

Quinquennial inspections and bells

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The Church of England was early to introduce the practice of regular inspection of its church buildings to report on its state of repair. This was first introduced in 1955, in the Inspection of Churches Measure. The legal requirement to do this is now in the less-memorably titled Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 2018, Part 3 paras 45 to 48, as amended by the Miscellaneous Provisions Measure 2019 (Section 7).¹

The basis requirement for a quinquennial inspection to report on the condition of the building has not been changed by any recent legislative interventions. What has changed is the definition of who can undertake the inspection and the role of the diocese, exercised by its Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) in this.

The legislation now requires that the inspection is done by a suitably experienced and qualified professional, appointed after consultation with the DAC. The Church buildings Council has given guidance on what a suitable experienced and qualified professional will look like according to the historic significance and architectural complexity of your church building.

The general line of this guidance is that the more complex the building, the more experience and evidence of professional qualification is needed. For example: Competent to inspect Grade I or II* churches; proven experience of work in a sole capacity with listed buildings; proven experience of work with such highly designated church buildings at least at a junior level under a more experienced professional; preferably experience in sole capacity. Relevant accreditation would normally be required, and always for professionals undertaking their first Inspector role.

The appointment is made by the PCC, after taking advice from the DAC. The DAC must maintain a register of people appointed to undertake quinquennial inspections in the diocese. This is not a list of people approved or vetted by the DAC. It is a list of people appointed in the diocese.

A parish that needs to appoint an inspector is encouraged to invite two or three potential inspectors to tender, and then make an appointment after taking advice from the DAC. If a parish is happy with its current inspector it may simply reappoint them, and many choose to do this. If a new inspector is needed a parish might simply see who else is working in the diocese. A new initiative from the CBC and the National Churches Trust will see a new section introduced to the NCT website where people seeking work as an inspector can advertise, and DACs and others can encourage a church to use this as part of appointing a new inspector.²

This is a change from the previous situation where a DAC would approve architects or surveyors to be inspectors in the diocese, and the parish would have to choose someone from the list. This way of working, dating from 1955, did not take account of contemporary regulation around anticompetitive practices and restraint of trade. With the increased availability of relevant professional qualifications and accreditation, there is no longer a need for the DAC to decide if a person was suitable to work with churches in its diocese.

For any professional providing a service it is a core part of their professionalism that they will not give advice on matters outside their professional competence. A church building will include many items whose inspection requires special professional skills. Bells and bell frames are one such thing; others will be electrical and gas safety, lightning protection, organs and fire alarms (if fitted).

For items requiring specialist skills the inspector is helped by being provided with information by the parish in advance of making an inspection. If these are not available the inspector will note this in his report. If an electrical safety test is not available, for example, the inspection report will say that one is needed.

An inspection report will not have detailed comments on the bells included in it. Even where the inspecting architect has knowledge of bells and bell frames it does not follow that the inspection will have a full report on the bell installation. This is not what they are employed to do during their inspection.

An inspector is likely to comment on the presence of bells and will comment on the condition of the building around the bells, whether belfry or bell cote. If the inspector has reason to doubt the safety of an installation, they are likely to indicate this and recommend that a bell hanger makes a separate inspection. Occasionally the inspector will note that the tower captain has reported to them about the condition of the ring, and will include this comment, but not take responsibility for its accuracy.

If an inspection of the bell installation is needed, this is a job for a bell hanger, with relevant professional insurance. It is not part of the role of the Diocesan Bell Adviser. A diocesan adviser may well have the knowledge and experience to understand if an installation is safe or not, but this is not the same as providing a report with the benefit of professional indemnity insurance, nor a specification for works to be done.

Note – List B and silent ringing devices

(See also David Knight's article 'Recent changes in faculty rules', 20 March p.287, and David Bagley's letter 'Faculty for installing a simulator?', 2 Oct p.970)

One new introduction to the items for bells in List B was 'an electric silent ringing device', which will usually mean a simulator. The condition on this item about work to an electrical installation is only to be applied Quinquennial inspections and bells David Knight, Senior Church Buildings Officer, Church Buildings Council where work to the electrical installation is required. If the simulator is simply plugged into an existing power point, no work is done that would require the attention of a qualified electrician. If nothing in the proposals triggers this condition it does not apply. If something to do with the installation meant that work was required to an electrical installation, then the condition should be used.

However, the installation of a simulator does require the authorisation of the Archdeacon, however the simulator is connected to the electricity supply.

1. See <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/church-resources/churchcare/adviceand-guidance-church-buildings/quinquennialinspections> for full documentation and guidance.

2. <https://www.nationalchurchestrust.org/building-advice/professional-trades-directory>.

