

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT GRANTS TO THE CHURCHES
CONSERVATION TRUST ORDER 2021

Tuesday 16 March 2021

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: †SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE

Andrew, Stuart (<i>Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household</i>)	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd (<i>Brighton, Kemptown</i>) (Lab/Co-op)
Coyle, Neil (<i>Bermondsey and Old Southwark</i>) (Lab)	† Selous, Andrew (<i>Second Church Estates Commissioner</i>)
Dinenage, Caroline (<i>Minister for Digital and Culture</i>)	† Sobel, Alex (<i>Leeds North West</i>) (Lab/Co-op)
Docherty, Leo (<i>Aldershot</i>) (Con)	Tarry, Sam (<i>Ilford South</i>) (Lab)
Dowd, Peter (<i>Bootle</i>) (Lab)	Throup, Maggie (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)
Fovargue, Yvonne (<i>Makerfield</i>) (Lab)	† Tomlinson, Michael (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)
Freer, Mike (<i>Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household</i>)	† Twist, Liz (<i>Blaydon</i>) (Lab)
† Lamont, John (<i>Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk</i>) (Con)	Nick Taylor, <i>Committee Clerk</i>
† Morris, James (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)	† attended the Committee
Pursglove, Tom (<i>Corby</i>) (Con)	

The following also attended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(2):

Huddleston, Nigel (*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport*)

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

Tuesday 16 March 2021

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Draft Grants to the Churches Conservation Trust Order 2021

2.30 pm

The Chair: I call Michael Tomlinson.

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury (Michael Tomlinson): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Grants to the Churches Conservation Trust Order 2021.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, for my first contribution from the Front Bench.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I thank you, Sir Christopher, and my colleague from the Front Bench for helping out at the start of the sitting. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

The order is required so that the Government may continue to provide funding for the Churches Conservation Trust. The trust takes into its care some of the most magnificent examples of our churches that are no longer required for regular worship. All these churches are listed; they are mostly grade I and grade II*, and some are also scheduled ancient monuments. Historic places of worship are a valuable and vital part of the nation's heritage. About 45% of all grade I listed buildings are Church of England churches or cathedrals. They are some of the finest examples of our historic buildings and showcase the most accomplished design and workmanship.

The Churches Conservation Trust currently cares for more than 350 churches in towns, villages and cities across England. They range from small hidden treasures to grand Victorian buildings. The churches that the trust has saved are some of the finest examples of architecture and craftsmanship, spanning over 1,000 years of our history. The trust keeps these buildings open to the public and does not charge an entry fee, believing that historic churches are buildings that belong to everybody and to their local communities.

The Churches Conservation Trust is a charity and was established by ecclesiastical legislation in 1969 as the Redundant Churches Fund, aimed at protecting an essential part of our heritage. It demonstrates a successful partnership between the Church, Government and community. In 2019-20, the Government made up 31% of the trust's overall funding; the figure was down from 35% in 2017-18. The CCT raised the rest of its income from other sources.

The trust's recent strategy has been to invest in staff to create an infrastructure to support local communities to use and love their historic church buildings. This infrastructure provides community support, learning, fundraising, conservation and maintenance expertise, and major project support, as well as funding.

The trust has increasingly made use of its statutory grant to raise new income from other sources, such as donations, legacies and grant-giving foundations. Among its many initiatives, champing—church camping, Sir Christopher; that was a new one on me as well—is a scheme offering overnight stays in historic places of worship. This is extremely popular. The scheme began in 2015 and has continued to thrive, even in the 2020 season, as there is now greater emphasis on UK breaks. Champing is a successful social distancing holiday option. It has so far proved to be a good income stream and will be again, I am sure, when restrictions allow.

Filming has also been an important contributor to the diversification of the CCT's income streams. It offers another creative route to supporting and conserving the estate. In the last year, the organisation has facilitated film and TV productions from the BBC, Sky, HBO and Netflix across its sites. While the country continues to recover from the impact of covid-19, there remains the potential to attract more film and TV production to the CCT estate.

