Newcastle Diocesan Synod 28.02.26

Church Buildings Support Officer

3 Year extension

February 2026

1. Summary

The Bishop's Council was asked to consider a proposal to submit an application to the national church through the Building for Mission: Church Buildings Support Officers (CBSO) Grant Scheme, to extend the contract for our CBSO (Tim Lewthwaite) from 1 Jul 2026 to 30 Jun 2029.

The CBSO role was introduced with the appointment of Tim Lewthwaite in April 2024, with 88% of costs funded by the national church. The role currently ends 30 June 2026.

The CBSO role provides frontline support to parishes to discern and develop mission-led uses of church buildings to ensure they remain open and sustainable in the long-term, while enabling wider community access and diverse activities that complement worship, strengthen mission, and maximise the spiritual and cultural value of church spaces.

The role also attracts national funding for our parishes with £134k distributed to date alongside a further £59k for Net Zero projects.

At their meeting on 4th February 2026, Bishop's Council approved the proposal to provide the necessary 25% match funding (£40k) to extend the CBSO role for 3 years.

2. Background

The role of Church Buildings Support Officer (CBSO) in the diocese is held by Tim Lewthwaite who joined in April 2024. The role builds upon previous diocesan initiatives to provide parishes with dedicated support to help maintain and repair their buildings so they better serve our mission including:

- Inspired Futures I (2015-2019): a Heritage Lottery Funded (HLF) grant to work with churches in the North East to develop opportunities for heritage conservation, improvements to facilities and access, and to open up potential for wider community use;
- Spirit in Stone (2015-2019): HLF funded development of a website celebrating many of our historic churches including details of their heritage and practical information to encourage people to visit them;
- Inspired Futures II (2017-2019): Historic England grant to provide additional capacity to support Places of Worship at risk;
- Rural Churches for Everyone [RCfE] (2019-2023): a National Lottery Heritage funded grant to develop sustainable futures for 35 of our rural church buildings in the least populated areas of Northumberland.

3. What is the CBSO role?

The role is to provide frontline support to parishes to discern and develop mission-led uses of church buildings. The role helps ensure buildings remain open and sustainable in the long-term, while enabling wider community access and diverse activities that complement worship, strengthen mission, and maximise the spiritual and cultural value of church spaces.

4. Strategic Context

4.1 Deanery Development Planning

Our diocesan witness of 'Seeking, Sharing, Sending' orientates us to turn outward in mission, becoming worshipping communities in which younger and more diverse voices are heard. 2026 sees the implementation of our parish-led Deanery Development Planning, through which deaneries work together to create an overview of church buildings in terms of need, fitness for mission, and longer-term future. This is an opportunity for PCCs to build on the distinct identity of their buildings and how they can be contextually fit for purpose, including serving communities beyond just offering worship, becoming anchors of belonging and expressions of hope.

4.2 National Lottery Heritage Fund

Our previous successful project in partnership with the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Rural Church of Everyone (RCfE), worked with 35 churches grouped into four clusters. The project built on the CBC Open and Sustainable (O&S) criteria to create a repeatable process for a diocesan wide church buildings strategy through 'traffic-lighting' church vulnerability and PCC action-planning, a process that has been shared nationally. The diocese is now working on the next stage of this project which will initially rollout the Open and Sustainable 101 Checklist process to all remaining parishes in the diocese (who wish to participate) which will create a baseline in support of developing an innovative lottery-funded diocesan strategic project partnership aimed at addressing long-term heritage skills and capacity shortfalls, by working with church building- and community-based activities, particularly focussing on young people.

4.3 Diocesan Strategy

In parallel with the above, the diocese is embarking on a partnership with the national church to secure funding in support of our missional and ministry priorities. The first stage of which is for our newly appointed strategic lead (Duncan Podbury) to help secure capacity funding to enable us, together, to discern the mission and ministry priorities for each of our contexts, and to determine the interventions required to help us achieve our vision of *becoming confident Christians turning outwards in mission, enabling more and different people to experience the love of God.*

A building block to support this will be our church buildings fit for mission and, in all places, to achieve longer-term PCC and local resilience, and engagement with wider communities.

5. What is the Need?

Many of our parishes face the challenges of low PCC capacity to manage their church buildings, identifying the potential for mission, acting on QI priorities, and remaining financially sustainable. This is particularly the case for many parishes in deep rural, deprived urban, and post-industrial contexts. Whilst we share these challenges with many other dioceses, we also have our own unique challenges including one of the lowest diocesan financial reserves nationally.

