



Finding Futures for Scotland's Churches: Further Information

Why are Churches Important?

A rich tradition at the heart of communities across Scotland is at risk, with around one third of the country's 3,000 places of worship predicted to close by the end of this decade. With over 100 of these heritage buildings already closed since COVID, the crisis is an immediate one, and one that constitutes a national emergency for the heritage sector since many of these churches hold tangible and intangible cultural heritage significance.

Scotland's church buildings and their contents represent a wealth of cultural heritage built-up over generations. There are over 3,000 such buildings, belonging to a range of different denominations, and encompassing a variety of building types and periods of construction, from the early medieval period to the more recent past. In addition to their religious and ceremonial significance, they also possess tangible architectural, historical, archival, genealogical, archaeological and artistic legacies that can be of local, regional, national, and international importance.

What will the Finding Futures for Scotland's Churches project do?

The project will focus on three key areas:

1). **Rapid Needs Analysis:** We will immediately begin collating country-wide information on a) heritage value (including built and material culture, architectural and setting significance), and; b) community value (including use, need and social value) and related Intangible Cultural Heritage. We will prioritise the 250+ churches currently at risk of closure and sale as listed by Scotland's Churches Trust database. Existing information from local authorities, Historic Environment Scotland, and specific projects and initiatives will be collated and where knowledge gaps are identified, heritage survey will be undertaken as required, using the award-winning Recording Churches Project as a model and with a preference for engaging local communities. We envisage at least five surveys carried out with local communities. Where knowledge gaps are identified regarding community value we will apply the University of Stirling's Social Value Toolkit to provide the information, working with up to five local community-representative organisations from amongst the network created by the Make Your Mark campaign, which the Society helps coordinate.

This information will be made publicly accessible through a dedicated microsite with a regularly updated database and blog; gaps in the Canmore database, and relevant Historic Environment Records, will be updated toward the end of this project phase. This will be a swift process, made publicly accessible, which will help inform immediate decision-making and will continue as an evolving exercise. Initial results are likely to be enhanced as work continues.



2). **Initiating a Finding Futures Action Group and Prioritising the Need:** We will draw together people and organisations working within this diverse area to explore practical solutions, share resources and prioritise sites for further action. This group will regularly meet over the 24 months to undertake the following sequential actions: Identify, collate and support information gathering for the Rapid Needs Analysis; Create a list of priority sites of very high heritage and/or community value; develop a Second Phase of the project to address this list (see below). As part of the project we will organise a symposium half-way through the project to update and discuss the Rapid Needs Analysis. Initiating the action group will require working with Historic Churches Scotland to garner the perspective of existing community-use (and to inform the Assessment Phase) and will also involve regular updates to the Places of Worship Forum.

3.) **Developing Second Phase:** Building on the initial analysis and action group, we will develop a plan for providing creative solutions for as many religious buildings on the priority list as possible. We will hold a workshop to allow different organisations to feed into this and submit funding bid(s) in Autumn 2026 as the main output and legacy.

Why are the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and Scotland's Churches Trust running this project?

The Society has considerable experience of working in partnership to deliver this type of project, most recently through its national Scottish Archaeological Research Framework (ScARF) and subsequent regional and thematic framework projects. Through these projects the Society has a demonstrable track record of working in partnership with local authorities, national bodies, academic, commercial, third sector and community stakeholders to create a knowledge and value assessments. These existing frameworks are designed to inform heritage significance, research priorities and therefore decision making. They assess the current resource and knowledge base and then formulate key research questions and recommendations. These are then used to across the heritage sector in Scotland including aiding the specification of planning requirements to avoid loss of heritage knowledge during development and as the justification for funding for research and conservation projects from community projects through to multi-year AHRC academic research programs. We have capacity to deal with all aspects of project administration, reporting and promotion, with experience of managing grant funding and attracting press coverage. Through projects such as the *Make Your Mark* campaign that the Society administers, we have experience of creating resources such as the Inclusive Volunteering Toolkit, hosting them on accessible digital platforms, and ensuring that they are used. We have experience of working with most of the main partner organisations and through our experience of running the Dig It! Project are experienced in opening-up heritage to new and/or excluded audiences and have a network in place to identify community-representative partner organisations for the community value surveys.

Scotland's Churches Trust has almost half a century of experience working closely with the owners of Scotland's religious built heritage, providing advice, support and small grants, aimed at improving the long-term resilience of church buildings, and advocating on their behalf. It maintains a national places of worship database and has recently developed the only public resource that currently monitors and publicises the full extent of the ongoing crisis, mapping Scotland's closing churches as information becomes available and working with congregations and communities looking towards the future of their local church buildings.



Over the years it has grown a national network of churches, of all denominational affiliations and none, that it signposts from its popular website. It holds and maintains the trust of the wider heritage sector, policy makers and print and broadcast media on all matters relating to Scotland's ecclesiastical built and cultural heritage and possesses a full appreciation of the varied legal, ethical and financial issues surrounding the challenges of church ownership. It has also recently developed, with pilot funding from Historic Environment Scotland, a rapid church recording methodology and grown a national network of church recording volunteers that have begun the task of documenting the contents of closing churches before closure and sale. The output of this project has already been of some use to communities around Scotland interested in taking ownership of their local church buildings. Since 1978, Scotland's Churches Trust has made the long-term sustainability and survival of Scottish church buildings its fundamental priority.



Using money raised by National Lottery players, The National Lottery Heritage Fund supports projects that connect people and communities with the UK's heritage.

Finding Futures for Scotland's Churches is made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, this project will provide a rapid assessment and of the heritage assets of churches, prioritising those at risk of closure. The project will create a comprehensive framework of information to help prioritise significant heritage at risk, and mobilise and support individuals, communities and organisations to find sustainable uses for Scotland's church buildings.