

'A place of living': The role of heritage buildings on community wellbeing in a 'Decade of Renewal'

Esther Platt & Alisha Palmer
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“The cathedral is the ultimate monument of long duration, continuities and rebirths. A place of collective memory but above all a place of living.” Jacques le Goff

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Esther Platt and Alisha Palmer

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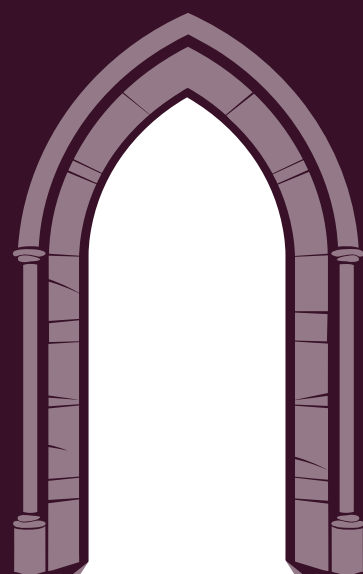
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Wishing you a warm welcome



About us

The ChurchWorks Commission¹ brings mainline church denominations and umbrella organisations together to collaborate with government and equip local congregations to transform the lives of the most vulnerable in our country and communities. It has a particular focus on tackling the mental health and wellbeing crisis, supporting vulnerable children and families to flourish and tackling poverty. The ChurchWorks Commission catalysed the Warm Welcome Campaign, a movement that exists to turn poverty and isolation into warmth and connection through the power of local Warm Welcome Spaces made by and for the community.

The Commission is supported by a Secretariat that is provided by the Good Faith Partnership, a social consultancy that exists to build a better world, through the power of unlikely relationships.



Alisha Palmer is a Consultant with the Good Faith Partnership². Based in the South West, much of her work aims to support churches in their mission to contribute to the common good.



Esther Platt is a Senior Consultant with the Good Faith Partnership. Esther's work focuses on exploring ways that the NHS, local authorities and faith groups can collaborate to increase the wellbeing of local communities across the UK.

¹ www.churchworks.org.uk

² www.goodfaith.org.uk

Foreword

Warm Welcome Spaces are places of belonging and reconnection. They're spaces for everyone to feel at home, make new friends, and get to know others in their community.

In the context of significant social divisions, high levels of loneliness and the recognition of a need for holistic health provision close to home, Warm Welcome Spaces are a very simple way to deepen community cohesion, expand social networks and improve wellbeing and mental health.

The Government is set on a 'decade of national renewal'. In the 'Plan for Change', they have set ambitions to raise living standards, provide affordable housing, reduce hospital backlogs, improve school readiness, increase police presence and accelerate the UK towards Net Zero. According to More in Common's report, 'Shattered Britain', 70% of the British population believe the country is on the wrong track. Driving this dissatisfaction and also resulting from it, are stagnating levels of wellbeing across the UK. Improving wellbeing could have a significant positive impact on the cross-government ambitions in the Plan for Change.

Our impact evaluation for the Warm Welcome Campaign shows that these simple community spaces can have a profound impact on the wellbeing of communities with 87% of guests saying that being at a Warm Welcome Space had improved their mental health. Historic England's 'Heritage Capital and Wellbeing' report from 2024 shows that the overall wellbeing value for people's day to day encounters with heritage is around £29 billion per year in England.

I am delighted that this report strengthens the evidence base for the wellbeing impact of both Warm Welcome Spaces and heritage buildings, as well as making the case for the importance of connecting the two. If we can make the most of heritage churches in our local areas through providing warm, safe, free and welcoming spaces for everyone, we could see the wellbeing of communities improved, greater community connection and belonging, and the right support being made accessible for those who need it.

If we are to see a 'decade of national renewal', we need community, we need each other and we need our heritage buildings. Partnering with heritage church buildings and church communities, and resourcing Warm Welcome Spaces, would seem to be an obvious next step for Integrated Neighbourhood Health Teams, Primary Care Networks, social services and public health among other organisations concerned with community wellbeing.

I look forward to seeing the conversations and partnership working that come out of this report.

David Barclay
Director of the Warm Welcome Campaign



Executive Summary

A Warm Welcome Space is a warm and welcoming community space for everyone. **The Warm Welcome Campaign** currently supports over 5,700 Warm Welcome Spaces across the UK.



All Warm Welcome Spaces make a positive difference to the wellbeing of individuals and the wider local community. Our research found that Warm Welcome Spaces on average contribute 1.99 WELLBYs³ (an increase of 1.99 on a 0-10 scale of Life Satisfaction for 1 person over 1 year) per person. The UK Treasury correlates this to a value of just under £26,000 per year⁴. Our interviews showed Warm Welcome Spaces to be 'bumping places' where informal conversations could take place leading to an increased sense of community and belonging. Warm Welcome Spaces were also identified as access points to other wellbeing services and as good opportunities for volunteering for local people.

In addition, visitors to Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage buildings were more likely to say that the building reflects the shared history of the community who live around it, compared to modern buildings. The heritage of these spaces led to an increased sense of identity, belonging and ownership which in turn can be seen to have a positive impact on wellbeing and community cohesion.

Our research illustrated that Warm Welcome Spaces located in heritage church buildings were seen as a place of sanctuary from the busyness of modern life. This was partly because of the beauty of the physical building providing a place of reflection and stillness. Those attending Warm Welcome Spaces in churches were more likely to say that the building was a place of peace and reflection than those attending Warm Welcome Spaces in non-church buildings. These spaces were also seen as accessible for many people and to be places of consistency

and safety. Our interviewees saw heritage church buildings as somewhere where important life moments happened, namely weddings and funerals, but also spaces where they could 'just be' in the complexities of day-to-day life.

This report outlines the challenges faced by heritage church buildings: they can be cold, difficult to make accessible, expensive to maintain and require additional work to keep safe.

From our research findings, **we recommend that churches** explore ways of adapting their buildings for modern use, including making use of resources and advice from organisations such as Historic England and denominational networks. We recommend they explore how to weave heritage into their Warm Welcome offer and that they pursue local partnership working.

We recommend that the UK Government recognises the contribution of heritage buildings to communities, through creating and sustaining dedicated funding streams for accessibility improvements and maintenance and through integrating heritage buildings into government strategies for public health and community cohesion.

We recommend that local authorities, GP surgeries and other local public services make contact with heritage church buildings and Warm Welcome Spaces in order to understand what services are already being offered and could be integrated into initiatives such as Integrated Neighbourhood Teams. In addition, we suggest that these local public services should also explore the opportunities for making use of local heritage church buildings for provisions such as vaccine clinics and consider partnering with churches to offer holistic community provision, for example through a community hub.



Introduction

“The cathedral is the ultimate monument of long duration, continuities and rebirths. A place of collective memory but above all a place of living.” Jacques le Goff

Back in the summer, I visited Bayeux Cathedral. This quote from Jacques le Goff was posted on the main information sign at the back of the building. At that point in the project we were in the middle of our site visits and interviews to Warm Welcome Spaces and particularly looking at those located in historic church buildings. While our work does not look at cathedrals but at heritage churches in general, I knew that this quote summarised what we wanted to say.