Over the last three years, the trust has earned an income of about £1.4 million from consultancy, champing and the maintenance business. The trust's people are award-winning experts in conservation when it comes to regenerating historic churches for new uses. The organisation has an international reputation for innovation in the field of historic church buildings. Consultancy work is a positive income stream for the trust, working on projects with dioceses, churches and community groups, as well as a new maintenance business initiative.

The impact of covid-19 has meant that the Churches Conservation Trust has been unable to open its buildings at the very time of year when most of its activity takes place. Therefore, in common with many other parts of the sector, the trust has experienced a considerable loss of income throughout the lockdowns. Although the trust has been able to manage pared-down, basic care of its buildings, we need to ensure that it can continue to thrive and to protect them. During the pandemic, membership of the trust has grown, predominantly through the Thursday lunchtime lecture series, which has attracted more than 200,000 viewers to date. It has also created an online community of interest in the work of the CCT.

Sadly, the trust has been affected in other ways during the pandemic. An illegal rave, for example, took place in All Saints' in East Horndon in Essex, causing damage to the grade II* listed 15th-century church. However, after a public appeal was made to raise £2,000 to clean and repair the damage, the community far and wide raised an incredible £22,000, which is testimony to the support the trust has from the wider public.

The trust has saved nine additional churches of exceptional merit for the nation since 2016, with more in the pipeline. The trust's primary objective and the greatest call on its funds is the conservation of its churches, particularly upon initial vesting when buildings may have been out of use for a number of years. I am pleased to say that the trust has an excellent reputation for quality in its conservation work. In 2015, the CCT won one of the European Heritage Awards/Europa Nostra Awards in recognition of its role in protecting the architectural significance of historic places of worship and their essential function as centres of community life. The work, and also the expense, does not end there.

With an estate of more than 350 buildings serving their communities, there is a rolling programme of repairs and new facilities across the estate. Between 2019 and 2020, 1.74 million people visited a Churches Conservation Trust church. The trust's churches are run by 1,800 volunteers and I offer my sincere thanks to those people without whom the churches could not hold such diverse events. The trust has shown that it is excellent at partnership working and at the forefront of saving buildings by looking well beyond the traditional heritage solutions. I am aware, also, that the trust is lending its expertise in the development and delivery of workshops on caring for historic places of worship as part of the £1.8 million Taylor pilot scheme, set up and funded by the Government to help build a sustainable future for listed places of worship. I take this opportunity to thank the trust for that support.

I am extremely fortunate to have three Churches Conservation Trust churches in my constituency: All Saints' Church in Spetchley, St Michael's Church in Churchill and St Lawrence's Church in Evesham. That means I have more than my fair share of CCT churches. These historic buildings remind us of communities of old. They anchor us to our history in a way that we should never take for granted and, indeed, which other countries rightly envy. To close, I hope the Committee shares my enthusiasm for the work of the trust and the key role that it plays in preserving and promoting a vital aspect of our nation's heritage, and that it will consent to approve the draft Grants to the Churches Conservation Trust Order 2021, as the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), proposed.

2.38 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher, and see the Minister on the Front Bench. The last time we debated heritage matters was the fairs and fairgrounds debate in Westminster Hall, which was quite a while ago. Hopefully, it will not be so long before we get another opportunity to debate heritage matters.

Churches are so important for a number of reasons: as places of worship, of course, but also as community spaces, foodbanks, homeless or refugee support centres, creches and very often beautiful buildings of great historical significance. I am lucky enough to have a number of historically significant churches in my constituency, which bring great benefit to all members of our community, whether Christian or not. Adel St John has served the community of north Leeds for 850 years. The building is one of the finest examples of Norman architecture in Britain. Picture an elaborately carved doorway, a chancel arch with sharp carvings, still clearly visible despite being 850 years old, and a corbel table of 78 grotesque heads. Carvings on the capitals of the supporting pillars include a centaur with bow and arrow, a favoured device of King Stephen, who visited Leeds and whose mother, Adela, was William the Conqueror's daughter.

