Places of Worship: Planning Forward Event Outcomes Report

About The Event

Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS) is an umbrella body for organisations working in the built environment in Scotland. Drawing on extensive expertise in a membership-led forum, BEFS informs, debates and advocates on the strategic issues, opportunities and challenges facing Scotland's existing built environment. BEFS is a supporting member of the Climate Heritage Network.

On 27 August 2025, BEFS arranged an interactive conference for all stakeholders engaged with or interested in the future of buildings that currently serve as Places of Worship, or have previously done so, in all parts of Scotland.

The participative conference was held in The Pyramid in Anderston, Glasgow, a former Church of Scotland property that is now a community-owned multi-purpose hub (scale model pictured).

The event brought together planning authority decision makers and those actively involved in: owning, managing or running places of worship; funding places of worship; giving heritage advice, and any national organisation that has an interest in the sustainability of communities who may become owners of places of worship.

The 50 participants in attendance included Members of two Working Groups facilitated by BEFS: the Places of Worship Forum and the Conservation Officers Group, in addition to representatives of stakeholder bodies from the public, private and voluntary sector. The event purpose was to:

- Share best practice and exchange ideas;
- Highlight case studies and build connections;
- Discuss how best to approach the busy pipeline of pending applications;
- Explore perspectives from planning decision-makers, practitioners and communities.

This report summarises the main outcomes from the full-day event, which comprised presentations, facilitated breakout discussions, a strategic mapping session, funding and signposting information, an exhibition space, networking opportunities, and a tour of The Pyramid.

Key Themes and Issues In Summary

Legal and regulatory framework

The conference identified significant gaps in understanding of current laws and regulations affecting heritage sites and church buildings. There was discussion about the need for more consistent guidance and whether new legislation (such as a revised Burial Act) might be required. The complexity of Ecclesiastical Exemption (EE) regulations was highlighted as a particular concern, with confusion about what constitutes "worship" and how different denominations should be treated.

Practical challenges

Several practical issues emerged around building maintenance and adaptation. Ground disturbance for utilities and access scaffolding must consider potential human remains, which cannot be owned under law. The intersection of heritage protection with modern infrastructure needs (such as ground source heat pumps) creates complex conflicts that require careful navigation.

Data and documentation

The conference addressed the challenge of preserving diverse types of heritage material, from physical objects to intangible heritage like traditional singing. The loss of digital archives when websites close was noted as an emerging concern. Better coordination between organisations and improved data interoperability was identified as essential, with the Archaeological Data Service suggested as a potential model.

Adaptation and community engagement

Significant discussion focused on how historic buildings can be adapted for contemporary use whilst preserving their heritage value. Housing associations and community partnerships were identified as potential collaborators, with examples from Scotland showing successful approaches. The balance between attracting visitors and managing the impact of increased traffic and usage was recognised as an ongoing challenge.

Climate change and planning

The conference considered how heritage buildings can adapt to climate change whilst engaging with local development planning processes. The importance of connecting heritage sites with their wider communities was emphasised as crucial for long-term sustainability.

Key questions for further consideration

- Should current exemption systems be reformed or replaced?
- How can organisations better collaborate on data preservation and sharing?
- What mechanisms exist to encourage community cooperation on heritage projects?
- How can heritage buildings be integrated into local climate change adaptation plans?

Conference Action Points

BEFS recorded 18 action points from the event, which will be followed up with through Working Group activity. These are:

Short-term:

- Discuss 'adjacent land issues' further between Conservation Officers Group (COG) and the Places of Worship Forum (POWF);
- Explore a short-term working group on insurance;
- Explore bringing in Housing Associations and community partnership reps to POWF/COG to speak/participate/present;
- Bring the following key questions for further consideration to COG/POWF for further discussion:

    1. Should current Ecclesiastical Exemption system be reformed or replaced?
    2. How can organisations better collaborate on data preservation and sharing?
    3. What mechanisms exist to encourage community cooperation on heritage projects?
    4. How can heritage buildings be integrated into local climate change adaptation plans?

