

New Futures: Former Places of Worship

Churches into community ownership – first steps



Community Ownership Support Service

The Community Ownership Support Service (COSS) is a Scottish Government funded programme, set up to:

- Help community groups in Scotland take on assets for their community, giving them greater control of land and buildings, and helping to ensure local service delivery in the future
- Support local authorities, other public bodies and members of Community Planning Partnerships to transfer a building or land asset, recognising the benefits of partnership working with the community to meet future goals
- See the animated guide on the [COSS website](#)



**Community
Ownership
Support Service**

Development Trusts Association Scotland



'New Futures: Former Places of Worship' programme

- A three-year programme (January 2025 – December 2027)
- Funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), Historic Environment Scotland (HES) and Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS)
- To provide enhanced support to community groups considering taking on a church across Scotland
- In direct response to the significant and unprecedented number of former places of worship that are due to for disposal over the next several years
- Staffing: Three Churches Advisors and a Churches Programme Officer



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA



Development
Trusts Association
Scotland

A Thriving Community-led Network



Who delivers the programme, and what does it offer?

The Community Ownership Support Service, within the Development Trusts Association Scotland



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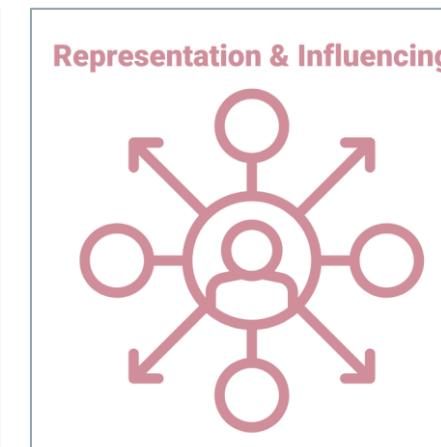
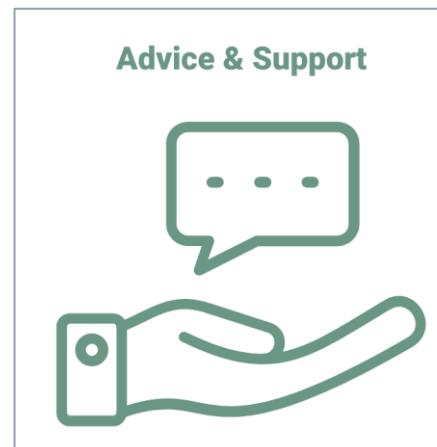
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Today's workshop: Churches into community ownership – first steps

- Presentations today from Audrey Dunn & Claire Martin, COSS Churches Advisors
- Plenty of time for questions (at the end)
- Housekeeping:
 - Please keep yourselves on mute, to avoid background noise
 - Feel free to introduce yourselves in the chat; and if possible, put your name and church building in your profile
 - Please also put any questions in the chat/raise hand – and if you have a specific question for Audrey or Claire, say that too
 - Please keep any sensitive information confidential (Chatham House Rule) – this session isn't being recorded
- Follow up:
 - We will send the slides out by email
 - Feedback forms – this week and in three months' time
 - Get in touch! With us – and each other (via us if you'd prefer)





Churches into community ownership – first steps

Today's agenda:

- Getting started
- Steps to success - Good governance, Practicalities of managing a historic building, Ensuring viability and sustainability
- Tools and resources
- Accessing support
- Case studies
- Q&A

Photo Applecross Community Company (ACC) successfully brought Camusterrach Church into community ownership. Photo credits ACC.



Your church, your community



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Heritage
Trust
Network

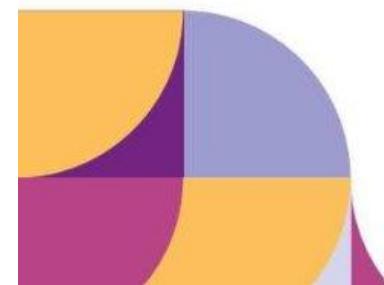


3 Steps to success

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One of the most common questions that people ask when considering whether to undertake a project like this is – what do I do next?

The steps that have been summarised on this page and in the more detailed information that follows, have been written for people who are considering the acquisition of a church for the community. These don't have to be completed in the order provided, but have been presented here in the order they are most likely to be carried out.





STEP 1: Establish a working group



- Get a group together - you can't do it alone!
- Define your community
- If possible, gather people from one or more existing local groups and include people from across the community
- Speak to the congregation
- Spread the word – ask for volunteers
- Be clear about the commitment that's needed
- Have a range of skills in the group
- Do a skills audit

TOP TIP! Ensure good governance from the onset



Set a code of conduct



Be clear in roles and responsibilities



Community ownership = collective leadership



Policies and Procedures



Communicate well



Once constituted – this is your bible!





