

APPOINTING A NEW INSPECTING ARCHITECT

The Inspection of Churches Measure lays down that each consecrated church must be inspected every five years by an architect or surveyor whose name is on the approved list maintained by the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC). To save tedious repetition, for the remainder of this paper, the word “architect” should be taken to include “chartered building surveyor”.

The Inspecting Architect appointed to carry out the quinquennial survey will normally be asked to prepare specifications and oversee major repairs, and to advise generally on matters affecting the church building and its surroundings.

You may be looking for a new architect because the previous one has retired, or because the PCC is not happy with the service it has been getting. If the latter, you will need to give notice to your existing architect. A letter is all that is needed. At this point, it may be that you will receive a fee account for any recent work your architect has done for the PCC, which has not previously been charged for. In passing, it is worth noting that some architects are generous in their charging policy to PCCs, and in particular with regard to abortive projects. If their appointment is being terminated, it is perhaps to be understood if a fee account is raised for outstanding work.

Who can you choose?

The DAC maintains a list of architects and surveyors who have been approved for inspecting churches. The practice in the Diocese of Oxford is that any PCC can select any architect on the list. The individual choice does not have to be approved by the DAC.

You can obtain a copy of the list from the DAC Secretary. The DAC does not recommend individual names: the choice is the decision of the PCC. On the other hand, the DAC Secretary is happy to suggest names which might be considered for a shortlist and can identify other parishes which have experience of the people concerned. The following is a suggested procedure which has worked well:

1. Appoint a small group to meet with the architects and come back to the PCC with a recommendation.
2. The group should select a short list of perhaps three names, from the approved list.
3. Architects can then be contacted and asked whether they would be happy to be considered.
4. Assuming that they are, the group could then either
 - a) meet the architects at the church for a discussion, or
 - b) ask if the group can visit their offices.

There are pros and cons to both a) or b). If you go to them, you can get a feel of how big or small the architect’s practice is, its general style, and the resources available to it.

You will also learn about the sort of work done by the practice, and how your requirements fit in. If you do visit an architect’s office, take along some photographs and a ground plan of the church – these will help explain what the building is like, and what your current concerns are.

On the other hand it can be revealing to see how an architect reacts to your church, given the chance of a first-hand look at the building. How well can the architect interpret the features of the church and how interested is he or she in it?

What to look for and what to ask

5. Geographical location

It may seem sensible to choose the architect who lives nearest to your church, but this should not influence your choice unduly. Most architects travel widely, and will not always need to make a special trip to your church. However you should be clear on the matter of travelling expenses.

6. Conservation skills and experience

The main requirement for looking after a traditional building is a sympathetic approach to materials and construction methods. The DAC puts great emphasis on this in selecting architects for the list. It is most important that an architect has plenty of experience with older buildings, but these need not necessarily be churches.

7. Fees

This is an important area. The fees for quinquennial surveys are in most cases paid by the deanery from the deanery inspection account to which parishes contribute each year. Practice varies on “extras” (travelling expenses, photography, copying etc). An increasing number of architects are charging these on top of the standard fees – the diocesan scheme allows them to do this.

More significant is the architect’s policy on charging for other work. Architects will charge for substantial work, for example specifying and over-seeing a re-roofing project. You should ask about the fee structure for this type of work. Also, and most importantly, you should be clear about the architect’s policy on “casual” advice. You will want to consult him or her about all sorts of matters, including possible adaptation projects which may never get off the ground. How much advice and service is the architect prepared to give before charging a fee?

8. Mobility

Is the architect happy to use ladders? This is a question which the DAC covers when considering the inclusion of an architect on the list. Nevertheless people’s physical circumstances can alter, and it is quite appropriate to discuss this point, particularly in relation to the type of access ladders at your church, for example in the tower.

9. Church experience

What experience has the architect of parish life? If the architect is actively involved in his or her own church, this will be a bonus, however it is not essential. What is important is that the person is in sympathy with the requirements of the parish and is prepared to work with the voluntary structures of the PCC and/or fabric committee.

Appointing someone you know

It may be that you or someone on your PCC would like to appoint an architect who is already known to the parish, and who may or may not be on the approved list.

To deal with the latter point first, any architect can apply to come on to the diocesan approved list at any time. There is a questionnaire with accompanying notes, and an intending architect needs to complete this and return it to the DAC Secretary. The DAC will then decide whether or not the person has the appropriate skills and experience.

As a general rule, however, the DAC does not encourage PCCs to use architects (whether or not they are already on the list) who have a close connection with the parish. Conflicts of interest can sometimes occur which may place the PCC or its architect in a difficult position. Even where there is no direct conflict of interest, the relationship may cause difficulty or embarrassment to the PCC, if things do not work out satisfactorily.

This is especially so if the architect is doing the work for nothing or for a reduced fee, perhaps as a form of Christian stewardship. A number of parishes have found in the past that it can be difficult in these situations to apply the necessary pressure if things have not progressed as smoothly as they should. For this reason, it is usually wiser to maintain a strictly arms-length relationship and to avoid appointing a parishioner or even a close friend of a parishioner, so that the PCC's hands are not tied.

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October 2009