

Report of the Church Buildings Review Group

Consultation – October 2015

Response from the Heritage Lottery Fund

HLF welcomes the establishment of the Church Buildings Review Group and the publication of its initial review into the Church of England's stewardship of its church buildings as part of the ongoing *Reform and Renewal* programme. The review is a very welcome initiative as it will undoubtedly assist the Church of England in terms of thinking about its strategic plans for the future sustainable management of the 15,700 church buildings in its care. The analysis of the newly available statistical data setting out the recent trends in church use and membership is particularly interesting, and we would commend the use of this evidence to inform strategic policy-making. We also hope that this data will continue to be gathered and analysed in order to gain some insight into the underlying trends, so that future decisions regarding the management of church buildings are supported by firm evidence rather than relying too heavily on anecdote and personal or professional knowledge and understanding, though we recognise that there is much of value that can be gleaned from informal data gathering too.

We therefore register our broad support for the general principles outlined in paragraph 121 and in particular the recognition that local ownership – in every sense of the word – is preferred to other alternatives. We also strongly endorse the view that church buildings belong to their communities and are assets of great significance beyond their core religious purpose. We therefore agree that finding ways to support local people to implement a sustainable plan for the ongoing care and use of their parish church should be the key priority for diocesan teams over the coming years.

However, we would also like to make some specific comments on the recommendations set out in paragraph 209 as follows:

New Models (Recommendations 209.2 and 209.5)

We welcome the suggestion that the Church of England will explore new models of managing its estate at diocesan level. From our own experience of working with grantees at a local and regional level, we very much endorse the recognition in paragraph 44 that 'one size fits all' solutions are rarely appropriate. It therefore seems entirely sensible to seek to support dioceses to tackle their local challenges in the way that best suits their needs and opportunities. There is, however, always a need to balance this with strategic thinking and leadership at national level and we would therefore support the recommendations aimed at increasing collaboration and improving the sharing of best practice and good ideas across the country.

In terms of identifying local solutions, we note that the report highlights a number of specific proposals that are being considered in the dioceses of Norwich, Exeter and Lincoln; these include strategies such as setting up a Diocesan Churches Trust and the creation of 'festival churches'. Although it seems sensible to consider alternative ideas for managing church buildings in places where there are fewer church members, we feel that these proposals would benefit from further exploration before they are promoted more widely as potential models of future stewardship. We would also hope that any new proposals that are taken forward for implementation are fully supported by a realistic and well considered business case as well as a robust analysis of the evidence base. There is clear need to be rigorous in terms of gathering the evidence to support potential changes in management structures and to be thoroughly objective in considering the potential negative aspects of such changes alongside the perceived benefits.

Festival Churches

In considering the idea of 'festival churches' in particular, we feel that there are specific issues that require further consideration to ensure that appropriate and financially viable proposals for the routine care and repair of 'festival churches' would be put in place to ensure that problems are not simply 'stored up for the future' as highlighted in paragraph 149. We are also concerned to see that the 'festival churches' proposal has already been likened to 'moth-balling' in some of the media coverage. Whilst we note that the report sets out the various measures that would be put in place to ensure that 'festival churches' remain properly cared for, we suspect that there is considerable potential for the designation of 'festival churches' to be interpreted as something of a 'retreat' with the risk that the local community might disengage still further from its parish church. If this happens then reversing the trend and trying to re-energise the community so that it is able to find a sustainable new use for its church building could become much more challenging in the future.

We would therefore suggest that if the idea of 'festival churches' is to be taken forward then it will be important to agree a set of positive intended outcomes that can then be tested through evaluation based on data gathered during and after the change is implemented. If the evaluation shows that the idea does work well in practice and does deliver the desired outcomes, then it would be helpful to have a strategy for sharing the lessons learned with other dioceses. However, it should be acknowledged that it does not necessarily follow that a proposal that works well in one location will automatically work equally well somewhere else where local circumstances may be very different.

Transfer of Responsibilities

We would also comment that achieving a good level of local community engagement with the process of change and then wide spread support for the intended outcomes will be key factors in terms of the potential success, or otherwise, of any proposed new model. Whilst there can sometimes be an intrinsic fear of change within a community there may also be entirely justified and sensible concerns that would need to be addressed if new models of management are to be introduced. The transfer of responsibilities to a new body or to another existing organisation is an area that may be potentially difficult to resolve. Although there may be merit in changing the law to allow the transfer of responsibilities from one group to another, there are challenging practical issues to address in terms of defining the extent of responsibilities to be transferred and to what degree the new governing body will be liable in terms of financial, legal, building maintenance, health and safety and insurance matters.

The partial transfer of responsibilities might also raise questions about local leadership and decision-making in relation to the taking forward any necessary physical changes to enable a sustainable future use of the church building. Roles and responsibilities would therefore need to be very carefully described, and those taking on the new responsibilities would need to have a very clear understanding of what this would mean. We would be concerned that if roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined then activities to safeguard the building fabric may not be undertaken. The nature of the bodies taking on some of the responsibilities also needs to be carefully considered and further thought will be needed in terms of agreeing appropriate governance models for these new organisations along with robust proposals for their sustainable future funding. This leads to the more fundamental question of whether such bodies will actually be able to raise funds and implement maintenance and repair programmes more effectively than parochial church councils.

