

Written evidence submitted by the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance

DCMS Select Committee Inquiry:

The impact of COVID-19 on Historic Religious Buildings in England

Overview

There are about 14,800 listed religious buildings in England. Of these 83% are owned by the Church of England, with most of the remainder being churches or chapels cared for by other Christian denominations or charitable trusts. Some 60 (0.4%) listed places of worship are owned by other faith groups, including buildings used by Jewish and Muslim groups.

For historical reasons, although owning such a high proportion of listed churches and chapels, the Church of England accounts for only one third (approximately) of the Christian worshippers in church on Sunday. The remaining two-thirds are split in broadly equal proportion between the Roman Catholic Church and various Free churches.¹

Religious buildings and their ancillary accommodation (whether listed or not) provide a home for activities which bring people together, strengthen social ties, and promote wellbeing – at a local level, and in all communities, including the most deprived. The pandemic has brought this home. The dislocating effect of not being able to celebrate major life events such as weddings and funerals has been widely commented upon, but also noticed has been the closure of tens of thousands of local social action projects organised by congregations, and based in places of worship. In addition, these buildings are in normal circumstances a major supplier of rooms for hire for local groups, an essential element of any thriving community: any future loss of these facilities would have a significant impact at local level.

Those religious buildings which are historic add an additional dimension. Often they are central features in the townscape or landscape, contributing significantly to a sense of place and local identity. They are places of shared memory. The buildings – and the first-rate works of art they contain – form an essential part of our national cultural heritage, of international significance, a fact which is widely recognised in the promotion of heritage tourism, both domestic and from overseas. Historic religious buildings contribute significantly to the overall tourism economy .

In almost all cases each of these 14,800 historic buildings is cared for – and paid for – by a local volunteer group, which we will refer to generically as ‘congregations’.

Many of these custodian congregations have been hard hit financially by the pandemic, and have not benefited from government support. The majority are inherently viable, but some of them, and the organisations of which they are part, have been put under serious threat by Covid-19. With the right support, targeted in a way that has immediate economic impact, they could continue to care for the nation’s cultural heritage whilst serving their communities through and beyond the current emergency.

Who are we?

The Historic Religious Buildings Alliance brings together those seeking a secure future for historic religious buildings. Our members include faith groups and charitable trusts who between them own and maintain almost all listed religious buildings in Great Britain.

The various faith groups caring for historic religious buildings do differ greatly in how they organise themselves, with various degrees of centralisation; and also in how they view the role of their buildings. Nevertheless, there are important commonalities.

- The need to maintain and adapt listed buildings, often with sensitive interiors, for routine use.
- A heavy reliance on volunteers. In some cases these are ‘vulnerable’ to Covid-19 by reason of age. Volunteers can walk away or lose the habit of turning up.
- A heavy reliance on regular voluntary giving, and fund-raising organised by volunteers. For some faith groups their regular income has partly relied on weekly cash donations.
- A shortage of capital resources. (In this context we note that the financial arrangements of the Church of England are often misunderstood; we anticipate they will be set out in that body’s own submission to DCMS.)
- For a very small number of historic religious buildings, such as cathedrals, a deliberate positioning as a heritage attraction – often as destination sites. *These are outside the scope of this note.* For the rest, there is modest or negligible income from tourism – not least because it is difficult to monetise visitors even when, as quite often, they are fairly numerous.
- For many, a reliance on letting out space for income, often with little or no margin (because of the tradition of giving hospitality).
- For most, the inability to use their buildings as security for lending.
- For some faith groups, both Christian and non-Christian, teaching that a place of worship may *only* be used for religious purposes (some, but not all, of the relevant faith groups describe the place of worship as being ‘sacred space’).
- For most, the sense of being inadvertent custodians of cultural heritage to the benefit of the wider community, but largely paying for it out of their own pockets.
- For most, an organisation which is designed for religious, congregational and community activities, not optimised for providing a heritage attraction.

This submission focuses on the Covid-19 issues shared by all or most listed places of worship in England. We have excluded any discussion of cathedrals and other tourist destinations, which we anticipate will be covered by the submission from the Church of England.

Q1. What has been the immediate impact of COVID 19 on the sector?

Drop in income

There has been a sharp drop in routine income, caused by:

- a major drop in donations as people have not been able to attend their place of worship and give on a weekly basis; this varies from area to area – one faith group reports that the problem is greatest in more deprived areas, where cash giving (rather than by bank standing order) is more common;
- a collapse in income from the hire of halls and rooms open to the public, and from rents from permanent tenants (such as nurseries); with social distancing continuing, this is unlikely to recover soon;
- the disappearance of tourism and its associated income;
- the cancellation of a very high proportion of fund raising events, traditionally held during warmer weather; many of these are organised by ‘vulnerable’ volunteers, and it is uncertain how quickly they will pick up.

