



Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust

Supporting Oxfordshire's Churches since 1964

From the Chair
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Michael Ellis, MP
Secretary of State for Arts, Heritage and Tourism
DCMS, 100 Parliament Street
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9 March, 2018

Dear Mr Ellis

The Taylor Review: Sustainability of English Churches and Cathedrals

I am writing as Chair of the Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust (OHCT), a charity dedicated to encouraging a wider interest in our historic religious buildings and providing financial help for their repair and practical enhancement. We are an extremely active Trust, at the fore of the County Churches Trusts with a level of grant giving approaching a quarter of a million pounds annually, and we have for some time been clear that we are happy to support not only the maintenance of churches but also building work and re-ordering intended to make the church buildings more broadly useful to the communities that they serve. Our publication, "Churches for Communities – Adapting Oxfordshire's Churches for Wider Use" (Becky Payne, 2014) which focuses attention on this by describing 25 such projects, is cited in the Taylor Review.

Given the particular interests of our Trust, we are naturally grateful for the work of the Taylor Review Panel, and we welcome the thrust of their recommendations. As a member of the Historic Religious Buildings Alliance (HRBA), we are aware of the response which they have sent to you, and we would echo both their general support and the concerns that they have expressed. I should like to take this opportunity not only to add some emphasis to what the HRBA has said, but also to make some additional points which we see as important relating in particular to the issues of the timescale for implementation and the level of resourcing likely to be needed in the longer term.

The need to consider places of worship beyond the Church of England

The Review has addressed the issue of churches within the Church of England. Our Trust works interdenominationally, and we have direct experience of the similar needs faced by Roman Catholics and Non-Conformists. Whilst these other denominations do not carry the medieval

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legacy typically found in the Church of England, they nonetheless care for many buildings of considerable architectural and historical interest. We wish to urge the DCMS to discover their particular needs and, in devising a general plan for the care of places of worship, to take care to ensure there is appropriate provision across the denominations.

Fabric Support Officers

The OHCT has long been concerned at the extent to which many PCCs simply do not have the expertise to care for their buildings as effectively as they would wish. Whilst many DAC's provide expert input, particularly in the context of granting Faculties, the Review's proposal for a network of Fabric Support Officers certainly merits the recommended pilot. The Review Panel is right to be seeking to secure the timely and effective attention to defects which would otherwise lead in the long term to a need for much more expensive work. The Panel gives no indication of the ratio of FSOs to church buildings that will be needed, and it will be important to design the pilot with a scope and resourcing that will give it a good chance to produce the intended result – improved ongoing maintenance with consequent future savings.

Bringing Churches into wider use for the community

The Review focuses on the potential to bring in additional income and so make churches more self-sufficient. We should remember also the value of engaging with the community beyond regular worshippers in widening the sense of local responsibility and ownership, an obvious route to facilitating local fundraising when it becomes necessary. Whilst some churches have already found a successful way ahead, others find assessing what might be possible for them a real difficulty: others, very possibly rightly, can see this approach will not work given their particular building or given that there is no local community of any substance (which is often the case in rural Oxfordshire). The OHCT, with support from the Oxford Diocese, is currently looking to organise a forum for a sharing of experience in this area. The HRBA has expressed reservations that the possibilities for opening churches for other uses will often be limited, and the Review is itself explicit in accepting that point, but we would support its recommendation to pilot 'Community Support Advisers' in order to test just what is possible. We do, however, have concerns relating to the Review Panel's apparent expectations for the timescale of the pilots and for the level of resourcing that is likely to be needed in the long term.

Timescale and resourcing

The Review acknowledges that opening churches for wider use is unlikely to meet the substantial costs that will inevitably be needed from time to time for major works. It is a good thing when a church building, often after considerable initial outlay, can be made into a more useful resource for the wider community. That may bring in some funds which can be useful in the context on minor maintenance, and it adds to the justification for calling on tax-payer funding when it becomes essential. For significant additional income to be gained in this way implies that use of the building can be successfully marketed, but we must remember that, so often, the additional uses, though valuable, are represented by what is effectively voluntary outreach from the church to the community, and there is no financial profit to be had. Making necessary changes to a church and establishing community uses takes time. The Rural Churches programme (opening up the use of some 70 rural churches) ran to the year 2000 and was reviewed after three years, by when a broad range of community use had been established in over 90% of churches. Six

years further on¹, church use had generally declined to some extent and, in some instances, the new uses had collapsed. The finding was that maintaining wider church use is possible, but only with resilient and energetic volunteers. This very extensive experience in rural churches shows the time that is needed to develop the wider use of a building and the further time that is needed to test the extent to which that new use is sustainable.

The Taylor Review does well to look ahead to 2020 and suggest a level of ongoing government funding for church maintenance and to set it at a level higher than the old historic level (though lower than more recent levels which it represents as having allowed for a degree of 'catch-up'). This is a positive aspect of the Review's recommendations which the OHCT wants particularly to commend. That having been said, in the context of the discussion in the previous paragraph, we consider that a clear outcome from the CSA pilot cannot be achieved by 2020: by the time the pilot is established, it will have less than 18 months to run. Nor will the long-term savings available from FSOs through enhancing minor works programmes be apparent by 2020. We should by then know that CSAs and FSOs are workable propositions, and how many posts are likely to be needed, but knowing their effectiveness will take longer.

The Executive Summary of the Review envisages the work of CSAs to be front-loaded, with lots of work being needed at the outset to help parishes make changes that would become self-sustaining. This approach seems to be reflected in the indications given for split between the categories of funding from 2020: while the pilots for FSOs and CSAs are expected to cost £2-3m initially, these costs in 2020 are then seen as rising perhaps as little as five-fold (to £15m p.a.) as the model is rolled out over the whole of England. This approach seems to us to allow insufficient time and resourcing for the Review's recommendations to be properly tested.

Summary

The OHCT warmly commends the review's recommendations to the DCMS. We support the proposed pilots, but we urge the Department to give further careful thought to the resource and time needed to run meaningful pilots. We believe that it will be necessary to allow a longer period – significantly beyond 2020 – before the extent to which churches can achieve greater financial self-reliance can be established. Throughout that longer period, it will be necessary to keep overall central funding under review if this important part of the nation's heritage is to be protected.

I should be most grateful for the attention of you and your colleagues to these points.

Yours sincerely

¹ For an overview, see: <http://www.hrballiance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/7-A-postcard-to-the-future-Susan-Rowe-TALK.pdf>