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REPORT

Living Stones

English Cathedrals as Sacred Spaces in Changing Times

George Lapshynov & Nathan Mladin

Theos is the UK's leading religion and society think tank. It has a broad Christian basis and exists to enrich the conversation about the role of faith in society through research, events, and media commentary.

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About the photography

Emma Ledwith is a Sheffield-based photographer with over twenty years' experience of analogue and digital photography.

Many of the photographs in this report use a technique called multiple exposure, where two or more photographs are overlayed in a single shot.

The layered images portray the vast, changing, and overlapping roles that cathedrals play in the twenty-first century. Cathedrals are simultaneously: local and national, sites of Christian worship and open to all, hubs for community life and places of quiet contemplation. Each image tells a different story of the complex reality that England's cathedrals face today.

This effect is produced in-camera for analogue photos, and in post-production for digital photos. These were taken across four of the six cathedral case studies that form the basis of this research.

We are grateful for the sensitive, beautiful way in which Emma Ledwith has captured the spirit of these cathedrals.

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This report in 2 minutes

England's 42 Anglican cathedrals are not simply places of Christian worship but are among the country's most remarkable institutions. They are centres of civic life, beacons in their communities, and sanctuaries of stillness in a world of incessant noise and constant change. Worship remains foundational to their identity and purpose and is the centre from which their many other functions flow. Cathedrals run outreach programmes, educate schoolchildren, stage world-class music and art, mark the civic calendar, and hold space for communal grief and celebration. They are among the most visited heritage sites in the country, contributing hundreds of millions of pounds to local economies, mobilising thousands of volunteers and sustaining thousands of jobs.

They are also, for many, places of unhurried spiritual exploration. In a country where fewer than half the population identifies as Christian, cathedrals remain spaces where stillness, beauty and wonder can gently draw the spiritually open toward an experience of the sacred.

In the years since our first major exploration of English Anglican cathedrals, in a report titled *Spiritual Capital*,[1] cathedrals have changed in remarkable ways. They have professionalised their management and operations, diversified their revenue, expanded their events programmes, invested in digital communications, deepened their partnerships with local institutions, and broadened the range of people who cross their thresholds. They have survived a pandemic that drastically reduced visitor numbers and prompted the furloughing of most of their staff. They have adapted to a major overhaul of their governance under the Cathedrals Measure in 2021.

Yet the resources that sustain this work are stretched thin. Cathedrals depend financially on the Church of England, through the Church Commissioners, as well as a patchwork of commercial revenue, charitable giving, and lottery grants to maintain ancient buildings, pay staff, and deliver the services that communities have come to expect of them. The gap between what cathedrals contribute and the support they need is widening.

Drawing on a nationally representative YouGov poll, a separate survey of over 1,300 cathedral visitors, and qualitative fieldwork involving 146 interviewees across six representative cathedrals, this report examines the social, cultural and spiritual contribution of cathedrals. It traces how cathedrals are changing, and what pressures they face, ultimately calling for greater recognition, both financial and societal, of cathedrals' status as civic, cultural, and spiritual assets.

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Thanks to colleagues past and present at Theos for input on the polling questions and the project design; to the Communications team for their creative vision and for their work in promoting the research; to Polly Parrott for designing the report; and to colleagues Madeleine Pennington, Nick Spencer, Marianne Rozario, and Coco Huggins for comments on earlier drafts. Special thanks also go to Emma Ledwith, whose photography brought the research to life.

Finally, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to the main funders of this project, the Church Commissioners' Cathedral Sustainability Fund, and to our partners at the Association of English Cathedrals. Their support, from the initial stages of the project to its completion, has been instrumental in making this research possible.

Executive summary

This report draws on a nationally representative YouGov poll, a survey of more than 1,300 cathedral visitors, and qualitative fieldwork across six representative cathedrals to examine the social, cultural, and spiritual contribution of England's 42 Anglican cathedrals, the pressures they face and the forces reshaping them, and what they need to flourish.

Chapter I: More than a big church. The opening chapter argues that cathedrals are not larger versions of parish churches but multi-dimensional institutions, with worship at the centre, from which flows a remarkable breadth of roles. Cathedrals are:

- Churches serving whole regions rather than single congregations
- Community hubs and centres of civic life with significant bridging and symbolic capital
- Sanctuaries of stillness for unhurried spiritual exploration
- Partners in interfaith work
- Centres of arts, music, and culture of national standing
- Providers of formal and informal music and religious education
- Stewards of nationally significant heritage and centres of tourism

Chapter II: The English and their cathedrals. Cathedral visiting is far from a niche behaviour.

- 74% of English adults have visited a cathedral in the last three years, with 37% visiting more than once in the last year. According to the latest government statistics, this suggests

cathedrals attract a comparable share of the public to museums and galleries, and more than live sporting events.

- 74% of all English adults who visited a cathedral at least once in the last three years did so for a religious purpose. Over two-thirds of the non-religious English population have also visited a cathedral over that same period, and one in eight has attended a regular Christian service.
- Public sentiment toward cathedrals is warm but largely passive. Most people are pleased cathedrals exist and glad to benefit from them, yet feel little personal responsibility for sustaining them.
- Many assume cathedrals are comfortably resourced by a wealthy national Church, a perception with a kernel of truth, since funding from the national Church is indispensable to cathedral ministry, but which obscures the reality that this support falls short of what cathedrals actually need, particularly for the upkeep of their fabric.

The chapter closes by arguing that overcoming public ambivalence will require work that begins long before the cathedral door: in schools, community life, and the wider public conversation.

Chapter III: The forces reshaping cathedrals. Since 2012, English cathedrals have changed in remarkable ways, professionalising their teams, diversifying their revenue, expanding their events programmes, and broadening the range of people who cross their thresholds, all while weathering a pandemic and adapting to a significant overhaul of cathedral governance.

This is a story of impressive institutional adaptation, but also one of strain. The two most visible shifts have been commercialisation and professionalisation. Both have brought genuine benefits, and both have introduced tensions that cathedrals are learning how to navigate thoughtfully: between revenue and identity, between businesslike operations and the worshipping life at the cathedral's heart, and between what cathedrals must do simply to keep going and what they would wish to do if circumstances allowed.

Chapter IV: An enduring purpose expressed anew. The final chapter makes the case that cathedrals have an enduring vocation that should continue to be expressed anew, imaginatively, confidently, and on cathedrals' own terms, in a society that increasingly needs the anchoring, continuity, and stillness they offer. As social narratives fray, cathedrals are among the few institutions with the reach and moral authority to help communities tell the story of who they are.

Yet they are in serious difficulty: 80% are in structural deficit, with statutory responsibilities for buildings of immense national significance whose costs outstrip their resources by orders of magnitude. The chapter closes with a statement of need addressed to the national Church, to government and public funders, and to cathedral cities, calling for cathedrals to be valued and resourced as the civic, cultural, and spiritual assets they are.

York Minster – space for contemplation

Introduction

In 2012, Theos, in partnership with the Grubb Institute, published *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals*.[1] That report painted a picture of Anglican cathedrals as unique repositories of "spiritual capital", celebrated for their capacity to connect even those on the fringes of faith with the sacred. It highlighted cathedrals' dual character: at once bastions of Christian worship, and open civic spaces where tourists might unexpectedly become spiritual seekers.[2] A decade and more on, the social, financial, and religious landscape of England has shifted markedly, and with it, the world in which cathedrals operate.

In light of this, Theos has partnered with the Association of English Cathedrals, supported by the Church Commissioners, to conduct a new piece of research exploring how Anglican cathedrals are perceived by the public today, what their particular vocation is to speak to a growing non-religious and non-Christian demographic, what they can still offer that is unique to society, what the rest of the Church can learn from their particular witness to faith, and how they might best balance these opportunities and challenges in their work.

> "This secularising trend is only part of the story."

Shifting social and religious landscapes since 2012

The England of 2026 is a less religious but more religiously pluralistic country than that of 2012. The 2021 Census revealed that, for the first time, less than half the population of England and Wales identified as Christian (46%, down from 59% in 2011), while

Carlisle cathedral from above

those reporting "no religion" jumped to 37% (from 25% a decade prior).[3] That's over 8 million more non-religious people than in 2011.

Yet this secularising trend is only part of the story. Alongside it has been the rise of the spiritual-but-not-religious cohort, or "spiritual Nones" – individuals sceptical of institutional religion but still longing for the spiritual.[4] As *Spiritual Capital* observed in 2012, cathedrals seem to appeal especially to those who distrust organised religion yet seek transcendent meaning. That dynamic appears even more pronounced today, with many identifying in surveys as having "no religion" while still expressing spiritual beliefs or experiences.[5]

Some evidence also suggests a possible religious stir among younger adults. A range of studies suggest younger generations may be more open to spirituality and faith than older secularisation scripts would lead us to expect.[6]

> "British religiosity is not a straightforward narrative of decline; it is changing and remixing into new forms."

Such shifts, though tentative, indicate that British religiosity is not a straightforward narrative of decline; it is changing and remixing into new forms. Many younger seekers show an interest in spirituality on their own terms, outside traditional parish structures – precisely the kind of milieu where cathedrals, with their openness and anonymity, have an advantage.[7] In an age when institutional trust is low, but hunger for meaning endures, this quality has only grown in importance.

Meanwhile, the proportion of Britons belonging to non-Christian faiths as per the Census has inched upward (e.g. Muslims

comprised 6.5% in 2021 versus 4.8 % in 2011), contributing to a more multifaith society.[8] Thus, English cathedrals operate in 2025 at the intersection of a more secular *and* more religiously diverse nation – a unique space where a largely post-Christian public can still encounter living Christian heritage and where the "spiritual but not religious" find an accessible sacred context.

Public policy evolution and cathedral governance

Over the past decade, government and Church authorities have paid unprecedented attention to the sustainability and accountability of English cathedrals. Direct funding of cathedrals grew through initiatives like the First World War Centenary Cathedral Repair Fund (launched 2014), which injected £40 million for urgent repairs in just two years[9]. This was accompanied by the long-running Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme, whose funding peaked at £42 million per year in 2017 and now stands at £23 million for 2025/26,[10] and inclusion in the Culture Recovery Fund during the Covid-19 pandemic.[11]

This reflects wider policy reframing of cathedrals as *active social assets* and highlights their contribution to community cohesion, urban regeneration, and interfaith understanding. Lord Bourne's landmark report from 2017, *Cathedrals and Their Communities*, for instance, lauded them as not only "drivers of tourism and local economies and bastions of England's heritage," but also as "homes for our diverse communities", documenting their work of service with refugees, the homeless, and other vulnerable groups. According to HM Treasury's Green Book methodology, cathedrals and churches contribute £55 billion to national wellbeing.[12] Through tourism, they contribute around £235 million in additional

Clergy and the choir process out of evensong at St Albans cathedral

expenditure to local economies.[13] In recognition of this, the 2017 *Taylor Review* underscored the need for sustainable funding models for historic churches and cathedrals.[14]

The most consequential change, however, has been the introduction of the Cathedrals Measure in 2021, following recommendations by the Church of England's 2018 *Cathedrals Working Group*.[15] The Measure transformed cathedral Chapters (the governing bodies of cathedrals) into regulated charitable entities, subject to dual oversight by both the Church Commissioners and the Charity Commission.[16] This introduced modern accountability standards, including stronger financial controls and external audits, diversity requirements in Chapter appointments, fixed term limits, and new management structures. As parliament's most significant intervention in cathedral management since the 19th century, the Measure brought these ancient institutions in line with contemporary charity law and public standards.

These shifts occurred during the pandemic, which dealt a sharp blow to cathedral finances: visitor numbers plummeted by an estimated 75%, tourism and events came to a standstill, and a significant share of staff were furloughed in 2020.[17] Most cathedrals have since bounced back, but the financial picture remains tight. Public grants have receded. The national repair grant was cut to £23 million in 2025 with a new cap of £25,000 per building.[18] Since then, MPs have repeatedly expressed concern that shrinking support for cathedrals, coupled with the sharp rise in building maintenance costs, could jeopardise their significant contributions to local economies and social wellbeing.[19]

Cathedrals must now demonstrate their value more clearly than ever to secure resources, even as they themselves exemplify

adaptive change in how they are run. It is in this context of institutional resilience under growing pressure that we conducted our research.

About the research

The project used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies and six case studies, in line with the approach taken in the 2012 *Spiritual Capital* report.

The qualitative element of the research consisted of in-depth interviews conducted between August and November at the cathedrals of Carlisle, Derby, Exeter, Rochester, St Albans and York. These involved 146 interviewees, including 33 cathedral staff, 31 cathedral volunteers, 61 visitors, and 21 local stakeholders. Interviews were complemented with observational fieldwork notes, and a condensed ethnographic approach which consisted of participating in a variety of cathedral events – religious, as well as cultural, community, and commercial.

> "Cathedrals were carefully selected to offer as wide and as representative a picture as possible of English Anglican cathedrals."

Cathedrals were carefully selected to offer as wide and as representative a picture as possible of English Anglican cathedrals. This study is always talking about *Anglican* cathedrals within the jurisdiction of the Church of England; we did not look at other ecclesial traditions that also have them (e.g. Orthodox, Catholic). Selection criteria for these English cathedrals included: cathedral size; financial health; geographical location; congregation size; touristic attractiveness; type of cathedral building; congregation

affluence; and deprivation. More information on how the case study sites were chosen can be found in Annex I.

Staff and volunteers were recruited through participating cathedral offices, and included a fixed list of roles – namely, Dean, COO, Head of Visitor Engagement/Experience/Pilgrimage (or equivalent), Director of Music, Head of Comms/Marketing/ Development (or equivalent), and in some cases Residentiary Canons. Volunteers were sampled to include both public-facing and non-public-facing volunteers, in both liturgical and secular roles (i.e., nominations/ safeguarding/ finance committees, archivists, readers, servers, stewards, gardeners etc.).

Lists of community actors with a stake in cathedral life were compiled by the participating cathedral offices, and local community actors were approached and recruited by us directly, to minimise bias. Visitors were recruited ad-hoc and in-situ, on the cathedral floor, during designated days of fieldwork at each cathedral, at different hours of the day at all cathedrals, to catch a wide variety of visitors with or without children, on holidays and living locally, participating in the community life of the cathedral or visiting in passing.

> "The survey touched on questions including why cathedral visitors value cathedrals and the ways in which they do so."

In addition to our qualitative fieldwork, we ran a cathedral visitor survey that gathered 1,375 responses across all six cathedrals. The survey touched on questions including: why cathedral visitors value cathedrals and the ways in which they do so; what cathedral visitors believe the primary purpose of cathedrals

Visitors ascend the staircase in the shadow of a stained-glass window at Carlisle cathedral

to be; whether cathedral visitors believe cathedrals are delivering what they should; and how cathedral visitors feel about the nature and contributions of commercial events to cathedral life.

We concluded our study by commissioning a national poll of 1,802 members of the general public in England, conducted for us by YouGov Plc. This poll was designed by us and YouGov conjointly, to test the extent of popular perceptions about Cathedrals' role, their accessibility, funding, and purpose, as well as gauge the attachment of England's population to their cathedrals. Fieldwork for this national poll was undertaken between 27th and 28th November 2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in England (aged 18+).[20]

All figures given for both the Theos visitor survey and the national YouGov poll are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Chapter I.
More than a big church

English cathedrals are more than large churches. They are first the seat of the bishop, the mother church of the diocese (that is, the collection of all parishes in a wider region), and a centre of worship and mission for that whole diocesan community. As the Cathedrals Measure 2021 makes explicit, they have a focal role in the life and work of the Church of England in the diocese. They are places for teaching, mission, ordinations, synods, and other diocesan occasions. From that primary vocation flow a wide range of other public roles, as we explore in this first chapter. Cathedrals are heritage sites, community anchors, cultural institutions, and centres of public life. Whilst not all cathedrals are alike in history, scale, fabric, or local setting, we argue that this variety allows each to develop a distinct mission and public presence: their plurality is their strength.

> "Cathedrals are heritage sites, community anchors, cultural institutions, and centres of public life."

Whilst churches across the country may offer many of these same social goods, cathedrals can often offer them at scale, and with a degree of continuity, public visibility, and institutional capacity, that parish churches cannot easily sustain – though some do. Being episcopal and diocesan in addition to its many public roles, cathedral ministry is therefore distinct from parish ministry, and the two can coexist fruitfully within the Church of England's ecology. Structurally, cathedrals are also different from most churches, being independent charities run by Chapters, with larger professional and lay teams, typically more than three clergy, an explicit chaplaincy function, and a wider diocesan horizon.

Figure 1.1 "Which of the following categories describes your contact with your cathedral? You can tick as many as appropriate."

Category of contact	%
Event attender	65
Local community member	47
Donor	37
Tourist	37
Worshipper	35
Volunteer	22
'Patron' or 'Friend' of the cathedral	16
Local church member	9
As part of an educational visit	7

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375).

Cathedrals' distinctive role as the diocesan church of a wider region is reflected, too, in the mix of people who use them. Our visitor survey shows that cathedral users cannot be defined in a binary way as either congregants or tourists, but comprise an overlapping population of worshippers, heritage visitors, local community members, volunteers, donors, and event attendees. Respondents were all asked why they were visiting and could tick more than one reason in a multiple-choice list; most respondents (76%) said they were visiting in more than one capacity. Event attenders were especially likely also to see themselves as donors and local community members, suggesting that events attract locals first and that many probably treat their ticket as a form of donation. Only one in eight local community members saw

themselves as tourists, while one in five worshippers is also an event attender.

