicar at the same time, so I will hang on a bit longer...’

‘Being a Churchwarden is not a cheap job, you give a lot to the church...’

‘I have a large house, but I couldn’t downsize because of all the stuff I store for the church...’

‘It is the same people all the time giving that time and money. We are happy to do it, but it does give a false perspective of the situation of the church and makes it seem we are better off/coping better than we are, we keep bailing it out.’

Informality and lack of structure

This links to another area which is both a strength and weakness for churches – a lack of structure in volunteering. As the graph (Fig. 5) illustrates, few of the survey respondents received any formal information or induction relating to their role.

There was an indication that bigger, busier churches were more likely to have something in place, but on the whole volunteer management seemed very informal.

This informality does suit the sense of a parish church being part of an extended family where people can help as and when required, but it does have its drawbacks, particularly in an environment where personal interests and personalities may clash.

It is, therefore, important to have a strong sense of leadership at a local level, however, the survey highlighted the fact that there is no one person ultimately responsible for volunteers at a church. Many respondents answered that they ‘imagined’ it was the Vicar or ‘guessed’ it was up to them – either way, no-one felt anyone was actually trained to take on that role.

It goes back to that idea that people ‘just get on with it’ and somehow things keep going.

‘there is no one person ultimately responsible for volunteers at a church’



Fig. 5. Number of respondents receiving various types of induction training. Respondents could choose more than one. The most common choices were ‘informal conversation and ‘handover from predecessor’.

“it is not fair for PCCs to do it all. It’s very sophisticated stuff.”

“...the hierarchy, or rather the approvals etc... it is unnecessarily complex...”

“...there is so much more personal accountability now, it worries people.
Expectations are much higher and there is too much paperwork.”

“The challenge of being an Anglican today is that you also have to be a listed buildings property expert.”

“We are volunteers but many of us are amateurs as well. We are dealing with contractors etc... but we aren’t experts.
Nor do I want to be”



Fig. 6. Some comments made by Churchwardens on the pressures they face.

Pressure

Just over half of respondents described their role as meeting their expectations, but many also expressed a growing sense of pressure, an increasing need to be expert in all things, as well as a lack of time to carry out all their duties, as the quotes illustrate (Fig. 6 above).

This led me to consider if a key role like Churchwarden could be carried out by someone in full-time work, so I asked the people I interviewed. The response was overwhelmingly ‘no’, you couldn’t combine this with a full-time job, unless you had a very understanding boss, flexible working hours, the ability to work at home or a wide network of people to draw on for support. In essence, the roles require a lot of flexible spare time, so it is perhaps no wonder they struggle to attract people from younger age groups.

‘you couldn’t combine this with a full-time job’

Finding volunteers – who can do the work?

Most of the respondents expressed a preference to recruit volunteers from within the congregation, or find people with some familiarity of the church, who could be eased into a role and make a long-term commitment. So why not recruit from the wider community? It’s not that anyone in the church is against it, just that there is a feeling or experience that people ‘would not be interested’ (box opposite).

How do you sell a church role, particularly those with key responsibilities which have been described as time-consuming, demanding and sometimes stressful, to people who are not part of the worshipping community?

WHO CAN DO THE WORK?

‘You can’t just pluck people out of the community to help if they are not interested in religion.’

‘A Churchwarden has to be a communicant of the church... You could split the role up and have a Fabric Officer, but that person does need to have some understanding of Church. People are surprised that things cost so much more than they do in secular buildings, and the time things take and the lack of specialist support (without paying fees).’

‘I am not a member of the church and had no knowledge of the church when I started, so it is possible for a Fabric Officer to be someone who is not part of the worshipping community. You do still have to attend PCC meetings; you also have to get used to the language.’

‘(People) don’t want the commitment though that comes with church, or the religious element of PCC meetings (prayers throughout).’

‘others agreed that the role [of churchwarden] could be split . . .’

As highlighted by one respondent, ‘A Churchwarden has to be a communicant of the church...but you can split the role up and have a Fabric Officer, but that person does need to have some understanding of Church. People are surprised that things cost so much more than they do in secular buildings, and the time things take and the lack of specialist support (without paying fees).’ Others agreed that the role could be split but noted that a Fabric Officer would still have to attend PCC meetings and ‘get used to the language’ used, which might not be appealing.