Development Trusts – legal structures

Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG)

No share capital or shareholders & members have no claim to company assets

Owned by members on a collective rather than individual basis – democratically controlled by membership (1-member-1-vote)

Personal liability of members is nominal amount & directors personally protected

Can apply for charitable status on establishment or any later point

Flexible and democratic form – easy to set up

Two-tier Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO)

Offer nearly all of the characteristics & flexibility of CLG with charitable status

Charities from the outset & regulated solely by OSCR – streamlined reporting requirements

Two-tier option is suited to development trusts (single-tier not suitable for DT model as not democratically accountable to members)

Well suited to development trusts that are sure they wish charitable status from the outset

Community Benefit Society

Similar to CLG in essence, **regulated by the FCA** – reporting requirements therefore slightly different

Can get **charitable status**

Allows you to do community share offer

DTAS has developed CBS model rules and guidance notes, working with Burness Paull

DTAS's partner service Community Shares Scotland can provide guidance & support



Establishing a working group & good governance: resources

- See HIE's [Ten Steps to Community Ownership](#)
- In particular:
 - [Starting out as a steering group](#)
 - [Carrying out a skills analysis](#)
- See SCVO's resources on [Good Governance](#)
- [TSIs](#) (Third Sector Interfaces) - Support and advice on project development, supporting social enterprise delivering services, volunteer support
- [Acas](#) - Workplace rights, rules and best practice
- Volunteer Scotland: [Volunteer Scotland](#)



Church of Scotland procedure for communities



General Trustees Property Sale Guidance Document

Eligible Buildings

In some cases, where a building is in a desirable location, sits within its own plot of land, or is in a busy centre of population the GTs may need to test the open market to meet their duties as Trustees. Community groups can still make an offer in these circumstances.

Where the building does not fulfill this criteria, the GTs are often willing to give exclusivity to a serious community interest. This means that if your group is organised and ready to proceed, you may be able to secure the building without it going to open market.

If the interested Community Group and building are thought to be eligible as detailed above, please contact the GTs by writing to: **gentrustees@churchofscotland.org.uk**.



Church of Scotland procedure for communities –page 4

Exclusivity

If a community group meets the eligibility requirements and shows interest in an eligible property, the General Trustees may offer a period of exclusivity. This means the property will not be marketed during that time, and the Trustees will work only with that group.

The conditions of exclusivity are:

- Length: 6 months, starting once the valuation is confirmed.
- Purpose: To give the group time to engage with the wider community, secure funding, and complete the process of becoming a legally constituted body.
- Preparation: Ideally, much of this work should begin before the Church approvals process is completed, so the group is ready to move quickly.

In some cases, a short extension to exclusivity may be possible if:

- The building is still being used,
- The Kirk Session continues to support the transfer,
- A constituted body has been set up to take ownership of the building (e.g. SCIO), and
- The group can show clear progress in fundraising.

If these conditions are not met, the GTs may need to place the property on the open market. Likewise, if there are serious health and safety concerns or urgent repair issues, this may limit the GTs' ability to extend exclusivity.



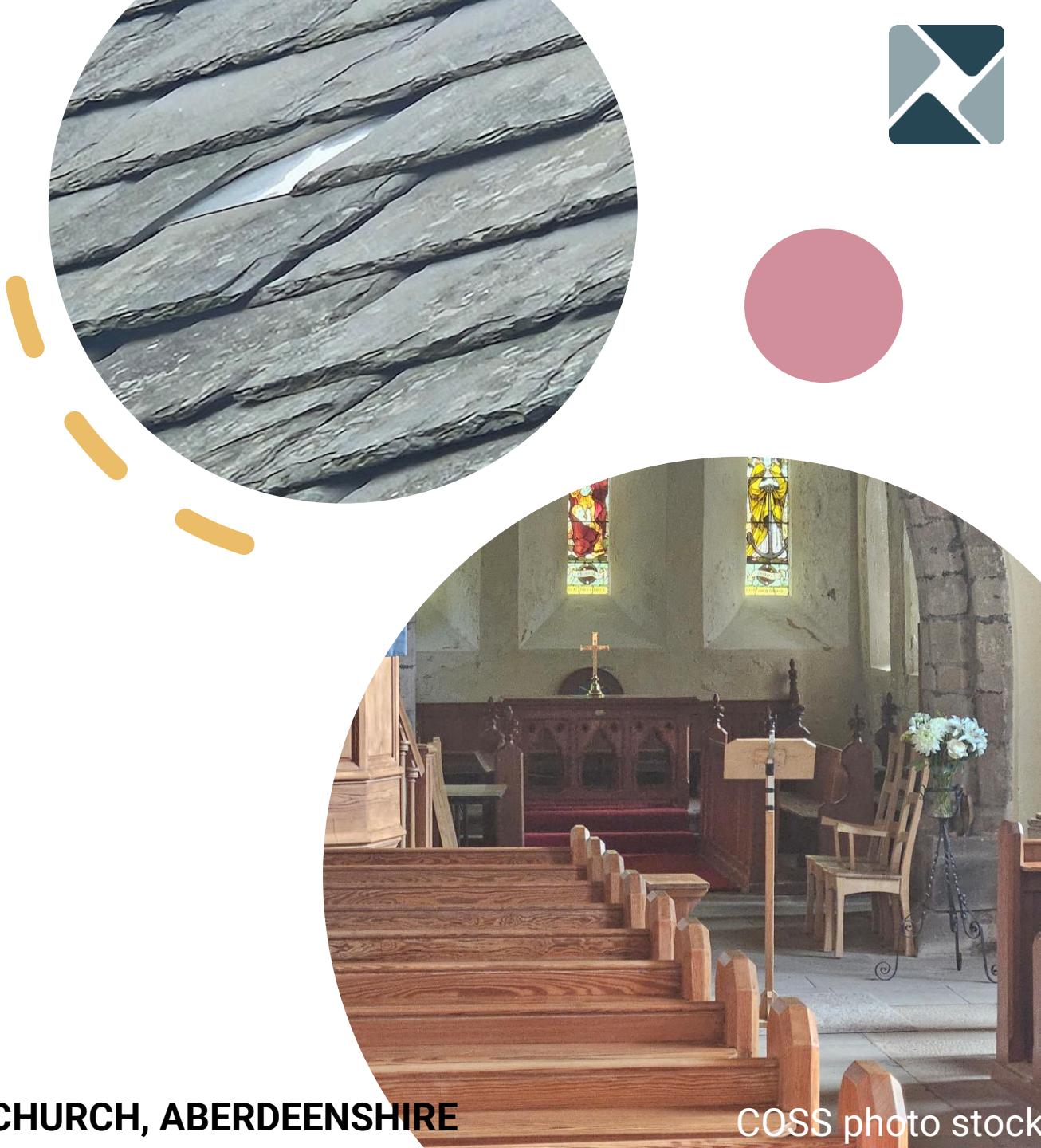
STEP 2: Gather information on the building