It is striking that, in our interviews also, neither staff nor visitors experienced the cathedral as merely a larger version of the parish church. As one non-Christian interfaith actor put it: "A cathedral, for me, is a different thing to a church or synagogue or whatever, because of its historical civic place in a city. It isn't just a place of worship." That sense of being more than a parish church is not a departure from its church function. At its best, it means cathedrals can be capacious public-facing institutions while remaining rooted in Christianity.

1.1. The church of the city

While the parish system provides a dense geography of local worshipping communities, the cathedral's purpose is to serve and unite a whole region. Though extending far and wide, the city in which it is situated is the place where it serves and draws together a diversity of communities most tightly, playing a public and often civic role by virtue of its bridging capacity and becoming the universal 'church of the city'. It therefore serves a broader and more socio-economically, religiously, ethnically, and politically varied community, often acting as a point of visibility for the Church of England's established presence. Yet the precise shape of this public role varies between cathedrals. Some are deeply embedded in city leadership; others exercise a quieter but no less important public

> "The cathedral's purpose is to serve and unite a whole region."

ministry through openness, convening, education, service, and symbolic presence.

Our interviews repeatedly returned to the same point: cathedrals are not simply bigger than parish churches but are differently placed. One member of clergy described their cathedral as "open and available to every person in the diocese, every community." A volunteer who had served for decades in a parish church put it similarly: "This cathedral has a much wider network. It's nice to be part of something bigger than a local church, to be honest."

This is supported by the fact that only about half of all respondents to the visitor survey identified as belonging to the local community, and only one in three said they worshipped in the cathedral. Two in five (39%) respondents also identified as non-Anglican, and one in five (18%) said they have no religion.

Figure 1.2 "Which is your religion?"

Religion	%
Anglican	61
Other Christian	18
Other religion or spirituality	3
No religion (Nones)	18
... Spiritual Nones	(8%)
... Tolerant Nones	(9%)
... Campaigning Nones	(1%)

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375).

A view from Carlisle cathedral's tower

Part of what makes this difference tangible is the cathedral's daily permeability. Many cathedrals do not have a congregation strictly speaking, yet they are open almost every day of the year and ordered around a daily rhythm of prayer and worship. In a context where many local churches are closed for much of the week, the cathedral's 'open door' and reliable provision becomes a pastoral and civic resource in its own right.

> "In a context where many local churches are closed for much of the week, the cathedral's 'open door' and reliable provision becomes a pastoral and civic resource."

> *You can come in if you've lost someone. You don't have to come to the church regularly because you know it's open. The cathedral doors are open every day for people to come in and find that space. It's a meeting place. It's a hub.* (staff)

This low barrier to entry makes the cathedral accessible to those who find the intimacy of a parish community intimidating.

Our fieldwork surfaced people who consider themselves "non-churchgoing", yet regularly attend cathedral services, take communion, and live, for all intents and purposes, active Christian spiritual lives. Even in cathedrals that are also parishes and do have more defined congregations, we found their functions to operate discretely, but in parallel: at some times the cathedral becomes parish-like for its congregation, whilst still continuing its wider extra-parochial cathedral role alongside this.

This complementarity is not always well understood in the wider Church. Cathedrals are still sometimes framed as an

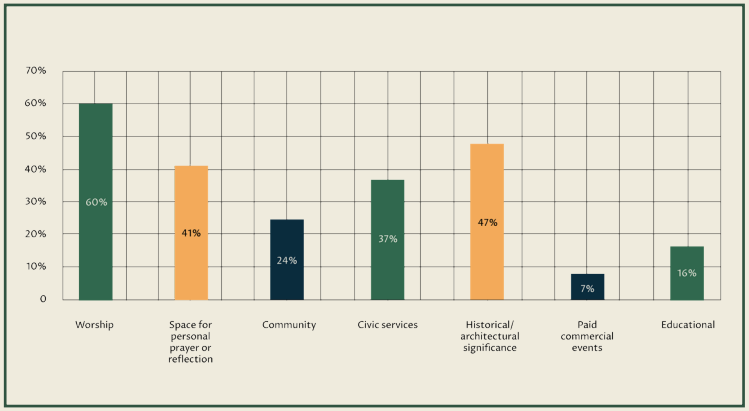
unnecessary luxury, rather than a distinct vocation that reaches audiences the Church struggles to reach otherwise. Across interviews with current and retired clergy, including some outside cathedral ministry, we encountered uncertainty about why cathedrals were needed if the parish system already covered the whole of England. That myth, we believe, needs further deliberate dispelling if cathedrals are to receive the church-wide support they need.

1.2. Worship, spirituality and mission

If cathedrals are more than big churches however, their distinctiveness still begins in worship – that is, their daily worship and sacramental life, with their choral and liturgical excellence. Daily cathedral worship also plays an important missional role, attracting significant numbers of infrequent or non-churchgoers to regular midweek services, with numbers having risen steadily since the pandemic.[1]

> "Daily cathedral worship also plays an important missional role, attracting significant numbers of infrequent or non-churchgoers."

Figure 1.3 "Which of the following, if any, do you think should be the key functions of a cathedral in modern society? Please select up to three."



Theos/YouGov. Base: All (n=1,802).

Respondents to the national YouGov survey largely echoed this, with well over half (60%) – including half (51%) of Nones – believing worship should be the key function of a cathedral in modern society. Last year, the Church of England's own statistics indicated a 15% increase in midweek attendance compared to the previous year, suggesting an enduring and growing interest in cathedral worship.[2]

Clergy at all cathedrals, however, were also keen to stress that the other dimensions of cathedral life serve that same missional purpose – and sometimes more efficiently, because they are more popular than daily worship.

> *It seems to me cathedrals have three roles. One is to be a daily worshipping community. One is to be a heritage attraction. One is to be an events venue. And I think all of those are part of our mission, because I am a great believer that the building does most of the mission for us.* (clergy)

The idea that the building itself does much of the missionary work recurred across our fieldwork. Cathedrals facilitate experiences of transcendence through services, events, and simply by being beautiful places of prayer, awe, stillness, and exploration for believers, the curious, and the non-religious alike.

> "The idea that the building itself does much of the missionary work recurred across our fieldwork."

Most visitors we interviewed rejected the language of the sacred or divine, yet some who did not identify as religious still described the cathedral as spiritually impactful. One spoke of a "different attitude" on entering and said he was happy to "borrow the cathedral's serenity." Another, also not religious, found the cathedral spacious enough to afford her "a little moment" of prayer and reflection in bereavement. Even where visitors refused spiritual language, they still spoke readily of peace and wonder: "I feel at peace and in awe, but I wouldn't say I've particularly been swept up… I'm fairly down-to-earth; I'm not mad, you know."

Visitors do not merely admire cathedrals aesthetically; many experience them as spiritually or quasi-spiritually affective spaces, even when they do not use explicitly theological language.

Evensong at St Albans cathedral

Figure 1.4 "On a scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree,' please tell us whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about this cathedral." (Percentage net agree by religion)

Net Agree	Anglicans	Nones
I experience God through the calm and quiet of the Cathedral space	91%	35%
I find it easier to pray in the Cathedral than elsewhere	56%	26%
I get a sense of the sacred from the cathedral music (e.g. choral, organ)	91%	71%
I get a sense of the sacred in the Cathedral's welcome to visitors	88%	53%
I get a sense of the sacred from the cathedral building	94%	77%

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375); Anglicans (n=834); Nones (n=244).

One in three (35%) cathedral-visiting Nones say they experience God through the calm and quiet. Nearly half (43%) say the calm and quiet has helped them meet with God. In other words, concerts, art, civic services, and calm spaces within cathedrals register meaningfully for a significant share of visitors as spiritual, including for some who are not religious or not frequently practising.

> "One in three cathedral-visiting Nones say they experience God through the calm and quiet."

Figure 1.5 "In your experience, which of the following cathedral activities have helped you to meet with God?" (Percentage net helped by religion and practice)

Net Helped	All	Nones	Religious non-practising
Calm space	70%	43%	60%
Evensong	54%	21%	64%
Eucharist	55%	12%	25%
Religious festivals	69%	28%	50%
Civic services	71%	37%	59%

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375); Nones (n=244); Religious non-practising (n=117)[3].

Many visitor interviewees readily recognised that an invitation to "unload" or "empty out" felt as though it were built into the very stones of cathedrals. Although nearly all described this in terms of physical or mental wellbeing rather than anything overtly spiritual, this nonetheless suggests that the building itself has a capacity to transform in a way which can support mission.

But this raises a further question about what cathedrals' mission is: is it purely 'mission' in the Christian sense, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ afresh in each generation to the people of England – as is the Church of England's mission – or is it something less well defined?

Inspired in part by our *Spiritual Capital* report, cathedrals across England often frame themselves as porous spaces where tourists and pilgrims morph into one another. One senior clergy member, articulating an ideal echoed by many others, said:

I hope visitors leave as pilgrims, whatever condition they are in when they arrive… and that they will pick up something of the glory of God, and of the Good News of the Gospel.

If by visitor-pilgrims we mean *Christian* pilgrims who "pick up something" of the Gospel, then the present study in fact suggests that this is not the case for the great majority. If, however, we use the term more broadly for 'sojourners who encounter something of the numinous', then the description rings true.

Moreover, even though the cathedral building is a powerful missionary tool, the question remains as to how much missionary work it can carry out independently, particularly when it is used for purposes other than worship. As chapter III explores in more detail, several members of staff were acutely aware that commercial logic can subtly reshape the spiritual experience of cathedral visitors. One clergy interviewee noted that their cathedral wanted to treat all visitors as pilgrims, while simultaneously establishing a deliberate consumer relationship with them. While these two approaches may not always be incompatible, they demonstrate that missional opportunity is not automatic: it depends on how the cathedral curates the visitor experience and presents itself.

> "Missional opportunity is not automatic: it depends on how the cathedral curates the visitor experience and presents itself."

As one volunteer steward noted:

You've got to be conscious of the low religious literacy, not just for foreign visitors but for anybody… Occasionally, even an English family will come in on a Sunday and be confused: 'Really? Sunday morning? This [attending a church service] is what people do on Sunday?!'

This comment is not intended as criticism of any particular group but rather highlights the fact that it is no longer reasonable to assume familiarity with Christian practices, even among people living in countries where churches and cathedrals exist. This includes people for whom knowledge of church activities might once have been culturally typical. This lack of literacy is perhaps more understandable coming from visitors from other countries who are unfamiliar with churches.

Many visitors, religious and non-religious alike, told us they could not fully understand the beauty and meaning of the cathedral they were visiting. We heard repeatedly that there were not enough materials to make sense of the building in a religious sense, and some senior clergy admitted that the cathedral's own "interpretation of the Gospel… was not very good at all."

Collar off, I walked into the building trying to imagine I was a first-time visitor who didn't know anything about anything. I learned a lot about Catherine of Aragon and Henry VIII; I didn't learn much about Jesus of Nazareth. (clergy)

However, if the Christian message is interpreted well for diverse publics, and with some handholding where appropriate, we observed that cathedrals can fulfil their sacramental and spiritual function, even for visitors who arrive simply as heritage tourists. We observed this ourselves in open midday services, where paying

visitors with no obvious intention of 'going to church' ended up attending a eucharist, some even taking communion. There is good reason to think that here too, the building itself helped dispose them to that encounter between the moment they entered and the moment they witnessed the midday service. It is also hard to imagine many other settings in which several dozen tourists would, almost unwittingly, end up praying – or at least being willingly prayed over.

At its best, then, the cathedral offers a spirituality that is distinctively Christian yet allows all, and perhaps especially those who do not identify as Christian, to take some steps on their spiritual journey. As in *Spiritual Capital*, we reiterate the belief that cathedrals are liminal spaces of spirituality. But the building – and even the liturgy – cannot communicate the Christian faith alone. Its potential for Christian mission will be realised only with the provision of clear interpretation and gentle handholding for the spiritually curious.

1.3. Community hubs and sanctuaries

Cathedrals' roles at the heart of community life remain central. England's cathedrals collectively host thousands of events each year – concerts, exhibitions, civic ceremonies, educational events, graduations, conferences, public debates, and health and wellbeing activities – averaging roughly three events every week per cathedral.[4] Many also run or support social action projects such as food banks, night shelters, community cafés, debt counselling, and support groups for vulnerable people. During the pandemic they redeployed buildings and volunteers rapidly, from food-parcel

coordination and vaccination centres to childcare for essential workers.[5]

Cathedrals do not merely 'do a lot'; they function as bridges within fragmented communities. Visitors recognise this too. Very nearly all respondents to the visitor survey, whether Anglican or non-religious, saw their cathedral as a non-sectarian focal point of local identity and community.

"Cathedrals do not merely 'do a lot'; they function as bridges within fragmented communities."

Figure 1.6 "On a scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree,' please tell us whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about this cathedral." (Percentage net agree by religion)

Net Agree	Anglicans	Nones
I get a sense of community through the way the cathedral provides space for local events and activities	90%	92%
I see my cathedral as a 'hub' to engage in the life of the wider community	95%	94%
I see my cathedral as a symbol of local identity	97%	98%
I see my cathedral as a venue for important occasions in the life of the city	97%	96%
I see my cathedral as a welcoming space for the whole community, not only those affiliated with the Church of England	96%	94%

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375); Anglicans (n=834); Nones (n=244).

Children reading at the Little Stars toddler group in Carlisle cathedral

In moments of national significance or local crisis, cathedrals are also focal points for collective ritual and reflection. Staff described this as part of the cathedral's ordinary identity.

> *If a public figure is lost, or there's an event capturing attention in the media, it becomes a place where people gather and remember… When the Queen died… they did still come to gather and remember. It was really moving.* (staff)

During fieldwork we attended several civic events and saw cathedrals' unusual ability to host a civic ecosystem that brings together diverse constituencies without dissolving their Christian character: clergy leading explicitly Christian services with Bible readings, prayers for the city, and a sermon, alongside senior non-Christian public figures delivering the Gospel reading. At such moments, the established Church could be said to be at its best: universal, and more than a religious organisation for its own members.

Beyond the explicitly spiritual, cathedrals also function as spaces of wellbeing, places of stillness where people can unburden themselves. Most visitors we interviewed said cathedrals made them feel calm and safe. One, comparing the feeling with yoga, said: "After I visit cathedrals I feel more calm inside. It feels like your heart is larger and lifted." Two volunteers from a low-church evangelical background contrasted cathedral worship with their former experience:

> "Beyond the explicitly spiritual, cathedrals also function as spaces of wellbeing, places of stillness where people can unburden themselves."

> *What I like is it's totally predictable. It's a safe space – profound and deep. The spirituality I've encountered here is totally different to the noise and froth and bubble of a lot of evangelical churches.*

As we have already seen, four in five visitors report experiencing God through the calm and quiet of the cathedral. Yet even more simply value that peace for its own sake. One in ten (9%) visitor survey respondents said peace and quiet was the best thing about the cathedral, ahead of architecture, history, community, or worship. Visitors told us the quiet helped them cope with stress and made them feel "calmer and gladder." Some said they came not for history or religion but precisely because the cathedral was a sanctuary of stillness. School representatives also told us they were increasingly seeing cathedral visits not only as educational, but as valuable for children's mental health.

> "Cathedrals provide this social good – rest for the heavy-laden and restless – at no cost."

> *The biggest challenges for young people today are anxiety, stress, worry, social media – all of that life which creates mental health issues. Allowing space for stillness, calm, quiet, away from their phone, away from potentially chaotic home life, away from the busyness of school, is so important.* (school representative)

This wellbeing dimension resonates strongly with a cultural moment that prizes personal wellbeing while making it harder to find. Cathedrals provide this social good – rest for the heavy-laden

and restless – at no cost, likely saving the taxpayer in ways that are difficult to quantify.

Cathedrals are also bulwarks against social desertification because they generate large volunteer ecosystems that build social capital and service cultures. The average cathedral we visited had 300–400 volunteers, with some having as many as 600, most volunteering at least monthly.

> *It gives me a community to belong to, and it's such a diverse group of people… When I started out as a steward, it gave me an opportunity to meet older people with more life experience. When I stepped into the tour guiding role, I got a chance to interact with so many people from all over the world. And then, being part of those [worship] services, that's for my own personal spiritual gain and wellbeing.* (volunteer)

Volunteers described benefits including social contact, mental stimulation, usefulness, reduced loneliness, a stronger connection to the city, and the sense that by serving a cathedral they were giving back to the whole city at once, rather than to a single charitable cause.

However, the volunteer culture that underpins the cathedral's hospitality and social capital depends heavily on older age groups, with younger adults showing a record-low level of interest in volunteering nationwide, raising questions about succession. Of visitor survey respondents who identified as cathedral volunteers, two thirds (67%) were aged 65 or older, and over half (58%) had been involved with their cathedral for more than ten years. This is not unique to cathedrals, given the national age profile of volunteering and given the fact that retirement affords many an

opportunity to volunteer they did not have before.[6] Nevertheless, because volunteers are so central to cathedral life – from welcoming visitors and giving tours to stewarding events and serving at the altar – cathedrals would be disproportionately affected by any reduction in volunteer numbers.

