

The Virtuous Circles project proposes an innovative, low-energy and low-impact solution, introducing a complementary new use into a historic church in order to generate revenue, and take a positive step toward financial sustainability. The Virtuous Circles approach is designed to be appropriate for either closed or open churches.

The objectives of the Virtuous Circles project are as follows:

Discretion

- As little alteration to the exterior of the church as possible, retaining the cherished appearance of rural churches in their landscapes.

Sustainability

- The new spaces should be designed to be as environmentally conscious as possible, in both the specification and fabrication of the fabric, and in the operation and daily use of their inhabitation.

Respect

- Design should be underpinned by analysis of significance and be sensitive to the unique setting of a church's interior.

Reversibility

- Intervention should be demountable and removable, leaving the church interior as complete as possible. Components should be reusable or recyclable at the end of their life-cycle.

Retention

- Wherever possible the Chancel must remain unaltered, and available to community and visitors for contemplation and prayer

Turnastone is being developed as a pilot for this national project, with the support of the Vowchurch and Turnastone PCC and the Diocese of Hereford.

The proposal for overnight accommodation for visitors builds on the growing popularity of "champing", a Churches Conservation Trust initiative that offers camping within churches across the country.

The project at St Mary's will be a high quality design that will be both appropriate and sympathetic to the space at Turnastone. It will act as a pilot for other churches that may be interested in learning from or replicating the design elsewhere and a Design and Development Guide will be produced as part of the project.

Context

The Church of England is responsible for maintaining 15,700 churches. Funding for their upkeep has traditionally been the responsibility of individual congregations, with centralised grant-funding available to provide additional support.

In recent years as rural populations have decreased and average congregation sizes have waned, it has become increasingly difficult to fund essential works of repair. There is no longer a dedicated Grants for Places of Worship fund and securing funding is increasingly challenging.

Responsibility for coordination of building work falls with the incumbent clergy of a Parish, who might be responsible for several churches across a joint benefice, and the complex management of fund-raising and procuring construction contracts can become a burden, potentially distracting attention away from primary mission.

Securing the future of the United Kingdom's historic churches is considered by many to be the greatest conservation challenge of the coming generation.

- Church of England maintains 15,700 churches
- 78% are listed and costly to maintain
- 57% are in rural areas where only 17% of the population live
- 91% of rural churches are listed, compared to 55% in cities
- 45% of England's Grade I listed buildings are Church of England churches
- 50% of churches have fewer than 38 regular attendees
- 20-25 churches have closed every year for the last 20 years
- 85% of the population visit a church building each year
- 68% of the population consider the church an important part of their local community
- Average capital expenditure on upkeep is £10,000 per church per year
Totalling £157m per year across all churches
- In 2006 the Church of England estimated a required £925m repair work in the next 5 years
- The Church of England spent £110m each year up until 2010

Statistics from Church Buildings Review Group – October 2015

In 2018 the National Lottery Heritage Fund announced the launch of its Inspiring Ideas programme – a strategic funding initiative to support projects exploring innovative ideas and testing new approaches to managing, caring and funding historic places of worship. Inspiring Ideas aims to encourage ways to help make churches financially resilient by diversifying their community uses and safeguarding the buildings for future generations.

Herefordshire Churches Tourism Group successfully applied for funding for the Virtuous Circles project, including a programme of support and capacity building for churches interested in increasing their tourism potential across the Diocese of Hereford, and the feasibility and development work associated with the Turnastone accommodation project.

The Diocese of Hereford is statistically the most rural Diocese in England, with 409 churches across a population of 319,000. This results in 780 people per church, nearly half the number of the next smallest Diocese at St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich.

The sparsity of population and abundance of attractive villages makes Herefordshire a popular visitor destination. Directing visitors towards the rich history of the county's churches is the primary objective of the Herefordshire Churches Tourism Group.

The latest designs and drawings for the Turnastone project are due to be presented to the PCC in the next month or so and will be on display to the public in due course.

If you would like to find out more about the project please contact the Project Manager, turnastone@visitherefordshirechurches.co.uk