- Get to know as much as possible about every aspect of the building – ask for information from the current owner
- Is it a Listed Building?
- Local significance for events or traditions?
- Ownership: graveyard, surrounding land, rights of access
- Conditions or burdens?
- Consider professional advice (surveyor / architect)



Key things to look out for

- Check roof, rainwater goods, walls, etc. to identify repair needs
- Get access to the inside - check internal structure; what works what doesn't. How flexible is the space, does it meet your needs?
- Anything of significance that needs retained? [Research in Action Church Heritage](#) can provide guidance and support on this.
- Utilities, does it have electricity, running water, etc.





Gathering information on the building: resources

- Listed buildings are detailed in the Historic Environment Scotland database: [Search for a Listed Building | Historic Environment Scotland](#)
- Additional information can be found in the Canmore database: [Welcome to Canmore | Canmore](#)
- There is guidance here: [Listed Buildings | Public Body for Scotland's Historic Environment](#)
- Other information about churches in Scotland is available here: [Scotland's Churches Trust - living traditions of Scottish faith](#)
- Maintenance resources from the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings: [SPAB Maintenance Co-operatives Project Resources](#)
- Conservation support from the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland: <https://www.ahss.org.uk/>
- Research in Action on church Heritage: <https://churchheritage.scot/>



Gathering information on the building: resources

- <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings> - covers various guides from bat surveys, maintenance, looking after graveyards, achieving net zero
- <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/funding/good-practice-guidance> - covers Conservation Management Planning, Management and Maintenance planning, (as well as procurement guidance and other things required to achieve grant funding)
- <https://churchgrowth.org.uk/area/technical-issues/> -various docs we already have but technical issues offer insight into dealing with felt roofs, bats, fire exits etc.
- <https://www.ctfc.org.uk/caring-for-cumbrias-churches/resources/> - conservation/technical advice (videos)
- <https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/about-us/departments/law-department/property-and-church-buildings/looking-after-church-buildings>
- [General Trustees Property Sale Guidance Document](#)



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**Community
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Development Trusts Association Scotland

