

Places of Public Worship

CHAPTER 5





Good stewardship, through appropriate maintenance and repair, has ensured the survival of thousands of historic places of public worship throughout the country

5.1 Architectural Heritage Protection for Places of Public Worship¹

5.1.1 Church buildings of various denominations constitute a substantial part of our architectural heritage and cultural patrimony. Places of public worship are often the finest and most prominent buildings in their locality and, because of their particular architectural, historical and social interest, proposals to alter such buildings will require careful consideration by the planning authority.

5.1.2 The heritage significance of church buildings, including their fixtures and features, lies in their central role in the community as places of public worship, usually over many generations. This patrimony is made up of works of architecture, painting and sculpture, as well as fittings and liturgical furnishings; features that have constituted the highest artistic expression of faith. The churches and their communities have, through their stewardship, kept and maintained these structures in good order, often through difficult times, so that they are now part of our architectural heritage. It is recognised that generally this continues to be done effectively and with great care.

¹ The guidance contained in this chapter was first published in a document entitled 'Architectural Heritage Protection for Places of Public Worship - guidelines for

planning authorities; published by the Minister in November 2003 following consultation with representatives of the four main churches.



Places of public worship are often repositories of works of art such as painting and sculpture which continue to be added to by each generation as with this newly carved capital in Loughrea Cathedral



In this example, the original decorative paint scheme is being recreated based on detailed evidence



The adaptation of places of public worship may be sought to reflect revisions in liturgical requirements

5.2 Respecting Liturgical Requirements

5.2.1 Church buildings are used for the public worship of their congregations which includes many forms such as traditional services according to established rites, freer forms of a charismatic and evangelical form, experimental, occasional and devotional expressions of worship, teaching and mission. Respecting liturgical requirements includes recognising that churches may wish to adapt places of public worship in the light of contemporary revisions of their worship and mission. Thus church authorities may, in their places of public worship, require flexibility in the provision and arrangement of seating, in the openness of space, for example, for a baptismal font area; for the enlargement of an existing sanctuary or chancel or for the relocation of the altar-table and lectern. A church authority may also seek flexibility in the associated use of buildings and spaces within the curtilage, such as for access to another space or building for processions, children's liturgy and Sunday school.

5.2.2 The essential character of a church, expressed in its fabric and features, arises from its function as a place of public worship. When considering a declaration relating to a protected structure that is regularly used as a place of public worship or an application for planning permission for development to the interior of a protected structure that is regularly used as a place of public worship, the legislation provides that the planning authority shall respect liturgical requirements.

5.2.3 Careful consideration should be given to the scale and potential impact of the works on the specific character of the individual structure. This is a matter of judgement to be made by the individual planning authority following consultation with the relevant church authority (see paragraph 5.3.1 below).

5.2.4 Many factors should be considered by a planning authority before issuing a declaration as to the type of works it considers would or would not materially affect the character of a protected structure that is regularly used as a place of public worship. The basic considerations are the effects, if any, of proposed works on the special interest of the structure, including its interior, and whether proposed alterations are necessitated by the liturgical requirements of worship. Planning authorities should consider whether any substantial structural changes or alterations to the existing plan-form are required for the proposed alterations, for example, the subdivision of important existing spaces, as well as any consequential effects in other parts of the building. Any proposed removal or alteration/destruction of important fixtures and fittings, for example galleries, box pews or fixed seating will require careful consideration. The age, rarity and craftsmanship of the internal fixtures and fittings can contribute to the architectural coherence of the whole building and, even where not original to the building, the internal fixtures and fittings can be an important part of a later remodelling of the interior. Impact on decoration, for example any interesting decorative schemes such as stencilled decoration, tiling or panelling, should be taken into account. It would also be appropriate to consider any proposals to minimise the impact of proposed changes. Any proposals to store or salvage fixtures and fittings proposed for removal should also be assessed carefully.

5.2.5 Where the planning authority determines that proposed works to the interior of a protected structure that is regularly used as a place of public worship require planning permission, it shall respect liturgical requirements in reaching a decision on the application for permission.

5.2.6 In a changing environment, the use that will generally give the greatest protection to a church that is a protected structure is as a church serving the community. Where works are proposed that are not required by the liturgy, but would facilitate a religious use continuing in a place of worship, the planning authority should respect the architectural heritage of the structure. In addition, it should consider whether the proposed works are directed at accommodating other compatible activities within the building or in its curtilage. This may help to ensure its continued viability in community use, primarily as a place of public worship. Such alterations would require a grant of planning permission.