In our visits to heritage churches, we heard people talk about the centrality of church buildings in the geography of the local community as well as their centrality in the social life of the community. Churches are places that connect us to previous generations, to past stories, to our past selves. Christenings, weddings and funerals take place in these spaces and many people across the UK have some church space that they've visited more than once for these occasions. Churches can be the place that links us to the past but also where the most intimate moments of life continue to happen.

We heard stories of how Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage churches were places of belonging, of hope, of comfort. While our report shows that all Warm Welcome Spaces have a positive impact on the wellbeing of individuals and communities, heritage churches held a particular type of space for local people where they could 'just be', reflect, connect and ground themselves in a fast-paced world.

The impact of heritage buildings on the wellbeing of individuals and communities is well evidenced by Historic England's Wellbeing and Heritage Strategy⁵ and the broader sector⁶. The positive impact of the church is also demonstrated by research such as National Churches Trust's House of Good report⁷ which estimates that over £55 billion of social value is enabled by UK churches every year.

The Warm Welcome Campaign⁸ was established in Autumn 2022 as a community response to the cost of living crisis. Today there are over 5,800 spaces that offer welcome, connection and belonging. Warm Welcome's Impact Evaluation from 2024 shows that 87% said coming to a Warm Welcome Space had improved their wellbeing.



This report is not intended to duplicate these previous pieces of research but rather to join the dots between them. Here we evidence how heritage churches can run Warm Welcome Spaces as a means of making the benefits of heritage available to the wider community. We make the case for heritage churches as important assets in the UK Government's 'Decade of Renewal' and explore how continued investment in these 'places of living' can have a positive impact on communities for generations to come.

Alongside this report we have published 'Our Places of Renewal', a booklet for churches on making the most of heritage spaces for community activities. We encourage local church leaders to make use of this resource.

Esther Platt and Alisha Palmer

Methodology

Our key research aims were:

- 1. To be able to evidence the impact of Warm Welcome Spaces located in located in heritage church buildings on the wellbeing of individuals and connection within communities
- 2. To be able to articulate the social value of Warm Welcome Spaces located in historic church buildings through using WELLBYs as specified in the HM Treasury Green Book⁹

For the purposes of the research, we defined **‘heritage churches’** as those which were built before 1960. Across the total population of 5,700 Warm Welcome Spaces, we divided these into four groups:

Heritage church Warm Welcome spaces
(churches built prior to 1960)

Heritage non-church Warm Welcome spaces
(buildings built prior to 1960)

Non-heritage church Warm Welcome spaces
(churches built since 1960)

Non-heritage non-church Warm Welcome spaces
(buildings built since 1960)

The research was conducted between February and July 2025 and included an online survey, 10 site visits with three interviews at each site, and an online workshop.

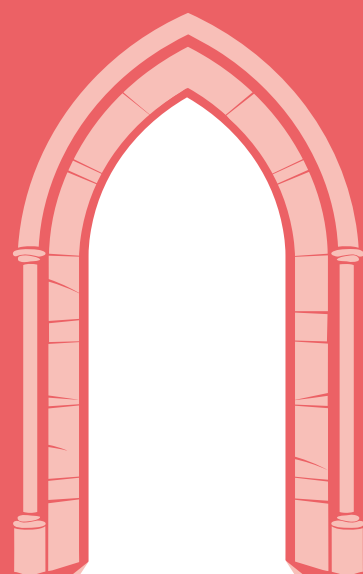
A simple survey was designed and completed by 164 respondents from 23 Warm Welcome Spaces throughout the UK. Our survey asked about the respondent’s life satisfaction before and after attending the Warm Welcome Space in order to enable us to calculate WELLBY scores. We also asked people about what they did at the Warm Welcome Space, which aspects of the building contributed positively towards their experience of the space and how the space made them feel.

Due to the small sample size of our survey, we recognise that our results demonstrate the impact of Warm Welcome Spaces on life satisfaction but that this cannot be reliably broken down by the four groups listed above. However, we can look at respondents’ comments on the aspects of building and how the space made them feel in order to tell the story of the value of heritage spaces for those who use them.

We undertook a total of 10 visits to Warm Welcome Spaces. This included four heritage church spaces, one non-heritage church space, four heritage non-church spaces and one non-heritage non-church space. In each location we took photos of the Warm Welcome Space, engaged in the activities and wrote notes on participant observation. We also spoke with three visitors from each Warm Welcome Space and recorded their reflections on the value of the space, the historical importance, the importance of the physical building and whether they would still attend if it moved to a modern leisure centre. We also asked the visitors to draw their ‘Warm Welcome journey’ by mapping out how it has made them feel and what about the space made them feel this way. This map was a launch pad for further conversation.

In July 2025, we hosted an online workshop with seven Warm Welcome facilitators from heritage church spaces. The workshop particularly focused on the value of historic church buildings to their Warm Welcome Space and encouraged them to share the challenges and opportunities of these buildings to support the wellbeing of individuals and communities. The output of the workshop was our booklet: ‘Our Places of Living’: a guide for churches on making the most of heritage buildings for community activities.

The Benefit of All Warm Welcome Spaces for the Wellbeing to Local Communities



Our research demonstrated that all Warm Welcome Spaces have a positive impact on the wellbeing of the local community.

This coheres with the Warm Welcome Campaign's own Impact Evaluation which shows that 84% of guests said that being at a Warm Welcome Space has given them a stronger sense of belonging in their community and 87% of guests said that being at a Warm Welcome Space had improved their mental health¹⁰. Furthermore, the percentage of guests who reported feeling lonely before coming to a Warm Welcome Space fell from 42% to just 8% of those who reported feeling lonely after coming to a Warm Welcome Space.

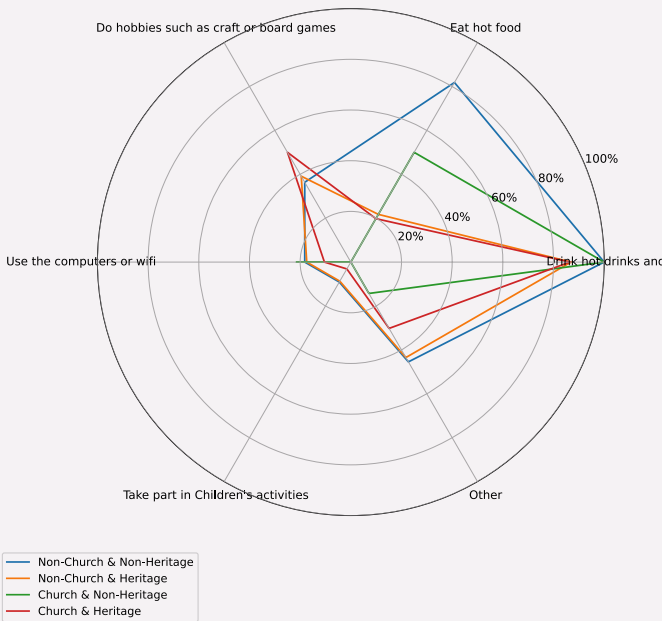
Our research adds to this picture with results from our survey enabling us to conclude that Warm Welcome Spaces on average contribute 1.99 WELLBYs (an increase of 1.99 on a 0-10 scale of Life Satisfaction for 1 person over 1 year) per person. The UK Treasury correlates this to a value of just under £26,000 per person, per year¹¹.