Medium/long-term:

- Highlight positive solutions case studies and transferable learning (EU) on specialisms such as above-ground waste composting;
- Pre-sale due diligence awareness raising from intermediaries like HES, DTAS, CLS;
- Further peer networking and collaboration between new Places of Worship owners;
- Clarify and inform on planning authority duties;
- Lobby for local heritage strategies to include guidance on budget for e.g graveyard asset managers;
- Lobby for HES to establish a clearer directory of contacts at HES for local government and community groups;
- Further discuss/explore communications with local communities on closing-down sales and processes;
- Explore services that can take objects when no one else can – stained glass symposium, archaeological data service, museums;
- Establish a shared portal of recorded artefacts and ICH – currently scattered and multiple projects ongoing;
- Lobby (perhaps HES?) to clarify rights, possibilities, and simple fact around material culture in a building – sales particulars should outline inventory and local planner contact details;
- Lobby (perhaps HES?) to produce guidance on documenting governance processes and models;
- Lobby (perhaps HES?) to produce guidance on education via e.g educational games, creating a match-making service (matching building types and particulars with specialised providers), inventory guidance;
- Lobby (HES?) to expand guidance; clarify "worship" and denominational particularities.
- Explore lobbying for revised legislation.

First Session: Speed Intros, Presentation & Discussion

BEFS Director Hazel Johnson introduced the event, and invited Places of Worship Forum Chair Sara Robertson and Conservation Officers Group Chair Alison McCandlish to provide some opening comments. A **speed introduction session** enabled the following Places of Worship Forum representatives to provide an overview of their respective organisations for the benefit of participants that may be unfamiliar:

- Judith Roebuck, Church of Scotland
- Victoria Collison, Historic Churches Scotland
- Louisa Humm, Historic Environment Scotland
- DJ Johnston-Smith, Scotland's Churches Trust
- Helen Spencer, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland
- Lucy Stewart, Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings Scotland
- Harry Whitmore, Development Trusts Association Scotland
- Sarah Pearce, Heritage Network
- Jack Nevin, Scottish Episcopal Church
- Diane Gray, National Lottery Heritage Fund Scotland
- Jen Novotny, Scottish Civic Trust

A dedicated section of the Places of Worship Forum in Scotland website features links to all 15 Member bodies.

Craig Stanford of **Historic Environment Scotland** (HES) provided the first main presentation. From 2023-25, Craig was Strategic Heritage Project Officer and managed the HES Places of Worship Project, which worked with the sector to support decision-making for places of worship undergoing transition of use. Craig, who now holds a senior archaeology role for the agency, said the project outcomes were summarised in a helpful HES webpage with advice, resources, guidance and signposting for all stakeholders involved with places of worship.

The webpage reflects the project's focus on sustainable futures for the buildings through action on protection, adaptation and reuse. It also features case studies highlighting varied uses, and a '12 things to know before buying a church' blog that is a rich source of practical advice for prospective owners. The webpage resource will be publicised by the HES Communications Team over the coming months and will add value as a central signposting hub for the sector.

Harry Whitmore of **Development Trusts Association Scotland**, which operates the Community Ownership Support Service (COSS), presented on research outcomes from an initiative entitled, New Futures – Former Places of Worship. Delivered by COSS over2024-27 with funding from HES and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, New Futures provides a range of support to community groups that are considering, or going ahead with, acquisition of a current or former place of worship. The project responds to the high number of places of worship which are highly valued by local communities, but which are due for disposal.

The New Futures research strand explored the current situation in each of Scotland's 32 local authority areas. It involved reviewing Presbytery Mission Plans and similar documents to gather accurate information on the status and plans for individual places of worship. Hot and cold spots for disposal in different parts of the country were found, and the research indicated that 800 churches are at risk of closure in the next five years. The Highlands, the Borders, Aberdeenshire, Perth and Kinross, and Dumfries and Galloway are among the administrative regions facing the highest number of closures.

