

Norwich Diocese Church Buildings Commission

The need to clarify the law regarding the legality of parish councils giving grants to church property

The Church Buildings Commission launched in January 2022 with the purpose of looking at the church buildings across the Norwich Diocese in terms of their use and sustainability for the future. It is due to report before the summer and is currently in the process of shaping its recommendations

The Diocese of Norwich has more medieval churches than almost any other Diocese. In fact, there are over 650 church buildings in the Diocese covering Norfolk and Waveney. 95 per cent are Grade 1 and 2* listed. The long-term sustainability of this very large number of churches needs positive and workable solutions.

The Purpose of the Commission

The aims of the commission are to identify:

- a) the parish churches of the Diocese of Norwich which are most vulnerable to diminishing usage, financial, practical and volunteer support
- b) potential opportunities locally to introduce complementary or alternative uses, drawing on best practice elsewhere
- c) options for the future as resources continue to diminish (all potential options will be considered)

Commission members were drawn from a variety of stakeholders including Clergy, church wardens and independent specialists with a knowledge of and interest in the use and heritage of church buildings, with an independent chair. The commission drew upon the experience and views of others in formulating ideas and options and then making recommendations to the Bishop of Norwich and the council of Trustees

The commission consulted widely, received evidence from a variety of organisations, visited a variety of churches to meet and listen to church wardens and incumbents, examined available data and carried out surveys before reaching its conclusions.

The Commission wanted to understand the issues surrounding the vulnerability of church buildings in the Diocese from a wide a range of perspectives, and as thoroughly, as possible. As well as referring to written reports and interpreting existing data, we were keen to speak directly to churchwardens, incumbents and other stakeholders to hear about their experiences and opinions.

Our main activities consisted of:

- a literature review
- an analysis of existing church data
- visits to benefices in the DoN
- twilight drop-in discussion sessions
- Commission presentations/expert evidence
- a church buildings survey

- a public survey
- ideas sessions

The relationship between Parish Councils and Parochial church councils

Many of the PCCs members we spoke to struggled to raise the money needed to maintain their churches and pay for necessary repairs. Many were keen to work with local community organisations to increase the use of their churches in complimentary ways, however, this was often hampered by a lack of kitchen and toilet facilities. In our Church Buildings Survey (see extract at annex A), the tables attached show that 48% of the churches surveyed lacked toilet facilities and 39% lacked kitchen facilities of any kind, and only 18% had full kitchen facilities.

Clarification of the law

A clarification of the law regarding the ability of Parish councils to fund Parochial Church Councils if they wanted to, would greatly enhance local churches abilities to fundraise to improve facilities and increase community access and engagement and thus improve the prospects of sustaining church buildings and local communities

One of our recommendations will be to

‘strongly encourage the Church of England to continue to lobby parliament to pass legislation to confirm that Parish and Town Councils (and other local authorities) may contribute to the upkeep of church property for the benefit of the community and remove the uncertainty created by a perceived conflict between the provisions of the Local Government Acts of 1894 and 1972 by pursuing the routes suggested in the Church Buildings Council’s March 2018 paper “Local Authority Investment in Church Property”.

Our evidence is as follows:

Twilight drop-ins – comments left on flip charts:

“Precept of Parish Council to help with supporting the church building - sorting it out so that they could support churches if they wish.”

“Open out to the community. Church & community should work together. Encourage Parish Council to engage.”

“Divisions between PC & PCCs not helpful.”

Comments from our Church Buildings Survey:

“We would like to add a kitchen and toilet, if we are able to raise enough money. This is being looked into by the Parish Clerk, because the Parish Council would like to help us, so that they are able to hold meetings and coffee mornings in the church.”

“The Parish Council gave the proceeds of The Jubilee Tea Party to the church and intends to use the church for an annual fete.”

Twelve churches recorded that the Parish Council held their meetings in their church buildings.

We didn’t ask directly about Parish Councils in our public survey, but we did refer to the ‘Local authority’. While only 19 people said they thought the Local authority owned churches, 59 said they

thought they should own churches and 148 thought they should be responsible for the upkeep of churches.

Findings from our public survey which attracted over 1,000 responses, 89% of those surveyed said that they thought it was extremely important or important that church buildings are used for the benefit of the wider (non-worshipping) community. (see Annex B)

86% felt that the use of church buildings for non-worshipping activities was extremely important or important in contributing to a sense of local community. We also asked what churches need to offer in order to be attractive as venues for wider events and ventures and 24% mentioned tea points or other catering facilities and 27% mentioned toilets.