Across our research, we identified three aspects of Warm Welcome Spaces that contribute to their positive impact on wellbeing: their role as 'bumping places', access points to health and wellbeing support, and opportunities for volunteering. We also heard how the Warm Welcome Campaign had positively contributed to the running of individual spaces through brand awareness.

Warm Welcome Spaces as 'Third' or 'Bumping' Spaces

The term 'third space' describes spaces where people go to casually socialise or build community outside of their home or workplace. Warm Welcome offers an accessible third space that is free to enter. As one interviewee said *"you can talk to lots of people but you can also be quiet and sit on your own."* Another interviewee remarked that they attended the space in order to catch up with friends and meet new people. A third interviewee said that *"What matters is sitting down and having a chat"* and our survey shows that across all Warm Welcome Spaces, the most common activity is having a conversation over a hot drink.

What do you do when you visit your Warm Welcome Space?



In addition to being places that everyone can come to socialise, the Warm Welcome Spaces that we visited were often busy. With people coming in and out to have a drink, make use of practical services like advice drop-ins or pop-up post offices, or to have a moment to sit down and reflect. Warm Welcome Spaces were located on busy streets to offer people a drink after their shopping, in the middle of housing estates for people to drop by during the day, or co-located with other community services. In a time when these busy, community spaces have been in decline¹², Warm Welcome offers an opportunity for gentle social connection and interaction with one's neighbours.

The relational connection offered here is informal and spontaneous which facilitates community rather than only furthering social groups. One interviewee described the Warm Welcome Space as a 'bumping place' *"where you bump into people between activities and have little chats... Making this a real community space with people coming in and out."*

Warm Welcome Spaces as Access Points for other Wellbeing Provision

Many of those that we interviewed remarked on the impact of Warm Welcome Spaces on their mental health and wellbeing. Whether through providing structure, someone to talk to, or just another place to spend time, having an informal space to visit was seen as positive to a range of people who spoke about the transformative benefits of coming to a Warm Welcome Space through COVID or stroke recovery, bereavement and homelessness.

One individual remarked: *"The space is valuable because it gives you something to focus on, a way to structure your day. It gives you people to chat with and something to do. It is comfortable and peaceful. It's good to meet other people and get out of the unhealthy social networks."* Another said: *"If it weren't for this place, my mental health would be terrible."*

Warm Welcome Spaces also provide access to other types of health and wellbeing provision. We visited spaces that offered advice for energy and heating, access to fresh surplus food from supermarkets, support with accessing GP appointments, wellbeing walks, seated yoga, arts and crafts activities, specific activities for those with autism and bereavement support. As third spaces that anyone can wander into, Warm Welcome Spaces can offer easy access to additional services that can improve health and wellbeing.



Warm Welcome Spaces

Empowering People Through Volunteering

The transformative benefits offered by Warm Welcome Spaces are not only available to space visitors but also to their volunteers. In fact, in many cases, the ways that Warm Welcome Spaces can most profoundly impact the lives of vulnerable people in their communities is through providing flexible volunteering opportunities. Volunteering can support individuals with their mental health by empowering them and giving them greater structure and purpose in their lives. One individual who was involved in redistributing surplus supermarket food through the Warm Welcome Space talked about the significant personal challenges of her past and how much the space had helped her build her life again. She said: *"I've had a horrible life... but now, I'm having a great time."*

The Hub: Redcliffe Community Centre

The Hub in Redcliffe is supported by St Mary Redcliffe Church and is located in a shop unit in the heart of the local community. They offer a drop-in space with computers for the local community to use and support and advice sessions twice a day.

Here we spoke to a volunteer, a lone-parent who initially visited the space to receive support in filling out her child's benefit claim form. After receiving the support she needed, she became a volunteer at the space, using her experience to help those with similar needs. She spoke about the hub as her 'safe space', where she has deep relationships with others who facilitate the hub and is able to make a difference to people who might be at their lowest.



Support from the Warm Welcome Campaign

Throughout the research, we heard how the Warm Welcome Campaign makes a difference to local spaces.

Being an official Warm Welcome Space, registered at the Warm Welcome¹³ website, enables volunteers to access a dashboard of resources, including a regularly updated list of funding opportunities, advice and webinars. One of these resources is a communications toolkit. This enables local spaces to easily communicate what their space is about through using the 'Warm Welcome' name and branding. This can also help them to gain new visitors who are familiar with the national campaign.

The Warm Welcome Spaces that we visited expressed how helpful this branding was in enabling them to share about their local space and activities.

Case Study: Keynsham Methodist Church

Keynsham Methodist Church has been open as a coffee morning for 25 years. A Victorian church on Keynsham high street, the space is open four times a week for hot drinks and conversation. There are children's toys out and people drop into the coffee morning after or before other church activities.

The church is one of the largest spaces in the town and has been used for concerts and a winter festival.

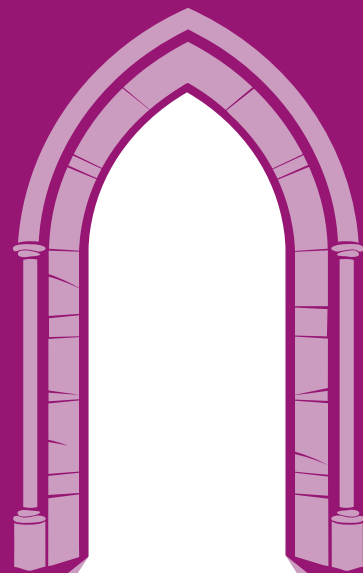
A volunteer said people come because they like the aesthetics of the building, such as the stained glass, or because a church is a familiar kind of building. However once they come in, they see all the things that are going on and they want to be a part of it. *"Inside, there is comfort here,"* she said.

