

THE PRACTICALITIES OF CLOSING YOUR CHURCH - A GUIDANCE NOTE FOR THE PCC

This Guidance Note explains what will happen as the formal closure of your church building approaches and then takes place. It outlines the transfer of various responsibilities on the legal date of closure of the church; what happens to the contents and utilities; the continuing legal responsibility of the PCC for any churchyard or church hall; the PCC's role in the management of the building after it has closed, including the appointment of a key holder; use seeking and final disposal of the building; and the disbursement of any sale proceeds.

Date of closure

A church is legally closed by means of a document called a Pastoral (Church Buildings) Scheme, which is made by the Church Commissioners in London. The legal date when a church closes is the date that the scheme is brought into effect. The Closed Churches team at the Diocesan Office will negotiate the exact date with the incumbent and PCC to allow time for a final service and for the closure activity outlined below to take place. From the date of closure the building and its contents are vested in (become the responsibility of) the Diocesan Board of Finance (DBF). The DBF takes over responsibility for insuring the church, maintaining it in a 'wind and watertight' condition, and for paying the utility bills. Through its Closed Churches Working Group, the DBF and the Church Commissioners will seek a new use for the building. The Closed Churches team will rely on the continuing support of the PCC during the use seeking period.

Contents

The Furnishings Officer will contact the PCC and arrange either to update or to prepare an inventory of the contents, fixtures and fittings. All the major ecclesiastical items (font, altar, lectern, pulpit, pews, memorials etc) usually remain in the building until a new use is agreed, unless they are particularly valuable or attractive or liable to deterioration if left *in situ*, in which case they will be removed temporarily to a safe place, usually another local church. The PCC must not remove or dispose of any of the contents without the express permission of the Furnishings Officer or Closed Churches team: it will be given the opportunity to ask for items for use in other churches but they will only be available for permanent relocation once the future use of the closed church has been settled. Just before the church closes the Furnishings Officer will arrange for the PCC to:

- remove for safekeeping any valuables, such as communion plate and altar brasses, as well as frontals and falls, and annotate the inventory with their new location. Each object removed should be photographed;
- remove all flammable items, for example hassocks, service books, Bibles, altar linens, carpets and fabrics etc, and equipment such as portable electric heaters, to reduce the fire risk and their deterioration;
- remove any items belonging to the parish, such as office materials and equipment, articles relating to refreshments, playgroups and other community activities, or objects stored in the church.
- relocate active Registers to another church in the benefice;
- deposit historic Registers and Minute books with the parish archives in an approved Record Office;

Utilities

Before the building is vested in the DBF, the Closed Churches Officer (CCO) will contact the PCC to arrange to take over the utility contracts. This will include taking final meter readings, turning off the water and draining the system, and possibly disconnecting the gas supply.

Continuing responsibility of the PCC for any churchyard and church hall

The PCC should note that the DBF becomes responsible only for the church building footprint. **The PCC remains responsible for:**

- the continued maintenance and tidiness of any churchyard, boundary walls and fences, unless the churchyard has been formally closed and maintenance responsibility has been passed to, and accepted by, the Local Authority

- any land attached to the church which has not been used for burials;
- any church hall that is attached to the church;
- the continued safety of, and holding appropriate insurance, including public liability insurance, for any churchyard, land or hall.

The appointment of a key holder, security and insurance checks

Besides keeping the closed church locked, a very important element of security is that the PCC and parishioners continue to 'keep an eye' on the building. An occasional presence and people showing an interest is a great deterrent. The PCC should appoint a key holder, who will almost invariably become the main point of contact with the Closed Churches Officer. It is a requirement of the DBF's closed churches insurance policy that the key holder, a churchwarden, or other nominated person carries out fortnightly checks of the inside and outside of the building. The fortnightly checks should include:

- that the locks are functioning and the building is secure;
- that access points are unobstructed, kept clear of rubbish, and any letter boxes remain sealed;
- that any fire extinguishers have not been tampered with and are not overdue servicing;
- that any damage or deterioration to the building, particularly broken windows, water ingress, blocked gutters or drains, and slipped roof slates, is noted and reported to the Closed Churches team.

For health and safety reasons we encourage two people to carry out the checks together. **NB checks should not be carried out in areas in which safety or personal security is a concern.** The Closed Churches team should be contacted as soon as possible if anyone has any security or maintenance concerns regarding the building, or the checks cannot be completed.

Maintenance

The DBF may need to carry out maintenance and we particularly rely on parishes to let us know if repair work is needed. The Closed Churches team may contact the key holder for details of local tradesmen who know the building and help in coordinating access.

Finding an alternative use

A closed church can be put to a variety of uses and the proposed future use of the building and any churchyard is subject to formal public consultation. The CCWG and the Church Commissioners are responsible for ensuring that any future use will be suitable and, if appropriate, will secure the long term viability of the building. The Church Commissioners might seek to include part of the churchyard, if there is one, in the disposal. This would be discussed with the parish and handled sensitively. The simultaneous disposal of any attached or adjacent church hall will be handled on a case-by-case basis.

Disbursement of sale proceeds

Any proceeds arising from the sale of a closed church are paid to the Church Commissioners. After the reimbursement of costs relating to the disposal process, one third of the balance is transferred to the Churches Conservation Trust for the upkeep of historic closed churches of national significance. The remaining two thirds are paid to the Diocesan Pastoral Account to support the current and future mission and ministry of the Diocese. The distribution of sale proceeds arising from any attached or adjacent church hall included in the disposal will be payable to the PCC.

Contacts - Closed Churches team

Please do not hesitate to ask any questions of the Closed Churches team:

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