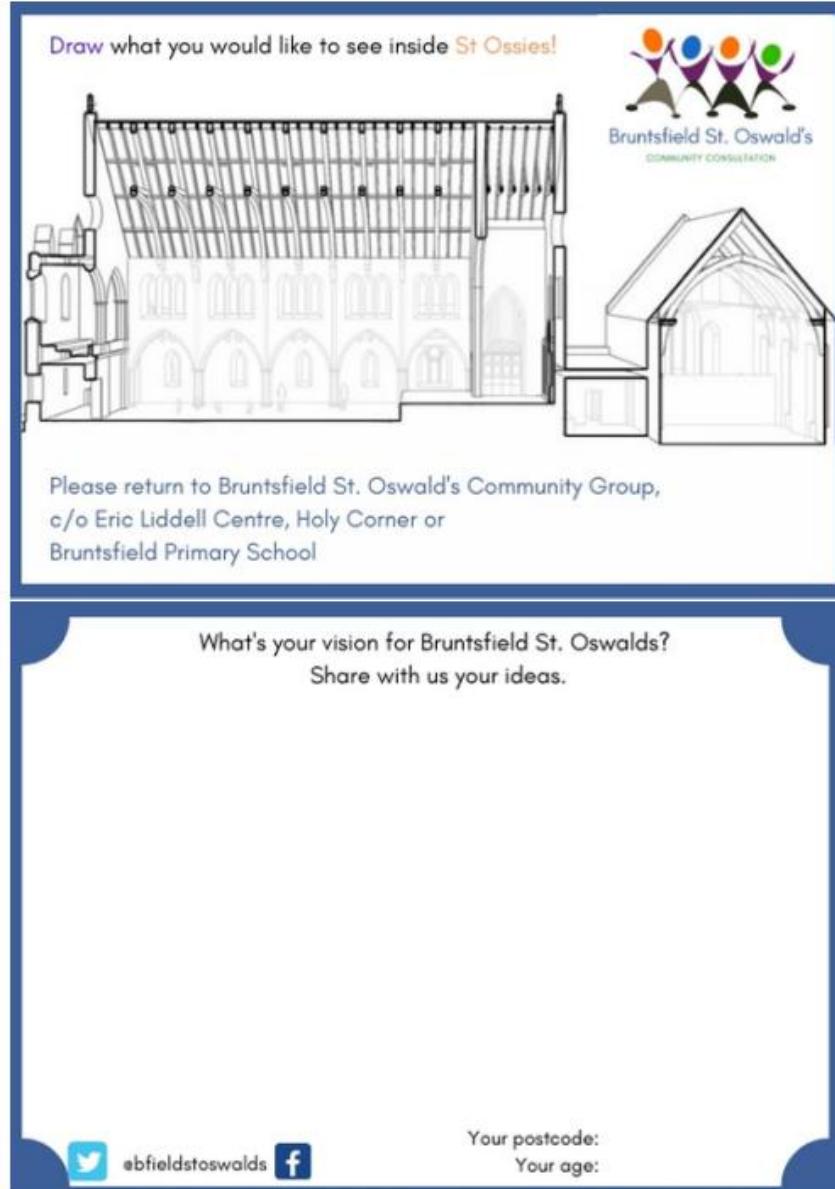
New Futures: Former Places of Worship

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STEP 3: Engage with your community

- Community engagement is a continuous process (and is one of the first things you do)
- Gathering people's views, ideas and priorities will help determine if the church building can fulfil a useful function, be of benefit to the community, and has support
- Through engagement, the church building can be understood and evaluated in the wider context of other community assets



Extract from St Oswald's Centre Business Plan

Community engagement

- Informing / consulting / engaging
- Is the church building important to us? If so, why?
- What future do we want to see for this building? How could it be used? What does our community need, and could this building help to meet that need?



Lochwinnoch Church
consultation event
Photo: COSS



Community engagement: resources

- DTAS resource: [Involving Your Community | DTAS Community Ownership Support Service](#)
- HES have developed this guidance: [Talking About Heritage](#)
 - See the questions on page 21 in particular; the step-by-step guide to understanding significance
- [Plunkett guidance](#) on community engagement for community ownership of assets

DTAS resource: Involving Your Community | DTAS Community Ownership Support Service

IN VOLVING YOUR COMMUNITY

A practical guide to the benefits and techniques for involving local communities in community asset based projects.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING SIGNIFICANCE

Significance is a big topic, so it helps to break it down into three simple questions that you can ask yourself.

STEP 1: WHAT IS IT?

Think in detail about the place, object or other thing that you're analysing.

A key part of this is to think about any physical elements:

- How much survives of what was once there?
- What does it look like?
- How much has it changed over time?

You may have to ask slightly different questions for things that aren't physical. For example, you could consider how stories change as they are told time and again.

STEP 2: WHAT IS ITS CONTEXT?

Next, examine where the thing that you're analysing sits in the wider world. Even if something is unique, it will still have wider relationships.

You can think about its context in terms of place and time as well as ideas and traditions:

- What is its history? How was it used in the past, and how is it used now?
- Does it have relationships to other objects? What about other places, events or stories?
- Is there anything like it? Can you find any other examples? Is your example unusual? Or is it in especially good condition?
- Does it have a wider meaning to people? Do people tell stories or sing songs about it? Is it something that people would recognise from a painting or photo? Has its meaning changed with time?

STEP 3: WHAT VALUES DO PEOPLE PLACE ON IT?

You should now be in a good position to think about what values people invest in the place, object or other thing you're analysing.

You can break down cultural significance into various values.

At Historic Environment Scotland, we often talk about:

- **Aesthetic value** – how we experience physical things; how they look, sound and feel.
- **Historic value** – something's place in history. Did it change or influence ideas, events or people? Or was it influenced by them?
- **Scientific value** – something that can contribute to research. Can it tell us more about the past?
- **Social value** – spiritual or cultural meaning for a certain community or group. You could think about how your community uses a building or public space.

The benefits of community engagement

- Find out exactly what the community need and want
- Sets you up to succeed in the longer term
- The community see the campaign as their campaign so will be more likely to get involved
- People have had a say so feel a sense of ownership
- Opens a clear and transparent feedback loop reducing risk of opposition
- Learn new info & ideas from people in the community
- Builds strength and capacity for the project

Articulate your Key Messages

We recommend that you try to encapsulate your community purpose in 3 short key messages to keep the campaign on message, promote cohesion and collective confidence. Each key message should ideally be confined to one sentence. It may be helpful to focus on:

- **Task:** What are you trying to do or achieve?
- **Why:** Why is it important and beneficial to the community?
- **Community:** How do you define your community and get them involved?

A 'good practice' community engagement journey

A good community engagement journey goes through the following stages:

- **Consulting**: Asking for opinions, needs and ideas from your community
- **Informing**: Communicating ideas and plans with your community
- **Engaging**: Actively involving your community in an agreed plan

Speak to other people to better grasp the full range of values linked to the heritage you're interested in.

People's views about heritage often differ. Heritage that is 'special' to one person or group may be seen differently by another – they may want it changed, changed or even destroyed. Heritage that inspires heated debate is sometimes known as contested heritage.

How people think about heritage can also change with time. Capturing this diversity of values can be the most rewarding part of the process.

We worked with the University of Stirling to look at the significance of heritage to communities. Find out more on the [Wrestling with Social Value website](#).