Whilst the more secular role of Fabric Officer does seem to be appearing at more and more churches, it is not universally recognised and thus people have been overlooked when it comes to training and support provided by the Diocese and other organisations.

What other incentives are there for people? Other organisations responsible for historic buildings often provide opportunities to develop skills which in some cases can lead to employment; free membership and free entry to other heritage sites; free uniform which can be popular as it gives a sense of being a valued part of team; discount at shops and tearooms etc. There is a feeling that there simply isn’t enough to tempt people who are not ‘of faith’ or from a different faith to take on the key roles of responsibility within parish churches.

Do church buildings volunteers feel supported?

Do church buildings volunteers feel supported? This is another difficult question to answer. In many ways ‘no’, volunteers don’t feel supported, but the survey also highlighted that people aren’t always clear who is supposed to be providing support and what is available to them.

General support (not necessarily related to buildings) from the local community, Diocese and National Church was found to be a bit ‘hit and miss’. The National Church in particular was thought to spend too much time telling people ‘what to do’ rather than ‘how to do it’.



“I am thanked by PCC and from the pulpit - that’s enough embarrassment”.

“we are not experts, but we’re expected to do expert roles”

“There is an assumption that all volunteers are likely to be vandals...Volunteers are what they are and should be given a degree of respect rather than a condescending pat on the head when one of too many bishops appears very rarely.”

Fig. 7: Some comments on recognition, made by Churchwardens.

‘awards and celebrations proved to be relatively unpopular’

When it came to recognition though, awards and celebrations proved to be relatively unpopular. What people valued more was recognition through the provision of the resources and support needed to achieve success.

In general, formal training also proved to be very unpopular, due mainly to a lack of time and a lack of quality in existing mandatory training sessions in the Diocese (not buildings related). The preference was for people to ‘learn on the job’ from others and to have opportunities to share ideas and experiences with people from other parishes.

Conclusions

As the focus of this survey was to help inform my own work, the recommendations tended to focus on what I personally can achieve; these are listed in the full report.

However the work did lead me to some other, wider conclusions, listed below.

- Support and training for volunteers must meet the needs of the audience and of the situation.
- Information needs to be more concise, with a limit on the number of links to further information, to avoid overwhelming people.
- We need to review the key leadership roles at local churches and their relevance to modern attitudes to volunteering. Are the responsibilities, duties and expectations appropriate, realistic or indeed fair?
- Financial and practical support is needed to ensure routine maintenance can be carried out.

- Free or subsidised professional support is required in key areas such as project management, bid writing, conservation of specific items such as wall paintings and heritage interpretation and tourism.
- Funding should be tailored to the needs of church buildings and the volunteers caring for them.

It's easy these days to become a bit bleak about the future, but in this case I think there is indeed a crisis in volunteering at parish churches. Many people feel this is becoming a greater threat to historic church buildings than the lack of funding.

But it's not just a crisis of numbers/capacity, it is also the lack of a positive volunteering experience for many people. I have worked for the National Trust and other heritage organisations in the past, where volunteers were essential to day-to-day operations. In each there was a huge focus on the benefits of volunteering to individuals. If there were problems, they were generally down to getting this wrong.

Whilst many respondents to this survey highlighted positive attributes of volunteering for their church, the pressure, the strong sense of obligation, personal accountability, of being stuck and not able to step down, did not speak to a positive overall experience.

* * *

Finally it was pointed out to me that I hadn't specifically asked if volunteers were happy . . . which led me to consider the further question, 'Who has a duty of care for Churchwardens?'. I asked around and most people, including an Archdeacon, answered '*probably*' the priest responsible for the church.

'*Probably*'? For volunteers who are vital to the health and wellbeing of our church communities we really ought to be doing better.

'we really ought to be doing better'

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We are independent of any faith group or individual heritage body. Since our foundation in 2008 we have built up an enviable reputation as a trustworthy and fact-based advocate for the future of historic churches and other places of worship.

We provide briefings to members on matters of mutual interest and help them share information and best practice with each other, and move toward a common mind on the issues of the day. We engage directly with a much larger constituency through our newsletter, public meetings, website and publications.

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