

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

First Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT GRANTS TO THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST ORDER 2025

Monday 10 March 2025

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: GRAHAM STUART

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| † Aldridge, Dan (<i>Weston-super-Mare</i>) (Lab) | † MacDonald, Mr Angus (<i>Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire</i>) (LD) |
| † Bhatti, Saqib (<i>Meriden and Solihull East</i>) (Con) | † Patrick, Matthew (<i>Wirral West</i>) (Lab) |
| † Brickell, Phil (<i>Bolton West</i>) (Lab) | † Qureshi, Yasmin (<i>Bolton South and Walkden</i>) (Lab) |
| † Bryant, Chris (<i>Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism</i>) | † Richards, Jake (<i>Rother Valley</i>) (Lab) |
| † Charters, Mr Luke (<i>York Outer</i>) (Lab) | † Robertson, Joe (<i>Isle of Wight East</i>) (Con) |
| † Foxcroft, Vicky (<i>Lord Commissioner of His Majesty's Treasury</i>) | † Siddiq, Tulip (<i>Hampstead and Highgate</i>) (Lab) |
| Hunt, Jeremy (<i>Godalming and Ash</i>) (Con) | † Timothy, Nick (<i>West Suffolk</i>) (Con) |
| † Jogee, Adam (<i>Newcastle-under-Lyme</i>) (Lab) | Wilkinson, Max (<i>Cheltenham</i>) (LD) |
| † Joseph, Sojan (<i>Ashford</i>) (Lab) | Kay Gammie, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| | † attended the Committee |

First Delegated Legislation Committee

Monday 10 March 2025

[GRAHAM STUART *in the Chair*]

Draft Grants to the Churches Conversation Trust Order 2025

6 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Grants to the Churches Conservation Trust Order 2025.

What an utter delight it is to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Stuart. I do not suppose one could find a more esoteric or *recherché* piece of legislation than this one, but I hope everybody will endorse it. I am pleased to speak to this order, which was laid before the House in draft on 28 January. It is required under law so that the Government may continue to provide funding for the Churches Conservation Trust, known as the CCT, though not by anybody other than the people who write notes for Ministers.

The CCT takes into its care over 350 of the most impressive examples of our churches that are no longer required for regular worship. All these churches are listed, mostly at grade I and II*, and some are scheduled ancient monuments. The trust keeps these buildings open to the public and does not charge an entry fee, instead believing that historic buildings belong to everyone in the community. More importantly, the CCT works to bring these buildings back to life. Its regeneration team delivers major new-use projects for historic places of worship, working with local people to deliver award-winning projects such as the Seventeen Nineteen in the former Holy Trinity church in Sunderland.

In addition to restoring the buildings in its own care, the trust is taking the exciting opportunity to move its headquarters into a new space in Northampton: the derelict, grade II listed Old Black Lion pub, which will be brought back to life as a pub through an innovative regeneration project that will support the management and maintenance of St Peter's church next door, while also becoming home to the trust's national team.

The trust is supported through funding from both the Government, which is what we are approving today, and the Church of England. It has also sought to diversify its income streams in order to further support its activity at a time of pressure on public funding, including through donations, legacies and grant-giving foundations.

I hope the Committee shares my enthusiasm for the important work of the trust and the key role it plays in preserving and promoting a vital aspect of our nation's heritage. The draft order will provide funding of over £3 million to the trust for 2025-26, and I commend it to the Committee.

6.3 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the Minister for introducing the draft order. His Majesty's official Opposition warmly welcome the Government's support for the Churches Conservation Trust. I suspect I may end up repeating some of what the Minister said, but the Opposition take this very seriously.

The Churches Conservation Trust performs a crucial role in protecting at-risk churches. The trust funds repairs and maintenance on the over 350 churches in its portfolio, and attracts over 2 million visitors per year. All the trust's churches are listed at either grade I or II and some, as the Minister said, are scheduled ancient monuments. However, it is important to highlight, as he already has, that the trust's work extends far beyond repairing churches. For example, the Churches Conservation Trust regeneration team works with community groups, charities, social enterprises, businesses, entrepreneurs and public bodies to find new uses for closed places of worship and other heritage sites. That helps to revitalise and rejuvenate the spaces for the benefit of local communities. Its core mission is to make sure that the buildings are preserved and remain at the heart of local communities.

The regeneration team tries to instil the key principle of sustainable stewardship, which includes ensuring that problems such as decay or irrelevance are identified early to prevent them from becoming overwhelming. Without the funding provided to the Churches Conservation Trust, the churches that it cares for now may have been listed only in the history books, and there is no doubt that communities would have been all the poorer for it, so I welcome the funding.