The Church of England estimates a loss of between £8m and £11m per week. Another major Christian faith group (with about 630 listed places of worship in England) estimates that income dropped by approximately one half overnight. Mosques are said to be suffering financially, particularly the smaller ones. In contrast, many synagogues rely on subscription income and have been less affected financially (so far).

One Trust which looks after about 350 listed (closed) churches, mainly rural, estimates its income this year will fall by about £500k.

Current repair projects and maintenance activity

Many major projects already on site stopped work when lockdown began, though some have now recommenced. There is already evidence of future capital projects being put on hold (discussed below).

Some of our members are reporting that there has been reduced routine maintenance activity this year for a variety of reasons related to lockdown and the difficulties of getting on site.

Q2. How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector’s needs?

Historic England

Historic England (HE) surveyed the needs of the heritage sector soon after lockdown. This informed an emergency grant scheme set up quickly afterwards, and a further scheme has followed. Although useful, this is widely recognised as being insufficient. We believe HE would be well-placed to give greater support to the heritage sector if increased resources were made available.

Treasury support for owners of buildings

Central offices of faith groups

At national and regional level, the furloughing scheme has been widely taken up by the central offices of faith groups and other organisations in our sector.

Furloughing has been invaluable in managing fixed staff costs of central operations. However as re-opening slowly gets under way, the costs of the central staff necessary to support local re-opening will probably rise more quickly than the income to support them, as this is generated by local congregations. This, and the reduced level of support for furloughing, will put **further financial strain on these central bodies**.

For individual historic places of worship

Most individual places of worship have been **unable to access any of the Treasury's support**. The various loan schemes are not appropriate as the major asset of the congregation (e.g. the historic building) usually cannot be used as security, and the surplus of income over expenditure is often small, making a loan inappropriate. The three-month deferral of VAT is irrelevant, as most are not registered for VAT.

The vast majority of places of worship are completely exempt from business rates (under an arrangement quite separate from 80% charity relief). So **none** of the Small Business Grant Fund (SBGF), the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund (RHLGF), or the Business Rates Holiday has been helpful to places of worship.

Q3. What will the likely long-term impacts of COVID 19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

We first outline the likely long-term impacts, and then the support being requested.

LIKELY IMPACTS

Impact of social distancing

The current 2m social distancing regulations restrict many congregational activities, and limit the hiring out of ancillary space, the opportunities for fund-raising and the opening up of buildings for tourism. This has a major impact on income.

As a small mitigation, there is at present a move towards using churchyards for public worship, especially in rural areas. Non-Christian communities such as Muslims are also actively exploring outdoor congregational gatherings. This approach may provide an attractive short-term fix during the summer months, and help some congregations maintain a sense of purpose and continuity.

The social distancing regulations are a matter for the Government, but we note that a relaxation in the 2m rule for indoor gatherings would help in all the areas of concern.

Impact of re-opening

Anecdotal evidence suggest many thousands of congregations will show a degree of resilience when the pandemic has eased.

Congregations in deprived areas are likely to see substantial falls in their members' disposable income, and in the short to medium term it is possible this may make them unviable; however some faith groups already cross-subsidise such congregations as part of their overall mission, so it is impossible to forecast how this will play out.

A major concern is that those 'vulnerable' to Covid-19 because of age may be less willing to take the risk of gathering together, perhaps preferring to sit at home and enjoy a digital offering; and they may not go back to their many voluntary tasks, at least for the medium term.

Lack of volunteers is a particular risk for smaller congregations, which tend to have a high proportion of 'vulnerable' people. Indeed we think that some very small congregations will be so reduced in size and energy that they may decide to close down, or perhaps simply not re-open. The Church of England, for example, has about 2,000 congregations in rural areas with 10 or fewer people, including a high percentage of 'vulnerable' people, many of them no longer working. Anecdotal evidence suggest that Covid-19 has put some these congregations under substantial pressure. Many of them are caring for nationally important, highly-listed buildings.

There is also considerable concern regarding volunteers amongst Trusts caring for closed churches and chapels. One Trust, caring for more than twenty such buildings in England (and more than this in Wales) reports that most of its volunteers watching over individual buildings are aged between 65 and 85. Another Trust (caring for 350 closed, listed churches) is explicit that lack of local volunteers is a major risk going forward.

