

Why should we care about cathedrals?

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Based on the report *Living Stones: English Cathedrals as Sacred Spaces in Changing Times*, by George Lapshynov & Nathan Mladin

Photography: Emma Ledwith

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Background

This briefing was written by *Theos*, based on research conducted in partnership with the Association of English Cathedrals. It is designed to support local authorities with cathedrals near or within their boundaries by:

1. Explaining the economic, social and spiritual contributions of cathedrals in England to their local areas
2. Offering policy recommendations to help local authorities work alongside cathedrals to meet shared community goals

The original research, *Living Stones: English Cathedrals as Sacred Spaces in Changing Times*, included a **nationally representative poll**, **almost 150 interviews across six Anglican cathedrals in England** (St Albans, Carlisle, Exeter, York, Rochester, and Derby) and an **additional survey of over 1,300 visitors**. This is supported by data from secondary sources.

Overview

- National survey responses suggest **74% of English adults** have visited a cathedral in the **last three years**.
- Cathedrals have significant economic benefit, directly generating **£235 million** a year, more than **6,000 jobs** and mobilising **13,000 volunteers**.
- They are sites of **historical importance**, generating social and **cultural value**.
- Over **98% of cathedral visitors** surveyed saw their cathedral as a **symbol of local identity**, and over **98%** said they felt **connected with history and tradition** when visiting.
- Cathedrals receive **no guaranteed funding from central government** and **limited funding from the Church of England** itself.
- **80%** of cathedrals are in **structural deficit** and remain under **significant financial pressure**, despite strong diversification.

We recommend:

- Cathedrals be **reframed as social infrastructure**
- LAs grant all cathedral activities **full exemption from business rates** (where not already the case)
- Cathedrals be considered as **key partners and representatives on economic boards** by default
- Considering local cathedral representatives as **board members and/or partners for grants**, in particular *Pride in Place* grants (where applicable)



1. What are cathedrals and why do they matter?

There are **42** Anglican (Church of England) cathedrals in England, of which 38 are Grade I listed¹. Cathedrals are large churches which are the “seats” of their local bishop. They are some of the **most historically and culturally important sites** in the country—two are UNESCO World Heritage Sites; many are almost 1,000 years old. Together, England’s cathedrals **generate £235 million annually** for local economies. This makes them significant **assets for their local areas**; not only economically, but also socially and culturally.²

This is not just because of their history, but because of what cathedrals are doing in England today. Whilst they are first and foremost places of Christian worship, open 365 days a year for communal worship, prayer and reflection, cathedrals also engage in a **wide variety of community and civic activities** and are **significant tourist attractions**.

They are often the largest public buildings in their local areas, **hosting concerts, art installations and ceremonial events**—including graduations, conferences and public debates. Cathedrals **held 6,000 public and civic events nationally** in 2024, which alone had attendance of **over 1.74 million people**.³

In our nationally representative survey of over 1,800 adults, 74% said they had visited a cathedral at least once in the past three years and 37% at least a few times a year. This outstrips attendance at live sporting events and positions cathedrals similarly to many museums and galleries in terms of attendance numbers.

2. Local economic benefits

Cathedrals’ activities and visits to them have significant economic benefits for local areas. In addition to the c. **£235 million generated for the local economy**, cathedrals directly support over **6,000 jobs** and around **15,000 volunteers**.⁴

Visitors to cathedral cities spend a considerable amount per day, the **majority of which is spent in the local community** rather than in cathedrals themselves.⁵ Around half of cathedral visitors surveyed were from **outside the local area, bringing footfall** to cathedral cities which they would otherwise not have. **This brings financial benefit to local businesses**.

3. Cathedrals music: “The English choral tradition IS cathedrals.”

In addition to direct financial benefits, cathedrals offer significant social benefits to their local areas, particularly from their music. Cathedrals are integral to English choral music, training generations of musicians. There were a record **207 cathedral choirs in England** in 2024, with over 2,210 choristers and lay clerks (adult professional singers) and 2,070 voluntary choir members.⁶ They provide a **unique musical education** which many child choristers would otherwise not have access to. Their **outreach activities** reach thousands more children—including in disadvantaged areas. Lincoln Cathedral’s outreach alone reaches more than 300 Year 3 and 4 children a week.⁷

4. Sanctuaries for wellbeing

Cathedral music has significant wellbeing benefit to those of all faiths and none. **71% of visitors surveyed of no religion (“nones”) reported getting a sense of sacred from cathedral music**. This figure rose to 91% of those who described themselves as Anglicans. 62% of religious but non-practising individuals, and 44% of those of no religion, also found that concerts helped them meet with God.

The cathedral building itself was also valued by visitors: 77% of those of no religion and 94% of Anglican visitors surveyed at the six case study cathedrals said they got a sense of the sacred from the cathedral building. Visitors interviewed reported feeling a sense of calm and peace in cathedrals which had benefits for

their wellbeing: “It’s a safe space – profound and deep”, said one visitor, another, “After I visit cathedrals I feel more calm inside”.

Together, cathedrals and churches are estimated to contribute **£55 billion to national wellbeing every year**, according to the Treasury’s Green Book methodology through the range of activities they undertake.⁸

5. Centres of community support and social cohesion

Over **98% of cathedral visitors** we surveyed across our six case study cathedrals, **saw their cathedral as a symbol of local identity**, and over **98% said they felt connected with history and tradition**. Over **94% of visitors** surveyed (including 94% of non-religious visitors) saw their cathedral as **a hub to engage with wider community life**.

This makes them a **valuable local asset and partners** for local authorities in building community and a sense of local identity.

6. Funding on the edge

Despite the significant public benefits cathedrals bring, they receive **no guaranteed public funding for their operations**. Each cathedral’s finances operate independently of the Church of England and their local diocese, and every cathedral chapter is its own charitable entity.⁹ The Church of England’s support is generally limited to the salaries of three clergy and some grants for office staff.¹⁰ Whilst this is invaluable, cathedrals receive **no fixed funding for running costs, which stretch into the millions of pounds per cathedral**. They are reliant on a patchwork of grants from multiple sources, philanthropic giving and monies from commercial and operational activities. As a result, **80% of cathedrals are in structural deficit**, despite strong commercialisation and income diversification efforts.

7. A call to action

Cathedrals are **much more than heritage or religious buildings** used by a minority. They are **vital community anchors** in their local areas, **particularly in more deprived areas**. They are often the **largest public buildings in their vicinity and draw large numbers of visitors to areas which may otherwise receive far less footfall**. Yet, this asset is often underappreciated by local authorities.

We therefore recommend local authorities:

1. Encourage Chairs of Neighbourhood Boards in charge of *Pride in Place Programme* grants, to consider local cathedral representatives as **board members** and/or partners for **grants** to enable cathedrals to provide support in furthering local community goals
2. Consider cathedrals by default as **key partners and representatives on economic boards** that are established within local government institutions, to share expertise and exchange knowledge and resources
3. Grant all cathedral activities (where not already given on a discretionary basis) **full exemption from business rates** in recognition of their knock-on socioeconomic benefits to the local area

The full report of our findings can be found here: [Living Stones](#)

For further information, or if you have any questions about this research, please contact the authors of the original report at: George.Lapshynov@theosthinktank.co.uk or Nathan.Mladin@theosthinktank.co.uk

References

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