Chaplains particularly embody the cathedral's pastoral presence. One framed his role simply:

> *I'm here to listen, to hear their joys, their troubles… You might occasionally have a crisis, someone [considering taking their own life]… At the end of the day, I feel exhausted – but very pleasantly exhausted. It's a privilege to share with these people.*

This ministry is often invisible in accounts of cathedral contribution, yet the hundreds of volunteer chaplains across England's 42 cathedrals provide frontline support and mental health first aid to some of the most vulnerable people in the country.

Taken together, these factors help explain why local and national authorities increasingly view cathedrals as partners in community wellbeing. The 2017 government report *Cathedrals and Their Communities* explicitly commended English cathedrals for their wider community work and commitment to local economic growth.[7] That marks an important shift from older narratives that saw cathedrals chiefly as heritage institutions, or merely as large churches. Today they embrace, with some confidence, the role of community anchors: a role that aligns with their theological mission to serve society and strengthens their case for external support.

1.4. Civic leadership and convening power

As both literal and metaphorical large common spaces, cathedrals can convene across divides. They are anchor institutions in their cities: visible participants in city strategy, cultural boards, place partnerships, and civic ceremonies. The range of organisations to which deans and cathedral representatives contribute – Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), chambers of commerce, tourism advisory boards, local authority councils, universities, shrievalties[8], mayoralties, constabularies, lieutenancies, school boards, and hosts of charities – is a useful indicator of this civic embedding. A fuller list and typology of the public roles of cathedral clergy and staff appear in Annex II.

> *People really believe in the cathedral's ethos and values. It's quite strange because it's such a religious space – you can't get away from that – but people don't completely associate it with religious belief. They associate the cathedral as an institution that is an anchor of the city. Everyone goes, 'Oh yeah, we need them around this table; we need the cathedral.' They're forward-thinking, open to discussion, willing to look at solutions and ideas. They're innovative.* (local authority representative)

> "As both literal and metaphorical large common spaces, cathedrals can convene across divides. They are anchor institutions in their cities."

Across interviews with local community actors, we repeatedly heard that the cathedral is valued in strategic conversations because, as one interviewee noted, "it does not push religious values as such; it asks: what does our community need? How can we bring people together to solve this problem?" It is trusted to contribute perspectives other community actors are not always able to articulate credibly. That trust should not be taken for granted. Theos has reported elsewhere on the unwarranted fear of proselytism and distrust of religious organisations that often impede churches' participation in civic forums.[9] The fact that cathedrals tend to escape this scepticism sets them apart again from many local churches and is likely rooted in their long urban histories and record of openness to the whole city.

One important dimension of this civic leadership is public and ceremonial: civic services with Lord Lieutenants, judicial circuits, Remembrance, mayor-making, school and community carol services, and celebrations of the voluntary sector, among much else. A fuller list and typology of civic and community religious services from the case studies is available in Annex III. Such events, which gather "the great and the good," in one clergy's phrase, do more than provide mere pomp and circumstance. They create rare opportunities for mayors, judges, councillors, clergy, and charity leaders to meet informally, exchange freely, and strengthen the relationships on which community resilience often depends in times of crisis. We observed this ourselves during fieldwork.

> "Several staff members told us that they were stunned by the scope of activity they discovered once inside."

Despite this extensive involvement, cathedrals may still under-communicate their civic role. Several staff members told

Votive candles alongside a war memorial at York Minster

us that, even after reading widely about their cathedral before taking up their posts, they were stunned by the scope of activity they discovered only once inside. It would be wise for cathedrals to assume that most in their community have even less prior knowledge and understanding than their staff members before taking up their posts. This matters not only for self-presentation, but because grassroots organisations and more deprived groups may miss opportunities to benefit from cathedrals' convening power, integrative capacity, and social capital if they do not realise what is available.

1.5. Interfaith and ecumenical relations

Cathedrals present themselves as generous Christian institutions that welcome those of all faiths and none. Our research confirms that they remain among the strongest vectors for interfaith and ecumenical relations in England, playing leading roles in interfaith activity in all the cities we visited – a finding consistent with the 2017 *Cathedrals and Their Communities* report.

Fieldwork, however, also surfaced a candid realism about the limits of inclusivity language. Strikingly, the pushback came not chiefly from cathedral personnel or from Christians in general, but from other faith communities themselves. Interfaith organisation representatives and other faith leaders in all fieldwork locations took some issue with the way cathedrals sometimes imagine their interfaith role. One interfaith actor put it clearly: "They view themselves as a space for all – which is true to an extent. But it is a Christian place of worship, and a Christian community, and that's absolutely what it should be." Another, speaking from within interfaith practice, warned against confusing convening power – or indeed, confusing simply power – with neutrality:

> *If you're having an interfaith service where you want lots of different people to pray together, then yes – you're going to have to make some compromises about Jesus. Jesus is not neutral. But at other times, don't be afraid to be Christian, because that's what you are. Be proud of who you are. Use the ability you've got as the Established Church to bring people together, provide spaces – but don't run away with yourself.*

This goes to the heart of the Church of England's role in a multifaith society. Cathedrals may possess greater convening power than any other faith institution in many English cities, but they are not, and cannot be unless they cease to be Christian, neutral spaces in the fullest sense.

> "The task is not to become neutral, but to be as hospitable as possible without becoming diluted."

Figure 1.7 "To what extent do you see your cathedral as a place for interfaith and ecumenical dialogue?" (Percentage very much agree by religion and age)

Very much agree	Christians	Other religious	Nones	18-34	55+
A place for interfaith and ecumenical dialogue	26%	14%	13%	15%	25%

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375).

The ‘Celebrating Women’ exhibition at St Albans cathedral

Where some aspire to greater neutrality in the name of hospitality, that may be a mistake. The task is not to become neutral, but to be as hospitable as possible without becoming diluted: to engage other faith groups from what Theos has elsewhere called a "full-fat Christian position,"[10] rather than from a soft syncretism that other faith communities, unashamed of their own faith, may neither want nor recognise as genuine. Theos has also previously found that people of other faiths were, on balance, more supportive of a distinctly Christian national ceremony than of a secular one, and in many cases more supportive than might have been expected.[11]

Our visitor survey reinforced this complexity. Respondents were overall markedly uncertain about their cathedral as a place for interfaith and ecumenical dialogue. Christian visitors were by far the most enthusiastic, while visitors belonging to non-Christian faiths valued this role about as much as non-religious visitors. There was also a notable age gap, with 18–34-year-olds placing much less value on this dimension than older groups – not an encouraging sign in an increasingly diverse society.

1.6. Arts, music and culture

If worship is the cathedral's core mission, the arts – particularly music – are often the main way that worship overflows into culture. The arts are also one of the ways by which worship is carried. Cathedrals are centres of musical and artistic excellence: they commission art, sustain choirs and heritage skills, deliver chorister education through both traditional and newer community models, and increasingly reach local schools through ambitious partnerships. They are major commissioners of new sacred music,

and their daily rhythm of rehearsals and performance makes them some of the liveliest cultural hubs in the country. As one member of staff succinctly put it:

The English choral tradition **is** *cathedrals.*

At the time of writing, several actors, including the Cathedral Music Trust, are seeking to have English sacred choral music included in UNESCO's Living Heritage inventory.[12]

Figure 1.8 "In your experience, which of the following cathedral activities have helped you to meet with God?" (Percentage net helped by religion and practice)

Net Helped	Anglican	Nones	Religious non-practising
Art	64%	32%	49%
Concerts	77%	44%	62%

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375); Anglican (n= 834); Nones (n=244); Religious non-practising (n=117).

Interview data repeatedly showed that music and art are experienced not as add-ons but as part of the cathedral's identity and, therefore, of its sacred and transcendent dimension. For many visitors, the spiritual experience is mediated through art and music, including significant numbers of non-religious and non-practising visitors. A third (32%) of visitor survey respondents said

> "For many visitors, the spiritual experience is mediated through art and music."

Tessa Campbell Fraser's 'Whales' installation hangs from the ceiling of Rochester cathedral

the beauty of the cathedral building – itself a work of art – was the best thing about visiting.

> *What is the cathedral there for? It's not just a venue or a historic building. The whole purpose of it is prayer and worship. And in a cathedral, an important part of that is the music.* (staff)

Music sits at the centre of most cathedral services, and England has come to expect from cathedrals an unusually high standard of execution. This often involves child choristers, whose musical formation entails a level of training, pastoral oversight, and safeguarding that is both resource-intensive and organisationally demanding. Interviewees were nevertheless consistent in their assessment that this commitment is warranted: both for the educational and formative opportunities it provides to children, and because it sustains a distinctive and internationally admired English choral tradition. Some clergy and staff also emphasised the fragility of this tradition, noting that it could be lost within a single generation, and that with it would disappear the largely oral knowledge through which repertoire, standards, and practices are transmitted.

"Music sits at the centre of most cathedral services, and England has come to expect from cathedrals an unusually high standard of execution."

> *Belgium, Holland and France have music-making every bit as good as anything here. But it's not free, it's not tethered to the Church in the same way, and it's not daily. Some cathedrals have*

restarted [the child chorister tradition] recently, but you can't just bring it back and have it be the same. (clergy)

Not all cathedrals sustain this through the traditional choir-school model. Some smaller and less well-resourced urban cathedrals draw children from a wider cross-section of local families, making the tradition not only artistically excellent but socially generative. This standard of excellence is often striking for international visitors. An Italian couple we interviewed after choral evensong could not believe the provincial cathedral they were visiting held such beautiful services with a full choir every day. "Even in Italy," they noted, "you would be hard pressed to find a cathedral that had such beautiful services with such frequency."[13]

Beyond worship, cathedrals draw new audiences through broad cultural programming: concerts, theatre, literature evenings, light installations, and exhibitions. In a culture-poor Britain where the arts are often early victims of cuts, there is a strong case that cathedrals help resist cultural desertification.[14] They also collaborate with local authorities, universities, and other public institutions on commissions. Many interviewees did not view such programming as a departure from mission, but rather as one of its contemporary forms: bringing in people who would otherwise never set foot inside, in the hope that some of them will later return for a visit, for prayer, or indeed for worship – as both clergy and staff emphasised repeatedly during the interviews.

The more commercial arm of what we do has a positive knock-on effect: people come in and go, "Oh, I've never been here before." They'll sit in the audience, watch a performance, have a glass of wine – and then they come back another day to have a proper look around. That might lead into something else. One thing can lead to a service, a carol service, Christmas Day, a chat with a priest… (staff)

Some interviews nonetheless raised legitimate questions of discernment: not whether cultural programming belongs in cathedral life, but how it is curated, what goods it delivers, and whether particular events deepen belonging, contemplation, and encounter or merely maximise income.

I think it is inherently more valuable to rent the building for less to a local choral society… In those choral-society scenarios there is a deeper local investment, and it is the sort of music that's more likely to lead people into contemplation. (clergy)

For this constituency, art in cathedrals should serve either an explicitly missional purpose or at least deliver substantial community goods. Others we interviewed rejected both that limitation and the assumption that worship and culture can be cleanly separated, or even the idea that there is such a thing as art that, if it is accommodated in a cathedral, could not participate in delivering mission.

> **"People are happy to sit in the cathedral; it touches people. You don't know when it's going to touch them, for how long, or in what way."**

Everything is intertwined. There's no black and white; there are no walls here at all… People are happy to sit in the cathedral; it touches people. You don't know when it's going to touch them, for how long, or in what way. (clergy)

While there is no consensus on exactly what cathedral arts programming should look like, all parties agreed that at its best it is not a distraction from mission but one of the principal ways mission becomes publicly visible.

1.7. Education

Every cathedral we visited had formal and informal partnerships with schools, colleges, and universities. While this is not exclusive to cathedrals – an estimated one in seven pupils attends a Church of England school, most of which maintain relationships with a local parish church[15] – the cathedral's educational role is distinctive in scope and quality.

> "They are also teaching environments, providing informal religious, cultural, and historical education through increasingly professional tour-guide training and interpretation."

Cathedrals participate in delivering formal religious education, welcoming many thousands of schoolchildren every year. As one non-Christian faith community actor observed:

> *One of the worst-taught religions in Britain is Christianity… School groups should be in there not just to see the building; they should be in there for the spirituality, the lived Christianity… Getting this full experience of Christianity is not really an option for a school visiting the local vicar, whereas at a cathedral, you have a diocesan education team who can provide insight into lived Christianity, as well as the lovely old buildings.*

Visitors in the Undercroft Museum at York Minster overlayed with an altar

They are also teaching environments in their own right, providing informal religious, cultural, and historical education through increasingly professional tour-guide training and interpretation. We noticed, however, that the quality of this informal education depended heavily on how well the cathedral explained itself to visitors.

Cathedrals also participate in music education through partnerships and community engagement programmes. Thanks to their musical excellence and the presence of highly skilled musicians, some play an active role in helping schools meet the Department for Education's statutory goals under the Model Music Curriculum, despite the fact that many schools and local authorities have all but abandoned elementary music teaching.

> *Music is on the national curriculum – particularly learning to read music – and virtually no primary school is able to deliver that… When I was at school, the music specialists would come in and teach every class. There'd be a piano in every room, but a lot of primary schools would now struggle to find anyone who could play the piano or lead musical activity or do musical training.* (staff)

This contribution is largely unacknowledged despite its direct public value. Cathedral-led Music in Schools programmes are especially significant, with some reaching well over a thousand primary school children a week. These programmes exemplify mission through partnership, with cathedrals giving away some of their riches – musical expertise, disciplined ensemble practice, confidence, joy, and access to beauty – in collaboration with schools pursuing educational and wellbeing goals of their own.

Cathedrals also widen musical education by supporting school and community choirs and providing extracurricular training beyond formal chorister programmes. This matters especially where there is no choir school and the cathedral must draw a diverse range of children into its musical life by other means.

> *It will very likely be the first time many of the children have sung anything together… very likely the first time they've been in the cathedral, and quite possibly the first time their families have been in the cathedral too – showing them that the cathedral is there for everybody.* (staff)

Informally, cathedrals also contribute to the wider musical culture of England by being places where visitors can encounter musical excellence. The effect of being able to walk into a cathedral and hear world-class organ and choral music, though difficult to quantify, should not be underestimated. We do not know how many contemporary musicians – or indeed throughout the centuries – have acquired their interest in and taste for music through such informal encounters with music.

"The effect of being able to walk into a cathedral and hear world-class organ and choral music, though difficult to quantify, should not be underestimated."

A special mention should be made of the professional standard of music education provided to choristers, often through scholarships. Across the country, these programmes form thousands of children from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. Beyond their evident value to music itself – including the industry to which a number of these choristers later contribute

when older – the expectations and discipline involved build character, teamwork, attention, and concentration, habits that often contribute to academic success well beyond the world of music.

Thousands of children – including many from non-churchgoing families – benefit in any given diocese from cathedral resources in music, history, architecture, and the arts, and hardly any school near an English city fails to make use of them.

1.8. Heritage conservation and tourism

England's cathedrals are custodians of nationally significant fabric, art, and archives. In 2024 they received 9.9 million visits, including hundreds of thousands of educational trips. [16] They are pivotal to destination branding and visitor economies, often dominating both the skyline and imagination of their cities and serving as "an iconic part of many cityscapes" and a repository of local memory.[17] Heritage conservation has therefore remained a funding priority for government and charities alike. The Taylor Review (2017) underlined the scale of public attachment and the "extraordinary commitment" involved in caring for historic church buildings.[18] Cathedrals, by virtue of their scale and significance, stand at the apex of that concern. From an economic standpoint too, the aggregate contribution is substantial.[19]

Figure 1.9 "On a scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree' please tell us whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about this cathedral." (Percentage net agree by religion)

Net Agree	Anglicans	Nones
I see my cathedral as a historic site where visitors can experience beauty, music, and history	100%	99%
I see my cathedral as a place of interest for tourists	99%	99%
I feel connected with history and tradition when I come here	98%	98%
I come here to appreciate the history and architecture of the cathedral, not for any religious/sacred experience	34%	95%

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375); Anglican (n= 834); Nones (n=244).

Cathedrals also sustain scarce heritage skills – stone masonry, stained glass work, and other conservation trades – not only by giving craftspeople opportunities to practise them, but in some cases by investing in formal training. The Cathedrals' Workshop Fellowship, for example, has offered apprenticeships in heritage crafts for two decades at more than a dozen cathedrals.[20]

> "Cathedral buildings represent a form of "living tradition" through the ecosystems of craftspeople, experts, and tourists that surround them."

One member of staff, speaking about their cathedral's new school for heritage skills, reflected beautifully on the patient trial and error, dedication, and perseverance – the ordinary human

The Abbey by Night tour overlayed with the exterior of St Albans cathedral. Tour guides dressed as monks take visitors back in time to the cathedral's medieval origins.

effort – that sustains extraordinary beauty, much as it has done for centuries. As they put it, "it's that conflict between a grand, magnificent thing and how fragile and human it can be."

Cathedral buildings, and the other heritage sites often bound up with their estates, represent a form of "living tradition" through the ecosystems of craftspeople, experts, and tourists that surround them. They are permanent construction sites: simultaneously ancient and continually renewed. For that reason, they are expressions of history and local identity worth more than the sum of their stones and windowpanes.