In-depth research was undertaken in Aberdeen, which is notable for having a transition process well underway, with 15 places of worship being sold or listed for sale. The project investigated the particular circumstances in each case, with a view to drawing out useful learning for other areas. A second research strand will look at the situations in towns with Business Improvement Districts, in collaboration with Scotland's Towns Partnership. More sector and region specific research is planned, and outcomes are being actively shared by COSS with local governments and the wider sector.

Lizzie Swarbrick of the **Society of Antiquaries of Scotland** and **DJ Johnston-Smith** of **Scotland's Churches Trust** (both pictured) talked about their new joint project, Research in Action on Church Heritage. The project, which had a launch event on 11 September 2025, is funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Pilgrim Trust. Its objectives include assessing the heritage assets of churches at risk of closure, and providing information and practical support to communities and organisations to save and promote assets of local and national importance when church buildings are repurposed.

Lizzie and DJ highlighted a changing context for churches, as evidenced by the 2022 census which showed for the first time that the majority of Scottish residents have no religion, and the average of three church closures per month in Scotland since 2020. While Scotland has an estimated 3000 places of worship across more than 30 denominations, one third are thought to be at risk of closing by 2030, highlighting an urgent challenge for material culture and intangible cultural heritage, much of which may be lost without intervention.

Research in Action on Church Heritage will undertake a rapid needs analysis in order to swiftly document the heritage assets and social value of churches at immediate risk of closure, and provide a methodology handbook for local groups to assist by undertaking their own heritage surveys. It will also draw together an Action Group of cross-sector experts to support immediate decision-making, and help build a longer-term strategic plan. Project updates will be shared with the Places of Worship Forum.

The morning session concluded with a **plenary discussion**, in which participants were invited to comment on the content of the presentations. The main topics raised were: the limited capacity of museums to rehome former church assets; the removal of fixed assets like pipe organs and stained glass that were supposed to remain part of a building post-ownership transfer; the rapid rise in buildings insurance premiums for owners of places of worship; and the funding landscape that is making community fundraising for acquisition and refurbishment less viable.

Second Session: Thematic Breakout Groups

Participants had the option of signing up for two of four discussion group topics, which were based on shared interests expressed by Places of Worship Forum and Conservation Officers Group Members at previous Working Group sessions:

The topics were:

1. Adaptation of Places of Worship;
2. Ecclesiastical Exemption;
3. Graveyards, (former) church land and changes of use/management/responsibilities;
4. Materiality and interiors – ownership and transition.

Each group was tasked with considering the challenges and opportunities on each topic, and recommending two or three sector-wide actions. A summary of each group follows.

1. Adaptation of Places of Worship

- Many examples were raised of successful changes of use. These included worship spaces for other denominations and faiths, art galleries, workshop spaces, nursery spaces, conference centres, office spaces, gyms, bookshops, food halls, tattoo parlours, climbing centres, wedding venues, funeral directors, music spaces, recording venue, theatres, lecture spaces, restaurants and cafes, tourist information centres, private residences and affordable housing (participants noted the "1 church 100 uses" project and relevant HES research on how to recycle a church);
- Signposting of who to contact would be helpful for new owners, within sales particulars;

- There is some inconsistency among built environment professionals in dealing with interiors, and changes of use around local authority expertise, lack of conservation officers, unsympathetic or inexperienced agents, lack of conservation accredited agents, and lack of pre-application advice.
- Limited knowledge around application of building regulations, environmental standards, environmental health issues, legal situation, insurance requirements, enforcement issues were highlighted;
- There are many misconceptions about listing ("only the front" being common) and also the fitting and fixtures (what can be removed, what belongs to the church building, what belongs to the former congregation);
- Space around the former church, and ancillary buildings, are particularly important to consider. Archaeological considerations and former community/manses may form part of sales particulars;
- Financial viability for alternative uses can be difficult. Consider compartmentalisation, dual use, income from filming, and specialist niches (e.g. Penicuik climbing centre has rope access training for scaffolders);
- Environmental considerations for change of use were highlighted, e.g. suitability of solar panels and air source heat pumps;
- Intangible heritage and stories of the buildings should be explored more. The wider community often see the church as "theirs", even if not a regular church goer (family links/ landmark status of the building, leisure use of grounds, attendance at significant life events etc.). How do we "mark" this or record it well?