However, too many PCCs are uncertain how to raise the funds necessary for fabric repair. Many churches have aspirations to better serve their communities but lack the resources to make the improvements to facilities and access.

With dedicated, full-time church buildings support, our diocese has capacity to *proactively* assist parishes with developing their church buildings as missional blessings, to support struggling PCCs, and to intervene where fabric condition is deteriorating.

6. How will the CBSO help address our needs?

The CBSO would continue to proactively support lower-capacity PCCs, including some of England's remotest and most deprived parishes. They will also continue to take on casework for any PCC seeking support with planning or undertaking work to fabric, to facilitate community outreach, or improve heritage engagement.

Since coming into post, our CBSO has supported over 40% of our churches at some level, from facilitating grant-funding to general fabric guidance. Funding through the Minor Repairs & Improvements(MRI) scheme 2024-2025, created a 'springboard' for the CBSO and applicant parishes to develop deeper working relationships, allowing for longer-term, sustainable diocesan support. These relationships would be carried forward, with an expanding umbrella of support.

CBSO grant administration allowed investment in church buildings needing immediate intervention and resourced those with opportunities to grow. This capital funding would have been difficult to administer without a dedicated officer, especially in a people-focussed, on-site manner. Future capital funding would make up part of the CBSO brief.

2024-26 CBSO work represents laying groundwork for what we hope is long-term support. Two churches have been removed from the Heritage at Risk Register 2025, and with CBSO assistance, two more expected to be, as well as other church buildings projects seeded or started. 2026-28 would see some of these to completion. The CBSO will continue to build on the network of relationships built up with funders, external organisations, and regional stakeholders – such as NLHF, NCT, Community Action Northumberland, etc.

The CBSO will support our bid to the Lottery through a systematic review of QI reports, training workshops, heritage activities such as identifying and cataloguing portable heritage, and updating and rolling-out the O&S Toolkit more widely. The outcomes of this project will form part of medium-to-long-term strategy with CBSO support.

The work of the CBSO to support the wider rollout of the Open and Sustainable 101 toolkit will further support our Deanery Plans, and accessing external funding opportunities and partnerships for the long-term.

7. Alignment with measures to care for the environment and achieve Net Zero

The CBSO role dovetails with the NZ team to assist in promoting Net Zero and Biodiversity with our parishes. The NZ Quick Wins grants to parishes and managed, alongside the MRI grants, by the CBSO. There is crossover in the partnerships that the CBSO and NZ team are cultivating, and the work of the CBSO also supports that of the DAC.

The CBSO supports those many PCCs that lack resource to envision more confident reordering projects, aligned with NZ targets, and provides shared learning, assistance with grant applications and project management. The CBSO also assists in encouraging PCCs in biodiversity and churchyard rewilding in both urban and rural parishes.

8. How will we monitor, evaluate and learn?

Evaluation will build on the current role as follows:

- Collate and distil relevant research findings
- Use a community development approach to further build networks within and between benefices
- Build on good practice from RCfE and in CofE Environment Programme and Growing the Rural Church
- Use 'Open and Sustainable' criteria as robust framework for assessment by PCCs and clergy
- Use scores to identify priority areas for action for next five years

The CBSO will develop appropriate outcomes, including baselines and regular measurements, to provide the data for evaluation:

- Grants applied for and success rate
- Church building conservation projects through repairs completed
- Reordering projects seen to completion
- Mission initiatives enabled by remodelling of buildings
- New partnerships enabled by sharing of our buildings
- Heritage and pilgrimage projects enabled
- Additional uses of buildings by wider community

The role will support the ongoing work with Deanery Development Groups to evolve their Deanery Mission Plans, and support the work of the DMPC, DAC and Generous Giving Team. The CBSO will support PCCs to be better equipped to work confidently to enact a plan in which church buildings no longer limit vision but are increasingly regarded as an asset for mission and service. Good governance will be a prerequisite for the CBSO through clear lines of accountability and responsibility alongside proportionate disciplines and mechanisms to provide oversight and control of activities. This will include oversight from the diocesan leadership team

9. Next Steps

Await the funding decision from the *Buildings for Mission* national team which is due by mid-March 2026.