

OUTREACH TO OWNERSHIP: 'BRIDGING THE GAP'

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A pilot research project exploring the barriers and solutions to sustainable community ownership of historic rural places of worship.



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**Churches
Conservation
Trust**



Heritage
Trust
Network



**Churches Trust
for Cumbria**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Outreach to Ownership¹ is a pilot research programme¹ developed to explore innovative approaches to inclusive community engagement across cultural sector organisations in Scotland and England. **Bridging the Gap** is one of the pilot research projects that forms part of this programme. It has been delivered by the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT), Historic Churches Scotland (HCS), Heritage Trust Network (HTN) and Churches Trust for Cumbria (CTfC).

The importance of the nation's historic places of worship, as both built heritage assets and valuable community assets, is well documented, as are the complex issues that these buildings face as they struggle to remain relevant as places of worship in the C21. Within this landscape, communities are playing an increasingly important role in taking ownership of, and/or managing, their historic places of worship as they try to carve out a sustainable future for them. The challenges and opportunities facing these groups are, however, under-researched from a community-perspective, particularly in rural areas where the issues are potentially more complex.

Working with a small number of community groups from rural historic churches in England and Scotland, and other sectoral stakeholders, a combination of desktop research, surveys and online/in-person workshops have been undertaken to begin to explore these issues with communities to better understand:

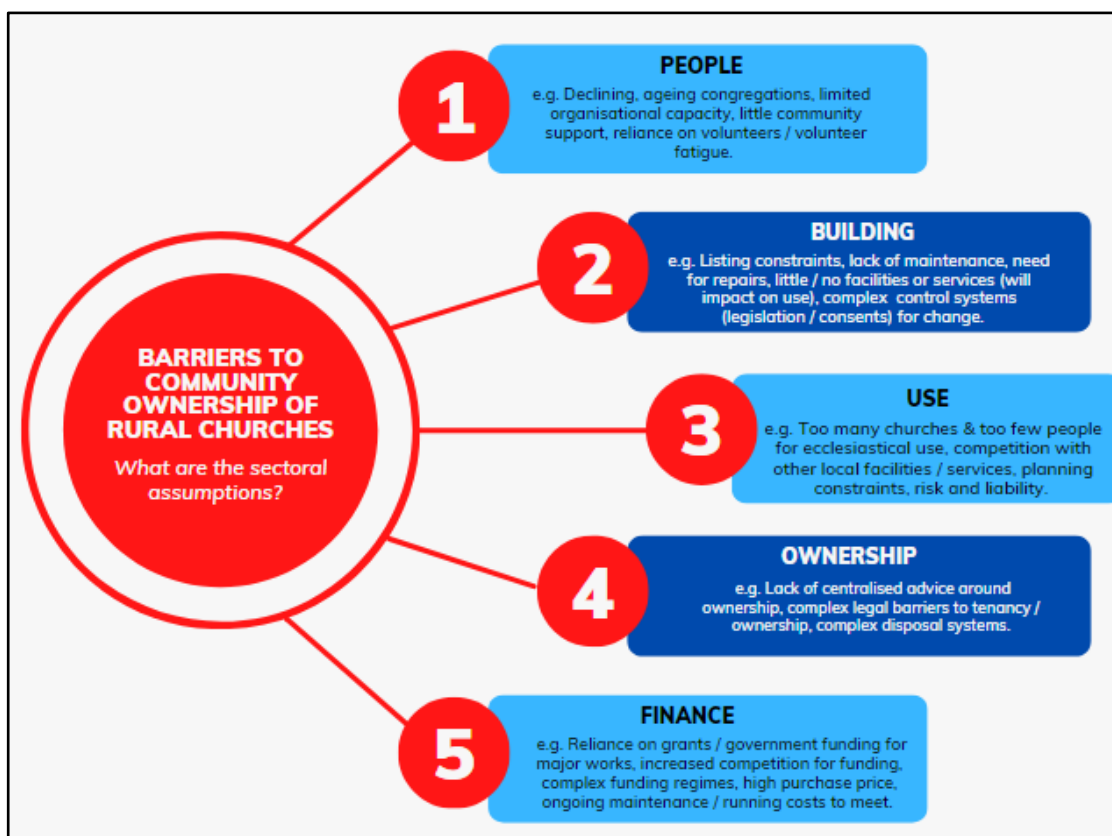
- The barriers to sustainable community ownership of rural historic churches.
- How these barriers have been overcome.
- What communities need to overcome these barriers.

¹ The programme is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and managed by Historic England and Historic Environment Scotland.

Drawing upon assumptions identified within the sector, and the feedback from stakeholders and communities as part of this research, the following key findings have been identified:

What are the barriers?

The barriers can be categorised under 5 key headings: **People; Building; Use; Ownership; Finance**, although in reality it is more complex and the barriers are often interrelated, interdependent and transcend themes.