For cathedrals themselves, moreover, heritage is not only a matter of conservation but of mission, of telling the story of God in the here and now through the built environment, and making that story publicly available through beauty, continuity, and care.

> "It seems to us that many businesses in cathedral cities still undervalue how much they benefit from cathedral-generated footfall."

As discussed earlier, the cultural and heritage draw of cathedrals, materialising chiefly as tourism, is therefore not at odds with their spiritual role but one of the principal means by which they address a plural public.

Looking after this heritage is extraordinarily complex. Cathedral Chapters have become highly skilled at maintaining their centuries-old estates, to the extent that they are sometimes asked to share their expertise with local authorities and other heritage partners. One council worker we interviewed was tasked with working on promoting heritage in their local authority and turned to their cathedral for help:

> *It was a steep learning curve for me, with the team's support at the cathedral – cathedral fabric committee, written schemes of investigation, heritage statements. However, I know a lot more now than I ever thought I would, thanks to the cathedral.*

Heritage is also extremely expensive to maintain. Cathedrals are therefore increasingly dependent on tourism and other income-generating activities, leaving them more exposed than before to visitor volatility and cost-of-living pressures. They collaborate with BIDs and tourism groups to co-deliver outcomes, though it seems to us that many businesses in cathedral cities still undervalue how much they benefit from cathedral-generated footfall.

> "The deepest experience even a non-religious tourist could have would be to see worship taking place."

One way some cathedrals fund asset maintenance is by charging for entry, perhaps the question that divides cathedral staff and clergy more than any other. In interviews we heard visitors insist that they "shouldn't have to pay to enter God's house," or complain that paying affected their experience, made it feel "less welcoming and relaxing" and more transactional. In charging cathedrals in particular, volunteers often objected in ecclesial terms and called on "the Church of England… to put their hand in their pocket and cough up some money."

> *You walk in: there's the café, there's where you pay your money, this is the tour, off you go. It's a bit like going around the National Trust, if you're not careful.* (volunteer)

While a strong case can be made against charging for entry, it is equally difficult to ask cathedrals to forego that income unless the nation is willing to relieve some of the financial burden they bear. The challenge is therefore not whether this heritage is worth sustaining, but how a nation that plainly values cathedrals will choose to sustain it.

1.9. Where the dimensions blend

We have tried to separate the many contributions cathedrals make to English society into distinct categories. But do visitors themselves really experience these dimensions separately?

Interview data strongly suggest that they do not. The leitmotif across our fieldwork was that everything is intertwined, and that the building is often experienced most fully as a tourist attraction *precisely when it is also fulfilling its primary purpose of worship*. As one volunteer argued, the deepest experience even a non-religious tourist could have would be to see worship taking place, whether or not they chose to join it.

As discussed at the opening of this chapter, visitor survey respondents tended to identify with the cathedral in several ways at once. Just as cathedrals mean many different things to people, people are many different things to cathedrals. Almost half (44%) of respondents who identified as locals also identified as tourists. Likewise, in interviews we encountered visitors who were in the cathedral for "a quick time of prayer," "some peace and quiet," or "to take a bit of time out of their day," but who also understood themselves as tourists at other moments of the same visit. This apparent contradiction reflects the complex relationship English people have with their cathedrals.

Figure 1.10 "Which of the following categories describes your contact with your cathedral? You can tick as many as appropriate." (Top 5 categories ranked by frequency of occurrence and by religion)

	All	Anglicans	Nones
1	Event attender	Event attender	Event attender
2	Local community member	Worshipper	Tourist
3	Tourist	Local community member	Local community member
4	Donor	Donor	Donor
5	Worshipper	Tourist	Volunteer

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375); Anglican (n= 834); Nones (n=244).

Cathedrals, in sum, are not 'multi-purpose' in the way a community centre is multi-purpose, as though they were blank venues into which any content might be placed. Worship remains foundational, but the worshipping life radiates outward into education, culture, wellbeing, heritage stewardship, and civic convening; and those outward dimensions, in turn, draw people back into contact with the sacred. Nor is this accidental. Rather, it is ordered outward from the cathedral's primary identity as the bishop's church and a diocesan centre of worship and mission. The task for the 21st century is therefore not to choose between "church" and "heritage," or between "mission" and "culture," but to sustain this distinctive, worship-led form of Christian presence in public life.

Jorvik Viking craft activities at York Minster over the Half Term holidays

Chapter II.
The English and their cathedrals

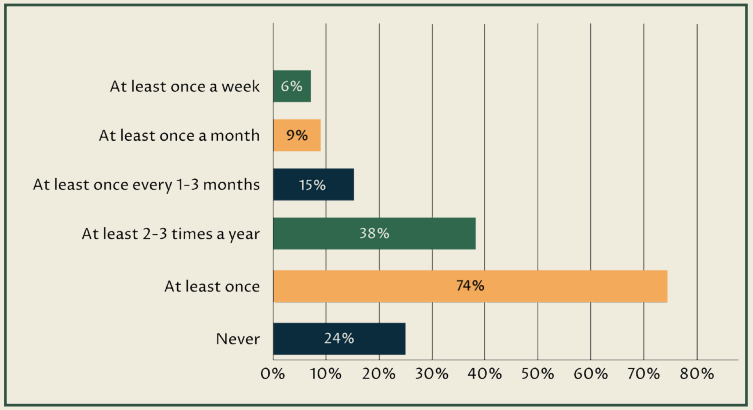
In the previous chapter, we examined what goods English cathedrals deliver for their communities and beyond, using evidence gathered through interviews and a visitor survey across all six cathedrals. We will now turn our attention to how the wider English public perceives and relates to its cathedrals.

The English public appears emotionally invested in English cathedrals and strongly opinionated about them. Perceived as inappropriate, art installations (e.g. graffiti in Canterbury), concerts (e.g. electro-symphonic metal in York), and community activities (e.g. crazy golf in Rochester) have all drawn extensive media attention and criticism for their sacrilegious or secular use of sacred spaces.[1] Such episodes often situate cathedrals within broader culture-war debates, generating not only condemnation but also lively public argument, with contrasting claims made about relevance, tradition, and the appropriate boundaries of sacred space. It might be tempting to read this intensity of feeling as evidence of a settled sense of public ownership or responsibility. However, as this chapter will show, the evidence suggests a more complex picture, in which strong feelings and symbolic attachment do not always translate into sustained responsibility or material support.

2.1. How we use our cathedrals

Our nationally representative YouGov poll suggests three quarters (74%) of adults in England have visited a cathedral at least once in the last *three* years for any reason whatsoever. Two in five (37%) did so at least a few times a year. For reference, the Church of England's own figures state English cathedrals recorded 9.87 million visitors across 2024.[2]

Figure 2.1 "Thinking back over the last three years, how often, if at all, have you visited a cathedral in England?" (Net total percentages)



Theos/YouGov. Base: All (n=1,802).

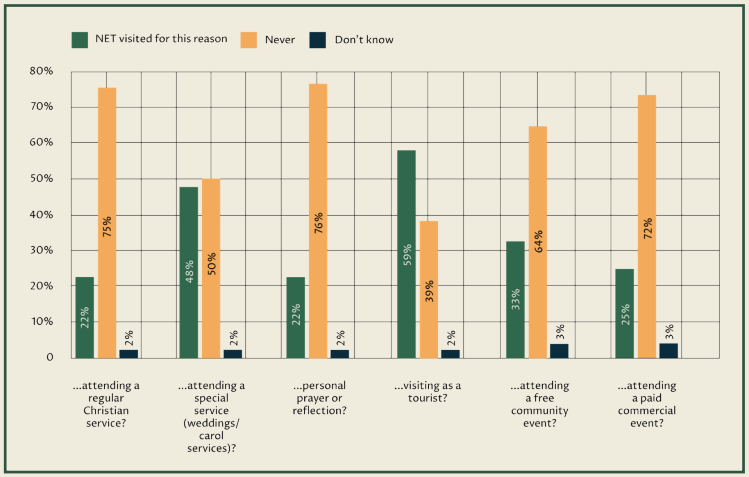
Cathedral visitation is therefore not a niche behaviour. Although these figures are not directly comparable, it is worth noting that, according to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 41% of UK adults engaged with a museum or gallery in person at least once in the 12 months leading up to March 2025, while 30% attended a live sporting event in person during the same period.[3]

The Association of Leading Visitor Attractions' (ALVA) 2025 visitor figures reflect a similar picture.[4] Major cathedral and church attractions sit comfortably alongside some of the country's most recognisable

> "Major cathedral and church attractions sit comfortably alongside some of the country's most recognisable destinations."

destinations, with Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral both ranking above Windsor Castle and Stonehenge. The seven cathedrals that are members of ALVA recorded over 5.5 million visits in 2025, which is a slight decrease of almost 2% compared to 2024.

Figure 2.2 "Have you visited a cathedral in England for the following purposes?"



Theos/YouGov. Base: All (n=1,802)

Tourism is the primary reason visitors engage with cathedrals. More than half (59%) of all national survey respondents had visited a cathedral as a tourist in the last three years, meaning that over four in five (81%) of all respondents who visited a cathedral did so for tourism, among other reasons.

> "Over half of all respondents actually visited at least once for a religious purpose in the last three years."

Perhaps more surprising is that over half (54%) of all respondents actually visited at least once for a religious purpose in the last three years – whether for a regular service of Christian worship (e.g., Evensong, Eucharist), a special Christian service[5] (e.g. remembrance service, carol service, wedding, christening, funeral), or personal prayer and reflection. In fact, of all the people who had visited a cathedral at least once, two-thirds (66%) said they had attended a special service, one-third (31%) had attended regular worship at least once, and one-third (30%) had come explicitly to pray or reflect. These figures were even higher among those who visited a cathedral more frequently.

Figure 2.3 "Have you visited a cathedral in England for the following purposes?" (Percentage by frequency of visit)

Reason for visit	Visited at least once in three years	Visited more than 2/3 times per year
... as a tourist	81%	86%
... for any religious purpose	74%	87%
... for a special service	66%	79%
... for a regular Christian service	31%	46%
... to pray or reflect	30%	49%
... for a free community event	46%	63%
... for a paid commercial event	35%	49%

Theos/YouGov. Base: All (n=1,802); Visited at least once in three years (n=1,335); Visited more than 2/3 times a year (n=682).

A tourist takes a picture of Rochester cathedral's architecture on their phone

Cathedrals are, as we have seen, also community hubs and event spaces. Nearly half (46%) of respondents who had visited a cathedral attended a free community event, and over a third (35%) attended a paid commercial event such as a concert or dinner. However, as *Spiritual Capital* carefully articulated, and as we explored earlier, even if someone visits for the purpose of tourism, it does not mean that they do not also benefit spiritually or otherwise.

Cathedral visiting is also by no means the preserve of the religious. Christians – and Anglicans in particular – are unsurprisingly more likely to visit a cathedral. Even so, over two thirds (68%) of non-religious respondents also visited at least once for any reason, and their patterns of use are more varied – and religious – than might be assumed. One in eight (13%) attended a regular Christian service in a cathedral, which is a significant share of that constituency.

> "Cathedral visiting is also by no means the preserve of the religious."

When asked more abstractly to choose what they believed the main three purposes of cathedrals should be in modern society, respondents' answers largely aligned with how they already use them.

Figure 2.4 "Have you visited a cathedral in England for the following purposes..." (Percentage reason for visit of who have visited at least once by religion)

Reason for visit	Visiting Anglicans	Visiting Nones
... as a tourist	84%	79%
... for any religious purpose	84%	66%
... for a special service	75%	59%
... for a regular Christian service	49%	13%
... to pray or reflect	47%	11%
... for a free community event	52%	41%
... for a paid commercial event	41%	30%

Theos/YouGov. Base: All (n=1,802); Anglicans who have visited at least once (n=337); Non-religious respondents who have visited at least once (n=653).

Worship remains the only function selected by an outright majority (60%) across the board, but heritage or historical significance (47%), civic (e.g., Remembrance Day, state funerals) (37%), and community roles (e.g., markets, art exhibits) (24%) are all clearly recognised by a substantial group of the public as part of the cathedral's public vocation. While Anglicans and non-religious respondents clearly have different views on the importance of certain cathedral purposes, both groups are almost unanimous in not choosing 'hosting paid commercial events' as one of the main purposes of cathedrals (7% across the board).

Figure 2.5 "Which of the following, if any, do you think should be the key functions of a cathedral in modern society? Please select up to three." (Percentage by religion)

Function	Anglicans	Nones
Worship	75%	51%
Historical / architectural significance	46%	52%
Space for personal prayer or reflection	53%	32%
Civic services	47%	33%
Community events	18%	28%
Educational	17%	16%
Paid commercial events	8%	6%

Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802); Anglicans (n=402); Non-religious respondents (n=955).

Our in-person interviews with cathedral visitors produced a similar range of answers: from "just historic landmarks" to "headquarters for Christians," with recurrent references to worship ("religious ceremonies," "Christian services," "to be a church"), community ("place of community," "centre of community"), and heritage ("a cultural and architectural phenomenon," "just a part of cultural heritage," "a museum").

> "Its purpose is to maintain the link with all the historical figures and tell the story of the city."

Its purpose is to maintain the link with all the historical figures and tell the story of the city, because… the things the cathedral's been through is the story of the city, which is also, in miniature, the story of English history. (visitor)

Some answers were more distinctive, evoking cathedrals as sites of sanctuary (e.g., "a place of protection"), built to impress ("designed to be awe inspiring"), or indeed as places so capacious they can be "whatever visitors make [them] out to be".

Worshipping God, definitely – that's the main and the first one… But it would be unfair to close it just for worship and not let people see the beauty. That would be unkind. Opening it for people – tourists or people who are interested – is human. (volunteer)

The qualitative material therefore strongly supports the survey finding that cathedrals are perceived not as single-purpose institutions, but as places in which several public meanings sit together.

> "Cathedrals are perceived not as single-purpose institutions, but as places in which several public meanings sit together."

It's difficult to be specific about a purpose. I do not think having a 'primary function' is quite right. It is more of a focus – a focus of being in a holy spot, in a holy place. It's somewhere where people can inquire without being committed. They can just wander around as tourists, and if they do not want anything more, that's fine. Or they can take their journey a little further. (staff)

The separate visitor survey helps sharpen this point. What visitors consciously value first and foremost is usually not an

abstract theory of establishment or heritage policy, but a mixture of beauty, peace, welcome, worship, and atmosphere.

Figure 2.6 "Briefly, can you tell us what you think is the best thing about this cathedral?" (Open question with coded themes and share of occurrence across the sample)

Most valued feature (selected)	Share
Architecture, visual beauty and craftsmanship	32%
Worship, liturgy, prayer and preaching	11%
Sacred atmosphere, peace and sanctuary	9%
Welcome and hospitality	8%
History, heritage	7%
Events, exhibitions and cultural programme	7%
Music, choir, organ and acoustics	7%

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All (n=1,375).

The picture that emerges, then, is one of an institution that remains naturally part of the average English person's life. Cathedrals are visited chiefly as places of tourism – and visitors prize architecture, visual beauty and craftsmanship above all else. Yet their spiritual dimension is unmistakably part of how the whole audience, including non-religious visitors, encounters them.

2.2. Contradictory feelings

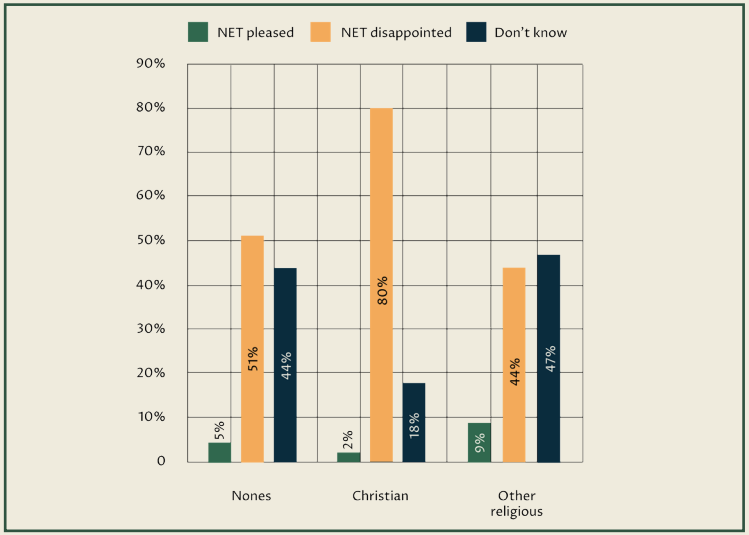
Public perception of cathedrals' cultural and heritage value remains strongly positive, and it has become a truism to say that

English people – religious or not – cherish their cathedrals as touchstones of identity and history. Their very stones seem to speak to a common heritage that even secular English claim.

At the same time, we are at risk of overestimating how emotionally, culturally, or financially invested English people are in their cathedrals. Behind their extensive use of these national treasures lies a contradiction, with a warm but passive dominant posture. This apathy is the other side of the "spiritual openness" coin: while the non-religious population unfamiliar with church can present an opportunity for cathedrals, this group's relative lack of spiritual formation also means it tends towards a default indifference, which requires deliberate effort to overcome. Many respondents are pleased that cathedrals exist, glad to benefit from them, and even emotionally attached to them; but they do not automatically infer from this that they bear any responsibility for sustaining them.