Volunteers

We are pleased to see that the report recognises the importance of volunteers and how much they already contribute to the care and management of church buildings. Volunteers are an incredibly valuable resource, but supporting them and encouraging new people to give their time to the sector is an ongoing challenge for all those involved in the care of historic buildings. We would therefore identify a potential risk to the success of the proposed changes, in that the proposals for alternative models of management are likely to require additional volunteers to take on roles within the new trusts. It may not be easy to find new people from outside the church congregation to accept the burden of responsibility of a challenging building when its future viability and funding are unresolved. A further risk might arise from the inevitably complex inter-relationship between a new trust and the parochial church council members who formerly cared for the building; this could result in new tensions which could thwart rather than support the changes intended to secure a sustainable future for the building.

In other circumstances, it is suggested that several church buildings might be looked after by a single parochial church council. From a purely organisational standpoint such changes might make sense in terms of achieving operational efficiencies, however there is a worry that this might overload existing volunteers with additional responsibilities, especially when there is no guarantee that additional voluntary support might be forthcoming. It would therefore seem sensible to consider whether there will be a need for investment in terms of training and other support measures or indeed a potential requirement for paid staff to take on some of these roles.

Funding (Recommendation 209.1)

The report contains some very useful information with regard to the current income for church buildings and how this money is spent. The details in paragraphs 23 to 16 are very helpful as they provide a broad understanding of the average capital expenditure per church building, but it would be useful to compare these figures with previous years in order to identify potential trends. We would also suggest that this information should be made more widely available, as it allows funders and other strategic bodies to gain some understanding of the financial needs of specific congregations in relation to the wider context.

However, we are disappointed that the report does not recognise fully the current role of HLF (and other funders) in supporting parishes through the wide spectrum of our grants programmes including Grants for Places of Worship (GPoW), Heritage Grants, Our Heritage, Sharing Heritage and First World War: Then and Now (paragraphs 46 to 48). We would comment that:

- Since 1994, HLF has awarded over £800m to more than 5,600 projects supporting around 4,700 faith-related sites.
- Over 4,600 faith-related buildings and monuments have received £572m through 4,590 projects for building conservation.
- HLF has awarded £629m (5,090 projects) to over 4,250 places of worship of all faiths, with £572m (4,240 projects) contributing to the conservation of building fabric of more than 3,950 buildings and monuments.
- £101m has been awarded to 60 cathedrals through 119 projects. Of this, more than £45m has been spent on building conservation helping 52 buildings.

We also regret the lack of recognition of the HLF's commitment to achieving positive outcomes for communities through our grant programmes as noted in paragraph 126 and would assure the Church Buildings Review Group that HLF fully endorses the view that listed places of worship exist for the benefit of the whole community and that helping to keep them in good repair for future generations is in the public interest. Our commitment to supporting communities to enjoy their local heritage is part of the reason why we introduced the community outcome when the new GPoW programme was established in 2013. We are pleased to record that, as a direct result our funding, church congregations have been able to engage a wider range and a greater number of people with the heritage of their local place of worship.

We would also note that other than a call for Government to provide greater financial support for churches and cathedrals (paragraph 128) there is little discussion about other future funding strategies for church buildings. We would therefore encourage the Church Buildings Review Group to engage more actively with the full range of potential available funding mechanisms and to initiate a more strategic discussion about future funding models. There is also a present need to put in place additional measures to ensure that church communities make use of the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme as we are concerned that GPoW applicants do not always refer to this source of match-funding in their application forms.

As part of the wider strategic exercise we would suggest that it would be sensible to convene a meeting between the CBC and the major heritage funding agencies to discuss this topic.

Other resources

HLF is keenly aware of the huge value that Church Building Support Officers have made in their respective dioceses, as the impact of their support for parochial church councils is evidenced in a number of well-constructed grant applications that have been successful in receiving funding from HLF over the last few years. So, whilst we recognise that diocesan resources are constrained, we would argue that investment in dedicated support for congregations that are considering making changes to their building to secure a sustainable future is immensely valuable. The current post-holders have been instrumental in leveraging additional funding for the repair and refurbishment of church buildings and for encouraging successful community outcomes for major projects. They have also accumulated a considerable knowledge-base, experience and resources that can and should be more widely shared with others in order to help raise the general levels of capacity in the church buildings sector. We would therefore strongly encourage the Church Buildings Review Group to make a strong case for retaining these posts in diocesan teams and potentially increasing the support for Church Building Support Officers over the coming years.

On a similar note, we would draw the Church Buildings Review Group's attention to another area of risk in relation to resources. To ensure that the fabric of church buildings is maintained to a good standard and that repairs and alterations are carried out according to best conservation practice it is important to ensure that there is sufficient access to appropriately skilled architects, building surveyors and other professional advisers. These professionals play a key role in helping communities to shape and implement their projects, but it is not currently clear whether there is enough capacity within architectural and surveying practices to support those caring for church buildings now or in the future and therefore this might be an area that would benefit from further investigation. It would also seem sensible to think about measures to enable young professionals with enthusiasm and new ideas to find a role within the sector.

Resources at Church House

On a practical note we would also support the Church Buildings Review Group's aspiration to rationalise the staffing and committee structures at Church House to enable more streamlined and efficient working processes in terms of casework, decision-making and policy-making. The arguments put forward in support of making these internal organisational changes are well made and we note that the changes could potentially enable the Archbishops' Council to utilise its resources more effectively, however we would comment that strong departmental leadership and vision will be needed in order to put the recommendations of the report into action and to ensure the future success of the suggested initiatives.

Conclusion

We hope that these comments are helpful to Church Buildings Review Group and also to the Archbishops' Council and the Church Commissioners. HLF remains committed to offering funding to church communities to use and share their buildings more widely and we would be pleased to be involved in any further discussions arising from this report and consultation.

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