

## **Guideline Leaflet LB10 : Considering Changes to Church Seating**

This Guidelines Leaflet is intended to help anyone considering making changes to the seating of a place of worship still in use as such. It is designed to be of help in most situations, but especially for listed buildings, where alterations require consent through the Baptist Union's Listed Buildings Advisory Committee. It gives no answers but suggests a systematic process for shaping proposals.

This Guideline Leaflet is regularly reviewed and updated. To ensure that you are using the most up to date version, please download the leaflet from the BUGB website at [www.baptist.org.uk/resources](http://www.baptist.org.uk/resources)

The date on which the leaflet was last updated can be found on the download page.

# LB10 : Considering Changes to Church Seating

## INTRODUCTION

These Notes are provided by the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee to assist Baptist Trust Companies, churches and their advisors.

See other leaflets:

LB01	<i>Introducing the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee</i>
LB02	<i>Applying to the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee</i>
LB03	<i>Professional Advisors and Applications to the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee</i>
LB04	<i>Listed Buildings Application Form</i>
LB05	<i>Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme</i>
LB06	<i>Looking after your Church Buildings</i>
LB07	<i>Building Materials and External Fittings in Listed Churches</i>
LB08	<i>Furnishings in Listed Church Buildings</i>
LB09	<i>Photographic Recording</i>
PC03	<i>Five Year Inspection Reports – Church Buildings</i>

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### 1a. What do you want to achieve?

This step encourages you to ask what you want to be able to do that the current seating does not allow. What is the range of things that you now do in the building, and what would you like to do differently – and why? Focus on the nature of what you want to do, the objective itself, rather than the means of achieving it by any particular solution.

An important part of this stage is ensuring that the objective is shared by the worshipping congregation and any other local stakeholders.

Later on, the output from this stage will probably help shape the 'Statement of Need'.

### 1b. What do you have and what is its significance?

In parallel with 1a, it is crucial to consider what you now have and its significance. This word 'significance' is a convenient piece of jargon, broadly meaning 'importance' – why does the present seating matter? This covers both the seating itself and also its setting and relationship to the rest of the interior, including e.g. other furnishings, the floor and perhaps wall surfaces.

Unfortunately, there is a strong temptation to skip this step, on the assumption that the answer is already known. But experience shows that it has to be done properly. The significance of the seating will reflect the different values people attach to it – historical, artistic, architectural, social, personal, liturgical, archaeological, and so on. It is often helpful to have someone who is unfamiliar with the building to look at the seating independently. In certain cases, expert advice might be required, but generally a less specialist approach is sufficient.

Later on, this assessment can be developed into the 'Statement of Significance'.

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<sup>1</sup> See also: The Baptist Union: PC04: *Redeveloping or Altering Church Premises* and LB08: *Furnishings in Listed Church Buildings*.

## **2. What are the options?**

After steps 1a and 1b you should generate a list of options. These will take account both of your objectives and the significance of what you currently have.

Among the ideas, make sure to include options for no-change and minimal change. These can be very helpful in understanding the relative strengths, weaknesses and feasibility of any other options. It is a common mistake to consider just one option, rather than several.

Possibilities which are sometimes overlooked include restoring or refurbishing the existing seating, or adapting it for increased comfort. Other approaches to improve flexibility include the shortening or removal of a few fixed elements.

If any new seating is being proposed, it is vital to think hard about its quality and its relationship to the overall interior.

### **2a. Modify the options because of financial and physical constraints**

Money is usually a constraint, and so is the layout and structure of the existing building. Think about such things as the heating system, the flooring (and what is beneath it), any differences in floor levels, and any wall panelling. In step 1b you should have identified any archaeological implications, such as burials or memorials. The location of water and drains may affect your plans, and such features as baptismal pools. Think too about access.

### **2b. Modify the options to help meet the objectives**

Draw up a list of pros and cons for each option, showing how well each one meets your objectives, and for each of the cons, think whether you could modify the option to manage the difficulty. This will not only improve the options but is important at stage 5, when deciding between them.

### **2c. Modify the options to mitigate or reduce loss of significance**

For each option, think carefully about what significance will be lost – referring back to 1b. Then think about what might be done to avoid or reduce this loss in each case.

For example, if it is the appearance of a group of seating that has value, you might propose maintaining a coherent block of seating in its original place. Or if seats have historical significance, but their present location and layout does not, you might consider asking to change their position or to incorporate them in new work.

In all cases where changes are planned to seating of any significance, an appropriate record should be made of it before such changes begin, with copies deposited in the church records, the Baptist Union and the local authority's Historic Environment Record. Making this record cannot be put forward as a fundamental reason for change. And if change is permitted, you may want or be required to keep a selection of the existing seating for posterity. It is also common to offer unwanted seating for sale and re-use elsewhere to avoid wanton destruction.