A visitor told me how she had been coming to the coffee morning for years. She lives on her own and this space matters a lot because of how friendly everyone is. *"It's lovely coming here,"* she said. *"It's peace, it's comfort. I know I'm not alone."*



The Added Value of Heritage Spaces

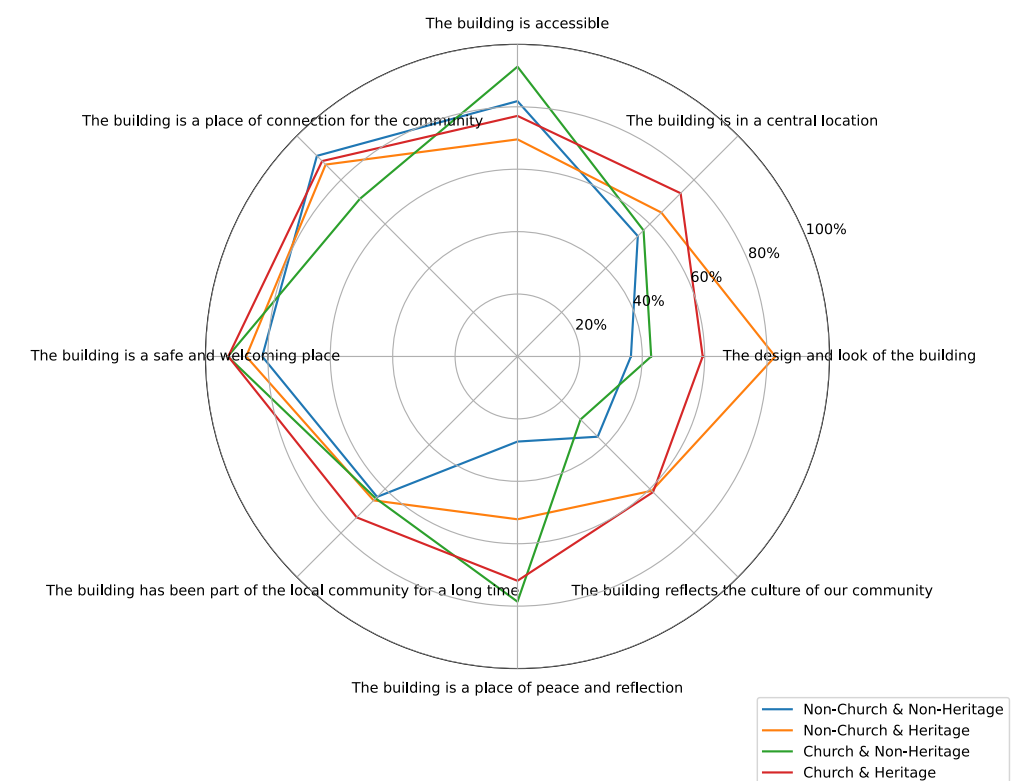
In addition to the positive impact on wellbeing that all Warm Welcome Spaces provide, when we spoke to individuals attending Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage buildings, they emphasised how the heritage contributed to their wellbeing through cultivating a sense of belonging, identity and ownership of the space.



A sense of belonging and identity

Participants attending Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage buildings were more likely to say that the building reflects the shared history of the community who live around it, compared to modern buildings.

Which aspects of the building contribute positively to your experience of the Warm Welcome Space



This coheres with our site visits to heritage Warm Welcome Spaces where we heard how individuals felt the building reflected their community identity.

Where the heritage features of a space had been preserved, such as tall ceilings and engravings, this was seen as a positive thing for those who visited the space as it reflected their collective history. Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage buildings also often captured the history of the local area in the activities that they offered, for example through maintaining old classrooms for school visits, or holding concerts in halls. Visitors remarked that it was important to carry on the purpose of community buildings so that they could be places for learning about local history.

A sense of belonging and identity continued

Case study: Heart of Newhaven

At the Heart of Newhaven, the old school building is a hive of activities. Outdoors there is a community garden, a Men's Shed and the Anchor building which has been built to be accessible. The school building itself houses advice services, tech support drop-in, lunch clubs, craft groups and is home to local businesses such as theatre school and art studio.

The school also includes a museum and archive of local artefacts of the fishing village, as well as a Victorian classroom which is used for school trips. The heritage of the local area is reflected in activities that happen here such as the choir that sings fisherwomen songs. The space engages in research projects such as looking at water quality in the local area, reflecting the proximity of the village and the building to the sea. There is also a video self-guided tour for those who wish to explore the history of the building.

Visitors at the Warm Welcome Space outlined how important coming to the hub had been for building connections and confidence therefore alleviating depression and anxiety. One individual had been referred to the hub by her GP. They stressed the immense value of what was offered at the Heart of Newhaven in terms of the impact on their wellbeing but also the importance of protecting older buildings so that people could learn about the local history of Edinburgh fishing villages.



However, it was important to many respondents that the people in the space were remembered to be more important than the building itself.

Historic England's Research Evidence on the Social Impact of Heritage¹⁴ outlines the breadth of evidence for the importance of heritage in building personal identity. Where we recognise our identity in the qualities or stories of a place, we can feel at home, safe and have a sense of belonging. This was echoed in the Warm Welcome Spaces we visited where the history of the building was important because of how it fitted with the identity of those who lived there and used the space. Whether it was an old school building that individuals remember attending, a ballroom that they met their partner in at 19, or a space that tells the industrial history of the area that has shaped who they are, the heritage buildings were important because they gave a sense of identity and rootedness to those who come to Warm Welcome Spaces.

This continuity of the buildings and their history was seen as particularly important for older people, especially those with dementia, as the familiarity of the space was reassuring. One interviewee told us: *"I don't like new things. I like old spaces and old things... I've been taking care of them all of my life."* We understood that the heritage space mattered to her because it was something that was at the heart of who she was and what her life had been about.

One Warm Welcome Space facilitator also emphasised the value of the space as a building that would continue to inform community identity. A visitor said: *"We saved this building because it is important to bring our community together. The building doesn't matter but it is central to our community and our identity."* *"I love our history,"* another visitor said, adding: *"We don't want to lose our historic building."*

Case study: The Old School, South Brent

Built as a local primary school in 1876, 'The Old School' is now a community centre home to a library, the South Brent Archives, a community fridge, share shed and bike bank, a post office, South Brent & District Caring who offer befriending and host a Warm Welcome Space, and Sustainable South Brent who organise a variety of community-led environmental projects.

The small corridor in the school has been turned into a gallery exhibiting stories of local history. The old school hall hosts music clubs and exercise classes, and a former classroom is filled with chairs and a little kitchen in the corner for tea and coffee.

During the week the Old School is busy with people queuing for the post office, popping in to the library, coming in and out for wellbeing walks, art clubs and cups of tea, and facilitating the community pantry. Many villagers come along consistently to an activity and then connect into other activities in the school too.

The Old School is currently raising £1,000,000 to improve the roof, install solar panels and increase energy efficiency. It became a community space when the primary school relocated in 1996 and a campaign fought to keep the building in the hands of the community. In 2022, it became a Warm Welcome Space and a hub.



Ownership of the Heritage Space

In addition to the positive impact of Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage buildings on identity, our research also showed how individuals felt a sense of ownership of these spaces which inspired a sense of belonging.

In our visits to the Warm Welcome Spaces, we were given tours by visitors, told about the traditional uses of rooms, and shown photographs of the area in the past. Warm Welcome Space facilitators told us that different members of the community can tell you where in the Warm Welcome Space they used to hang their coat as a school child, or that they would have people drop by who got married in the space, or held a birthday party there. We heard personal stories of how this was 'our' space because of the heritage of the building. In our workshop, Warm Welcome facilitators from heritage churches expressed how heritage makes it easier to welcome people into the building because they believe it already belongs to them.