Laura McGillivray MBE
Chair Church Buildings Commission
Norwich Diocese

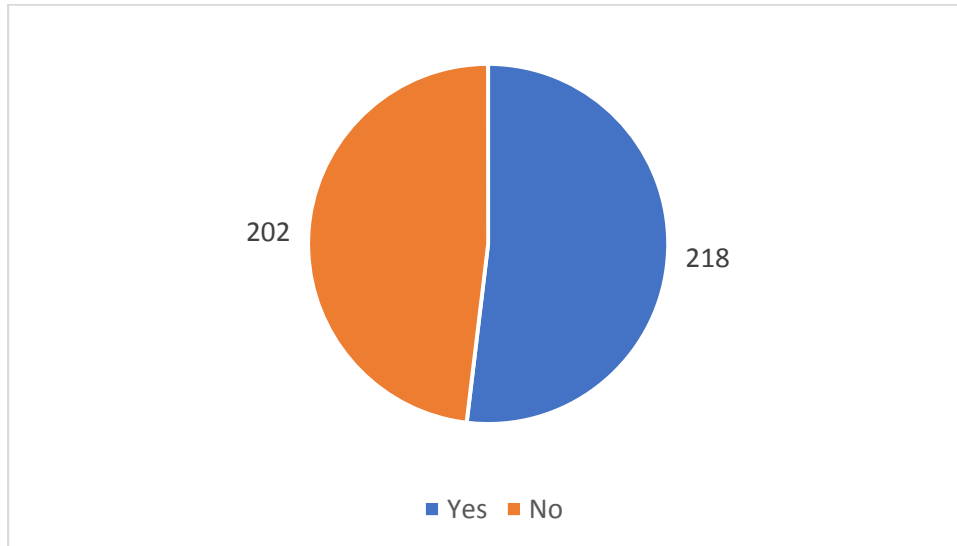
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ANNEX A

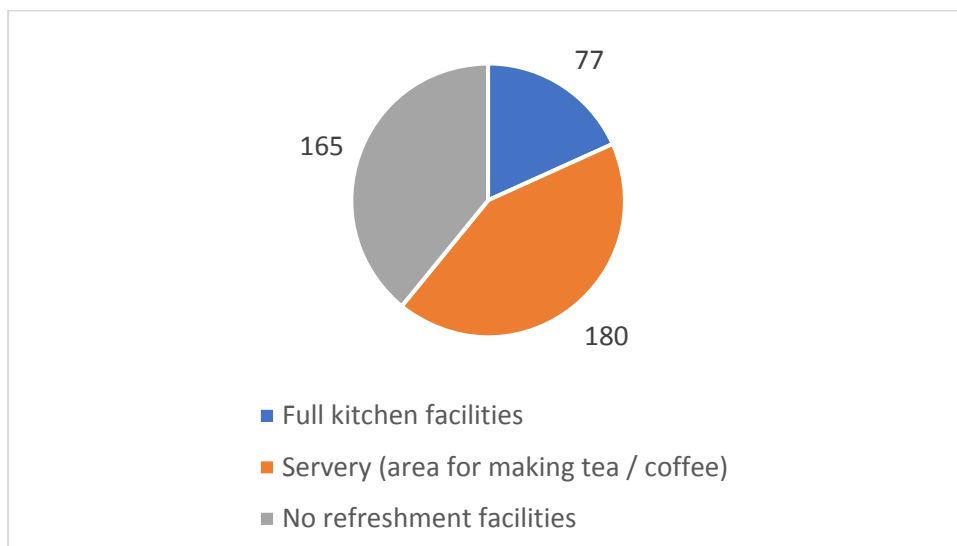
Church Buildings Commission Parish survey extracts

66% response rate shown to be a representative sample when data checked

6.11 Does your church have access to its own toilet facilities? (n = 420)



6.12 What facilities for providing refreshments does your church have? (n = 422)



ANNEX B

Public survey extracts (over 1,000 responses received)

7. How important do you think it is that church buildings are used for the benefit of the wider (non-worshipping) community?

Response	No.	%
Extremely important	517	51.7
Important	377	37.7
Neutral	70	7.0
Not important	24	2.4
Extremely unimportant	12	1.2
	100	
Totals	0	100.0

13. How important would the use of a church building for non-worshipping activities be in contributing to a sense of local community?

Response	No.	%
Extremely important	481	48.1
Important	379	37.9
Neutral	100	10.0
Not important	29	2.9
Extremely unimportant	12	1.2
Totals	1001	100.0

14. What do churches need to offer in order to be attractive as venues for wider events and ventures? Tick all that apply.

Response	No.	%
Tea points/other catering facilities	745	24.0
Toilets	843	27.1
Parking	655	21.1
Adaptable event spaces	664	21.4
Other	199	6.4
Totals	3106	100.0