STEP 4: Learn from other communities



Gain valuable learning from experienced groups



Case studies and presentations available



Get in touch with established groups; network



Visit other projects



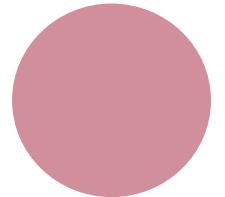
Access grants through the Community Learning Exchange



Take heart, learn and be inspired!

scottish
community
alliance

local people leading



The Pyramid, Anderston COSS photo

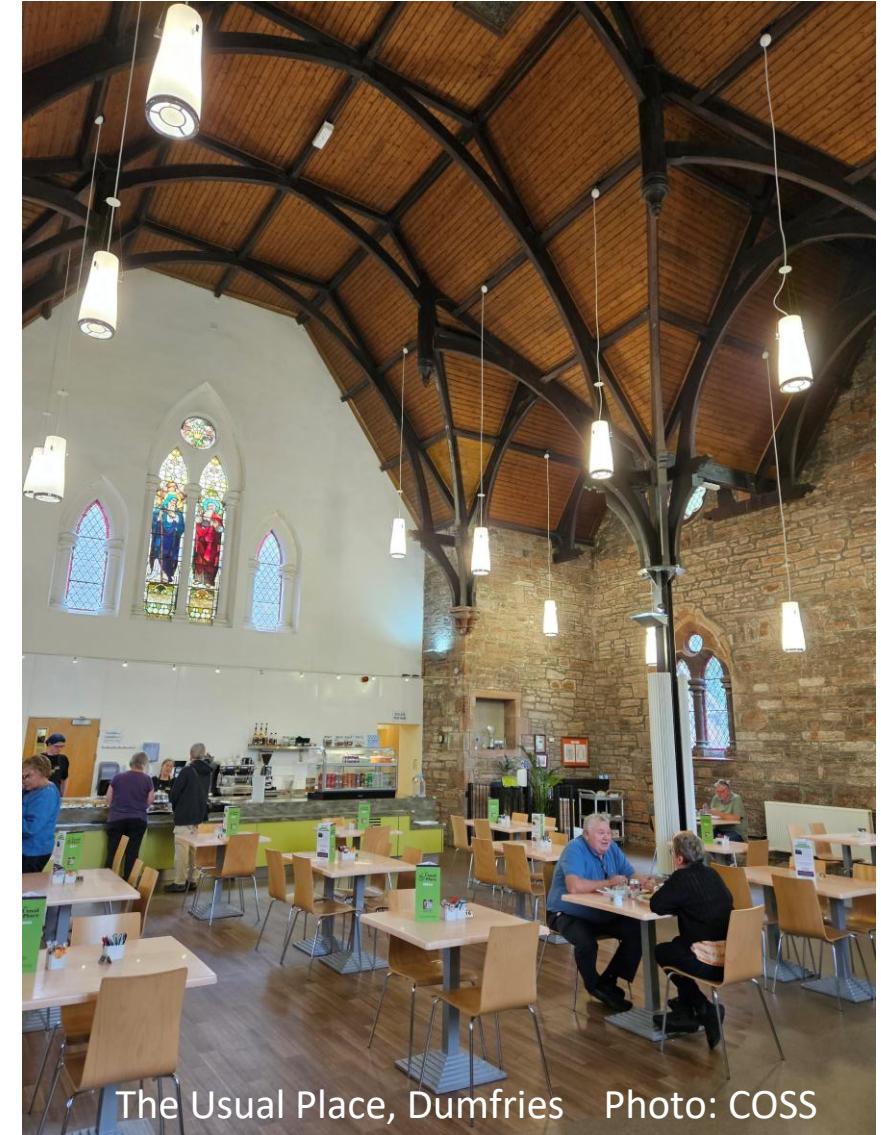


Learn from other communities: resources

- Community Learning Exchange funding:
[Community Learning Exchange](#)

- OSCR website: [OSCR | Home](#)
- Companies House: [Find and update company information - GOV.UK](#)

- Ask us about visits you'd like us to arrange
- And come to our workshop: [Involving Your Community](#) Tuesday 2nd December 2025,
13:00-14:30



The Usual Place, Dumfries Photo: COSS



Funding

- Capital funding to acquire the building itself
- Post acquisition renovation and project costs
- Start-up and development costs for professional support
- Think beyond the usual suspects!
- And come to our Funding workshops:
 - [Finance and Fundraising 1: Mainstream Funders](#) Thursday 11th December, 12:00-14:00
 - Finance and Fundraising 2: Other Funding Methods (date tba)



Kirk Covenant, Kirkmaiden



Funding: resources

- [Scottish Land Fund](#)
- [NL Community Fund](#)
- [William Grant Foundation](#)
- <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/>
- [Grants and Funding | Historic Environment Scotland](#)
- Fundraising toolkit: <https://inspiringfundraising.co.uk/>
- <https://listed-places-of-worship-grant.dcms.gov.uk/> - VAT back only on listed POW but POW needs to be main purpose with at least 6 worship days per year
- If you are remaining as a place of worship, even in part (committing to six services per year at minimum), then you would be eligible for grants from [National Churches Trust](#).

Photo Applecross Community Company (ACC) successfully brought Camusterrach Church into community ownership. Photo credits ACC.