Just a few minutes away sits the grade I listed Bramhope Puritan Chapel built in 1649. The chapel's four walls, doorways and windows stand as they were originally placed. In Otley, we have All Saints' Church, consecrated as early as the 2nd century, with the present-day chancel dating back to the 11th century. In the centre of Leeds is St John the Evangelist, the oldest church in the city. Unfortunately, despite its great historical significance, it

became redundant in 1975. Thankfully, however, the Church Conservation Trust stepped in and saved it from alteration or demolition. Thanks to the trust, it is beautifully maintained and now attracts many visitors with its magnificent Jacobean fittings and architecture.

Such buildings are defining parts of the communities in which they stand. They are places of rejoice, reflection and remembrance, and they are also places of great history and heritage. They are often architectural masterpieces—each one unique, yet part of an integrated whole. Churches encourage tourism to remote or neglected areas, and they tell our shared history. They can also bring great economic benefit.

Like the Minister, I congratulate the Churches Conservation Trust—perhaps we are both now considering a holiday this summer involving some champing. We are reflecting on the good work the trust does in the round. The CCT looks after more than 350 buildings, which would usually attract more than 2 million visitors each year. Its work is vital in protecting some of Britain's listed buildings and scheduled ancient monuments, which is why the Opposition will support the statutory instrument. The CCT's commitment to accessibility is something to celebrate, as is its unwavering support for small, knowledgeable and specialist building contractors. Through its vesting programme—the initial repair contracts for newly acquired churches—the CCT is preserving not just buildings, but skills and knowledge. It is also creating jobs in heritage construction, which is really struggling during this period of covid.

Unfortunately, like so many other institutions and organisations, the CCT has lost out to the pandemic, suffering a loss of visitor numbers and income. The usual community events and fundraising activities have been unable to take place in person, although, as the Minister said, the CCT has moved to online fundraising and made up a significant proportion of that income. For churches, the pandemic has compounded issues caused by an intense programme of funding cuts to local authorities, which has been presided over by successive Conservative Governments. Local authorities have been forced to make savings wherever possible while still protecting the most vulnerable people in their communities. That has often come at the expense of our heritage sites, which too often face neglect and decline. The Government must recognise the need to properly conserve all our listed buildings and other historical sites, not just the ones that fall under the CCT's remit. Can the Minister outline how he is working to protect other sites, especially those under local authority stewardship?

I want to touch briefly on the impact that climate change is having on our historic churches. Higher rainfall is causing damage to timber and stonework, and stronger winds are causing more frequent damage to roofs, towers and spires. One of the greatest threats to church buildings is termites, which are likely to become a real problem in the coming years as Britain's climate becomes ever more accommodating for them, as we have already seen in France. We have seen northward migration of animals that usually live in the UK. The Government must consider these new threats to our heritage and act accordingly.

All the churches managed by the CCT help tell the story of our heritage. They have stood strong through war, revolution and deadly pandemics, but we must not take them for granted. For them to stand strong for generations to come, we need a proper programme of

[Alex Sobel]

funding and investment—not just for charities such as the CCT, but for local authorities and heritage organisations. Having said all that, and with room for improvement on the Government's part, we will not be contesting the SI, because we know how important such funds are for protecting church heritage. However, if the Minister could clarify how the CCT ensures that the funding reaches the sites that most need it, I would be very grateful.

2.43 pm

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I do not intend to detain the Committee for long, but I have been asked on behalf of the Church to say a few words. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister, whom I have known since before we were elected to this House, for his very sympathetic remarks. I was particularly pleased that he mentioned the public response following the rave in the church in Essex. That just shows exactly what we are talking about: the public really care about such buildings. I was very touched that both the shadow Minister and the Minister were clearly aware of the churches looked after by the Churches Conservation Trust in their constituencies, and it was really wonderful to hear them both talking about how important those buildings are.

