

The Connexional Team – Support Services in Manchester

Removal of Pews from Historic Chapels

Permission is needed for the removal of any pews from chapels which are listed buildings.

Historic chapel interiors are exceedingly fragile and frequently rely upon their fittings to give them their architectural, historic and liturgical character. Fixed seating is often a very significant feature in most historic chapels. Its layout and quality can be important indicators of the way the building was originally and subsequently planned and used. It can define the character of the interior, making a major contribution to the spatial qualities and also the overall colour scheme. Even minor alterations to pews can therefore have a major impact on the character of a chapel interior.

Changing liturgical and social patterns such as the desire for increased flexibility, and more people involved in leading worship, often mean that the removal of a small number of pews from the front or back of chapels can be justified. But the comprehensive removal of all the pews from a historic chapel (or from any one level in a galleried chapel) needs to be considered even more carefully. In the case of chapels which are listed as being of special architectural or historic importance, there is a general presumption in favour of the preservation of pews.

Pews have some advantages over chairs: they are unlikely to be stolen, if fixed they don't fall over, they accommodate more people and they may minimise draughts. The replacement of pews by chairs is usually proposed on the grounds of flexibility and comfort. Pews can sometimes be improved by the addition of cushions, but some pews are unreasonably uncomfortable and may even deter or prevent some people from attending. They may also create difficulties for ambulant disabled people and wheelchair users.

Each scheme involving the removal of pews from historic chapels will be considered on its merits by the connexional Conservation Officer. The following questions will, however, need to be addressed and managing trustees are advised to seek appropriate advice before applying for the necessary consents:

1. Why is the removal of pews being considered? Are they defective in some way, if so what remedial action has been taken? Is it just to follow a fashion or will real flexibility and comfort be gained that could not be achieved in any other way?
2. Can some or all of the pews be modified to make them more comfortable or shortened to provide space for wheelchair users?
3. Are the pews of architectural merit? Were they designed to match other internal fittings as part of an overall scheme? Are they of a particular period or style? What is it about their design which implies that they should be retained?
4. Are the pews of particular historic interest? Are they original to the building or part of a later re-fitting of the interior? Would the removal of the pews adversely affect the appearance of the interior? Are the pews important as a whole group to the interior of the chapel? Would the architectural integrity of the interior be spoiled by the removal of some or all of the pews?
5. Are the pews an integral part of the fabric? Are they built in to the wall panelling or floor, or are they just stood in place (screwed in position)? What would be the effect of the removal of pews on the floor levels, the floor materials, and any wall panelling? Would there have to be alterations to the heating system?

6. Are the proposed replacement chairs of an appropriate design and solid construction? Are they of sufficient quality to enhance the character of the interior?
7. Can the pews be relocated or stored elsewhere in the building in case they are required again in the future?
8. Do any members of the congregation prefer the existing seating, for example the elderly or parents with very young children?
9. If chairs are preferred, where will they be stored and will there be sufficient volunteers to set them out and put them away on a regular basis?
10. The long term costs of the proposals should be evaluated carefully. Pews need little or no maintenance and have a long lifespan. Chairs have a considerably shorter lifespan; their joints weaken and the upholstery becomes worn. Future generations will therefore be committed to a cycle of replacement.
11. The introduction of carpeting (which often accompanies the introduction of upholstered chairs) will change the acoustic qualities of the building noticeably and have an effect on the music and congregational singing. It may also increase or create problems of damp.

Where consent is granted for the removal of pews, conditions will normally be imposed as appropriate in respect of the retention of sample pews, the sale or disposal for use elsewhere of surplus pews and the creation of a photographic and/or drawn record of the pews in situ prior to their removal.