2. Ecclesiastical Exemption;

Discussion points:

- Owners of churches don't understand Ecclesiastical Exemption (EE);
- Many decision makers don't understand EE either;
- Better signposting and awareness of the existing guidance on EE and better/new guidance on the 'grey areas' and sensitivities such as burials;
- What happens when a new denomination takes in a building?
- Complexity of EE when looking at transferral and transition of church building between denominations;
- At the point where the CoS announces that a church is to be released is when EE should end;
- Planning authorities have many cases coming across their desks, but often a lack of knowledge and expertise in this area, or resource for enforcement action;
- How not to place burdens on already stretched planning authorities? Possible to change who the statutory consultees are if legislation?
- If there was no EE would clients/buyers be less likely to take on a building?
- Exteriors not the main issue, interiors difficult;
- EE is not about protection, that is what Designation and Listed Building Consent is for
- What advantages does EE bring in the current planning system?
- If EE to be removed: question of interference with religious freedom – some resistance to be expected?

The big question asked by both groups: Do we need Ecclesiastical Exemption?

Possible actions:

- Wider discussion on the validity of EE – undertake a survey to explore views and possible impact/implications of removal;
- Short life focus group, including legislators;
- Tidy grey areas around closures – how long is 'closed' and when does this start/ EE end?
- An event with planners and local authorities to understand what they need and what support might look like in the meantime;

3. Graveyards, (former) church land and changes of use/management/responsibilities

Recurring points:

- Consistency of interactions between planning authorities and places of worship owners on navigating adjacent land issues needs to be addressed.
- Buyers of places of worship should have a stronger understanding of the ownership of surrounding land and what restrictions it may put on their plans.
- There is a need to balance respecting the heritage of the graveyard/site, with keeping the place of worship in viable long-term use by e.g. installing/upgrading plumbing for toilets, or a driveway for wheelchair users.

Suggested actions:

- Provision of guidance for planning authorities, case studies from planning authorities that are seen to be finding mutually agreeable solutions e.g. Fife Council, Cairngorm National Park Authority, and transferable learning from European approaches such as above-ground waste composting.
- Ensuring enhanced pre-sale due diligence takes place when places of worship are sold, via raising awareness of information and services available from intermediaries such as HES, DTAS and Community Land Scotland.
- Building stronger peer networking and collaborations between new places of worship owners, to share emerging solutions and explore collective negotiation on e.g. insurance, fencing, scaffold beams.

Q&A in plenary feedback:

- Planning authorities have a statutory duty to manage graveyards, despite capacity and resource pressures. When a graveyard is fenced off privately, planning authorities tend not to intervene, but this is wrong; planning authorities have a duty to maintain public access.
- Planning authorities need appropriate budgets to act as graveyard asset managers. There is a role for local heritage strategies in finding resources for this role.
- The land around places of worship has particular heritage, biodiversity, wellbeing and greenspace value that is not being recognised or capitalised on in policy and practice. Glebe lands, as well as graveyards, can attract funding for biodiversity survey work, for example.
- Insurance for places of worship has been mentioned a great deal at today's conference. BEFS should bring affected stakeholders together to discuss the scale of the challenge and how to best deal with it, perhaps in the form of a short term working group.

4. Materiality and interiors – ownership and transition

How do we identify and protect artefacts in the best way possible? How do we deal with ownership confusion and careless disposals?

