

£100-million heritage lottery funding 'easier for churches to access'

From Church Times – 10th September 2024, by Madeleine Davies

The chair of the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), Simon Thurley, has encouraged churches to apply for a share of the £100 million that the fund expects to invest in places of worship over the next three years.

Applications have fallen in recent years, with reports that churches are finding the funding difficult to access. In response, Mr Thurley has drawn attention to the simplification of application criteria.

"We have just four very straightforward things that we are looking for," he said on Tuesday of last week. "Saving heritage, making better access, environmental improvements, and making places more resilient. They all should be very straightforward to churches to make a case. . . Map them on to what you need for your place of worship. That is all we want to see.

"Don't get involved with expensive consultants telling you to do this, that, and the other. . . We will take very seriously any application that hits those four things in any combination."

On Tuesday, the Fund announced that it had awarded £4.68 million to the Church of England's Conservation Grants Scheme, which has been run since the 1950s in partnership with a group of trusts and currently awards about £250,000 a year for the preservation of church interiors. The award will mean that the scheme can invest nearly £5 million over the next five years, including funding building repairs that benefit historic objects.

This is the first grant from a new £15-million NLHF funding pot designated for places of worship. The aim is to fund "strategic projects" that can have a "broad impact across the places of worship sector to address widespread needs and challenges, and develop strategic projects with a focus on sustainability, accelerating new ideas and interventions, and proactively tackling long-standing heritage issues at scale".

Last week, Mr Thurley said that rural churches, in particular, had found it difficult to access the fund's grant programmes, or doubted whether they would be successful. "We feel that there are some geographical areas where we need to be more proactive," he said. "What we don't want to see is people thinking 'We are not in with a chance.'"

Another aim was to "look a bit more scientifically at some of the long-term problems", and to fund organisations "finding the answers to difficult questions". The Fund was keen to invest in "experimental" ideas, which, if successful, could be more widely promoted.

The £15 million is in addition to the £84 million expected to be awarded to places of worship over the next three years. A spokeswoman said that the total was "based on predicted income and past investment through the programme".

Since its Grants for Places of Worship fund was absorbed into its existing heritage programmes for all buildings in 2017 (News, 7 April 2017), the amount awarded annually to places of worship has fallen. Between 2022 and 2013, NLHF overall funding fell by nearly two-thirds in real terms.

The previous fund, which averaged allocations of £25-million a year, had covered the cost of urgent structural repairs and improvements to listed churches in England since 1994, having taken over from other state bodies (the HLF is sponsored by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport). Friends of Friendless Churches has reported that total allocations now stand at about £10 million.

Mr Thurley said that, currently, about ten per cent of the Fund's total awards went to places of worship. "But I think it is true that there has been a bit of a drop-off in applications, not a drop-off in the amount of money available."

There are plans at the Fund to work with places of worship to “increase awareness of the funding available, break down perceived barriers to accessing funding, and provide support for those making applications”.

The announcement comes in the wake of warnings about the cost of maintaining the Church’s 16,000 buildings, 12,500 of which are listed. The majority of these costs must be met currently by congregations. The former Second Church Estates Commissioner, Andrew Selous, told the House of Commons last year that the average annual cost for the maintenance and repairs to parish churches alone stood at £150 million.

The National Churches Trust estimates that clearing the backlog of repairs to C of E churches would cost at least £1 billion, and has suggested that at least £50 million of additional annual public funding for repairs is needed (News, 26 January). More than 900 buildings are now on Historic England’s At Risk register.

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The government-commissioned Taylor review on the sustainability of English churches and cathedrals, published in 2017, argued that the C of E should prepare for reduced reliance on government funding, and called for "a cultural shift in attitudes towards church buildings such that communities realise there are resources they can use, and congregations have the confidence to share space and, where appropriate, to ask for a fair income" (News, 21 December 2017). But — beyond 2020 — it recommended that the Government should provide a Minor Repairs Fund of £15 million per year, and a Major Repairs Fund of £36 million per year.

Between 2018 and 2020, a pilot of some of its recommendations was carried out in Manchester and Suffolk, providing churches with access to a community development adviser (who could assist in making grant applications), a fabric support officer, and a minor-repairs fund of £1 million, with a cap of £10,000 per bid. A key finding of the evaluation was the high demand for a major-repairs fund, with a "large reported conservation deficit". In just one diocese — Norwich — this deficit, based on quinquennial inspections between 2012 and 2017, was estimated to be £63 million.

Many of those interviewed expressed concern that the National Lottery Heritage Fund was proving "increasingly difficult for places of worship to access" (News, 17 January 2020). They drew attention to competition with professional bodies that are also eligible; an emphasis on community criteria; and the demoralising effect of being turned down. Community engagement activities were "seen as prohibitive for those listed places of worship with limited capacity".

Last year, dioceses were given £2.8 million by the Archbishops' Council to employ church-buildings support officers (CBSOs) to advise on the upkeep of buildings. A further £6.2 million was allocated around the dioceses for making grants of up to £12,000 for repairs (News, 9 November 2023).

Last week, Mr Thurley noted that replacing a single lead downpipe could cost £12,000, which a small parish church would have to work "jolly hard" to raise. The likelihood of getting "big chunks of money directly from the Treasury" was "quite small, particularly in the current climate", he said.

But he drew attention to the “fantastic” Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme, set to run until the end of March 2025, which enables applicants to apply for a grant to cover VAT costs incurred when carrying out building repairs. The grants available to Historic England had been “reduced enormously”, however, and he would like to see them increased.

Last week, the Heritage Minister, Sir Chris Bryant, said: “The UK’s places of worship are an extraordinary part of the tapestry of our national identity. Many have marked our births, deaths, and marriages for centuries. They have been criss-crossed with the scars of countless everyday events and moments of national crisis and celebration. They can offer sanctuary from the slings and arrows of life for people of all faiths and none, a place to be calmed or inspired.

“Thanks to funding provided by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, these important buildings will continue to thrive and serve the communities that cherish them for generations to come.”

The director for cathedrals and church buildings for the Archbishops’ Council, Emily Gee, welcomed the contribution to the Conservation Grants Scheme, and paid tribute to “all the thousands of dedicated volunteers who work so hard and give their time to ensuring that the heritage of our church buildings, so cherished by our communities, is sustained into the future”.