



MISSION COUNCIL

13 – 15 MAY 2013

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Listed Buildings Advisory Group

Introduction

The Listed Buildings Advisory Group, which normally meets twice a year, is accountable to Mission Council for co-ordinating a common approach to the application of Ecclesiastical Exemption across the Synods of the United Reformed Church other than Scotland. It is widely acknowledged that the facility to control our own listed buildings consent procedure, gained from the government by the churches some twenty years ago, is a valuable concession. For instance, each Synod, in coming to a decision on proposed alterations, must take account of the role of the building as a centre for worship and mission. This consideration, not required of local authorities, is an important benefit of the arrangement.

Additionally, but no less vitally, its officers and other members maintain the link between this Church and other organisations, in particular English Heritage where relationships are positive and cordial. They also maintain contact with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and relevant representatives of other churches. These relationships ensure the smooth flow of information both ways, to the benefit of all United Reformed Church congregations.

The year 2012

A preoccupation of the early part of the year was the decision by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to impose VAT on alterations to listed churches. Alongside the other churches the United Reformed Church made representations, noting in particular the difficulties experienced by churches part way through a building project. Subsequently the Department of Culture Media and Sport extended the scope of the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme, and more funding was made available to it.

The United Reformed Church, through its Listed Buildings Advisory Group, has been commissioned to help English Heritage improve its advocacy for historic chapel and church buildings. English Heritage wishes to create an up-to-date database of the physical condition of and extent of criminal damage to all listed United Reformed Church church buildings in England, and the Group is grateful for the cooperation of Synod offices in the preparation of this material.

An announcement by English Heritage that they are changing their procedures for listing may reassure the officers of some churches. Noting that only 30 per cent of spot listing applications result in a listing, English Heritage are now much less likely to respond to a member of the public in pursuing a listing application, unless the building concerned is about to be demolished, is self-evidently of major significance, or is in a heritage priority area.

Heritage protection legislation is changing, and the Listed Buildings Advisory Group has been involved in the Government's consultation on the proposed changes. More will be reported as the Government's intentions become clear. The changes are part of the current Government's desire to see

regulation reduced and simplified. It is believed that the wider government initiative to simplify planning through a new National Planning Policy Framework will have few implications for the work of the Listed Buildings Advisory Committees.

In 2011, the Listed Buildings Advisory Group reported with regret the decision by the National Synod of Wales to withdraw from the Ecclesiastical Exemption arrangements. This is still pending. The latest information is that the new arrangement, by which listed buildings matters for United Reformed Church buildings in Wales will fall under the control of local planning authorities, is part of the development and implementation of a new Heritage Bill expected in 2014-15. Meanwhile, arrangements continue as before, and the Synod's officers are kept in touch with the activities of the Group.

General

As indicated earlier in this report, the facility to control changes to our own listed buildings consent is a valuable concession. The Synods are very well served by the members of their Listed Buildings Advisory Committees, some of whom have been involved since the scheme's inception in 1994. Between them they provide the Synods with considerable relevant knowledge and expertise. They cannot go on for ever, however, and, although the system of synod-based committees is currently viable despite difficulties of recruitment, the time may well be coming when it is desirable to consider alternative arrangements. Meanwhile discussions are in hand to streamline the formal consultation required when new members are recruited.

Mission Council is invited to:

receive the annual report of the Listed Buildings Advisory Group

David Figures
5 April 2013