## **Back to step 2 : What are the options?**

At this point, through 2a, 2b and 2c, you will probably have modified the options and may need to go round the loop several times.

### 3. On balance, what is to be proposed?

The final choice between the options is likely to involve a trade-off between the likely benefits of change and the loss of significance. The process you have been through should help in making a clear case to the Baptist Union Listed Buildings Advisory Committee, although it cannot guarantee that your proposals will be acceptable to all those who will have a say in the outcome. Informal consultation is encouraged by the BULBAC and should avoid unnecessary delays once the formal application is submitted.

As part of the formal application you will need to have clear photographs and a plan of the existing seating and a plan (perhaps also a drawing) of the proposed changes.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

### Box 1: What seating do you have?

- Of what material(s) is the seating made?
- Is the existing seating fixed to the floor and/or wall ?
- Is the seating all straight, or are some elements curved or angled?
- Are there any box pews (that is, pews with doors)?
- Was any of the seating intended for schoolchildren, deacons, singers or other special groups?
- Do you know the age of the seating?
- Does the seating appear to have been altered significantly since its introduction?
- Has some seating been removed previously?
- If there is a gallery, how does its seating compare with that downstairs?
- Does the seating seem to be of the same age and/or design as other fittings or furniture (e.g. the pulpit)?
- Are there any distinctive features, such as pew numbers, book ledges, umbrella holders, hat pegs, communion-cup holders, etc?
- Does any of the seating have special associations, e.g. with particular people or events?
- How might you describe the character of the design (e.g. industrial, rustic, Gothic, mechanical, artistic)?

### **Box 2: Flooring and wall surfaces**

- Is the floor level, sloping, or stepped? Would any change be necessary?
- If the present seating is on a raised base (or "pew platform"), would that – or the gangway level – need to be altered?
- Might any doors be affected by alterations to floor levels?
- Is a new floor finish being proposed? If so, could it affect the "breathability" of the floor? How long should the new finish last?
- Might the heating, plumbing, baptismal pool or under-floor ventilation be affected by any changes?
- Are there archaeological implications if changes are made to the floor?
- If the present seating is fixed to the wall or wall panelling, what will be the effect of any change?

### **Box 3: Changes to the present seating**

- Can the present seating be adapted or altered to make it more suitable for your needs?
- If you wish to adapt, shorten or remove some fixed seating, how will that affect the appearance of the seating and the interior as a whole?
- If the purpose is to make space for wheelchair-users, can that be achieved within any existing blocks of seating?
- Are there any gallery columns or raised pipework within the present blocks of seating?
- What will the effect of any changes be on the seating capacity?

#### **Box 4: Introducing new seating**

- How long is any new seating expected to last?
- What are the long-term costs (capital cost now, expected life and replacement cycle)?
- Will the existing seating capacity be altered?
- How suitable will any new seating be for people of different shapes and sizes, and for those who are more or less agile?
- Have you considered all types of seating, including newly designed pews, movable short pews (or benches), linked chairs, freestanding chairs?
- What will be done with books, coats, umbrellas, walking sticks, etc?
- How will any new seating respond to – and affect – the visual character of the interior, including colour, shape, materials, style, etc?
- Might any changes to seating (and floors or wall surfaces) affect the acoustics?
- If movable seating is proposed, have you considered: the people and effort required to change layouts; storage space; wear and tear (affecting seats and floor surfaces)?
- How tidy will the interior be?
- How will parents cope with small children (who might crawl away, stand on seats, accidentally move chairs, etc)?
- How easy will it be to clean the seating and the floor?

The Baptist Union is grateful to Trevor Cooper and Sarah Brown, whose work on church seating (*Pews, Benches & Chairs*, published by the Ecclesiological Society in 2011) has provided the basis for the present document.

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This is one of a series of *Guidelines* that are offered as a resource for Baptist ministers and churches. They have been prepared by the Legal and Operations Team and are, of necessity, intended only to give very general advice in relation to the topics covered. These guidelines should not be relied upon as a substitute for obtaining specific and more detailed advice in relation to a particular matter.

The staff in the Legal and Operations Team at Baptist House (or your regional Trust Company) will be very pleased to answer your queries and help in any way possible. It helps us to respond as efficiently as possible to the many churches in trust with us if you write to us and set out your enquiry as simply as possible.

The Legal and Operations Team also support churches that are in trust with the East Midland Baptist Trust Company Limited.

**If your holding trustees are one of the other Baptist Trust Corporations you must contact your own Trust Corporation for further advice. A list of contact details is provided above. If you have private trustees they too should be consulted as appropriate.**

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