"English people – religious or not – cherish their cathedrals as touchstones of identity and history."

Figure 2.7 "How pleased or disappointed would you feel if your nearest cathedral was forced to close?" (Percentage by religion)



Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802); Christians (n=642); Non-religious respondents (n=955); Other religious respondents (n=103).

When asked how they would feel if their nearest cathedral were forced to close, six in ten (61%) respondents said they would be disappointed (a quarter [28%] said they would be very disappointed and a third [32%] said they would be *fairly* disappointed). However, the largest share of respondents was ambivalent (35% saying don't know), with Nones and non-Christian religious respondents divided quite equally between those who said they would be disappointed (51%), and those who did not know (44%) how they would feel.

> "Ambivalence is closely linked to a lack of experience, rather than a negative visitor experience or a lack of religious faith."

Demographics seem largely insignificant in explaining this apathy in the data; personal experience, however, is highly relevant. People who have visited a cathedral for any reason at least once in the last three years are two times less likely to say that they 'don't know' how they feel. Ambivalence is therefore closely linked to a lack of experience, rather than a negative visitor experience or a lack of religious faith.

Figure 2.8 "How pleased or disappointed would you feel if your nearest cathedral was forced to close?" (Percentage don't know by frequency of visit)

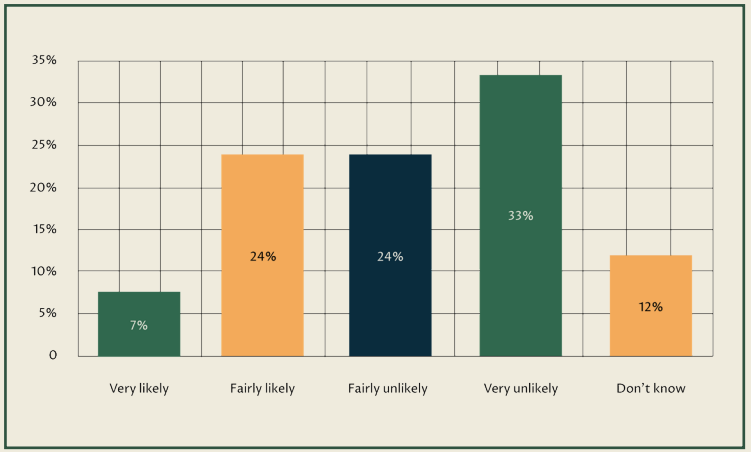
Pleased or disappointed	Never visited	Visited at least once in three years	Visited more than 2/3 times a year
Don't know	56%	27%	18%

Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802); Never visited (n=467); Visited at least once in three years (n=1,335); Visited more than 2/3 times a year (n=682).

We must also consider that some respondents' ambivalence may be a reflection of their disbelief in the premise of the question – that England's ancient cathedrals, institutions sometimes as old as the country itself, could one day be forced to close. This, in itself, could indicate the public is not fully aware of the real financial situation of most cathedrals.

Long exposure photo of visitors under York Minster's arches

Figure 2.9 "Imagine your nearest cathedral was fundraising due to financial challenges. How likely or unlikely is it that you would donate to help the cathedral stay open?"



Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802).

Even so, the willingness to donate to cathedrals remains strikingly modest. In our national poll, only a third (31%) of respondents said they were *likely* to donate to their nearest cathedral if it were in financial difficulty; over half (57%) said they were *unlikely* to. Likelihood to donate rose to two in five (39%) among those who had visited at least once in three years, and to half (50%) among those visiting at least twice a year. Likelihood to donate for respondents seemed especially strongly linked to emotional attachment to their nearest cathedral.

Figure 2.10 "Imagine your nearest cathedral was fundraising due to financial challenges. How likely or unlikely is it that you would donate to help the cathedral stay open?" (Percentage net likelihood by how pleased or disappointed respondents feel if their nearest cathedral was forced to close)

Net Likelihood	Very disappointed if my nearest cathedral closed	Don't know how I would feel if my nearest cathedral closed
Likely to donate	67%	6%

Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802); Very disappointed (n=529); Don't know (n=606).

In the separate visitor survey, the acceptable donation imagined by most respondents sat in the £2 to £5 range, with an average of £4.70 – less than a flavoured latte from Costa, with which many cathedral visitors tend to walk around these ancient and fragile buildings, according to several volunteer interviews. Statistical modelling revealed that, contrary to expectation, frequent cathedral attendance and age were not significant predictors of donation amount. The single most significant variable was frequency of worship attendance as part of one's usual religious life, regardless of denomination, with higher church attendance strongly correlated with higher donations.

> "Most respondents sat in the £2 to £5 range, with an average of £4.70 – less than a flavoured latte from Costa."

Fieldwork suggests that even these bleak figures are, in reality, overly optimistic. One member of staff at a non-charging cathedral told us that fewer than 5% of visitors donate anything at all, a statistic which they described as "actually really pathetic… and

quite depressing". A volunteer at another said that, on a suggested donation of £3, they were often "lucky if they got 50p", and that nearly nine in ten visitors did not even donate that much.

This is all the more striking because the public is overwhelmingly satisfied with what cathedrals offer: two thirds (66%) of cathedrals visitors in the national poll – and 61% of Nones who have visited – reported feeling 4 or 5 out of 5 on a scale of *not at all* welcome to *extremely* welcome during their most recent visit. The public is overwhelmingly satisfied with what cathedrals offer; they simply do not, on the whole, feel a personal responsibility to help sustain what they value.

> "The public is overwhelmingly satisfied with what cathedrals offer; they simply do not, on the whole, feel a personal responsibility to help sustain what they value."

2.3. Common misconceptions

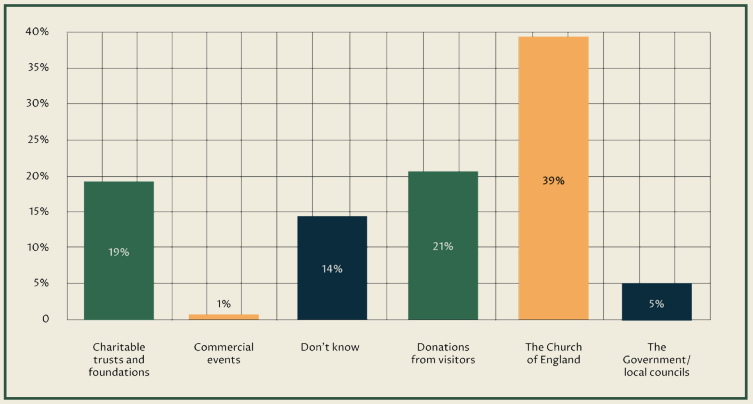
At the heart of this pattern are a set of public misconceptions about cathedrals identified through our fieldwork and national polling. This section examines several of these misconceptions.

About cathedral funding

One such misconception concerns the assumption that cathedrals, as publicly accessible spaces, do not require financial contribution from visitors. A related misconception, echoed throughout many interviews, is the belief that cathedrals are

well-resourced institutions with ample financial reserves when in fact 80% are in structural deficit.

Figure 2.11 "To the best of your knowledge, where do you think cathedrals in England currently get MOST of their funding from?"



Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802).

When asked where cathedrals get most of their funding, a plurality guessed the national Church of England, followed distantly by donations from visitors and charitable trusts in second and third place respectively.

While it is challenging to compile precise data on the finances of Anglican cathedrals as a whole – not least because they are not public bodies and are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act – preliminary research suggests that public perceptions are significantly inaccurate. Funding from the Church of England generally covers the wages of clergy and, through grants, some administrative staff. The bulk of funding comes from other sources,

which vary from cathedral to cathedral and often depend on whether entry is charged.

The insignificant number who guessed commercial events suggest the public realise this is not where cathedrals draw most of their funding, but perhaps that it also underestimates how dependent some cathedrals have become on commercial income, as chapter III will unpack.

Those aged under 24 were significantly more likely than any other group – over twice the average – to identify national and local government as the main source of funding (12%). Although this remains a small proportion of the youngest age group, it suggests that the next generation may be more inclined to think that cathedral finance currently is a public rather than a personal responsibility.

There is also a strong relationship between understanding funding and willingness to donate: respondents who think donations are a major source of cathedral income are significantly more willing to give themselves (40% compared to 31% on average). Likewise, respondents that are most uncertain about cathedral financing appear also least willing to donate (13%) – and this despite most non-charging cathedrals now having professionally designed donation stations with carefully articulated messaging.

"There is also a strong relationship between understanding funding and willingness to donate."

Figure 2.12 "Imagine your nearest cathedral was fundraising due to financial challenges. How likely or unlikely is it that you would donate to help the cathedral stay open?" (Percentage net likelihood by source of cathedral funding)

Net Likelihood	Donations from visitors	The Church of England	Don't know
Likely to donate	40%	29%	13%
Unlikely to donate	50%	61%	62%

Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802). Donations from visitors (n=379); The Church of England (n=697); Don't know (n=259).

Cathedrals do receive substantial funding from the central Church of England, via contributions from the Church Commissioners for the stipends and pensions of cathedral deans and residentiary canons. They also receive funding through the Church's Cathedral Sustainability Fund, which finances key roles in many cathedrals, enabling them to apply for grants, optimise operations, and seek new sources of income. Without this funding, cathedrals would be significantly worse off than they are today and would not be able to operate at the scale that they do.

> "With the media's focus on the Church's £11 billion endowment, the public is likely to assume that cathedrals have easy access to this large sum."

However, it is also beyond doubt that the English public views the national Church as extremely wealthy. With the media's frequent focus on the Church's £11 billion endowment,[6] the public

The organ overlayed with the donation box at Carlisle cathedral

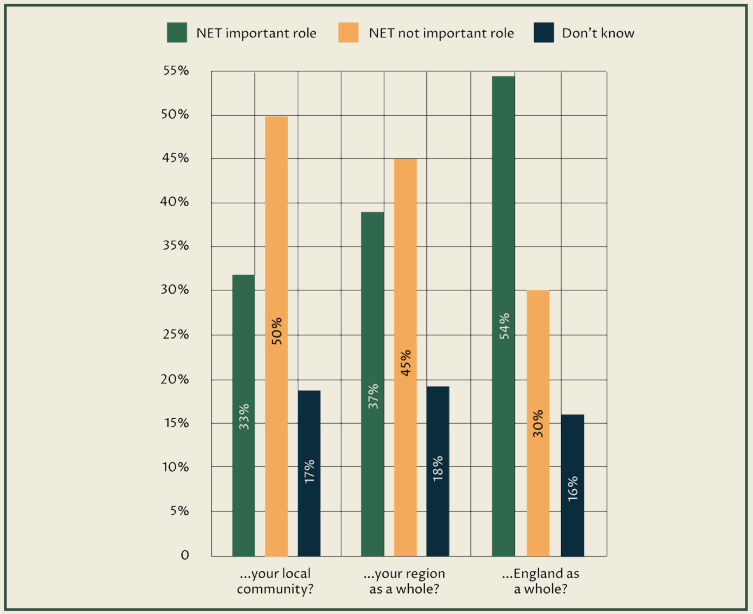
is likely to assume that cathedrals have easy access to this large sum, even though most of it is tied up in long-term investments and cannot be spent. We believe that this assumption contributes directly to the abdication of personal financial responsibility seen among those who think cathedrals derive most of their funds from the national Church.

This perception is not confined to the wider public. Some cathedral staff and volunteers similarly express concern about what they understand as limited financial support from the national Church. These views are captured in the words of one volunteer, who described cathedrals as "the beacons which project the Church of England's mission" and questioned why the Church Commissioners would appear to "starve the golden egg, the foundations of what you stand for." Where such views are held by those closely involved in cathedral life and governance, it is reasonable to suppose that the wider public may be even more inclined to assume that responsibility for the upkeep of cathedrals rests primarily – if not exclusively – with the national Church, particularly in times of financial difficulty.

About local importance

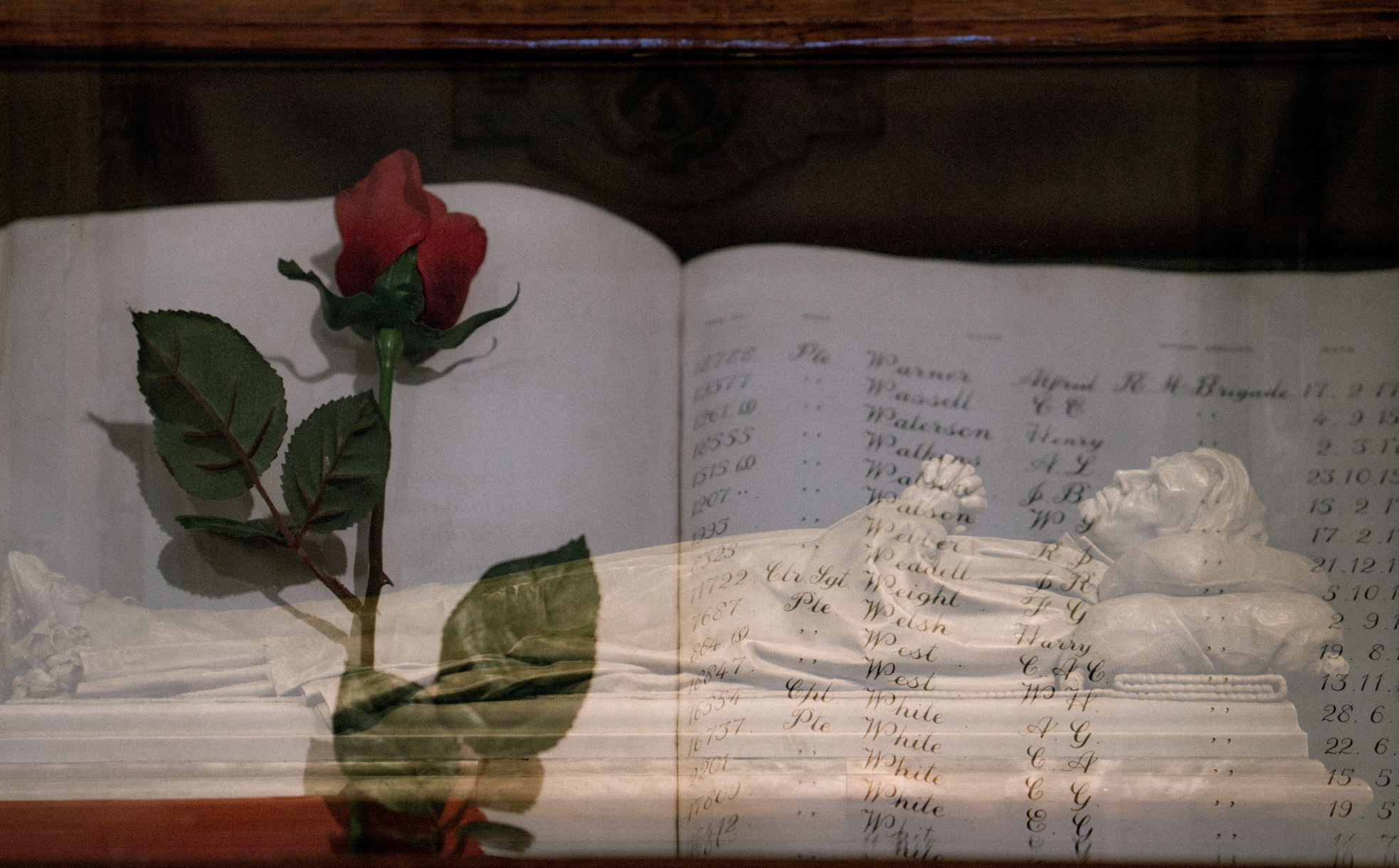
This leads us to what is perhaps the most consequential misperception we identified: not only where cathedral money comes from, but where cathedrals matter.

Figure 2.13 "How much of a role, if any, do cathedrals play in..." (Percentage net important by level)



Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802).

When asked how important they thought cathedrals were at three levels of society, respondents were much more convinced by their abstract national significance than by their more concrete and directly observable impact on people's local communities and regions. This was true even for Anglicans, two fifths (40%) of whom thought cathedrals do not play an important local role. Over a quarter (28%) of the overall sample also say with confidence that cathedrals do not play an important role in the local community *at all*,[7] a share rising to one third (33%) for Nones.



A remembrance book and tomb effigy at Rochester cathedral

We only see a notably improved picture among relatively frequent visitors, with half (51%) of those who visited a cathedral at least two or three times a year recognising its important role in the local community.

Significantly, perceptions of where cathedrals mattered were also strongly correlated with the likelihood of donating. Not only were respondents much less likely to donate to cathedrals if they perceived them as less important, and therefore less worthy. They were also statistically significantly less likely to donate if they perceived their contribution to matter more at a distant, abstract national level than locally.

> "Respondents were much more convinced by their abstract national significance than by their directly observable impact on people's local communities and regions."

Figure 2.14 "Imagine your nearest cathedral was fundraising due to financial challenges. How likely or unlikely is it that you would donate to help the cathedral stay open?" (Percentage net likelihood by perceived importance of cathedral role)

Net Likelihood to donate	Your local community	Your region as a whole	England as a whole
Net Important role	54%	55%	47%
Net Not important role	20%	17%	12%

Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802).

