



One of the most frequent changes made to churches today will involve seating in some way. Changing seating inside a church can have a significant impact upon the interior. The process of changing furniture, as well as choosing a suitable alternative, requires careful consideration. This document is intended to guide parishes through the planning stages and the decisions involved.

The decision to remove pews should be made on a case by case basis following careful assessment of significance, needs and impacts. If the decision is taken to replace existing seating in a historic church building, then the Church Buildings Council aspires to seeing replacement chairs or benches of the highest quality of design.

Changes will require a faculty and, due to the presumption against any change that will adversely affect the character of the church as a building of special architectural or historic interest, applicants are required to demonstrate sufficient need for change.

It is worth noting that collegiate-wise chancel stalls are often of higher quality and significance so their retention is often desirable. Doing so not only facilitates the retention of some of the original character of the church, but also

retains a formality at the east end of the church and preserves interior views. Even though there may no longer be a robed choir using the stalls, the pews can be used for smaller midweek services and as a quiet worship area.

### **Brief history of church seating**

The earliest churches in England had no fixed seating. In some there were stone benches around the walls and the pillars.

Seating was increasingly introduced from the late thirteenth century, a process accelerated by the Reformation and the consequent shift in emphasis from altar to pulpit. Simply formed benches were introduced to which backs and ends were subsequently added, in time these became more sophisticated in form and design until churches were fully pewed.

By the Jacobean period pews had higher sides for greater privacy and comfort. From the end of the sixteenth century rights to a particular pew could be acquired through faculty, rent, or continuous long use. Numbering and locks became common features to ensure correct appropriation. Galleries were introduced to provide additional 'free' seating.

During the nineteenth century many churches were entirely re-seated.





Over the following pages we provide step-by-step information to assist the decision making process for parishes considering new church seating.

## 1. Evaluate current situation

Analyse significance of existing seating (historical assessment).

### Research

Establish date of seating, when it was introduced to the church and if it incorporates other work, maker if known, type of wood, if there are any remaining private rights to any pews (rare, but local knowledge and research in parish archives will be essential). If they incorporate older work, then a report from a specialist wood conservator ought to be commissioned.

### Analysis

This includes the value of the existing seating in terms of age, rarity, quality and workmanship but also its importance in relation to the building and its contribution to the building's overall character.

For example, many churches contain nineteenth-century pews that are not of great artistic merit in isolation, yet contribute greatly to the overall character of the church particularly if they formed part of a contemporary restoration. The case for retention would be much stronger in such an instance.

Where the pews are of great historic interest, for instance with carved ends and poppy heads, the case for retention may be overwhelming. There will also be a presumption against the removal or alteration of all pre-Victorian

and especially pre-Reformation, pews and in particular box pews.

### Action

Write a statement of significance to layout the information you have established so far, and to inform decision-making going forward. [[www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/guidance-advice/statements-of-significance-need](http://www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/guidance-advice/statements-of-significance-need)]



## 2. Assess and define needs

### Analyse what the need is for new seating in the church.

Consider what it is that the parish wishes to achieve with new seating and why the existing seating is unable to provide this.

### Consider the practicalities.

If the desire is to have chairs to 'improve flexibility', how will it work in practice? Consider how often the seating will need moving and by whom (age and fitness will affect weight and stackability), and where the seats will be moved to or stored, have you sufficient storage space for when the chairs are not in use?

If change is proposed for liturgical reasons, how will that work practically within the building?

### Caution

Remember that changing seating, particularly from pews to chairs, will reduce the number of seats available. Removing pews and associated pew platforms may also uncover archaeology and burials, or necessitate a new floor surface by virtue of increasing visibility of the floor or revealing existing finishes are of poor repair. Some pews also support existing heating installations so consideration may need to be given to alternatives. Existing pews also often have a lower repair and maintenance requirement than modern seating.

### Action

Write a statement of need to demonstrate the demand for change and to show how impact on character and significance is balanced by the benefits to the parish and its mission [[www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/guidance-advice/statements-of-significance-need](http://www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/guidance-advice/statements-of-significance-need)]

## 3. Consider the available options and decide what to do

Is the desire to alter the existing seating being driven by another project, for example underfloor heating? If so, if the project or outcome could be delivered differently would that remove the need to remove pews?

The following are the usual options for changing seating, as well as some alternatives. These could be explored as an options and feasibility study and may help illustrate the argument for change:

- Removal of existing seating and replacement with new benches;



- Removal of existing seating and replacement with new chairs;
- Work with the existing pews following expert advice. Consider only partial removal, or adaptation. For example, how they can be altered by adding castors to become movable, shortening benches to be more flexible, adjusting the raking of the back to be more comfortable and by using cushions or pew pads.



#### 4. Assess impact

Considering the impact of the change upon the existing building, its character and historic fabric.

You ought by now to have produced statements of significance and need. It may also be necessary to commission an archaeological evaluation, particularly if work is likely to disturb the floor and pew platforms.

#### 5. Consult experts

Discuss your ideas with your inspecting architect at an early opportunity, and seek advice from your local DAC early on [<http://www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/church-buildings-council/who-s-who/dacs/dac-contact-details>]. They may also have their own seating guidance.

Remember that open communication with the relevant consultees (which includes Amenity Societies such as the SPAB, Georgian Group and Victorian Society) can avoid unexpected delays further down the line, and their comments and suggestions may ultimately enhance the overall scheme.