Thanks to the fantastic work of the trust, the buildings are tourist attractions that bring visitors to UK cities, towns and villages. They are spaces for education and development, they are meeting spots for local residents and, as they are all still consecrated, they remain open for worship. Looking forward, I hope that the Government recognise the place of churches in modern society and the wider benefits that they bring in terms of education, tackling loneliness, bringing communities together and attracting visitors.

As many Members will be aware, there are sadly 969 places of worship on Historic England's 2024 heritage at risk register. That is a significant change from 2023: while 23 were removed, 55 were added, marking an increase of 26 above the total on the 2023 register. Cathedrals, parish churches, chapels and meeting houses make up 959 of the 969 places of worship on the register, with the other buildings belonging to other faiths.

Churches are closing at an alarming rate and the Chancellor's Budget has unfortunately placed an additional financial burdens on every aspect of society and culture, including churches. Many churches have staff who are part-time or on lower wages within the congregation. Concerns have been raised about the impact that the increase in national insurance and the decrease in the thresholds will have on churches, and particularly parish administrators who work only a few days a week.

The Opposition are clear: churches that are not under the strong stewardship and care of the Churches Conservation Trust must not be left to decay and neglected.

The Government's decision to continue the listed places of worship grant scheme was welcome, and I thank the Minister for what he did on that, but there was a cut in funding. The decision to commit to only one more calendar year leaves churches in a worrying period of uncertainty. Was the impact of the new cap on the scheme taken into account when laying the draft order, and will the Minister consider a more permanent grant or relief scheme—not a rebate? I am more than happy to work with him on that, as the shadow Minister.

To add to the uncertainty, the Government are yet to publish their guidance on how the changes to the scheme will work. When the shadow Minister in the other place asked the Minister there whether the new annual limit of £25,000 per institution on claims from the listed places of worship grant scheme will apply to works begun before that date, the Minister was able only to say:

“We will provide updated information on scheme applications and eligibility in due course, before April.”

Can today's Minister clarify that? Many people will be looking for an answer. Those working behind the scenes to fund restoration projects deserve a bit more clarity and certainty from the Government, which I hope will be forthcoming. As I said at the start, we welcome the draft order, but I hope that the Government take onboard those points.

6.7 pm

Chris Bryant: I will run through the various points that the hon. Member made. Some were not strictly speaking anything to do with the measure before us, but none the less I am happy to try to accommodate him.

First, the hon. Member knows that this is solely about redundant churches. It would be impossible for the trust to take on all the new redundant churches every year; it can take on only two or three or so. We do not want to overload the trust, and make it impossible for it to do its work. It is a sad fact that vast numbers of churches are passing into redundancy. They do not have a congregation, or certainly not one that is able to maintain them financially. There are churches that were built in areas where—and eras when—more people went to church, or it was hoped that more people would go to church than ever actually did, and some of them are very difficult to maintain.

The hon. Member is right that the heritage at risk register is problematic. This is not the only place that money comes from: the Church of England itself provides roughly 34% of the trust's funding and the heritage lottery has committed something like £110 million over the next few years towards listed places of worship, so there are other means of trying to maintain listed places of worship that are also at-risk heritage sites.

The hon. Member asked about the listed places of worship scheme, which, as I say, is nothing to do with the draft order. He asked why a funding commitment is made one year at a time. To be honest, it has always been made one year at a time. When he was a Minister, the situation was exactly the same under his Government, year after year. That is why we have been able to make a commitment only for next year.

The hon. Member could have asked why the draft order is only a one-year commitment, because in previous years Governments have been able to make three-year commitments in relation to such orders. The reason is simply because we want to fit in with the spending review process. As he knows, the next spending review will cover the next three years, so we hope that the next time we lay an order, we will be able to match that three-year spending review process. I cannot guarantee that that is what we will do for the listed places of worship scheme, but the idea behind trying to go back to three-year spending review processes is that it would give much more security for people to make longer-term decisions, whether that is a local authority or a piece of heritage at risk—ecclesiastical, cultural or whatever it may be.

The hon. Member asked about the £25,000 cap on the scheme. Before we introduced that cap, which leads to an overall cap of some £23 million for the whole listed places of worship scheme for the year, we assessed what previous bids had led to, and 94% of bids were for less than £25,000, so we estimate that 94% of bids would be accounted for. Obviously, if multiple schemes are engaged, people can make multiple claims. Any claims that are received up until the end of this financial year are of course not subject to that cap.

The hon. Member asked about advice. I am afraid that I am unable to provide any further advice today, but we will certainly want to do so as soon as we can so that people can make secure decisions before 1 April. He will know that virtually every church in the land that has already made long-term commitments to rebuilding and restoration work has written into the Department, so we are well aware of the issues that many churches face.

Without the measure, we would be unable to give the £3 million and a bit that we will give to the trust in 2025-26, so I hope that the Committee will approve the measure.

Question put and agreed to.

6.12 pm

Committee rose.

