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# Living Stones: English Cathedrals as Sacred Spaces in Changing Times

*Evidence from new national research by Theos*



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## Summary of the Theos research background and methodology

This booklet explains the social, cultural, economic, and spiritual importance of Anglican cathedrals in England, drawing on new research by Theos, the UK's leading religion and society think tank.

The research was conducted in partnership with the Association of English Cathedrals and supported by the Church Commissioners. It brings together:

- a nationally representative YouGov poll of over 1,800 adults in England
- a survey of more than 1,300 cathedral visitors
- almost 150 in-depth interviews across the six Anglican cathedrals of St Albans, Carlisle, Derby, Exeter, Rochester, and York.

You can find the full report on the Theos website: [theosthinktank.co.uk/research](https://theosthinktank.co.uk/research)

Read the full report here:



## Summary

- Anglican cathedrals are not only places of Christian worship. New Theos research shows that they function as multi-dimensional public institutions: civic anchors, cultural centres, sites of heritage and learning, and places of spiritual refuge for everyone.
- Cathedral engagement is widespread: 74% of adults in England have visited a cathedral at least once in the past three years, according to national survey responses.
- The research finds cathedrals have levels of engagement comparable with national museums and galleries.
- Cathedrals reach far beyond regular churchgoers. A majority of those with no religious affiliation have visited a cathedral in the last three years, and many enjoy worship, music, prayer, or stillness while doing so.
- Across six case-study cathedrals, over 98% of visitors saw their cathedral as a symbol of local identity, and over 98% said they felt connected with local history and tradition when visiting.
- Other research confirms that Cathedrals have significant economic benefits, generating £235<sup>i</sup> million of additional expenditure a year, more than 6,000 jobs and mobilising 13,000 volunteers.<sup>ii</sup>
- Despite high public value, around 80% of Anglican cathedrals operate in structural deficit, with no guaranteed national funding for their core functions.
- The research identifies a growing gap between the scale of public benefit cathedrals provide and the level of recognition, understanding, and support they receive.

Carlisle cathedral from above



## What is a Cathedral?

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In the Church of England, a cathedral is a church associated with a bishop. It is the ‘mother church’ of the local area (the diocese) and takes its name from the Greek *kathédra*, meaning “a bishop’s throne”.

There are 42 Anglican cathedrals in England. Some, such as Canterbury and Durham, are over a thousand years old; others, such as Guildford Cathedral, are more recent. Together, they form a national network of historic, civic, and spiritual institutions.

## Why are cathedrals important?

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- **Cornerstones of shared history and identity.** Cathedrals are among England’s most historically and culturally significant buildings. Two are UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and almost all are Grade I listed, meaning they are of “exceptional interest” historically. Over 95% of visitors surveyed reported feeling connected to local history and tradition when visiting their cathedral.
- **Engines for local economic growth.** Cathedrals are amongst England’s most popular tourist destinations. National polling suggests **74% of adults have visited a cathedral in the past three years**; 37% reported visiting at least several times a year, outstripping attendance at live sporting events. Through tourism and visitor spending, cathedrals support local high streets and hospitality economies, contributing around **£235 million in additional expenditure** each year to towns and cities across England. Visitors to cathedrals bring financial benefit to the surrounding area, spending most of their money outside the cathedral precinct on local businesses.
- **Anchors of local community.** Cathedrals are often the largest and most accessible public buildings in their towns and cities. They run a wide range of community and civic events, from homelessness projects to educational outreach programmes. Using HM Treasury’s Green Book methodology, cathedrals and churches contribute an estimated **£55 billion to national wellbeing**, reflecting their impact on wellbeing, culture, and placemaking, alongside more conventional economic measures.<sup>iii</sup> In 2024, Cathedrals held around 6,000 public and civic events, attended by more than 1.7 million people.<sup>iv</sup> Across the six case-study cathedrals, over 94% of visitors, including those of no religion, saw their cathedral as a hub for engaging with community life.

- **Centres of musical excellence.** Cathedrals sustain the English choral tradition and train generations of young musicians. In 2024, there were **over 200 cathedral choirs, involving over 2,200 choristers and adult professional singers**, and over 2,000 voluntary choir members.<sup>v</sup> Cathedrals’ musical outreach activities reach thousands more children –including in disadvantaged areas. They play an active role in helping schools meet the Department for Education’s statutory goals under the Model Music Curriculum. Cathedral music creates measurable spiritual and wellbeing value, including for those of no faith. **71% of visitors of no religion reported experiencing a sense of the sacred through cathedral music.** Over 60% of religious-but-non-practising visitors, and nearly half of those of no religion, also found that cathedral concerts helped them meet with God.



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BBC Big Band overlaid with the organ in Rochester Cathedral

## Call to Action

Anglican cathedrals function as essential civic, cultural, economic and spiritual infrastructure, yet receive no guaranteed public funding for their operations.

Each cathedral's finances operate independently of the Church of England and their local diocese, and every cathedral chapter is its own independent charity.<sup>vi</sup> Central church support is generally limited to the salaries of clergy and some grants for office staff.

Despite strong commercialisation and income diversification efforts, 80% of cathedrals are in structural deficit.



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



Building blocks from the Little Stars toddler group overlaid with stained-glass at Carlisle cathedral

## What do cathedrals need?

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- **Funders.** Cathedrals deliver public benefits in wellbeing, education, heritage skills, music, and community cohesion. **Sustainable investment** would enable these outcomes to be maintained and expanded.
- **Local and national government.** Cathedrals act as anchor institutions in many regions. **Strategic partnership and recognition** need to catch up with the scale of their public impact.
- **Journalists and commentators.** Cathedrals are disproportionately reported during moments of controversy. **More accurate, contextualised coverage** of what cathedrals do and who they serve today is essential for their long-term survival.
- **Visitors and local community members.** Cathedrals remain open because people who value them choose to give. **Becoming a Friend or making a regular donation** is one of the most effective ways to support their future.



A view of Carlisle cathedral's nave from above



The organ overlaid with the donation box at Carlisle cathedral

Stained-glass at St Albans cathedral



## Footnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Hansard HC Deb. vol. 762 cols.927-8, 27 February 2025, Cathedrals: Local Economic Contribution.
- <sup>ii</sup> Ecorys (2021) The Economic and Social Impact of England's Cathedrals, available at: <https://www.ecorys.com/case-studies/the-economic-and-social-impacts-of-englands-cathedrals/>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Hansard HC Deb. vol. 723 col.1000, 1 December 2022, Historic Cathedrals: Maintenance Costs.
- <sup>iv</sup> Eames, K. and Day, H. (2025) 'Cathedral Statistics 2024', The Church of England, available at: <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2025-08/cathedralstatistics2024.pdf>
- <sup>v</sup> See Eames and Day (2025)
- <sup>vi</sup> Church Commissioners for England (2021) General Guidance for Cathedrals, available at: [churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/general\\_guidance\\_for\\_cathedrals\\_sept\\_2021.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/general_guidance_for_cathedrals_sept_2021.pdf)



Visitors at Carlisle cathedral

**This booklet summarises findings from *Living Stones*, Theos' 2026 national study of Anglican cathedrals in England.**

For media enquiries, funding discussions, or policy engagement, please contact Theos at [hello@theosthinktank.co.uk](mailto:hello@theosthinktank.co.uk).



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