Many of the Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage buildings were hard-won by local communities who had to work together to keep them in community hands. All the spaces had required financial investment as well as time and effort so that the space could be renovated and maintained. This meant that there was a strong sense of collective ownership of the building because individuals had a clear stake in the existence and sustainability of the community space. Collective ownership can alleviate loneliness and increase a sense of purpose and responsibility, leading to a positive impact on wellbeing.



Case study: Stretford Public Hall

Stretford Public Hall was first opened in 1879. Built by John Rylands, a man who made millions from Manchester's textile mills, it was intended to be a lecture hall and lending library for the local community. The building was used as a town hall, civic theatre and council offices before being reopened for the community in 1997.



The hall boasts high ceilings, tiled walls and a beautiful open staircase. It is one of six community hubs in Trafford and houses Stretford Advice Hub, Weekly Warmer Cafe, board games club, gardening club, English Conversation Classes and other one-off community events.

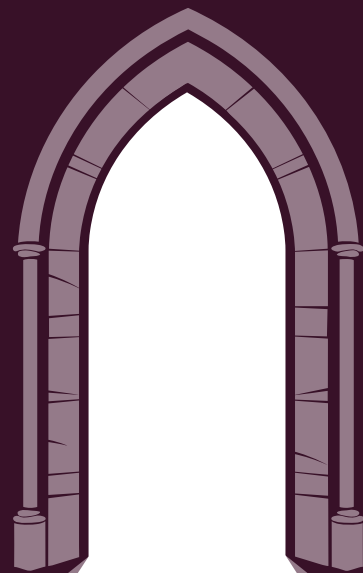
Volunteers are on hand to signpost to other community services as needed, to have conversation and to provide visitors with items such as surplus food, and blankets for the winter.

The running of the hall is carried out by Friends of Stretford Public Hall which is a Charitable Community Benefit Society. This is a co-operative and local people can have shares in it.

The Unique Impact of Church Heritage Spaces

In addition to the value that comes from all Warm Welcome Spaces, and the impact of those in heritage buildings, our research showed something distinctive about the way in which people used, and thought of, heritage church buildings.

In our site visits and interviews, guests articulated church heritage buildings as an 'other' space that was different to anywhere else in their community. Spending time in a historic church was a unique experience and therefore one with significant value.



Heritage Churches as a Place of Sanctuary

The first way in which visitors described the value of Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage buildings was as a place of sanctuary.

Many of the heritage churches hosting Warm Welcome Spaces are physically striking. As one respondent said: *"This is a beautiful space. The ceilings are so high and the windows are lovely. The atmosphere here is very nice. Space does matter. I've been in some little rooms that can be so dreary."* The physical attributes of the heritage church buildings were seen as being key in creating a specific feeling of peace and lightness. Another interviewee remarked: *"The aesthetics matter because even if you're not a church goer, you get this feeling by osmosis. It's a beautiful space. The atmosphere is powerful."*

Our survey respondents attending Warm Welcome Spaces in churches were more likely to say that the building is a place of peace and reflection than those attending Warm Welcome Spaces in non-church buildings. In our site visits, we noticed the contrast between the busy, noisy world outside and the quiet peace of the heritage church interiors. We also observed individuals coming in just to sit, reflect and be present.

The space for reflection and sanctuary offered by the physical presence of the church and shaped by the aesthetics of the building was noted by interviewees to be a rare thing in current society. Our workshop attendees said how visitors would often remark on the peace of the space and felt it was safe for them. One Warm Welcome Space facilitator explained that: *"We're not here to run a venue. We're not here to convert everyone either. We're here to meet people and give them a space to belong. We're creating safe spaces of sanctuary and peace... When there are so few safe spaces, we cannot underplay the scale of what is being offered."*

Case study: Holy Sepulchre, London

Holy Sepulchre is the National Musicians' Church, the home of the Royal Fusiliers Memorial Chapel and is in the centre of the City of London. In 2021, the church entered a new journey of exploring how the heritage of Holy Sepulchre could be used as inspiration to enrich people from all walks of life.

On a weekly basis, the church runs 'musicali-tea' where the doors are opened for people to come for lunch, listen to a performance by students from the Royal Academy of Music, and engage with a talk from a City of London guide. 'Communi-tea' is also run once a week which includes art, tea, chat and other community activities. Every Saturday, the church is opened specifically to welcome adults with autism.

All these activities take place in 'the harmony zone', off to the side of the main sanctuary. The church is magnificent with high ceilings, large stone pillars, stained glass windows, many marble memorial plaques and fusilier flags from across the centuries.



Heritage Churches as Central and Accessible

Historic Churches were seen as spaces that could be more accessible to people than other types of community buildings. This meant that people would come to a Warm Welcome Space in a heritage church who might not attend community spaces elsewhere.

Our interviewees and workshop attendees noted that not all people felt safe in a church, and that it is good that Warm Welcome Spaces are found in a diversity of buildings. However, for many, churches are easy to identify and access due to their often central location in the middle of residential areas or town centres. You can dip your head into a Warm Welcome Space in a church while passing and our workshop attendees noted how the history of the building can often be an easy conversation starter with someone who is new to the space.

We also heard from interviewees who felt that the church building was a familiar place due to general familiarity with churches as places for school services, weddings and Christmas celebrations. One individual told us that he would never attend a Warm Welcome Space in another building because he felt it would be "an old person's space". For him, the church building lacked any kind of stigma because it was intergenerational and acknowledged that people use that space for lots of things, not just because they need a particular type of help.

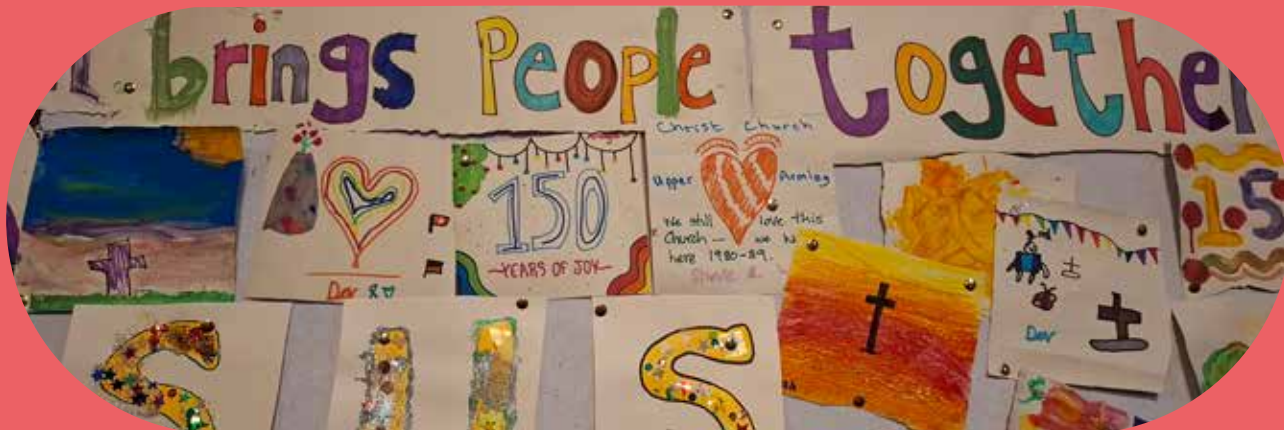


Case study: Christ Church Armley

Christ Church Armley is a large, Victorian church in the centre of an inner-city housing estate in Leeds. Once a week, the lobby is turned into a Warm Welcome Space with table tennis, board games, food and chatting. Throughout the rest of the week the church is used by the worshipping community but also provides offices for a refugee charity and is home to the local foodbank.