The reality, as the previous chapter has shown, is that cathedrals play a prominent role in the spiritual lives, social cohesion, tourism, and civic ecology of their cities and the wider regions at the hearts of which they sit. Many of the members of staff and clergy interviewed in-person by us were very adamant that cathedrals "fulfil their historic mission by catering to the local community specifically and being *about* local people as well as *for* them." Yet we are forced to concede that if cathedrals are imagined primarily as national institutions, the public will expect national institutions to fund them.

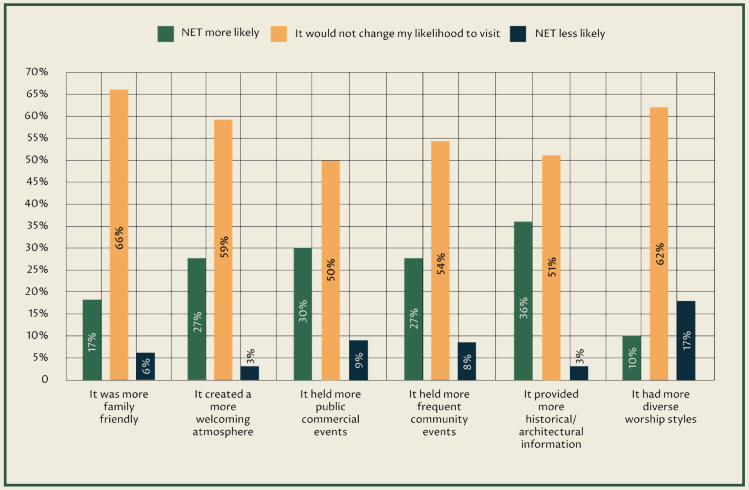
> "If cathedrals are imagined primarily as national institutions, the public will expect national institutions to fund them."

The political consequences of these misconceptions should not be underestimated. Although we know that many senior government figures recognise the importance of cathedrals to the nation and agree that they cannot be allowed to fail, public perception will directly influence the political justification for spending significant amounts of money on their maintenance and upkeep.

About barriers to visiting

A final window into public attitudes lies in the push and pull factors: what would make people more or less likely to visit their nearest cathedral? More than simply identifying marketing opportunities, the question reveals how well informed the public is about what cathedrals already provide.

Figure 2.15 "To what extent would the following changes make you more or less likely to visit your nearest cathedral?")



Theos/YouGov. All (n=1,802).

For nearly half of respondents (46%), nothing would make them more likely to visit a cathedral more often. This was especially true among non-visitors (those who have not visited a cathedral in the last three years) and non-religious respondents: over two thirds (70%) of non-visitors and half (51%) of Nones identified no 'pull' factors at all. Nor did either group tend to identify any changes that would make them less likely to visit, with 81% of non-visitors and 82% of Nones reporting no 'push' factors. Taken together, this suggests that these groups are, on the whole, not

> "For nearly half of respondents, nothing would make them more likely to visit a cathedral more often."

Young people make bracelets for Jorvik Viking Half Term activities in York Minster

sufficiently engaged with cathedrals for particular changes to affect their behaviour in either direction.

Figure 2.16 "To what extent would the following changes make you more or less likely to visit your nearest cathedral?" (Percentage net likelihood by whether someone has visited at least once)

Changes to cathedrals	More likely	
	Visitor	Non-visitor
More info about architectural and historical elements	43%	18%
More public commercial events	37%	14%
A more welcoming atmosphere	33%	13%
More free community and civic events	33%	11%
More family friendly	21%	7%
More diversity of worship styles	12%	4%

Theos/YouGov. Respondents who visited at least once in three years (n=1,335); Respondents who never visited in three years (n=440).

Visitor respondents, on the other hand, are much more likely to have identified at least one pull factor, indicating by this a greater investment in cathedral life. Of all respondents, one third (36%) say better interpretation of architectural and historical elements is the most likely to make them visit more, followed by more public commercial events in second place (30%). Even among respondents who have visited a cathedral at least once and can therefore speak from experience, the main pull factor remains more information about architectural and historical elements (43%).

The single change in cathedral life that would put off respondents the most (17%) – including visitors (19%) – is greater diversity of worship styles. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that people often go to cathedrals to witness a specific kind of traditional worship.

We acknowledge that non-visitors have not engaged with cathedrals for at least three years, so they are likely to be making assumptions based on preconceptions rather than offering an informed opinion. Nevertheless, cathedrals should take these preconceptions seriously. The stark and significant differences between visitors and non-visitors also highlight the disinterest of a large proportion of the currently disengaged English population in engaging more. This hurdle, and its accompanying inherited myths, may prove difficult to overcome, as the current cathedral approaches – such as public commercial events – appear to be much more appealing to respondents who already engage with their nearest cathedral than to those who do not.

> "Significant differences between visitors and non-visitors also highlight the disinterest of a large proportion of the currently disengaged English population in engaging more."

2.4. What this means

So, what does England think of its cathedrals? The picture that emerges is of a somewhat misinformed public that perceives cathedrals as abstract national institutions: financially underwritten by a wealthy national Church and, to some extent, by the state, and playing an important but distant role in the life of the nation. Non-visitors often imagine that a warmer welcome might persuade them to come, even though cathedrals are already offering what is perhaps the warmest welcome they have ever extended to those who cross the threshold. Despite years of effort to dispel the persistent myth that cathedrals are cold and intimidating places 'not for people like me', the shadow of their former (relative) isolation from the secularised still lingers in the public imagination.

This means that we are at significant risk of underestimating just how important these mental barriers are for large sections of the population. A welcome sign or greeter cannot, on its own, overcome the deeply rooted belief that one must be a certain type of person to enter a cathedral. Similarly, a sign explaining that it costs thousands of pounds per day to keep the cathedral open cannot compete with the equally ingrained perception that these institutions are well funded and do not really need visitor support.[8]

> "A welcome sign or greeter cannot, on its own, overcome the deeply rooted belief that one must be a certain type of person to enter a cathedral."

Efforts to engage the disengaged will therefore have to begin not at the cathedral door – which at least a quarter (27%) of our respondents had still not crossed in three years – but at home, on social media, through schools, councils, community centres, and neighbourhood networks. In other words, in their hearts and minds.

At the same time, cathedrals should be mindful that the way audiences first experience them is likely to shape how they continue to relate to them. All the cathedrals visited currently operate under the assumption that affections are transferable, but the evidence presented in chapters I and II suggests that this should not be taken for granted. A tribute concert may bring a new, younger audience through the door, but that audience may come to feel comfortable entering the cathedral primarily as a concert venue, as we heard in interviews conducted after several concerts. Given that the pull of commercial events appears to be stronger among those already engaging with cathedrals than among those who do not, cathedrals may be at risk of replacing one set of misconceptions with another.

> "Cathedrals should remember that they have only one chance to make a lasting first impression, and should not underestimate its power."

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the flip side of 'spiritual openness' is that many within the UK's growing non-religious population are, to some extent, free from the preconceptions of previous generations. Their lack of experience with cathedrals may result in indifference, but it also means that the way cathedrals engage this audience and invite them across the threshold is likely

to shape how they come to understand and relate to cathedrals in the future.

For the first time in England's thousand-year history, this un-churched and more open generation presents cathedrals with a unique opportunity to shape the terms of engagement and articulate how they should be understood. While some will no doubt discover other dimensions of cathedrals beyond the initial encounter, cathedrals should remember that they have only one chance to make a lasting first impression, and should not underestimate its power, lest they create a new set of lasting misconceptions.

Chapter III. The forces reshaping cathedrals

English cathedrals have changed markedly since *Spiritual Capital* was published in 2012. They have professionalised their management and operations, diversified their revenue, expanded their events programmes, invested in digital communications, deepened their partnerships with local institutions, and broadened the range of people who cross their thresholds. They have survived a pandemic that reduced visitor numbers by three quarters and prompted the furloughing of most of their staff. They have adapted to a major overhaul of their governance under the Cathedrals Measure 2021. They have done all of this while continuing to offer daily worship, maintain nationally significant heritage, and serve their communities, often with small teams.

This is, in many respects, a story of impressive institutional adaptation. But it is also, increasingly, a story of strain. The forces and shifts reshaping cathedrals, including commercialisation, professionalisation, governance reform, are interconnected, and they are producing both real benefits and tensions, and have consequences that extend to the communities and local economies in which cathedrals are embedded, and the millions of visitors that pass through their doors.

> “The forces and shifts reshaping cathedrals, including commercialisation, professionalisation, governance reform, are producing both real benefits and tensions.”

Taken together, they describe institutions that have become adept at responding to immediate pressures, but that risk, in the process, being pulled away from the sense of purpose that makes them distinctive.

3.1. Commercialising cathedrals

One of the most visible changes in English cathedrals over the past decade has been the growth of commercial activity. Cathedrals now run extensive programmes of paid events, including candlelight concerts, gala dinners, fashion shows, contemporary art exhibitions and installations, Christmas markets, and drinks receptions, alongside community and cultural programming. Many have established enterprise arms, expanded their retail operations, and begun to treat their buildings, consciously, as assets to be “sweated,” as one visitor put it.

The growth of commercial activity is a public matter, determining both what visitors encounter when they cross the threshold and the future of these institutions. Understanding the pressures behind this shift is important to all those who have a stake in what cathedrals offer nationally and in their local settings, from national and local government to local business and civic institutions, including grant-making bodies.

> “Cathedrals are decidedly outward looking and actively seeking to contribute to their communities.”

As one non-executive member of a cathedral Chapter said: “If you compared the event schedule 15 years ago to what it is today, it is a very, very different offering.” Cathedrals are decidedly outward looking and actively seeking to contribute to their communities.

The gift shop and visitor centre at St Albans cathedral

The driving forces behind this change are not hard to identify. The most immediate one is financial necessity. Cathedrals face persistent deficits, operational and structural – 80% of cathedrals are in fact in structural deficit – with maintenance costs running into the millions. Commercial events offer a vital stream of income that most cathedrals simply cannot do without. As a non-executive member of a cathedral Chapter put it: "If people looked at the financial challenges cathedrals have, they might be a little more sympathetic to why cathedrals broaden the range of events they host."

In many cathedrals, the revenue from a Saturday evening tribute concert or a Christmas market directly underwrites the salaries of the musicians, education officers, and visitor-experience staff who deliver the activities that the public and policymakers value most.

But financial need is not the whole story. One member of staff in a cathedral put it this way:

> *When people say, 'Well, do you do the commercial activities simply for the income?' – the income is very important, but actually bringing people through our doors who would not otherwise come through our doors is also important, because then we hope that they come here, are touched by the place, and come back on some other occasion.*

Indeed, as we noted earlier in the report, there is a genuine desire to show the cathedral as an institution that is modern, welcoming, open to all, including to those who would never attend a service, and to demonstrate its relevance in a broadly secular, pluralist society. Commercial programming has undeniably

succeeded in drawing new audiences, with several cathedrals reporting that they could now fill their weekend evenings several times over with booking requests.

Yet the growth of commercial activity has also introduced a set of dilemmas that cathedrals are navigating with varying degrees of confidence.

The first concerns the nature of the events themselves. We spoke to research participants across our six case studies that felt their cathedral got some things wrong in the early years, whether it be spirits tasting events, inappropriate comedy acts, or horror film screenings, and suggested they are now more deliberate about what events they host. One cathedral staff member described systematic background checks on all performing musicians, verifying their personal histories and the content of every song.

Yet different Chapters draw different lines. We encountered cathedrals that had run a rock tribute concert or an alcohol-based festival, and others in our sample that had turned down those exact same programmes because of the lyrical content or the kind of atmosphere they would create. One member of clergy noted that their cathedral had been "approached about silent disco, and we really kicked the tires on that hard, and we just couldn't work out how to square that, at a very basic level." Others reported being approached about burlesque shows and openly lewd comedy nights.

> **"Every booking turned down for ethical reasons is lost revenue, forcing cathedrals to put a very real price tag on their ethical stance."**

The onus is, of course, on Chapters to refuse inappropriate events. But the fact that companies would now approach a cathedral with such proposals is itself significant: something has shifted in how English society itself perceives these sacred spaces, and the boundary between what is and is not appropriate for a cathedral is no longer culturally self-evident. That the public still expects cathedrals to exercise moral judgment also tells us these institutions are still perceived as moral signposts. Yet every booking turned down for ethical reasons is lost revenue, forcing cathedrals to put a very real price tag on their ethical stance.

The second dilemma is one of identity and messaging. Several interviewees, including senior clergy, expressed concern that commercial events were beginning to define how the public perceives their cathedral. One member of clergy was candid:

> *My fear is that, if you went out into the street, a lot of people would now recognise us as an events venue. They wouldn't even think of it as a church. The messaging has skewed towards 'events venue' rather than 'place of worship.'*

This is not, however, a general view. Many staff and local community actors defend commercial events and programming enthusiastically, and visitors and the wider public are overwhelmingly positive about the diversity of events on offer, as chapter II has shown. But the tension between the commercial and spiritual dimensions is real, and it is felt most acutely by those closest to the worshipping life of the cathedral. One cathedral volunteer noted: "I know we have to make money in order to keep the place going, but it's a fine balance between putting on so much commercial activity that we don't have room for the kind of worship that people want and need."

The third dilemma is operational. A cathedral is not a purpose-built venue. As one staff member with a museum background observed:

> *A museum opens in the morning, might have an evening event. We're open for worship; we turn ourselves around to be a visitor attraction; we have coach parties; we might have another service at lunchtime; we set up seating for a concert; we open again in the evening, having had Evensong in the middle. Our staff are here until eleven o'clock at night.*

The relentless pace has consequences. Several cathedrals reported high staff turnover in their events and floor teams. One member of staff described how the traditional downtimes of January and August – essential rest periods after the intensity of Christmas and Easter – had been "increasingly monetised," creating "a permanent sense of flux within the building" and a human cost "which we don't really have the capacity to manage".

It is striking that when we asked visitors, staff, or volunteers about commercial events, they would, unprompted and near-systematically, mention financial necessity as the justification – even when we had not raised the topic of money. Indeed, cathedral staff confirmed that if they were more financially secure, their programming would look different: "Would you need to be as edgy? Maybe, maybe not." It seems clear that many cathedrals would gravitate towards community and civic events with clearer social benefit, rather than revenue-maximising commercial bookings, if the financial pressure were relieved.

The problem is not commercialisation itself, but commercialisation driven primarily by survival, which leaves little

Volunteers at Rochester cathedral

room for evidence-based and patient deliberation about what events can achieve beyond the income they generate.

> "The problem is not commercialisation itself, but commercialisation driven primarily by survival."

There is also a growing sense among some that the commercial model may be approaching its limit. As one member of clergy observed: "We cannot commercialise much more. We could try to be more profitable at the margins, but we're never going to make the amount of profit that's needed." Several cathedrals described being "locked into" what one staff member called "a very neat market – this kind of travelling installation model," referring to the circuit of touring exhibitions (the Moon, Gaia, and similar), but also tribute concerts that move between cathedrals. While the installations draw large numbers, and are promoted by cathedral leaders, there is scepticism in some quarters about their lasting impact. As one member of clergy noted of one such programme:

> *If you pushed [the Dean], I think they'd admit that all of it has done nothing to increase the worshipping congregation. It has done a bit to improve the financial circumstances.*

However, the recurring refrain we heard throughout the research was that commercial events are an important means of attracting people who would not otherwise countenance visiting a cathedral and who, upon attending a concert or an art exhibition or installation, might encounter the power of the buildings itself to draw them closer to the sacred and return for the religious events.

It is also worth noting that commercialisation did not originate with cathedrals. It was often outside companies – events producers, touring concert operators, installation designers – that identified cathedrals as an untapped market, drawn by the unique atmosphere these buildings offer. The sacred setting lends secular events a subliminal spiritual quality that no modern venue can replicate, and companies have learned to play, artfully, on that quality. Cathedrals have been willing participants, but the dynamic is one in which external commercial forces have helped set the terms, which is partly why cathedrals had to correct course on the nature of some of the events offered, as they learned to navigate this market.

At its best, however, commercial development opens new avenues for creative partnership. One local authority employee described how the relationship had become genuinely collaborative: "It becomes co-produced and co-created. It's not done to the cathedral; they're part of developing those programmes from the very beginning. They become part of your creative team when we co-produce, co-commission, and co-create with different cultural organisations." Through commercial and community activities, cathedrals do create a following, even if many of these new audiences are not primarily interested in the cathedral as a church. Whether this is a valid means of ensuring the cathedral is still here tomorrow is a question that runs through much of what follows.

> "At its best, commercial development opens new avenues for creative partnership."

Figure 3.1 "We would like to ask you about the principle of commercial events in the cathedral. On a scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', please indicate how much you agree with the following statements" (Percentage strongly agree by religion and age)

Net: Strongly agree	FP Anglicans	Nones	18–35-year-olds
Cathedrals should adapt in whatever ways are necessary to remain relevant and meet the needs of modern society	51%	68%	40%
Hosting commercial/ cultural events is a legitimate way for a cathedral to raise the money it needs	57%	73%	52%
Events such as art exhibitions/ installations and non-religious music concerts increase the cathedral's value for its local community	61%	78%	61%
Surprising events such as silent discos or minigolf are a legitimate way to attract new audiences to the cathedral	31%	57%	39%
A commercial event can offer an experience of the cathedral that is just as rich as sitting in silence or worshipping	31%	58%	39%

Theos Cathedral visitor survey. All respondents (n=1,375); Frequently practising Anglicans (n=565); No religion (n=249); 18–35-year-olds (n=82).