Impact on maintenance and repairs

The Covid-19 pandemic will add pressure on inspections, routine maintenance and major repairs, due to:

- General financial pressures in congregations;
- The retargeting of funding by major grant-givers away from capital repairs, in order to meet the immediate social needs of the pandemic;
- Difficulties with fund raising this year, meaning a whole year of repairs will be lost;
 - For example, the national Ride and Stride fundraising event, which normally raises about £1.5m for repairs to places of worship, is likely to take place this year on a much reduced scale, or not at all. At a more local level, the Norfolk Churches Trust, which makes grants for church repairs, will suffer a loss of income this year of about £130k, approximately three-quarters of its typical annual grant activity.

We fear that financial pressures on some congregations may be such that regular maintenance work does not resume, with potentially catastrophic consequences in years to come.

As regards capital projects, one of the better-off Catholic dioceses has already put all of these on hold. Another large Christian faith group (about 500 listed churches) has put on hold all internal property grants. One Church of England diocese (more than 300 listed churches in the diocese, most of Grade I or Grade II*) believes that congregations will redesign their larger projects to deal with the minimum essential, making the best use of small grants, and

postponing major repairs into the distant future. This view is shared by one of the larger specialist grant-givers in the sector.

As an unwanted side-effect, there are concerns about the survival of many smaller contractors and specialist craftspeople on which listed places of worship rely for conservation, maintenance and repairs. (This concern is supported by detailed research which will no doubt be submitted to you by the relevant bodies.) Many contractors fall between the gaps of the existing government schemes, leading to a loss of specialist skills, posing a threat to the future preservation of our heritage.

Overall we are concerned that the pandemic will deal a permanent blow to the ability of the sector to address and carry out both routine maintenance and essential major repairs, from which it will take many years to recover. There is a risk of many decades of private and public investment being undone.

Impact on development and diversification

The sustainability of some historic places of worship can be improved by widening their community use and engagement, a long-term solution often requiring an initial investment in development work and then modifications to the building. However, Covid-19 has seen the diversion of funding away from this purpose towards the present emergency, making such work much harder to take forward.

PROPOSED GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

The Government should consider what **messaging it gives to elderly volunteers**, especially those in good health, allowing an appropriate balance between the health risk from Covid-19 and the mental and physical benefits of engaging in meaningful activity with others.

We ask the Government to bring to fruition the work it has already carried out and **legislate to confirm that Parish Councils may legally donate money to their local church building** as recommended in the Taylor Review.

We urge the Government to **retain the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme**, which recompenses listed places of worship for their VAT contributions (it is currently set to expire in 2021). It is widely recognised as a very effective use of public money. This affects communities across the country, and its loss would be a major and immediate disincentive for spending on building work of any scale. On the wider issue, we join with our parent body, the Heritage Alliance, in advocating the equalisation of VAT on repair and restoration of existing buildings.

- A practical point has arisen with respect to this Grant Scheme, where completion of some works has been delayed because of Covid-19, so the claim slips past the one-year deadline. We would **ask DCMS to consider a one-off extension** under these circumstances.

In line with the Taylor Review (see note below), there is the need for **a new source of capital funding** for the sector for major repairs, and for upgrading work such as heating and lighting to make historic place of worship more usable and thus more sustainable. Given the life-cycle of major repair projects, this needs to be guaranteed for at least five years. This will feed through to the construction industry, boosting employment and local economies. It could also support the Government's levelling up agenda. Additionally, to assist historic places of

worship in carrying out regular maintenance, we would encourage **the long-term provision of a minor repairs fund, as recommended in the Taylor Review**, and recently piloted by Historic England: this again would support the construction industry at a local level.

- *Note on the Taylor Review*: In the light of a shortfall in capital funding for major repairs the *Taylor Review: Sustainability of English Churches and Cathedrals* (DCMS, 2017) proposed a Major Repairs Fund of £36m per annum for Church of England churches (the only places of worship within the scope of the report). Scaling up and rounding to include all listed places of worship suggests a figure of about £45m per annum for England. Since then the report the National Lottery Heritage Fund has changed its priorities and historic places of worship are finding it much harder to access the Fund, thus increasing the need for such a Major Repairs Fund. For reasons given earlier, the Covid-19 pandemic makes this type of support even more important.

We ask the Government to consider **extending the furlough scheme** to this sector for a further period. A relatively small further investment now is likely to pay dividends later by maintaining the viability of central organisations.

We ask the Government to **provide a one-off £10k Faith Building Grant** equivalent to the RHLGF grant, which has not applied to places of worship. Not least, this is likely to boost the construction industry across the country and help the many specialist small businesses and craftspeople who are at risk.

We ask the Government to **ensure that specialist heritage skills survive** through targeted grants and support. This could include apprenticeship support or skills and work training through government funding, assisting in a small but cost-effective way with unemployment issues. This could be targeted, as part of the levelling-up agenda.