The Warm Welcome Space is facilitated by Phil the vicar, who knows everyone by name, and welcomes each arrival in. About half of the visitors are recovering addicts or prison-experienced and this is an informal, safe place for them to spend time.

When the Warm Welcome Space initially started, they opened their doors to see who would come. While the congregation of the church are mostly families, the Warm Welcome Space has evolved to meet the needs of a very different group. The set-up of the Warm Welcome Space is very simple, and as more people with complex life stories have become part of it, this has encouraged other visitors and volunteers who may not feel comfortable in more formal settings to get involved. There are no pretences in the group that anyone has 'it all together' and so everyone can be a part of it and have something to bring.



Heritage Churches as Consistent and Safe

Thirdly, our research shows that heritage church buildings are seen as consistent and safe places which makes them good locations for people to access Warm Welcome Spaces.

For many in the UK, church buildings are seen as places where help can be found. People also know what to expect from a church building and so they can feel safe and familiar. In one visit, we spoke to a recovering drug addict who saw the church as a safe place for him. "I'm trying to get out of bad circles," he said, "I don't have many straight friends apart from these." When we asked if coming to the Warm Welcome Space in the church had helped his recovery he emphatically told us "yes". The consistency of knowing what a church does, what it offers and that the Warm Welcome Space is there, was key in enabling this individual to access a place of welcome.

There is a reassurance in the continuity of historic buildings that have weathered centuries of change and there is also reassurance in the consistency of church communities. When other community services often change, for those who are having a difficult time in life, it is important that the Warm Welcome Spaces in churches are consistent. One Warm Welcome facilitator told of a woman who visited the space while experiencing bereavement. She welcomed the woman in and said: "We are here... and we're not going anywhere... You know where we are and you can always come back."

Case study: Holy Trinity, Westbury-on-Trym

Holy Trinity was built in 1093 but was the site of a church before that date. It is one of the oldest buildings in the area and around the sanctuary are tapestries and memorial plaques with a beautiful window above the altar.

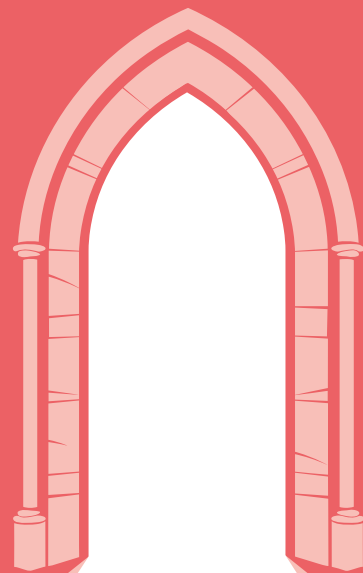
In the back corner is the 'cafe in the church' where every week hot drinks and cake are served by volunteers. There is chatter and conversation as lots of people in the local community gather in this space.

A lift has been fitted at the front of the building so that there is step-free access and accessible toilets have been put into the back of the church. One visitor we spoke to noted that she was not able to visit most churches because they were not accessible. The changes made to the church building made her feel welcome.



Challenges in Sustaining Heritage Buildings

Despite the many benefits of Warm Welcome Spaces being located in heritage church buildings for the wellbeing of local communities, our research highlighted several challenges.



Cold Spaces

One key challenge to Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage church buildings is that the high ceilings, large spaces, stone walls and the age of the building make it difficult and expensive to heat. One Warm Welcome facilitator told us: *"It's very cold in the winter. It's impossible to heat."* One space we visited mentioned that their visitors sometimes sat in coats, hats and gloves, therefore leading them to brand their space as a 'cafe in the church' rather than a 'warm welcome' as they don't want to misguide visitors.

Accessibility

Another major challenge faced by heritage buildings hosting Warm Welcome Spaces is their inaccessibility, particularly for those who require step-free access.

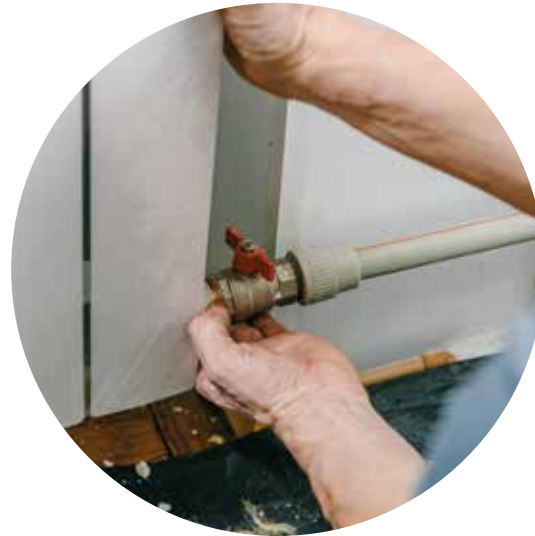
In some heritage spaces, the lack of ground-floor toilets or lifts can prevent the space from being used for any public activities, as it fails to meet the necessary rules and regulations. At one space we visited, a guest told us that she could only use the ground floor and couldn't access any of the activities upstairs because there was no lift.

Due to their listed nature, it can be both expensive and time-consuming, as well as onerous to pursue making these needed changes based on restrictions to renovation and greater planning permission regulations. This can prohibit historic churches from being able to offer Warm Welcome Spaces.



Maintenance costs

It is not only making updates to heritage buildings that can be expensive – simply maintaining them also comes with a high price tag attached! Due to the unique historic features of these buildings, such as stained glass windows or ironwork, maintaining the current state of the building can also be a financial burden. 'Funding for physical upkeep' was voted as the top challenge by the attendees of our workshop, closely followed by 'restrictions regarding changes that can be made to the physical building.' Workshop attendees noted that over recent years, there has been a resurgence for funding food programmes and initiatives that tackle cost of living but a lack of funding to sustain the buildings that provide these programmes.



The majority of the Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage buildings that we visited were undergoing some building work or a fundraiser for the maintenance of the physical building. While many interviewees shared that they wanted to maintain the space for the community, others were unsure as to whether it was economically worth maintaining the historic building when the activities could be hosted in alternative modern spaces.

Safety & security

The final challenge identified in our research was safety and security.

This was firstly expressed in terms of supporting volunteers who are on the frontline of challenges in the community. A common reflection was that volunteers can bear the burdens of those they are supporting and don't necessarily receive the emotional support that would be available to professionals working with individuals experiencing significant challenges such as mental ill-health, bereavement or poverty.