3.2. Professionalising cathedrals

If commercialisation is the most visible change, professionalisation is perhaps the most consequential. Over the past decade, cathedrals have brought in staff with backgrounds in heritage management, communications, fundraising, events, and operations, transforming what were, in many cases, institutions run largely by clergy and long-standing administrators into organisations with professional management structures. As one staff member put it: "When I started, people said, 'The cathedral is not a business.' Well, no, it's not, but it needs to be businesslike. We can't just be gentlemen amateurs."

This is largely a positive story. Defective management was among the principal causes in some of the most serious cathedral crises, up to and including bankruptcy, experienced by some English cathedrals in recent decades.[1] Although this poor management was due at least as much to those in charge as to the rapidly changing world in which they were trying to navigate ancient and unwieldy institutions with limited understanding of the new rules of play. The arrival of skilled professionals has improved financial oversight, strengthened external communications, enabled more effective fundraising, and helped cathedrals engage credibly with grant-making bodies and

> "The arrival of skilled professionals has improved financial oversight, strengthened external communications, enabled effective fundraising, and helped cathedrals engage with grant-making bodies and commercial partners."

A verger at St Albans cathedral

commercial partners. Part of the reason cathedrals have had to professionalise is precisely to be taken seriously by these institutions.

Cathedrals are also attracting a distinctive kind of professional: highly skilled people who want a job with a purpose and are willing to accept below-market salaries. We encountered former military personnel, heritage specialists, marketing executives, and development officers who had chosen cathedral work for its meaningfulness rather than its remuneration. This is a real asset, but the challenge is that cathedrals often cannot afford to remunerate their staff adequately, or to offer wage increases in line with promotions or inflation, which creates recruitment challenges and limits their ability to compete with the wider labour market.

For institutions of their size and complexity, cathedrals are remarkably lean. As we heard repeatedly, from staff, volunteers, and external stakeholders alike, they punch significantly above their weight. But the flipside of this is that staff teams are often stretched to breaking point, with many people doing more than their job title suggests. In this respect, they are becoming increasingly similar to other organisations in the charity sector, of which they recently became an official part. One staff member captured this vividly:

> *We always joke that the social media team is just me, and I do many other things on four days a week. The education manager, the volunteer manager – there's no team below those people. It's just those people. All it takes is one person being off sick and you actually have quite a major issue.*

Professionalisation has also introduced a dynamic that some within cathedrals find uncomfortable. Most of the new professionals we interviewed do not have a Christian faith and are not churchgoers. This is neither surprising nor inherently problematic. Employment law does not require it, and non-religious staff can bring a valuable outside perspective. But it can create what one volunteer described as "awkward dynamics" between staff who operate with a primarily commercial mindset and members of the worshipping community who feel that spiritual considerations are not always given sufficient weight. One volunteer and congregation member reflected:

> *I think we've strayed maybe a bit too far towards – not 'anything goes', because that isn't true – but it does feel like we've become quite commercial. I've defended that, because you have to be commercial to survive. But there's a sense sometimes that those things overtake its prime purpose.*

The same volunteer went on:

> *You can't expect all the team leaders to be people of faith, but I think we have an awful lot of people who aren't connected to that side of what they do. They're great staff, but they don't really have that connection with us. They're not here on Sundays.*

Another volunteer at a different cathedral described the dynamic in similar terms:

> *There's quite often a dichotomy between what happens here in this building and what happens 'over there.' You do feel there are two communities: a worshipping community and an admin community, which sometimes don't gel as much as they could. That's not a criticism; it's just how it is.*

This "two communities" phenomenon (worshipping and administrative) is not universal, but it existed in most case studies and represents a genuine tension within institutions whose unity of purpose has historically been their strength.

One practical consequence is that professionalisation can subtly reshape how a cathedral talks about itself. One staff member noted that their welcome materials had drifted towards "a more neutral tone" before the cathedral recognised it had gone too far: "We'd gone too neutral; we need to go back a little, because fundamentally if it's not here for worship, it's not here." Professionalisation of senior staff also rubs off on clergy, with COOs and other executives encouraging more defined goals and clearer project management for mission activities. This is not necessarily unwelcome, but it does represent a change in how Christian mission is conceived and delivered within these institutions.

"Professionalisation can subtly reshape how a cathedral talks about itself."

Professionalisation has also brought a growing weight of compliance. Safeguarding, health and safety, fire regulations, data protection, while necessary and important, all have expanded significantly in bureaucratic terms, particularly for institutions responsible for multiple historic buildings and large numbers of visitors and volunteers. As one staff member observed:

> *There's a lot more compliance now. Safeguarding, health and safety, fire – all of that. It's time-consuming, and it doesn't always fit with what the organisation is here to deliver. You'll*

hear Chapter members say, 'It feels like we're running an organisation of compliance,' when actually we're here to do something else.

This is not a complaint unique to cathedrals, but in institutions with such small teams and such ambitious mandates, the cumulative weight of regulatory obligations is felt acutely.

3.3. Governance and the Cathedrals Measure

As outlined in the introduction, the Cathedrals Measure from 2021 was the most significant overhaul of cathedral governance in decades. It introduced clearer lines of accountability, charity trustee status, and modern management structures. Reactions to it among our interviewees were mixed. Some recognised the need for reform and welcomed the improved transparency. But many expressed frustrations at the administrative burden it has imposed on institutions that were already overstretched. One member of clergy summarised a widely shared view: "We're spending so much time weighing the pig that we've no time to feed it."

Several interviewees identified a structural tension at the heart of the Measure: it appoints the Dean as simultaneously chair of trustees, chief executive, and spiritual leader – a combination of roles that would be unusual in any other charity or business. As one cathedral staff observed: "In any other charity, your chair of the board is almost never the chief executive as well."

> "It appoints the Dean as simultaneously chair of trustees, chief executive, and spiritual leader."

A close-up of a stained-glass window at Carlisle cathedral

Others noted that the Measure treats all 41 cathedrals it applies to identically, despite their radically different foundations, traditions, and sizes – from institutions following thousand-year-old monastic rules to what are effectively large parishes with an episcopal chair. One staff member spoke for many when they said: "At the moment, cathedrals have become governing bodies with safeguarding responsibilities and fundraising activities, and if we have any time left, we can then run a church on the side."

3.4. Cathedrals and the national Church

Across all our fieldwork sites, we encountered a somewhat fraught relationship between cathedrals and the national Church of England, with several interviewees expressing some frustration at what they perceived as a disregard of cathedrals, with the consequences of central decisions for individual cathedrals considered only as an afterthought. As we noted in chapter II, on p. 98, the national Church, through the Church Commissioners, is a significant funder of cathedral ministry. However, finance remains a charged issue, with several interviewees across our case studies expressing a desire for greater financial support from the Church.

We also heard frustrations that the national Church's strategic focus on numerical growth, with leadership perceived to be taking the institution in a more evangelical direction, has left cathedrals, as prime exemplars of a broader, more liturgical tradition of Anglicanism, feeling neglected. Whether the solution lies in greater investment from the Church Commissioners, a new financial model, or a fundamental rethinking of how the national Church relates to its cathedrals and their mission, is a question we return to in the final chapter.

3.5. Lottery funding and the question of identity

The National Lottery Heritage Fund has been transformative for English cathedrals, enabling major restorations, new visitor facilities, and improved accessibility. But NLHF funding does not cover religious activity, and this shapes how cathedrals present and interpret themselves. We heard in several cathedrals how lottery-funded projects had influenced, and in some cases largely erased, the religious meaning of spaces and objects in favour of heritage interpretation. As one member of clergy put it, this "lotteryification" is casting a shadow over cathedrals' ability to tell their own story on their own terms.

> "This 'lotteryification' is casting a shadow over cathedrals' ability to tell their own story on their own terms."

This was a key reason a cathedral in our case studies withdrew a lottery application, with a cathedral representative noting that "the compromises you'd have to make to get to what they want would mean we couldn't use that building in the way we need". The fundamental tension is structural: funding cathedrals as churches means the money should come from congregations and the national Church; funding them as heritage sites opens the door to public and lottery support, but on terms that may require them to downplay the very thing that makes them distinctive.

A question of identity – the choir at Rochester cathedral overlayed with BBC Big Band

Chapter IV.
An enduring purpose expressed anew

One cathedral visitor, reflecting on what made the building in front of her so remarkable, reached for a word that probably would not be used in a strategic plan: "irrational". Cathedrals, she said, were built "for love or for God". She meant this as a compliment. With their many layers and splendid intricacies, cathedrals offer a quiet but potent challenge to prevailing values of incessant optimisation and efficiency.

"With their many layers and splendid intricacies, cathedrals offer a quiet but potent challenge to prevailing values of incessant optimisation and efficiency."

The evidence presented in this report makes clear that English cathedrals are extraordinary, multi-dimensional institutions. They are places of daily Christian worship whose liturgical and musical excellence is without parallel in most of the world, while also being heritage sites of national and international significance, as well as beacons and civic anchors that bring diverse communities together around shared rituals and common life. Cathedrals are also centres of education, artistic creativity, and craftsmanship. They are sanctuaries of stillness and wellbeing in a society that produces anxiety at an industrial scale. The foundation of all of this is their Christian identity and ethos, to be reinterpreted and communicated afresh in each generation. Indeed, the different dimensions and functions of cathedrals grow from, and are sustained by the cathedral's identity as a living church, which is precisely what makes them distinctive in England's institutional landscape.

The ceiling at York Minster – a new perspective

At a time of rapid and accelerating change, cathedrals provide a sense of endurance and continuity. As one member of staff at a cathedral we visited put it:

> *People like it because it's always been here, and it will hopefully always remain here. It's something that's constant. In this time of change and uncertainty, people know that the building is here and it's open every single day, apart from Boxing Day… But any time they want to come in, to sit, to pray, to be still, to have a look around, it's always here. And I don't think you can say the same for 99.9% of other establishments or businesses in the city.*

The sheer material permanence of cathedrals, their stone and marvellous stained-glass windows, imbued and resonating with centuries of prayer and worship, offers a grounding which is needed more than ever, especially in a culture dominated by the ephemeral, in which the boundary between the virtual and the physical are increasingly blurred.

There is also the role these institutions play in narrating meaning, a sense of place and identity for the communities they serve and the nation as a whole. Our social narratives (that is, the stories that tell us why a place is special and why history matters) are fraying. Cathedrals are among the very few institutions in English civic life with the rootedness, the reach, and the moral authority to help narrate a community's sense of itself: its identity, its memory, and its direction of travel.

4.1. Cathedrals as a frontier of mission

In a country where less than half the population now identifies as Christian, and where the share reporting "no religion" has

climbed to 37%, cathedrals occupy unique territory in the Church of England's ecology. As earlier chapters have shown, they are places where people who would never attend a parish church – indeed, who might actively resist the idea of 'going to church' at all – nevertheless encounter worship, experience something of the sacred, and begin, sometimes without quite realising it or being able to articulate it, a spiritual journey. They are churches for the spiritually open.

Cathedral ministry operates at what one might call the liturgical-contemplative end of the Church's spectrum of public witness or mission, working slowly, gently, through beauty, presence, and the accumulated weight of centuries of prayer which suffuse cathedral walls. As one member of staff described it:

> **"Despite the building being very big, it's quite gentle in its way of being open to people who want to explore their faith."**

> *The team we have here – the clergy, the ordained members of the cathedral community – they're so good at drawing out that desire for faith in you and helping you explore that and introducing it in a gentle way… it's not forcing it down your throat. It allows people to explore their faith gradually and gently. We don't shout about who we are particularly loudly. I think we're quite quiet. Despite the building being very big, it's quite gentle in its way of being open to people who want to explore their faith.*

The recent evidence of a religious stir among younger adults makes this all the more significant. If, as the data tentatively

Holy Communion at York Minster

suggest, Gen Z is more open to faith than its immediate predecessors, then institutions that allow people to explore faith at their own pace, in beautiful spaces that allow for anonymity, are precisely what is needed. Cathedrals should, by rights, be ideally placed to meet this moment. In practice, however, their engagement with younger adults remains more limited, as cathedral audiences skew towards older age groups. This is not for want of trying, but it does suggest that the opportunity is, for now, largely unrealised.

Central to realising this missional potential is interpretation. As we noted in earlier chapters, the building itself possesses an intrinsic capacity to move visitors towards something resembling spiritual experience. But our de-churched society has lost not only the knowledge but the habitus, that is, the disposition and facility to read cathedrals' spiritual meaning. To relate their experiences of awe and peace, which cathedrals almost unfailingly elicit, to the Christian Gospel, visitors need thoughtful and accessible Christian interpretation. Investment in interpretation is therefore one of the most important things cathedrals can do. In a context of dwindling religious and historical literacy, good interpretation is the bridge between the building's latent spiritual power and the visitor's capacity to receive it.

4.2. Cathedrals in partnership

The evidence of this report repeatedly points to the conclusion that cathedrals' significant impact is the result of working in partnership with local institutions, from council and tourist boards to arts organisations, schools and universities, and BIDs. The breadth of partnership we encountered in our case studies flows

directly from the cathedrals' identity as an institution whose vocation is to serve not only the diocese but the whole city and wider region.

This ecology of partnerships is one of the strongest arguments for sustained investment in cathedrals. When a cathedral works in partnership with local schools to deliver music education, participates in civic poverty commissions or hosts interfaith gatherings after a community crisis, the return on those investments extends well beyond the cathedral walls and directly affects the fabric and flourishing of local communities.

One particularly significant dimension of this partnership role is interfaith relations. Our fieldwork found that cathedrals remain among the most potent spaces for bringing together people of different faiths and none. The Church of England's established status gives cathedrals a convening power that no other faith institution in most English cities can match. As the leader of one interfaith organisation observed: "The Church of England is still the state church, so other faiths still look up to it – even though we, as Christians, might critique or undermine its significance and role. For many other faiths it still has authority and standing." Or as a member of staff put it:

> "The Church of England's established status gives cathedrals a convening power that no other faith institution in most English cities can match."

> *I think it's broadly true that the faith communities are at least glad that there is one body which, in the modern age, tries to speak to the values that faith communities share just as much as it speaks to its own particular understanding of the Divine.*

The opportunity here is substantial. Cathedrals can host interfaith gatherings, facilitate coordination between faith communities on shared concerns (e.g. local poverty, asylum seekers, social cohesion, cross-cultural understanding). At the same time, it is crucial, as several non-Christian stakeholders told us, that this hospitality is not confused with paternalism or entitlement. The cathedral's role is to provide space and convening power, not to control the agenda. The representative of another interfaith organisation put it plainly: "Yes, they have the established position and the established name and the established power, but what that gives them is the ability to provide space." Cathedrals are also, in this capacity, spaces of informal religious education, places where people of different backgrounds can learn about each other's traditions simply by being together in a setting that takes religion seriously. As British society is increasingly polarised on questions of multiculturalism and integration, this contribution of cathedrals is of significant public import.

4.3. The predicament

And yet, for all their extraordinary qualities and contributions, English cathedrals are in serious difficulty. The financial picture is stark. Three quarters of English cathedrals are in structural deficit. They have statutory responsibilities to maintain buildings and treasures of immense national significance – responsibilities whose costs outstrip cathedrals' resources by orders of magnitude. In the words of one member of staff:

A community policing drop-in at Carlisle cathedral

There has to be a recognition that, for whatever reason, whether by accident or design, cathedrals have been put in a situation where they literally cannot fund their key goals as a charity. If you look at our charitable goals on the Charity Commission website, they are to provide a place of worship and further the Church of England version of Christianity, and also to be the conservator of the fabric of the building we've inherited. It's that last bit that gives us the problem. If you look at what we need to do, we are never going to be able, as a business, to make enough profit to maintain the fabric of the building within which we operate. It's just not going to happen.

As the previous chapter showed, cathedrals have responded to this financial pressure with resourcefulness, commercialising their offer, professionalising their operations and management, diversifying their income streams. But these responses, though often necessary, carry their own costs. Commercial events fill the calendar but can be taxing on already stretched staff teams and volunteers, and risk crowding out the sense of stillness and calm that visitors most value. Charging for entry provides vital revenue but risks setting up a consumer relationship that is at odds with the cathedral's identity as a place where God's

"Cathedrals have responded to this financial pressure with resourcefulness, commercialising their offer, professionalising their operations and management, diversifying their income streams. But these responses, though often necessary, carry their own costs."

grace is freely given to be experienced. Moreover, the pressures of financial survival can consume so much energy and attention that there is little left for the deeper questions of purpose and mission. Cathedrals have things they must do, such as keeping the lights on, the doors open, the fabric intact, and statutory obligations met, and things they wish they could do. The former consumes virtually all available resource, leaving little for the latter. As one cathedral staff member asked, with palpable frustration:

How do we reclaim that sense of purpose? I'm not sure we have it at the moment. That's not because of any intentional dislike of religion; it's that the problems are so overwhelming that we are constantly looking for quick fixes. If someone comes to you with a pre-packaged globe or a pre-packaged concert series, the easiest option is to take it.

