

Reading Deanery Synod Motion Supporting Paper

The Motion

"Reading Deanery Synod a) propose that all reasonable steps are taken to influence HM Government to amend planning regulations so that there is a presumption of permission for the installation of solar panels on the roofs of churches, where appropriate, and the installation of heat pumps, and other renewable technologies, even if the churches are listed buildings; and facilitate the installation of renewable technologies in other buildings as part of a programme of measures to increase energy efficiency; and b) propose that Oxford Diocesan Synod pass a motion to support this proposal, and refer this motion to General Synod."

Introduction

We are in a Climate Emergency. We need our churches to achieve net zero. How are we going to achieve this?

Churches are built with the most appropriate orientation to use solar energy via solar panels. Using renewable energy should be a priority action in order to address Climate Change. An additional advantage is that generating energy will reduce energy bills.

The Issue

If a church is not listed, then fitting solar panels is Currently if you want solar panels on the roof of a listed church, (or a church in a conservation area) then it is not "permitted development", but planning permission is required. Typically, solar panels may only be fitted if they are not visible from street level.

There is often a view that solar panels have a negative visual impact. So permission for installation of solar panels would often not be given as it would be considered their visual impact will cause harm to the character of the listed building.

Do solar panels really have such a negative visual impact?

Churches should be a beacon to world. It would be a powerful witness to our local communities our commitment to combatting climate change if they could see our church roofs had solar panels installed on them.

Planning Considerations

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) includes a presumption in favour of sustainable development and this is reflected in para 38. "Local planning authorities should approach decisions on proposed development in a positive and creative way. . . . Decision-makers at every level should seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible."

Despite the overarching objective, the environmental objective in para 8 c) , which includes "and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy", mitigating the effects of climate change does not appear to be a priority in the planning system.

In determining applications, the NPPF requires local planning authorities to consider the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset. Para 200 states: "Any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within its setting), should require clear and convincing justification."

If the visual impact of solar panels is considered to cause harm to the character of the church as a building of special architectural and historical interest, then the planning authority would need to believe there is compelling justification for their installation.

The balance is weighed against installation of solar panels on the roofs of listed churches. A presumption of permission for the installation of solar panels on the roofs of listed churches would address this.

Other renewable technologies

It may be appropriate for battery storage also to be installed so that electricity generated whilst a church is unoccupied in daytime may be stored for use at another time.

Heat pumps are likely to be the most efficient technology to heat churches, and the aim would be for sufficient electricity to be generated to power heat pumps of sufficient capacity.

Other technologies may be developed and adoption of such technologies should be facilitated as they become available.

Other buildings

It may be more appropriate and/or more cost-effective in the short-term to install solar panels on other buildings adjacent to a church. However, a solution will need to be found in future to achieve net zero for that church.

Appropriateness of fitting solar panels

It may be that a church roof is not suitable for structural or locational reasons. The effect of passing this motion should not be viewed as it being necessary to install solar panel panels on all church roofs – though it should be borne in mind that another solution will need to be found to achieve net zero for that church.

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