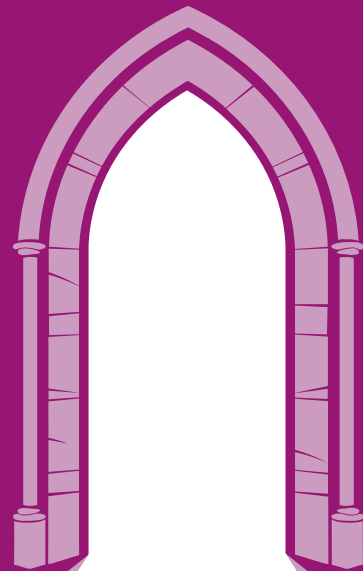


We heard concerns about protecting the safety of those who use the building, particularly in city centre churches in deprived areas. Arson, vandalism and drug use were frequent in these areas and funding for security measures such as CCTV was reported to be difficult to obtain.



Recommendations for Heritage Churches

Throughout our research, we visited and engaged with Warm Welcome Spaces located in heritage churches across the country that have engaged innovatively with their heritage and redefined some of the limitations of their space as value-adding assets. Here we draw on success stories to offer a range of practical recommendations for other heritage churches that are looking to host Warm Welcome Spaces. Alongside this, we have also produced 'Our Places of Living: a guide for churches on making the most of heritage buildings for community activities'.



Recommendation: Adapt your building

Historic churches often have large sanctuaries which can be potential barriers to creating warm, cosy spaces of connection and belonging. Splitting up these larger spaces not only helps create a targeted area to attempt to heat, but it can also create more intimate spaces that serve to make a Warm Welcome Space a relaxing environment. St Mary's Church in Southampton built storage units on wheels which can be used to create specific boxed-off areas in the church for their cafe, community supermarket, and drop-in advice area. These can be wheeled away for Sunday services, returning the sanctuary to a space for worship.

We also spoke to churches who had conducted an energy audit, a review of energy costs and potential ways to save money. Energy audits can be conducted by energy companies or energy consultants. In the Church of England, a Diocesan Environment Officer or Net Zero Carbon Officer¹⁵ can provide support. The Methodist Church¹⁶ has guidance on obtaining an energy audit and the next steps to take and Historic England's Guidance and Advice page¹⁷ has lots of information about improving energy efficiency in older buildings.

Case study:

Ebenezer Church, Bristol

Built in the early 20th century, Ebe Church provides a range of activities for the local community. From a Warm Welcome Space, to after-school hang-outs, to Community Breakfast, Ebe Church is a busy place.

In 2024, the church received funding from Bristol City Council which allowed them to replace and improve the insulation of their roof. As a result, they have been able to save enough money in energy bills to employ new staff and expand their children and families support for the local community.



¹⁵ <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/environment-and-climate-change/contact-details-diocesan-environmental-officers-and-net-zero-carbon-officers>

¹⁶ <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/property/net-zero-carbon/energy-audits>

¹⁷ <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/find/a-z-publications>

Recommendation: Weave in Heritage

This report recognises how the very essence of heritage spaces, for example, their recognisable buildings, aesthetic architecture and central locations, has the potential to create distinct community spaces with unique wellbeing benefits. As a result, we recommend that churches explore how to tell the story of the space and embody its heritage in what is offered.

When beginning on the journey of engaging with heritage, our workshop attendees encouraged other church leaders to play to their strengths, start small and just get on with doing something in the space for the local community. One Warm Welcome facilitator spoke about the value of engaging in building restoration and community restoration at the same time so that as more community activities are delivered, the building can also be improved. He encouraged churches not to wait until all the building restoration was done and perfected before opening the doors to the community.

Our 'Our Places of Living' booklet outlines how churches can tell their story through providing a gallery area, a self-guided booklet, or a slideshow on the screen for individuals to read as they come in. Our booklet also provides examples of churches who have sought to embody heritage into what they offer in the Warm Welcome Space.

For instance, The National Musicians' Church (Holy Sepulchre London) offers tea and cakes while music students perform a weekly lunchtime concert. They have also created a short video tour of the church, which they call a 'sitting tour', allowing guests with mobility challenges to engage with the space. They have found that articulating to guests that they are dwelling in a historic place of sanctuary, even if they have just come for a cup of tea and a chat, is also an important conversation starter, creating a point of connection between guests and opening up bigger conversations that might be pertinent to their mental health.

Case study: Gateway Church, York

Gateway Church is based in an old Victorian primary school with a large extension. The extension houses their Warm Welcome Space which has a large glass ceiling to let in the light and is a bright, open cafe space.

They host a pay-as-you-are-able cafe with hot drinks, toasties and cake. It is important to the church that guests feel at ease and at home. They encourage people to take whatever food or drink they would like, whenever they like. There are colouring pages and crosswords on the tables and books and leaflets, as well as volunteers available to chat.

After the foodbank takes place in another room, guests often come to the Warm Welcome Space for a hot drink and a snack. There are also grandparents and children who come by for lunch, and older people who come after they've been to shops.

This is "our space", a volunteer tells me. "We have the familiarity of the older building here but it's not stuck in the past. We've added the extension and evolved the building so that it is useful for today. There is a link to the past but also the future."



Recommendation: Work with Local Partners

There are many partners in the local area who may value using heritage church buildings. Charging them reasonable rates to use it can also enable churches to reinvest into the building and their activities.

Partners include local community groups, other local charities, health and care professionals and the local authority. Heritage churches with their wellbeing benefits can be great places for these other organisations to offer community services in a way that is accessible and welcoming. 'Our Places of Living' provides further detail on how to build these partnerships well. We also recommend the Good Faith Partnership's 'How-to Guide for Faith leaders'¹⁸ in order to build relationships with local Social Prescribing Link Workers and the ChurchWorks Family Hubs Toolkit¹⁹ for those who are looking to offer services to children and families.

Warm Welcome facilitators from heritage churches that attended our workshop were keen to encourage partnership working, right from the start of setting up a Warm Welcome Space. Bringing partners into the space can enable more people to experience the wellbeing benefits of the heritage building, enable professional services to provide early help to community members, and deliver holistic wellbeing support in communities.



Case study: St Jude's Community Hub

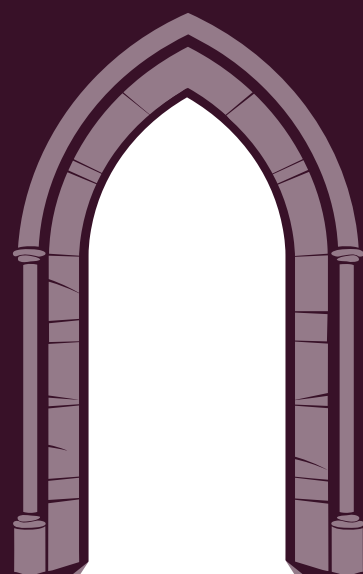
As part of their process in refurbishing the church, St Jude's held a community consultation and invited local community stakeholders including health and care professions, the Police and Crime Commissioner, local councillors, other faith and community groups and more. This enabled them to understand more about the community needs and how the church could provide support in meeting them.