Community ownership of churches

- Negotiated sale route map
- (Asset Transfer under the Community Empowerment Act doesn't apply, as the Church of Scotland isn't a "relevant authority")
- Community Right to Buy may be necessary – there will be a workshop on this in the new year, or ask us for more information



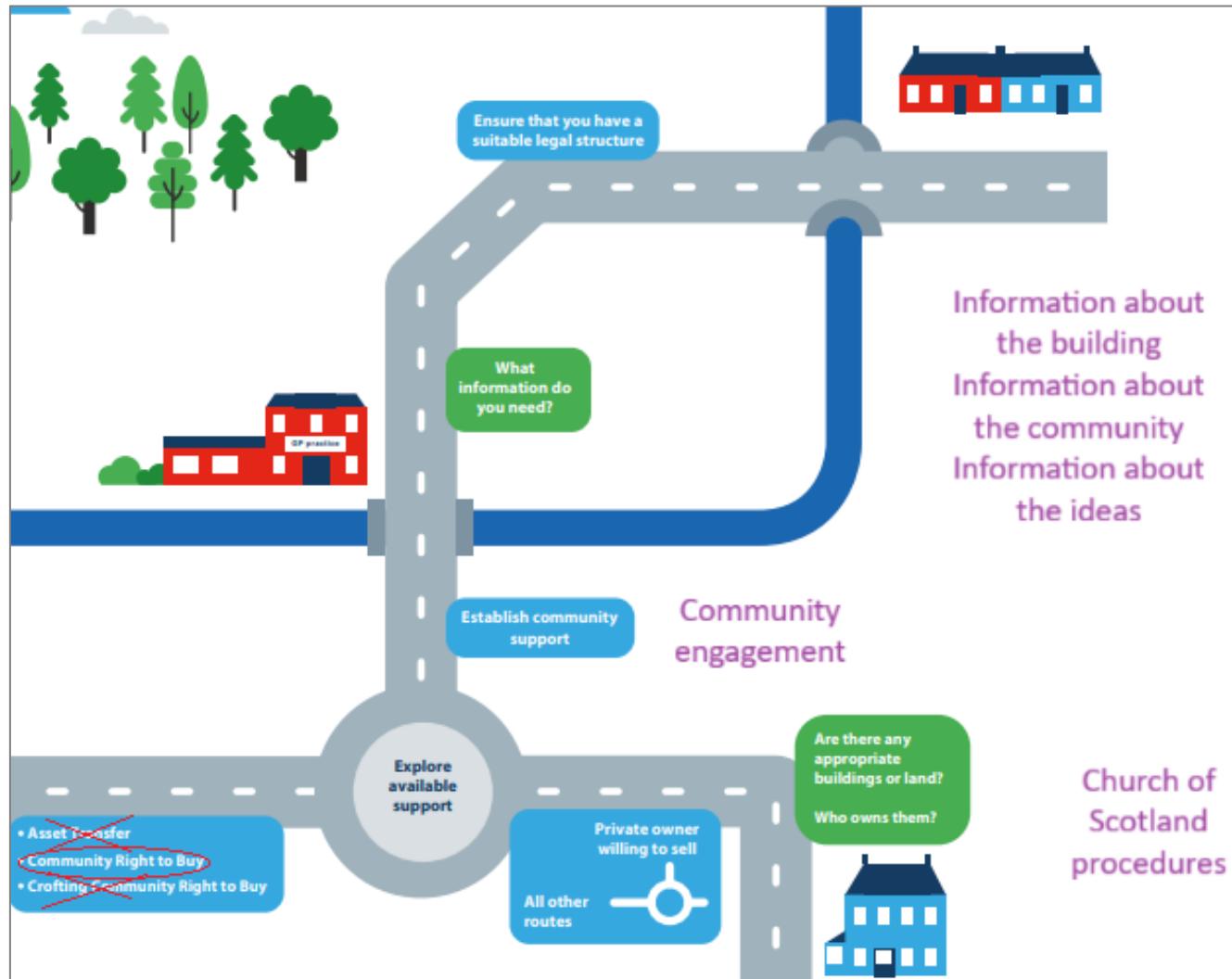


Community ownership of churches



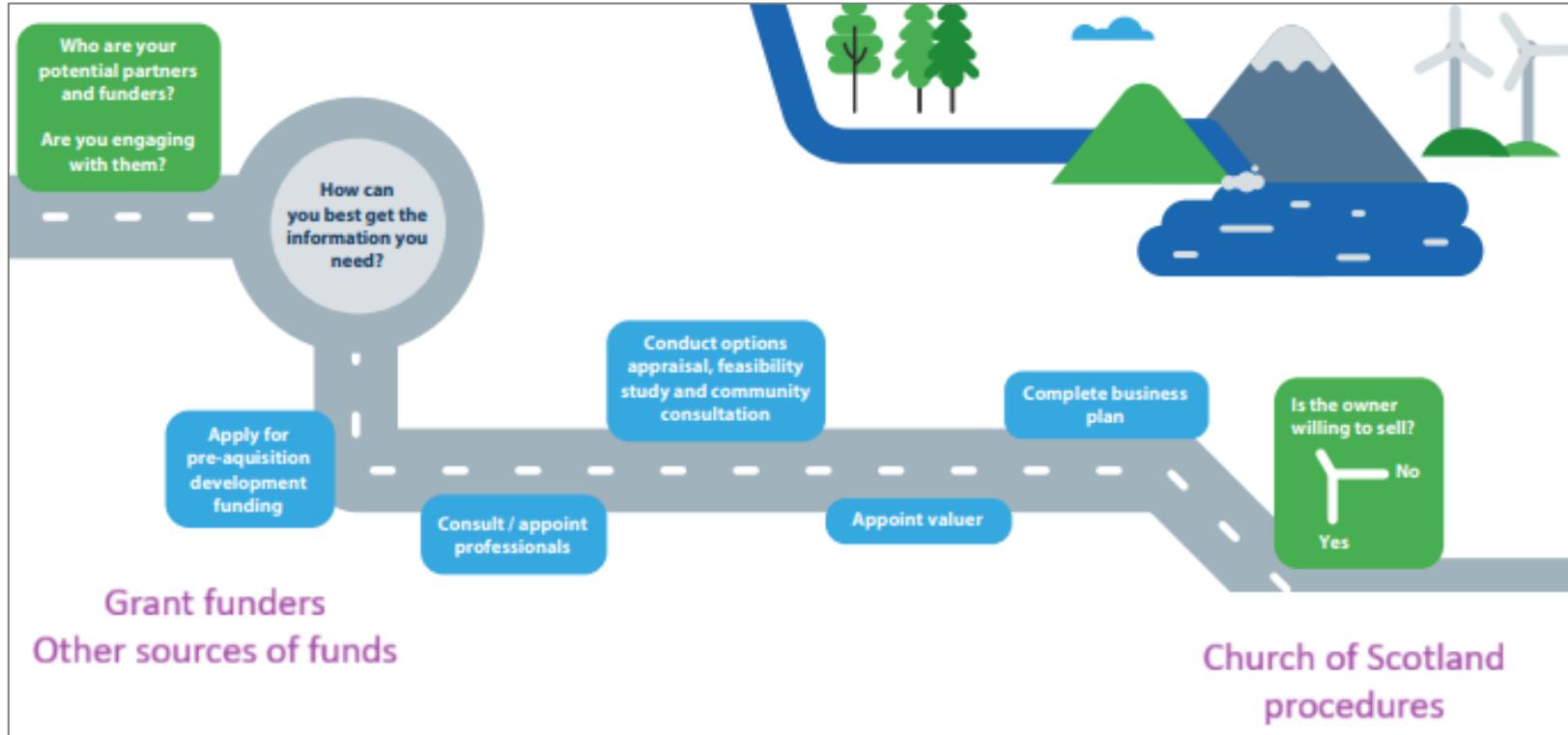


Community ownership of churches





Community ownership of churches



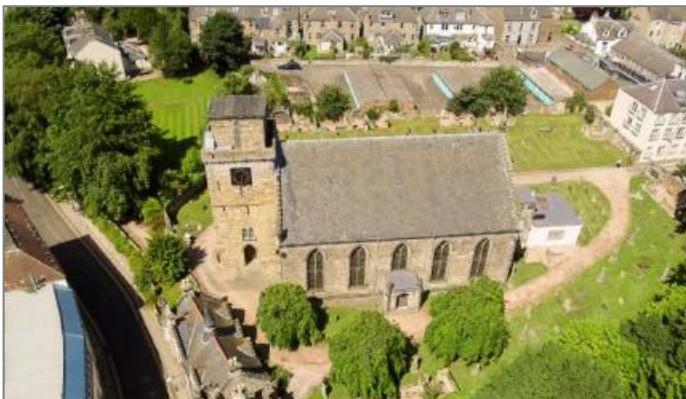


Community ownership of churches

- Bellfield Church, Portobello (2016)
- [About Action Porty | Bellfield](#)



- Kirkcaldy Old Kirk (2011)