- Some participants reported that they have found HES to be a good resource, and sometimes it has involved being in contact with a specific person at HES.
- There was agreement in that the diversity of items is a significant consideration – some are mobile, and some are fixed, and individual objects need to be understand to have individual needs. A participant raised that it's all straightforward 'on paper', but the emotional connection for locals must be considered and taken into account – this may complicate the process of dealing with material culture in places of worship in transition.
- A participant pointed out that there has been varying success in recording material culture, and that there are legal issues related to this.
- Some participants raised that a way to combat careless disposal is to improve communications with local communities to make sure e.g closing down sales can be as successful as possible. When artefacts are not disposed of properly, it may be due to lacking in understanding and skills to care for them.
- A participant gave the example of the stained glass symposium as a pathway to care for stained glass. Other participants raised an archaeological data service, and a museum of stained glass as a way to record what cannot be kept. At the same time, multiple participants agreed that data and information tends to be kept with individuals and organisations, and the lack of cohesion and a shared portal is a problem.
- Some participants raised the issue that the resources needed to deal with material culture at large is not there for planners, congregations, or individuals.

What paperwork is passed on to new owners, and are quinquennial reports useful in providing constructive information to new owners?

- Communication was raised as a central issue. Insufficient communication between locals and organisations means that there may be confusion about rights, possibilities, and even facts about the material culture in a space – who owns what? What's the story behind the objects? May there be someone who could/would take a certain object on? Some participants raised that reuse of material culture, where possible, is good.
- To help communication and understanding, one participant raised that the sales particulars should clearly outline what the building interiors include, and critically should include contact details for local planners who know the building and its particulars. Another participant suggested that information could be codified into the building code/building standards. Loan agreement support was raised by a participant.
- There was acknowledgement of an issue between planning department capacity, time constraints/pressures, and the issue of owner knowledge/education. Participants raised a number of potential solutions, such as documenting governance processes and models, and another participant gave the example of educational boardgames. Some participants agreed that combining a match-making system (matching buildings and owners with specialised providers) with bespoke guidance and an item inventory guide would be positive.

Third Session: Resources, Signposting and Mapping

The closing session of the conference focused on breakout group feedback, and plenary discussion on stakeholder mapping, signposting to resources, and next steps.

Facilitated by Sara Robertson and Hazel Johnson, the open discussion featured exchanges on the following topics:

- The **challenge of taking a strategic approach** to the pipeline of disposals, in the context of the complex national picture and the particular ownership, community and denominational dynamics that are unique to each case.
- Whether the declaration of a **national emergency** for places of worship, could provoke action in a similar way to climate and housing emergencies.
- The **capacity pressures on local government**, which challenges their ability to undertake statutory obligations effectively including in the protection of heritage and management of graveyards.
- The value of petitioning the UK Government to abolish **VAT rates** on the repair and maintenance of places of worship.
- The scope for **community group campaigning** to seek greater investment of resources in places of worship community ownership support from public bodies and other funders.
- The **planning misconceptions**, including with regard to Local Development Plans and Local Place Plans, that create confusion in some areas of the sector.
- The need to think about places of worship and **surrounding land** in tandem when planning for sustainable future.
- The role of Managing Change in the Historic Environment guidance from HES, which is valuable but has limitations, for example in not covering the full range of issues or providing legal advice.
- The **diverging views** in some religious bodies on the value of owning built heritage, with maintaining historic buildings increasingly seen in some quarters as an unnecessary or unaffordable expense that is not aligning with its mission.

- The reality that **fewer people are going to church regularly**, and the unreasonable pressure this places on smaller, ageing congregations on maintenance and insurance obligations.
- The **market recycling** of some places of worship, which tends to happen because owners make incorrect assumptions in their plans for redevelopment of the building they buy, so they sell it on.
- The **mixed picture** emerging nationally, which includes horror stories of transition going wrong as well as exemplar case studies like The Pyramid, and lots in between.
- The **different place dynamics** for places of worship, with rural and island localities, high density urban areas, and multiply deprived places needing distinctive approaches and types of support.

The Pyramid at Anderston, Glasgow: for information, visit: https://thepyramid.scot/

End of report. By Hazel Johnson, Director, Derek Rankine, Head of Policy and Strategy, and Jonna Meredith, Communications and Policy Officer, at BEFS. September 2025. For future updates on the Places of Worship Forum in Scotland, please sign up to the newsletter: https://readymag.website/u3958491031/5057712/20/