Cathedrals have been in a perma-crisis for a while now and there is simply no one-size-fits-all solution to their financial precarity; some struggle more than others. But it starts with a recognition that these are important institutions making substantial contributions to the spiritual, social, economic, and cultural life of the nation, and that they cannot do so sustainably on their own.

"Cathedrals have been in a perma-crisis for a while now and there is simply no one-size-fits-all solution to their financial precarity."

Cathedrals also face a challenge of communication. As we showed in an earlier chapter, the public response to cathedrals is affection tempered by indifference. Most people do not think about their local cathedral, or indeed even relate to the notion of

A donation box at Carlisle cathedral

having their own local cathedral in the first place. Speaking to this challenge, a senior clergy observed:

> *We've got to be much better at communicating what we're really about. The only time people see cathedrals is the official occasions – that's no good. We have to engage with folk across the piece… But it comes back to capacity.*

This report is, in part, an attempt to help with precisely this task, articulating on the basis of evidence both what English cathedrals contribute and what they need. Indeed, this report has shown that cathedrals are heavily and actively involved in their communities, partnering with councils, charities, businesses, and community organisations, hosting civic ceremonies, supporting asylum seekers, running food banks, and deploying volunteer chaplains as frontline pastoral workers. The problem is not a lack of centrifugal effort, but a lack of the resources, financial as well as human (and the two are deeply interdependent), to do more of what they are already doing well.

Public misunderstanding of cathedrals' financial situation and varied contributions is real and correcting it is necessary. But it would be wrong to conclude from this that the primary problem is one of communication rather than resources. Cathedrals' delivery of the social and spiritual goods documented in this report cannot be sustained without external support. Better public understanding and sustained investment are both needed.

4.4. A statement of need

If the evidence in this report demonstrates anything, it is that English cathedrals are institutions of exceptional value whose

current predicament demands a response from those who benefit from them. That case can be addressed to several audiences.

To the national Church: cathedrals are among the Church of England's most visible presence in the public square, and in many cities an effective point of contact with people who have no other connection to Christianity. They should not be seen as a luxury that the parish system renders unnecessary but rather be recognised as a key frontier of mission. The Church should consider going beyond its existing support through the Cathedral Sustainability Fund and the Church Commissioners and recognise cathedrals as central to its holistic witness and a singular means of discharging the responsibilities that come with establishment. This will involve calibrating expectations to the slow-burn nature of cathedral ministry. The return on investment in a cathedral should not be measured narrowly in new members or even visitor numbers (which have been, in fact, growing over the years), but in the provision of spiritual capital and social infrastructure for the nation, over generations. Cathedrals are, as one interviewee put it:

> *The shop window and the powerhouse of the Church of England. They're the place that can speak into the public square in most cities more than anywhere else. They can hold multicultural challenges in ethnically diverse cities. They can show dioceses how to do music well, and how to do mission and worship well. They just need caring for. (source)*

To government and public funders: cathedrals generate around £235 million per year for their local economies, support over 6,000 jobs, and mobilise some 15,000 volunteers.[1] They are anchor institutions in towns and cities that, in many cases, are among the most deprived in the country. They provide measurable economic

A view from above
at Carlisle Cathedral

returns and immeasurable social ones, in wellbeing, in social cohesion, in the preservation of heritage skills, in the education of children, in the pastoral support of vulnerable people. The wellbeing dimension alone – the capacity of these buildings to provide sanctuary, calm, and rest to people carrying heavy burdens – is a public good that likely saves the taxpayer considerably and that deserves serious academic study.

Government should recognise cathedrals as vital civic and social infrastructure, not only as national heritage. Indeed, government recognition of cathedrals' community value has been strong in rhetoric, as the 2017 report *Cathedrals and Their Communities* demonstrated, but it has not been matched by resources. If cathedrals are to continue delivering the social goods that government commends them for, they will need sustained public investment.

> "Government should recognise cathedrals as vital civic and social infrastructure, not only as national heritage."

Our polling also reveals that public willingness to support cathedrals financially is tied, in part, to understanding how they are funded and where they matter. A public that believes cathedrals are bankrolled by a wealthy national Church, and that they matter primarily at a national level, will be less likely to donate individually, and will not ask its elected representatives to invest. Any strategy for the sustainability of cathedrals must therefore include an effort to correct these misconceptions, an effort that cathedrals cannot undertake alone.

To cathedral cities: cities across England trade on the identity, beauty, and drawing power of their cathedrals. Cathedrals appear on city logos and merchandise, drive tourism footfall, and anchor visitor economies. Yet the evidence suggests that many local businesses and organisations remain unaware of how dependent their activity is on the cathedral. To ensure long-term sustainability of cathedrals' activities, local authorities and BIDs should develop further mechanisms for co-investment and partnership with cathedrals, recognising them as active drivers of economic and cultural vitality.

4.5. What purpose, expressed anew might look like

When asked to envision the future of cathedrals, most of our interviewees, from visitors to staff, clergy, and local community leaders with a stake in the cathedral, did not suggest that cathedrals should reinvent themselves, but simply continue to be what they already are. As one visitor put it: "It shouldn't want to be something else to remain relevant. It should just continue doing what it has, and I think there will always be interest in it."

> "Any strategy for the sustainability of cathedrals must therefore include an effort to correct these misconceptions, an effort that cathedrals cannot undertake alone."

This is a sentiment born from the recognition that the cathedral's greatest asset is its rooted identity and its commitment to worshipping God and serving the community around it. Expressing that purpose anew means, in the first instance,

protecting that identity from the forces that would dilute it; investing in interpretation so that the building's Christian story is told well; being willing, when necessary, to say no to a lucrative booking that would compromise the cathedral's character, even when the budget is tight. It also means finding imaginative ways to make the cathedral's enduring vocation legible to a society that can no longer take its meaning for granted.

But, as noted previously, this also requires that cathedrals are better supported to do what they already do.

> *I think the Church of England Plc or the Central Church Commissioners understand the importance of these buildings and the potential that they've got... I guess it's about how they're preserved and how they're released, and how they can maintain that core raison d'être of being a place of worship, yet being open and outward-looking, and allowing people in the community to come in and use them. To do that, cathedrals like us need the resourcing and the support to keep that going. (staff)*

English cathedrals have endured for centuries because successive generations decided they were worth the investment of prayer, money, and labour. The evidence of this report suggests that this investment should continue as a recognition that these institutions offer something irreplaceable through their enduring commitment to the sacred in the heart of the city. Cathedrals are, as one interviewee put it, "that thread of continuity in difficult times". That thread is fraying, and it is time to strengthen it.

Visitors overlayed with a vaulted ceiling at York Minster

Annex I: Cathedral characteristics

The six case-study cathedrals were selected to provide as wide and representative a picture as possible of English Anglican cathedrals. The sample was designed to vary by cathedral size, cathedral type, geography, congregation profile, tourist attractiveness, access model (charging or non-charging), financial position, and socio-economic context. Cathedrals included in the 2012 Theos study were excluded from the sampling process.

Cathedral	Summary of relevant characteristics
Carlisle	Small cathedral in the North West; non-charging; modest tourist draw; smaller congregation; located in a more deprived urban context within a wider rural region; selected as a smaller cathedral under financial sustainability pressure.
Derby	Small parish-church cathedral in the Midlands; non-charging; lower tourist profile; located in a deprived urban setting; selected as a more financially fragile and locally oriented case study.
Exeter	Medium-sized cathedral in the South West; charging; established tourist attraction; moderate congregation; located in a relatively deprived city with a wider rural hinterland; selected as a medium-sized cathedral facing continuing sustainability pressures.
Rochester	Medium-sized cathedral in the South East; non-charging; moderate congregation; located in a relatively affluent pocket within a more deprived Medway/west Kent context; selected as a case combining civic relevance with financial sustainability pressures.
St Albans	Large parish-church cathedral in the South; non-charging; pilgrimage and tourist centre; strong congregation; located in a relatively affluent urban setting; selected as a larger cathedral with a strong congregational base.
York	Large metropolitan cathedral in the North East; charging; major tourist destination; more limited congregational profile; located in an urban centre serving a wider rural hinterland; selected as a larger and relatively financially strong cathedral.

Annex II: The public roles of cathedral clergy and staff

Across the six case studies, cathedral leadership is embedded in local civil society through deans, clergy, and personnel serving as trustees, governors, patrons, presidents, ambassadors, deputy lieutenants, school and university governors, charity chairs and members of local strategic partnerships. The cathedral's ability to bring people together is therefore institutionalised in individuals who circulate between the cathedral and the wider civic sphere. While the list below is extensive, it is by no means exhaustive and should be read as representing a snapshot rather than the full extent of cathedral leaders' civic engagement.

Types of roles	Examples of roles
Constitutional and ceremonial civic office	Deputy Lieutenant; High Sheriff; County Ambassador; links with lieutenancies, shrievalties, and mayoralties
Education governance and academic institutions	School governor; school trustee/vice-chair; education-group governor; university governing council/court; multi-academy trust membership
Charity trusteeship, chairing, patronage, and presidency	Trustee; chair of trustees; director; patron; president… of local Christian, choral, homelessness, educational, and other charities
Local strategic partnerships and civic brokerage	Poverty commission chair; stronger communities board member; working links with council, MP, police, fire, county council, Business Improvement District
National church, diocesan, and cathedral-sector governance	AEC; General Synod; Archbishops' Council; national advisory group membership; diocesan board chair; diocesan vocations/mission roles
Heritage, archives, arts, and music leadership	Heritage and interpretation lead; music foundation trustee; publishing chair; arts and wellbeing leadership; ambassador to heritage body
Ambassadorial and relationship-broker roles	Ambassador; diocesan voice; partnership-builder across city/diocese/province; cathedral "link" roles to external bodies
Social justice, welfare, and community-wellbeing leadership	Poverty commission leadership; YMCA leadership; interfaith adviser; social justice/community outreach canonries; safeguarding/public welfare roles

Annex III: Special civic and community services

Our six case studies revealed that these cathedrals host more than just isolated civic services; they sustain an entire ecology of public rituals, including remembrance, constitutional life, justice, emergency services, social solidarity and communal mourning. The impressive variety of special religious services found at our case study cathedrals can be organised as follows.

Types of services	Examples of services
National memory and public mourning	Remembrance Sunday services; acts of remembrance; festivals of remembrance; Holocaust memorial services; public memorial and reflection services
Constitutional and civic life	Coronation and royal thanksgiving services; mayoral or civic-office services; thanksgiving/prayer services for local authorities, public bodies, and civic organisations
Justice and public order	Legal services; justice services; High Sheriff's services; services for those who administer law and order
Armed forces and emergency services	VE Day services; military and regimental commemorations; Trafalgar services; remembrance events linked to veterans and cadets; Blue Light / emergency-services thanksgiving
Social solidarity and public welfare	Interfaith prayers; Homeless Sunday; Sanctuary Sunday; safeguarding-related observances; services expressing support for vulnerable groups or communal wellbeing
Dedication, blessing, and commemorative marking	Dedication services; commemorative-installation services; special blessings or thanksgiving services linked to institutions, anniversaries, or corporate civic memory
Community carol and commemorative seasonal services	Lord Mayor's carol services; community memorial carol services; seasonal services that also function as civic gathering points

A close-up of a stained-glass window at St Albans cathedral

6

End notes

This report in 2 minutes

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Introduction

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5 Waite, *The Nones*.

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20 The statistics in this report have an estimated fraud rate of 1.4%, which is well below the industry average and is unlikely to alter the key findings.

Chapter I

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8 Shrievalties are the offices of High Sheriffs, who are ceremonial officers appointed annually by the Crown through a warrant from the Privy Council. They represent the sovereign in judicial matters within the county and play a ceremonial role similar to that of the Lord-Lieutenant, who represents the sovereign personally and militarily. The office of the Lord-Lieutenant is a lieutenancy.

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13 Interview conducted in Italian. Translation our own.

14 The Department for Culture, Media & Sports recognised in March 2026 in a letter to the Cathedral Music Trust that cathedrals function "as a cornerstone of the musical economy". www.cathedralmusictrust.org.uk/unesco-living-heritage/

15 An estimated 7,740,000 pupils are currently in primary or secondary education in England. Of these, an estimated 1 million attend Church of England schools. See: explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/national-pupil-projections/2025 & www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/church-schools-and-academies

16 In 2019, cathedrals saw 14.6 million visits, incl. 308,000 schoolchildren on educational visits; collectively contributed ~£235 million to local economies, supporting 6,065 jobs and 15,400 volunteers. See: Ecorys, *The Economic and Social Impact of England's Cathedrals* (2021), https://www.ecorys.com/case-studies/the-economic-and-social-impacts-of-englands-cathedrals/.

17 Bourne, *Cathedrals and Their Communities*.

18 DCMS, *The Taylor Review*.

19 Ecorys, *Economic and Social Impact*.

20 Find out more about the Cathedrals' Workshop Fellowship here: www.cwfcathedrals.co.uk

Chapter II

1 Public outcry at events in Anglican cathedrals have become a recurring feature of British media. Over the past two years alone, we have seen outcry over the "Rave in the Nave" silent disco (Feb 2024) and contemporary graffiti exhibition "Hear Us" (Oct 2025) inside Canterbury Cathedral, and the Plague of Angels metal concert in York Minster (Apr 2025). Previous outcries targeted helter-skelters, crazy golf, and other installations inside cathedrals. See: www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/09/row-over-canterbury-cathedral-silent-disco-profane-innocent or www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/cathedrals-christ-england-christian-britney-spears-b2492776.html or www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13144745/Canterbury-Cathedrals-rave-nave-silent-disco-glowstick-clutching-revellers-downed-wine-beer-face-protests-never-held-despite-raising-12-000.html or www.telegraph.co.uk/music/news/canterbury-cathedral-rave-in-the-nave-sacrilege-or-harmless/

2 Association of English Cathedrals, *Cathedral Statistics – Growth in 2024* (2025). englishcathedrals.co.uk/latest-news/cathedral-statistics-growth-in-2024-church-of-england-latest/

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4 It is important to note ALVA records only participating attractions, so these figures are illustrative rather than a count of the whole cathedral sector. See: ALVA, *Visitor Numbers in 2025* (2026). www.alva.org.uk/details.cfm?p=403&codeid=895.

5 Within the theology of the Church of England, marriages (or Holy Matrimony) and funerals are both considered religious rites, although there are varying views on whether or not they constitute 'full sacraments' or 'sacramental rites' instituted by the Gospel. That said, considering their important cultural role, we recognise that some members of the public may not view them as religious services in the strictest sense.

6 For example, at the time the Church Commissioners published their annual report in June 2025, many mainstream British media outlets, including Reuters, The Telegraph, and The Independent reported on the Church's "£11.1 billion endowment fund" or "multi-billion-pound endowment", systematically failing to report on how constrained or distributed these funds in fact are. See: www.reuters.com/world/uk/church-england-plans-record-22-bln-spend-after-signs-revival-2025-06-09/ or www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/06/09/abuse-scandals-church-of-england-risk-staffing-crisis/ or www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/justin-welby-archbishop-church-commissioners-church-england-b2766423.html

7 We must recognise that only an estimated quarter (26%) of the English population lives within an urban centre that contains at least one Anglican cathedral, according to ONS 2021 data. Nevertheless, we expect many people living outside the strict boundaries of cathedral cities, in their suburbs, and in their wider county and diocesan areas, to have an attachment to, or a relationship with, their cathedral.

8 In analysing the data, we initially assumed that at least part of the population might feel unable, rather than merely unwilling, to donate – especially in the context of the ongoing cost of living crisis. We reconsidered this after finding that neither socio-economic background nor geography was a significant predictor of likelihood to donate, either in the national YouGov survey or in our separate visitor survey. This should also be read alongside the fact that a significant number of respondents in both surveys were willing to spend considerably more than the recommended donation amount when attending events at a cathedral, suggesting either that they do not regard the cathedral visit itself as warranting that level of support, or that they are more willing to spend money on items such as speciality drinks and snacks than to donate for the experience of the building as such.

Chapter III

1 The Church of England's own *Cathedrals Working Group Report*, articulating the need for a new Measure before 2021, has stated that recent failures of governance and management within a small number of cathedrals had exposed wider vulnerabilities, many of them financial.

Chapter IV

1 Ecorys, *The Economic and Social Impact of England's Cathedrals* (2021), 4. https://www.ecorys.com/case-studies/the-economic-and-social-impacts-of-englands-cathedrals/.

Multiple exposure photo overlaying the nave and stained-glass window at Carlisle cathedral

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Living Stones
English Cathedrals as Sacred Spaces in Changing Times

You might think of a cathedral as a grand old church for the faithful. Or perhaps as a heritage site for tourists to visit. In fact, England's 42 Anglican cathedrals are open to all and pulsate with life. They are beacons in their communities, centres of civic life, and sanctuaries of stillness in a world of incessant noise. Alongside daily worship, they run outreach programmes, educate children, host world-class music and art, and hold space for communal grief and celebration.

More than a decade on from *Spiritual Capital*, our first exploration of English cathedrals, this report reveals institutions that have professionalised, broadened their offer, reached new audiences, weathered a pandemic, and grown into fuller public roles.

Drawing on a national poll, a survey of over 1,300 visitors, and fieldwork conducted across six cathedrals, Living Stones argues that, in today's increasingly fast-paced and fragmented world, cathedrals are vital civic, cultural and spiritual assets for the nation.

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