- [Kirkcaldy Old Kirk Trust](#)



OUR STORY

Bellfield is a vibrant community space in the heart of Portobello. Formerly Portobello Old Parish Church, Bellfield offers hire space for every occasion and a programme of regular classes and events. Since opening in June 2018 following a community buy-out, our halls have become a hub for Portobello's lively community, providing a local venue for people to come together to meet, play and celebrate.

THE BELLFIELD VISION

1

A PLACE TO
CELEBRATE

[Read more](#)

2

A SPACE TO MEET

[Read more](#)

3

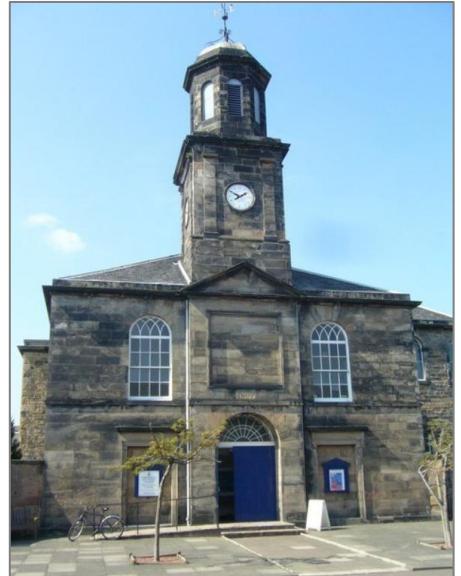
A HUB FOR
CREATIVITY

[Read more](#)

4

CONSERVING OUR
PAST AND OUR
FUTURE

[Read more](#)