Internal fixtures such as box pews, confessional boxes and altar rails can be significant elements of the character of the place of public worship

5.3 Consultations with Churches and Religious Authorities

5.3.1 In order to ensure that the appropriate balance is struck between the protection of the architectural heritage, and the need for continued use of the protected structure as a place of public worship, early consultation between the planning authority and the relevant church authority is necessary. Through this consultation, the planning authorities will ascertain the liturgical requirements in each case. The religious authorities consulted by the Minister have agreed to establish the following bodies (which, as well as liturgy, will draw on relevant expertise in art/architectural heritage) for consultations:

Roman Catholic Church

5.3.2 The consultations will be on a diocesan basis. Historic Churches Advisory Committees (or equivalent agencies) are to be established on a diocesan or inter-diocesan basis to advise the bishop on the heritage/historical factors in a place of worship for which a declaration is requested or a planning application is made. Each Committee will advise on the necessary documentation, including liturgical requirements, which will be forwarded to the planning authority. It will also be available for consultations with the planning authority. For churches vested in religious orders, the consultations will be with the provincial or regional superior (or in some monastic communities, the abbot or abbess).

Church of Ireland

5.3.3 The Representative Body of the Church of Ireland, subject to the Constitution of the Church of Ireland and pursuant to the powers granted to it to hold properties for the uses of the Church by the Irish Church Act 1869, will establish an Historic Churches Advisory Committee to advise dioceses and parishes on all matters pertaining to either a request for a declaration or a planning application concerning any place of public worship that is a protected structure.

Presbyterian Church in Ireland

5.3.4 The Presbyterian Church in Ireland will establish an Historic Churches Advisory Committee, appointed by the Board of Mission in Ireland, whose postal address is Church House, Fisherwick Place, Belfast, BT1 6DW.

Methodist Church in Ireland

5.3.5 The Methodist Church in Ireland is governed by the Annual Conference. All matters relating to consultations and declarations will be advised through the Conference Office, which will be responsible for appointing relevant persons to act on behalf of the Methodist Church in Ireland, and will regulate the supply of the necessary documentation for planning authorities.

5.4 Consultations with Other Religious Denominations and Communities

Other religious denominations

5.4.1 Consultations should be made through the local congregation with the appropriate religious authority, which will certify that the liturgical requirements stated in documentation to the planning authority are those of the particular religious denomination's worship and are in conformity with their traditions and customs.

Other religious communities

5.4.2 Consultations should be made through the local congregation with the appropriate leadership who will certify that the liturgical requirements stated in documentation to the local or planning authority are in conformity with their worship.

5.4.3 In order to ensure that these consultative mechanisms are as effective as possible, planning authorities and church authorities should begin the process as early as possible. Planning authorities may already have raised individual issues with the representative church bodies in their city or county area. Serious consideration should be given to establishing a continuing dialogue with those representative bodies, especially those with a number of protected structures, to devise a methodology that may be used in dealing with applications for declarations or planning permission. This should also allow the church bodies to give early indications where works are proposed to protected structures, and permit discussions on minimising the impact of proposed changes on the fabric of the protected structures in use for public worship.

5.5 Redundancy

- 5.5.1 The redundancy of a building as a place of public worship is a serious decision for a religious denomination. Several options can be considered including:
- The religious denomination may wish to retain the building but for another purpose consistent with its own mission. In this case, an application for permission for a change of use could be treated sympathetically by the planning authority.
 - The protected structure may be loaned or sold to another religious denomination, assuring its continuance as a place of worship or building for use in accordance with the religious mission of the new occupant. If retained as a place of worship, incoming religious authorities may wish for alterations as required by its worship. In considering applications for declarations, or for permission to carry out internal works to make the structure suited to the new liturgical use, the planning authority shall respect liturgical requirements.
- 5.5.2 It may of course be decided to sell the protected structure. This may pose problems for the conservation of the building and its interior, especially where substantial works are proposed to accommodate the new use. In particular, consideration may have to be given to permitting the removal of some fixtures and fittings, which are of liturgical or devotional importance. These should be dealt with sensitively as set out in 5.5.3 below.
- 5.5.3 Changing liturgical requirements can have an impact on the spatial arrangements and the fixtures in a place of public worship. From a conservation viewpoint, liturgical fixtures that are no longer in liturgical use should not necessarily be removed. If it is necessary to remove them for liturgical reasons, it is important that they are removed with care so that they may be used or stored elsewhere, within the structure or otherwise, returned to the religious authority or donated to a museum. For example, the organ may be an important instrument that would merit efforts being made to find a new home for it.



The conversion of a redundant church to a socially-inclusive function is often a good way of retaining its central importance to the community as with this example of a former Presbyterian church which now houses a museum



Some redundant churches are also recorded monuments, or are within the area of constraint around the monument: they may be on the site of, beside or in the midst of ecclesiastical remains. This former Board of First Fruits church was built partly within the walls of a mediaeval church that is now a National Monument in state guardianship