#### 6. Selecting new seating

##### The view of the Church Buildings Council:

With many years of experience and having seen a range of completed schemes, the Church Buildings Council generally advocates the use of high quality wooden chairs (i.e. unupholstered) and pews where seating is necessary.

The Council's experience is that wooden chairs have the greatest sympathy with historic church environments, present the best value for money with long life-spans, and that a well-designed, ergonomic wooden chair can provide as much comfort as an upholstered design.

Upholstered seats are not considered to be appropriate for the following reasons:

- They have a significant impact in terms of colour, texture and character which is not consonant with the quality of a highly listed church;
- Experience demonstrates that upholstered seating needs more regular refurbishment (wear and tear, staining) than seating without upholstery. This is especially true of multi-use churches where it will be

normal to eat and drink regularly on the chairs;

- They are heavy and therefore more difficult to arrange and stack;
- The addition of soft furnishings can alter existing acoustics;
- Wood tones and textures fit well within church buildings and have been used for centuries in this context, whilst some colours have associations with other types of buildings such as offices.

#### Research

Contact several manufacturers and trial a range of designs. Try to envisage how they will appear multiplied throughout the church, rather than in isolation.

Your DAC may also be able to suggest some successful completed church seating schemes within your Diocese which you can visit. This will allow you to see new seats *in situ* and to see how the design appears when furnishing an entire space.

#### Questions and considerations

*Why purchase a more costly chair when others are available for less?* Spending more on a good quality chair at the outset is likely to save money in the long-run and will provide a legacy for the church. Cheap chairs can quickly fail and upholstered chairs may need reupholstering at great expense within a decade. It is advisable to check how long the new seat will be under warranty for and/or how long the guarantee is. A cheap stackable metal-framed chair may only have a six-year



guarantee and could need replacing five times in the life-time of a high-quality wooden chair with a 30-year guarantee.

#### *How will we pay for the chairs?*

It will be easier to fundraise in one tranche for a long-lasting seat than to find more money to replace cheap seats in several years. 'Sponsor a chair' programmes are a good way to fund new seating.

#### *What do chair prices include?*

Most manufacturers have a basic price to which you add a cost for different finishes, arms, linkages, book holders, prayer shelf, hook for hassocks etc. It is worth going direct to manufacturers rather than through suppliers for best value.

#### *Is the strength and construction of the frame suitable for the intended useage of the furniture?*

The requirements for the new seating, as considered earlier, will impact on the choice of replacement chair. For example, if the chairs will be moved frequently they are likely to incur higher levels of impact which will necessitate a chair of greater robustness, and lighter weight, for ease of movement. However if chairs will be moved infrequently, a more substantial chair, which perhaps does not stack as efficiently, may be sufficient.

#### *Does the proposed seat complement and enhance the interior?*

A replacement of lesser quality than the existing seating, or that has greater negative impact is not worth pursuing.

#### *Do they meet health and safety requirements?*

More than four chairs in a row need to link together. Most designs come with an optional linkage system. Check how easy it is to use. The additional advantage of links is that they maintain order and tidiness.

The general recommendation is that 10% of chairs have arms. Also consider whether the layout allows space for wheelchair access.

#### *How easy are they to move?*

Consider the weight of the chair and ease of moving it by volunteers of different ages and strength.

#### *What is the method of storage or stacking?*

When you move the chairs, consider where they will be stored and how. How many chairs will stack together? What area will be required if all the chairs are stacked?

#### *Will you need additional seating for large services and events?*

Replacing pews with chairs will reduce the overall number of seats. It may be necessary to have additional seats available but if so, ensure you have adequate storage and ideally choose a folding version of the same seat design.

#### *What will the finish of the seats be?*

If wood, consider what type and what colour, and how the seat will contrast or complement the floor surface. Woods can also be stained. A darker stain might be more appropriate to some settings.

#### *What is the floor surface?*

Ensure that the chair will not damage it.



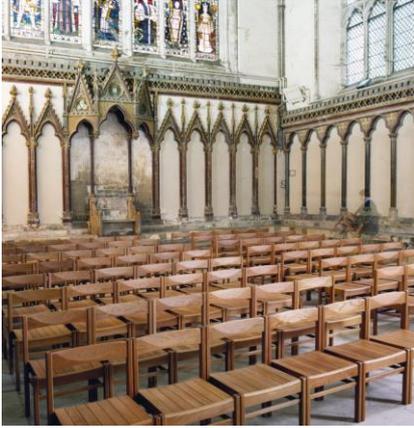
## **7. FINALLY! Consult and gain approval**

Having done the background research, established the value of the existing seating and need for new seating, written statements of significance and need, and in some cases carried out additional archaeological assessments or statements of pew significance, as well as chosen a suitable alternative seat - it is time to submit a faculty application. Your DAC will be able to help [<http://www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/church-buildings-council/who-s-who/dacs/dac-contact-details>]

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## For further information:

*Pews, Benches and Chairs; Church Seating in English Parish Churches from the fourteenth century to the present.* Ed. Trevor Cooper and Sarah Brown, The Ecclesiological Society, 2011.

*New works in historic places of worship.* English Heritage, 2012.  
<https://www.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/new-work-in-historic-places-of-worship/>

*Informing the Reordering Debate; Evaluating English Pews.* Charles Tracy – BCD Special report on historic churches 16th annual edition.

*Victorian church seating: variations upon a theme.* Geoff Brandwood, *Ecclesiology Today*, 42, 2010.

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