Now St Jude's Community Hub is an initiative that involves the Church, the local GP surgeries, the City Council and Councillors, the Police and Crime Commissioner, Transforming Plymouth Together and the local Mosque. They provide 'Coffee with Cops' where residents can drop in and raise concerns with the police. They also host drop-ins with the local Fire and Rescue Service and the local housing provider and the NHS Get Active Initiative partners with St Jude's to run community walks.



Recommendations for Public Services

Following our research, we have also developed recommendations for national government and local partners including local authorities and the NHS.



National government: Recognise the value of heritage buildings

Across government, there is an increased recognition of the importance of neighbourhoods and local ownership. Key policies such as Best Start for Life Family Hubs, Neighbourhood Health Teams and the 'Pride in Place' programme seek to meet local needs through collaboration and investment in local areas. Priority areas for the government include mental health and wellbeing, loneliness and community cohesion.

This report details the impact that Warm Welcome Spaces in heritage church buildings can have on the wellbeing of individuals and communities. The buildings are often central to neighbourhoods and if financially sustained can improve wellbeing, belonging, a sense of ownership and responsibility and provide peace, reflection and safety. We recommend that the national government recognises the contribution of heritage church buildings to communities and that dedicated funding streams for accessibility and maintenance are created and sustained.

Heritage church buildings are also excellent partners for the government in tackling loneliness, public health, community cohesion and creating safer neighbourhoods. We recommend that heritage buildings are integrated into these strategies and that DCMS, MHCLG, DHSC and DEFRA work together on a joined up approach that recognises church heritage buildings as essential community assets rather than optional extras.



Local Partners: Collaborate with Heritage Church Buildings

We recommend that local authorities, councillors, GP surgeries, Social Prescribing Link Workers and other local public services, make contact with local heritage church buildings to understand what they already offer and explore opportunities to make the most of the heritage building for the community.

Firstly, there may be existing community activities taking place in a heritage church, such as a Warm Welcome Space. These could be integrated into public services such as Integrated Neighbourhood Health Teams or Family Hubs, or signposted to through social prescribing.

Secondly, there may be an opportunity to use the heritage building for community services so that more people can benefit from the wellbeing benefits of the space. Examples include using heritage buildings for vaccine clinics, public health information sessions or back-to-work courses.

Finally, heritage churches may be open to explore opportunities for partnership in order to provide wellbeing support for local communities. The Good Faith Partnership's guide for Social Prescribing Link Workers provides support for statutory services engaging with faith groups²⁰.



Conclusion

Our research into Warm Welcome Spaces, heritage churches and community wellbeing has added to the strong body of evidence for the importance of heritage in leveraging community cohesion, belonging and wellbeing.

Warm Welcome Spaces are 'bumping places' that provide opportunity for informal connection, access to other health and wellbeing services and opportunities to volunteer. When Warm Welcome Spaces are located in heritage buildings, individuals and communities experience additional wellbeing benefits. Heritage buildings can strengthen our sense of identity and enable us to feel that we belong. Collective ownership of these spaces increases community together-ness and can provide a sense of purpose.

Heritage churches are a distinctive type of community space. The physical building can feel like a place of sanctuary and peace amid the hubbub of daily life. Churches are often central, trusted, lack the stigma of other community services and can provide safety and security in their consistency both in terms of the physical building and the people there who offer support.

The UK Government's 'Decade of Renewal' prioritises public health, community safety and economic prosperity. As 'places of living' that support individuals at significant moments of life, such as weddings and funerals, but also provide space for them to feel safe in the middle of the complexities of the everyday, heritage churches are a significant asset in meeting these priorities.

Locating Warm Welcome Spaces in historic churches can enable the wellbeing benefits to be felt by everyone. However, many churches could further engage in their heritage through telling the story of their building and reflecting it in their community activities. Sustainable investment in the fabric of historic church buildings is also needed alongside recognition from national government and local partners on the importance of heritage spaces in delivering public services.

Heritage churches provide us with something that can't be found elsewhere. They are 'places of living' which ground us in the past and in doing so, equip us for the future.

Glossary

Heritage Building – a property with significant cultural value that should be celebrated and preserved for future generations.

Warm Welcome Spaces – warm, safe, free and welcoming spaces that are registered with the Warm Welcome Campaign.

WELLBY – a Wellbeing-adjusted Life Year. One WELLBY is equivalent to one person moving one point of self-reported life satisfaction measured on a 0-to-10 Likert scale. One WELLBY is worth £13, 000 according to the 2021 HMT Green Book Supplementary Guidance: Wellbeing.

Integrated Neighbourhood Health Teams – teams made up of professionals from healthcare, social care and voluntary and community services. They work together to provide holistic care for local areas that cover 30, 000 to 50, 000 people. They are a key part of the UK Government’s 10 Year Health Plan (2025).

Primary Care Network – a group of GP practices that work together with other health and social care providers to deliver services to the local community.

Community Hub – a building or space that is accessible to the local community and provides a range of services that the local community wants and needs. They are often managed by a community-led organisation and delivered by several partners.

‘Decade of Renewal’ – the UK Government’s central policy at the time of writing. The ‘Plan for Change’ consists of the five missions of the UK Government which are to deliver a ‘decade of renewal’.

Social Prescribing – an approach that connects people to activities and services in their community to meet practical, social and emotional needs that impact their health and wellbeing.

Social Prescribing Link Worker – individuals employed by the NHS, local authority or a charity to connect people to community-based activities and services to meet their practical, social and emotional needs and improve their health and wellbeing.

Family Hub/Best Start for Life Family Hub – local centres where families can access a range of services all in one place. These services cover 0-18 years and 0-25 years for SEND. Family Hub services are delivered by local authorities in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, health services, schools and nurseries.

Pride of Place Programme – a UK Government initiative announced in September 2025 which will invest up to £5 billion into 250 areas of the UK. Local communities will be able to choose how to spend the funds in order to positively impact their area.

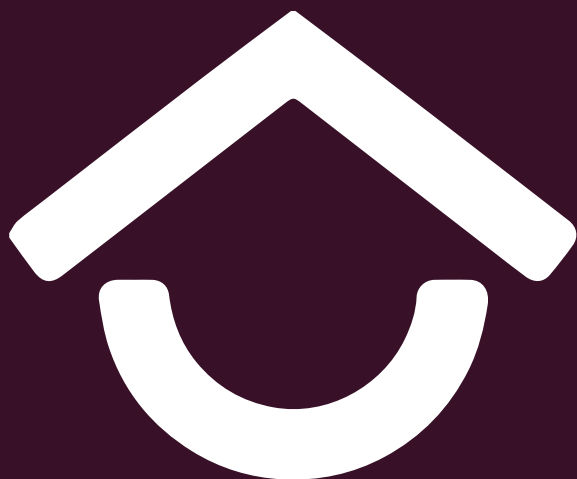
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Thank you to the churches
who attended our workshop
and fed into the creation of
this booklet.

This report is part of a research project
carried out by ChurchWorks and funded
by Historic England into how churches can
use their heritage to positively impact the
wellbeing of local communities. We call for
greater recognition of the role of heritage
churches in community wellbeing and
for investment in their sustainability and
integration into community services.



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