As the Second Church Estates Commissioner, I want to put on record the thanks of the Church Commissioners to the Treasury and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for their continued joint support for the Churches Conservation Trust. This is a brilliant example of partnership between the Church and state, and it was founded back in 1969—it is well over 50 years old—to ensure our nation's architecturally significant and historic churches remain open to the public when they are unable to sustain a regular worshipping congregation.

As a reminder to the members of the Committee, the Church of England is currently responsible for the upkeep and management of 45% of the country's grade I and II* listed buildings, including over 4,000 churches and cathedrals up and down the country. Today, the Churches Conservation Trust has the care of 356 churches right across the country, from rural Somerset to inner-city Bolton. They are used by diverse communities and are visited each year by more than 1.6 million people, along with the 4,000 volunteers who work to maintain these architectural treasures. The Committee may not be aware that the churches remain consecrated and, when allowed, they are open for private worship and often have significant community support as well.

They are often located in highly rural communities—although not always—or areas of low economic activity. The trust's work brings jobs, maintains craft skills such as masonry, glazing and leadwork and helps levelling up, giving opportunities for young people to receive apprenticeships and preserve other heritage crafts for the next generation. The Church Commissioners look forward to developing this vital Church-state partnership in the coming years and are pleased to see the Churches Conservation Trust already revitalising its communications and public engagement strategy.

On the Church of England side, the General Synod will be asked at its meeting next month to give approval for its side of the funding order. I hope the Committee

will recommend passing this financial support order and recognising the important partnership between Church and state to care for our national heritage.

2.46 pm

Nigel Huddleston: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and their positive words about the work of the trust. In particular, I thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous). We go back quite a long way, to an election in Luton South back in the general election in 2010, which I can assure hon. Members is an experience I will never forget. I thank him in particular for his role as Second Church Estates Commissioner, a role which he fulfils incredibly gracefully and effectively. I thank him for all the work that he does.

I also thank my opposite number, the hon. Member for Leeds North West. We share a great deal of passion for all things culture and heritage. I take the comments he made on board very seriously. He probably does recognise and acknowledge that we are trying to do what we can to support the heritage sector. In recent difficult times, the culture recovery fund has been hugely beneficial and much needed for the sector. I mentioned the Taylor review in my speech as well; he also mentioned several other issues, including the importance of skills, as indeed did my hon. Friend the Second Church Estates Commissioner. It is important that we do not just save the buildings, but also the jobs and the skills that go with them—skills that we could all too easily lose if we do not focus on that.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West also asked how effectively the money is spent. I assure him that I and my officials hold regular meetings with the CCT, both independently and jointly with the Church Commissioners who fund the CCT, to discuss its strategy, the maintenance of buildings, new acquisitions and so on. In addition, the CCT presents its annual report and accounts to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, where they are examined before being laid each year before the House. The Secretary of State also holds the CCT to account through a funding agreement, which sets out his priorities, along with the indicators that are used to measure the performance. We have mechanisms in place that ensure that the money is spent effectively, but with consensus and agreement.

I extend my grateful thanks to the trustees under the leadership of Peter Ainsworth, to the staff and to the many volunteers who ensure that the churches are open and welcoming. I have highlighted some of the programmes put in place by the Churches Conservation Trust to generate independent income from philanthropic endeavours and appropriate commercial use of buildings. We fully support those endeavours, which increase the use of the buildings in a way that anchors them even more firmly in the local communities that love them and use them. They increase access, increase use and reduce their dependence on public funds. That is the future for how these historic buildings will continue to thrive: through the commitment and dedication of the people involved and the communities that love and use them.

Question put and agreed to.

2.49 pm

Committee rose.