



Why should we care about England's cathedrals?

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

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Background

This research briefing was written by Theos based on research conducted in partnership with the Association of English Cathedrals. It is designed to support national policymakers by:

1. Explaining the **economic, social and spiritual contributions** of cathedrals in England
2. Offering **policy recommendations** to support the work of cathedrals in **furthering national policy goals**, including boosting social cohesion

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 **15,000 volunteers**.
- Cathedrals are sites of local, national and international **historical importance**, generating **social and cultural value** for a range of demographics.
- 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**.
- 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 pressures**, despite successful commercialisation efforts and income diversification.

We recommend:

- Cathedrals be **reframed as social infrastructure**
- The **discretionary removal of the £25,000 cap on the new Places of Worship Renewal Fund** where there would be **exceptional social cohesion benefit** to proposed schemes.
- Support for cathedrals' energy costs and a **long-term financial settlement**, including an endowment fund



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 the nation’s economy.² This makes them significant national assets; not only economically, but also socially and culturally.

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

Of a **nationally representative** sample 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. Economic benefits

Cathedrals’ activities and visits to them, have significant economic benefits for local areas, regionally and nationally. In addition to the **c. £235 million** generated for **the 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 This suggests that cathedrals bring significant financial benefit to local businesses.

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

Music is central to what cathedrals offer. **England’s choral music is world-renowned** and a fundamental part of **England’s nation-building**. King’s College, Cambridge’s annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is listened to by an estimated 370 million people worldwide via the BBC.⁶ Such services would not be possible without cathedrals: “**The English choral tradition is cathedrals**”, as one participant put it.

Cathedrals train generations of music scholars and are key commissioners of new choral music. 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.⁷ These choirs provide a **unique musical education** which many child choristers would otherwise not have access to. Their **outreach activities reach thousands more children weekly**, including in disadvantaged areas. Lincoln Cathedral’s outreach work alone reaches more than 300 Year 3 and 4 children a week.⁸

Cathedrals’ **music tradition** has changed little in the past 500 years and is of such **international importance** that the Cathedral Music Trust has recently launched a campaign, with support from DCMS, to have English Sacred Choral Music added to **UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage inventory**.⁹

Services like **choral evensong** are hugely **popular with tourists** from the UK and abroad, providing **world-class music at no cost to the visitor**, democratising access to live music.

The multiplier effect of the musical training and services that cathedrals provide are integral to England's status as a **world-leader in sacred and choral music**. This is a valuable source of **soft power for promoting British values and identity around the world**. Yet, cathedrals seldom receive support from central government to undertake this work.

4. Sanctuaries for wellbeing

Cathedral music also has significant wellbeing benefits to those of all faiths and none. **71% of visitors surveyed of no religion reported getting a sense of the sacred from cathedral music**. This figure rose to 91% among 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 said, "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.¹⁰

5. Centres of community support and social cohesion

Our research also demonstrates cathedrals' role in **building community identity and boosting 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**.

6. Funding on the brink

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.¹¹ The Church of England's support is generally limited to the salaries of three clergy and some grants for office staff.¹² Whilst this is invaluable, cathedrals receive **no fixed funding for running costs, which stretch into the millions of pounds per cathedral**.

Similarly, although cathedrals are public buildings and heritage sites of national significance, they receive **no funding guaranteed from central government and must apply for grants** from multiple separate bodies including the National Heritage Lottery Fund and DCMS.

In the past 10 years, cathedrals have taken significant steps to diversify their income streams, including hosting concerts and other commercial events. These typically make up a small proportion of their overall budget, however. Unlike museums and galleries which offer free admission, cathedrals are now to be **subject to full VAT on all maintenance and repairs**, driving up their costs further at a time when **rising energy bills and staffing costs** are pushing many cathedrals to the brink. **80% of cathedrals are now in structural deficit** and they cannot withstand further financial strain.

7. A call to action

As this research briefing has shown, **cathedrals are much more than heritage or religious buildings**. The Government's support for them must take this into account. Whilst there has been some recognition of the wide-ranging

roles of cathedrals by public officials, this has largely **failed to translate into policy action**. Without intervention, a considerable proportion of cathedrals remain under significant financial strain, together with their wide-ranging operations.

We therefore recommend the government:

1. Reframe cathedrals within DCMS and other relevant departments, as **economic and community anchor institutions**, rather than purely faith-based actors, in **recognition of their broader civic role**
2. In recognition of this, **scrap plans to levy VAT on cathedral and other religious buildings' repairs**, moving cathedrals in line with museums and galleries offering free admission
3. Consider a **discretionary removal of the £25,000 cap on the new Places of Worship Renewal Fund** where there is a strong case that the grant would have an **exceptional benefit for social cohesion**, in line with broader DCMS commitments and priorities¹³
4. Provide support for rising energy costs for cathedrals and similar civic institutions to help them continue their community operations and enable them to remain open
5. Take steps to consider what **longer-term financial settlements** cathedrals can be given to support their world-leading music, arts and cultural activities. This could include an **Endowment Fund**.

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:
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