- **People:** The decline in congregation numbers, the lack of volunteers (and competition for those available) and the ability to recruit new volunteers, in a competitive arena, particularly younger people. In addition, the lack of skills and capacity amongst volunteers, which can be more acute in rural areas where there are fewer people. Reluctance to see changes in the use and operation of these buildings.
- **Building:** The listing status (particularly CofE buildings), and the restraints of legislative frameworks/consent systems to manage physical change to incorporate modern facilities and new uses. Lack of maintenance, and the repair liability and the ongoing need to fundraise for maintenance and repair works.

- **Use:** The difficulty in identifying new uses which do not duplicate existing provisions, particularly in rural areas that are already well served or have very small populations and limited needs. Navigating the complexity of legislative frameworks/consent systems to enable new uses, and where to find resources to help with this.
- **Ownership:** The complexity and lack of centralised advice around community ownership. The need to remove or simplify legal barriers/policy issues to ownership, along with better signposting and information for communities. The risk and liability associated with playing a more active role in ownership and management of new uses.
- **Finance:** Raising funds to purchase a building along with affording ongoing running costs, maintenance and repair works. The recognition that many church buildings are not financially sustainable (with their current uses) and are over-reliant on grant funding.
- **Other:** Lack of support and clarity from the sector/faith groups.

Overcoming Barriers

Drawing upon advice from established community groups who successfully own and/or manage their church buildings, the following key solutions were noted as having potential to help communities overcome the barriers that they face:

- **People:** Engaging professional advice and introducing paid roles can alleviate pressures on volunteers (but has a cost implication). Extending the reach and collaboration with the wider community (businesses, schools, social groups etc.).
- **Building:** Finding the unique 'story' of your church, seeing built heritage as an asset rather than a constraint. Understanding your building. Having a clear vision and business plan. Having a maintenance regime and phased / prioritised repair programme.
- **Use:** Community consultation is essential to understand needs for wider use within the local area. Openness to new ideas and new/multiple uses.
- **Ownership:** Establish good communication with legal owners and stakeholders. Accessing support and forming partnerships.
- **Finance:** Knowledge of the building's repair and maintenance costs. Research funds available to your use/building and have a fundraising policy to create a sink fund.

It is evident that having the right people involved, a good understanding of your building (significance, costs, capacity for change), together with a clear vision and business plan, and

good communication with all stakeholders, are important ingredients to underpin sustainable community ownership.

Key Recommendations

Some of the key recommendations to emerge from this pilot research include:

Policy:

- Church owners/faith organisations should establish a formalised and public policy on the process of disposing of their buildings, making it clear and accessible to community groups.
- Church owners/faith organisations should consider a community first policy, whereby communities are given the first opportunity to purchase their building at the market rate (or less, depending on local circumstances) - recognising that they are community buildings.
- Church owners/faith organisations need policies that ensure that they act considerately and comprehensively when selling buildings to community groups (e.g. the purchase should have full road access to the building, have a recent building survey to understand its condition and they need full rights to use the building as they wish after purchase, free of restraints).
- Funders and decision makers need to better understand the multi-functional use of many church buildings (including occasional worship), and funding criteria needs to reflect this.
- Sector leading organisations need to continue to promote the benefits of volunteering in heritage and the opportunities available, including in respect of church buildings.
- Church buildings need to become more mainstream in the collective thinking of heritage, with sector leading organisations becoming more involved in the future of these buildings.

Practice:

- Denominations and sector bodies need staff in post to support community groups and give the guidance required.
- Church owning organisations need to be transparent about the future of individual buildings, to allow communities to discuss and plan their response to a building sale.
- Resources need to be developed for community groups in Scotland (this is underway through HCS and HTN).

- Existing support resources should be clearly sign-posted by faith organisations, heritage groups and support organisations.
- Groups and organisations taking ownership of their buildings need a support network to connect with one another and share information and experiences.
- Community groups need to understand their buildings (running costs, maintenance, significance etc).
- Community groups need to be connected with support for volunteer management/recruitment, and perhaps funding, to help boost and thank people for their efforts.
- Community groups need to embrace new uses and activities in their buildings that may not have been done before. For example, secular community activities and non-religious wedding ceremonies, which can bring in new people and vital income.
- Funding is needed by community groups for maintenance and adapting buildings for new uses, including putting in key services (such as water/electricity).
- Funding is needed to help stakeholders better support communities.

Research:

- Study to be extended over time to include more community groups and results shared with a wider audience.
- Existing research needs to be shared more effectively and with new/wider audiences. Particularly in areas looking at the benefits of church buildings and how they can be used.

Conclusions

Working with stakeholders and communities, the research identified a number of barriers to the sustainable community ownership of rural church buildings, and ways to help communities to overcome them. This has led to a number of important recommendations for the ecclesiastical, heritage and funding sectors, and for communities themselves. With community ownership of rural historic churches expected to increase, this pilot project provides an important platform for the sector to consider how they can support communities in their ownership journey, in turn helping to provide a more sustainable future for an important part of our built heritage.

To read the report in full, please visit/contact: Sarah Pearce, Development Officer for Scotland, Heritage Trust Network, via sarah.pearce@heritagetrustnetwork.org.uk