Kirkcaldy Old Kirk Trust

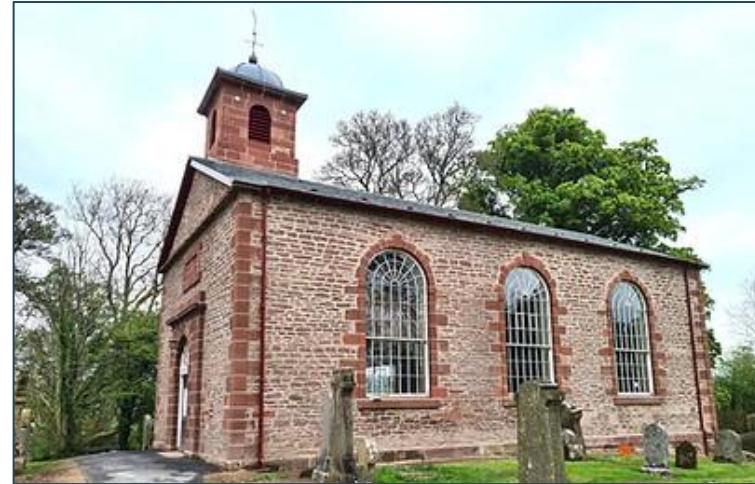
maintaining Kirkcaldy's heritage for the community



Community ownership of churches

- Kilmarnock Old Kirk (2017)
- [Kilmarnock Old Kirk | Community Venue](#)
- [How To Take a Kirk Into Community Ownership - Historic Environment Scotland Blog](#)

- St Monans Auld Kirk (2025)
- [St Monans Auld Kirk Enterprise](#)
- [Case Study: St Monans Auld Kirk Enterprise \(Heritage Network\)](#)
- [St. Monans - Fife Historic Buildings Trust](#)
- [FHB-T-Three-Churches-Viability-Report.pdf](#)



St Monans Auld Kirk Enterprise

Award £171,741

St Monans Auld Kirk Enterprise (SMAKE) will purchase the Grade A-Listed St Monans Auld Kirk in St Monans, Fife from the Church of Scotland. The group will develop the asset into a multi-use social hub and café for the community as well as a space to hold life events such as weddings.



Resources

- [Your church, your community](#)
- [How To Take a Kirk Into Community Ownership - Historic Environment Scotland Blog](#)
- <https://hereford.anglican.org/crossing-the-threshold-toolkit>
- step by step of taking on a church project from set up
- <https://www.befs.org.uk/latest/crucial-time-scotlands-places-worship/>
- <https://heritagetrustnetwork.org.uk/a-future-for-your-church/>





Our current online workshop programme

- This is the first in our current series of workshops taking place online on Zoom
- There will be 8 in total; for an overview, see the website [here](#)
- Dates and topics for those before the end of the year are available for booking:
 - [Involving Your Community](#) Tuesday 2nd December 2025, 13:00-14:30
 - [Finance and Fundraising 1: Mainstream Funders](#) Thursday 11th December, 12:00-14:00
- There is also a standalone workshop on planning: [Planning and your Church – Brought to you by Planning Aid Scotland](#) Thursday 20th November, 13:00-14:30
- Future topics (dates tba):
 - Finance and Fundraising 2: Other Funding Methods
 - Your Building: A Guide
 - Business Planning
 - Financial Planning
 - Community Right to Buy



Dreel Halls, Anstruther Photo: COSS



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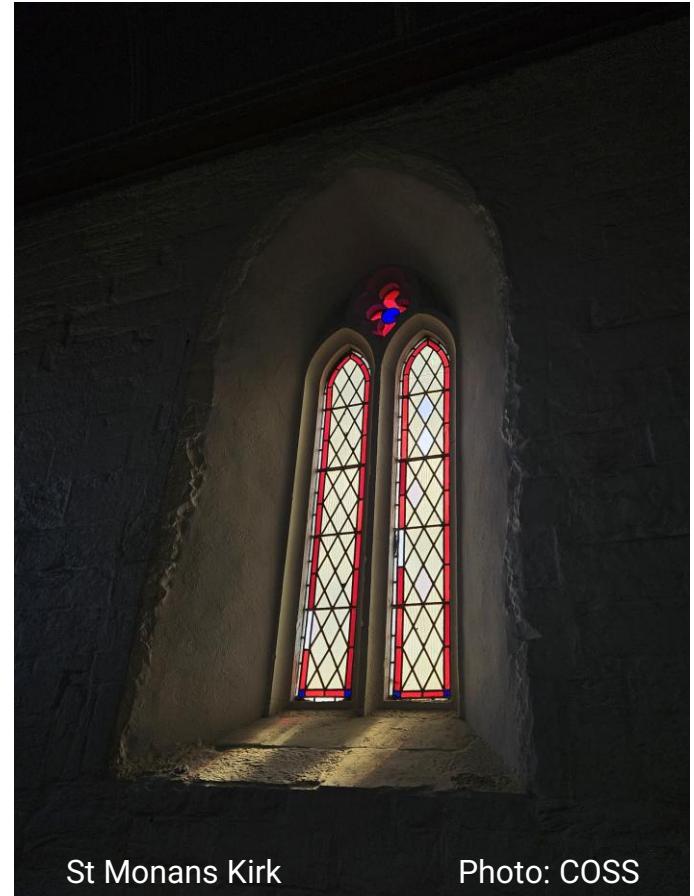
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St Monans Kirk

Photo: COSS



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