Government will need to include historic religious buildings in any messaging it may undertake in support of tourism, domestic at first, later international. It would also be helpful to make provision for additional funding to support the sector in engaging with local destination management partnerships and to assist existing organisations involved in supporting faith heritage tourism

Like many other sectors, historic places of worship would see **substantial benefit from a reduction in social distancing from 2m to 1m** if and when the Government deems it appropriate to make this change.

Finally, many congregations will need encouragement in the light of the extra pressures caused by Covid-19. We would encourage the Government to consider **raising the profile of its support for historic places of worship**.

Q4. What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with COVID 19?

General

We are aware of the submission to the Committee by our parent body, the Heritage Alliance, and agree with the points made there under Question 4 to the extent they apply to listed places of worship.

Places of Worship Taskforce (MCHLG)

The Places of Worship Taskforce, chaired by the Communities Minister, brought together representatives from a number of faith groups. It is not clear to us that established interfaith networks were used to set up this body. For example, as far as we can establish, there was no explicit representation from the Free churches, (e.g. the Methodist church), who make up about one third of Christian worshippers in England, and have a distinctive approach to the use of their places of worship.

We have noted some dissatisfaction with the relatively low priority apparently initially assigned to opening up places of worship for private prayer.

The sudden announcement, and then change, of the date for re-opening for private prayer caused confusion, as faith groups rushed to complete their guidance. It was not helpful that the guidance from Government appeared at the very last minute.

Q5. How might the sector evolve after COVID 19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

Digital tourism

There has been an increased interest in the opportunities offered by digital tourism, and some new activity in this area from many of our members. As is well known, there are difficulties in monetising such offerings.

Government support

No additional government support is known to be required in this area.

Digital religious activity

Since lockdown, many places of worship have been quick to adopt digital media to replicate many aspects of religious events. Various models have emerged, some with a local, ‘family’ feel, others in a format which can be appreciated anonymously by any number of people, anywhere. These thousands of local entrepreneurial initiatives have enabled a part of life essential to many people’s wellbeing to continue – at least to some extent – in digital form.

Government role

The pandemic has highlighted the need for better connectivity in rural areas.

Localism

The response of local communities and local congregations during the pandemic has demonstrated, again, how well local people can respond to local needs in a crisis. Places of worship will continue to play their part in this and future crises, but will need adequate resourcing and support both to maintain them through this difficult period, and to keep their historic buildings in good repair and enhance them for increased usability.

Government support

The necessary Government support was outlined earlier (final part of section 3).

Rites of passage

We anticipate a strong wish to return to previous levels of physical attendance at rites of passage, alongside live streaming for those unable to attend. Places of worship will need to consider the effect that this will have on buildings, modes of worship and funding streams.

Government support

No additional government support is known to be required in this area.

Consolidation and closure

In some faith groups the consolidation of congregations into fewer buildings is already happening, but fairly slowly. Despite the attractions of localism, the pandemic may well accelerate consolidation, either planned or reactive, as some congregations become increasingly unviable. One factor may be a reduction in the number of clergy from reduced income.

Existing measures to look after the nationally most important closed places of worship of the various faith groups were already overstretched before the pandemic and will not be able to cope with even a small increase in demand.

DCMS support

The public interest lies in an orderly transition of listed places of worship no longer required by their present congregations to appropriate new management and ownership. The current systems and approaches need to be reviewed. This is a specialist topic, but an important and increasingly urgent one, **on which we would very much like to engage with DCMS.**

Finally . . .

Research has confirmed that heritage plays an important part in supporting public wellbeing. Given their special nature, this must be particularly true of historic religious buildings. Research shortly to be published by one of our member organisations will drive home the considerable role of churches in promoting wellbeing, not least through their acting as local centres of volunteering.

We note too that the public believe that churches have an important role to play in recovery, for example in ‘providing a place where those who died as a result of the coronavirus can be remembered’.² Historic religious buildings have always been places of individual and collective memory, and for coming together in times of joy and sadness, a role they will continue to play in the current emergency and beyond.

Many congregations have actively supported their communities during the crisis, and are invigorated by the opportunity to rethink their future role. Depending on future economic developments, and the progression of Covid-19, it is possible that demand for their services will increase. The pandemic has emphasised the speedy, locally relevant, entrepreneurial and sustainable way that faith groups can respond in an emergency – despite the paradox that the very emergency that they are responding to has weakened them. If appropriate financial and other support can be made available for those congregations who find themselves looking after historic buildings (as detailed at the end of section 3 above), then they will be able to

continue to care for the nation's cultural heritage whilst serving their communities in a world learning to live with Covid-19.

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¹ See e.g. <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/church-attendance-in-britain-1980-2015/>
² <https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/news/churches-and-covid-19-opinion-poll>