

# Rural tourism in England inquiry

Response from the National Churches Trust

Submit online by Tuesday 6 September 2016

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environment-food-and-rural-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/rural-tourism-inquiry-16-17/>

We are pleased to submit our response to the Rural Tourism in England Inquiry 2016.

The National Churches Trust is the independent national charity dedicated to supporting those who care for our nation's churches, chapels and meetings houses. We work with churches of all denominations, all ages and across the whole of the UK.

The National Churches Trust works with partners and stakeholders across the tourism, heritage and church sectors to sustain the UK's historic churches.

Through our work, and that of our partners it is clear that:

- visiting heritage sites is one of the most popular pastimes in the country
- the number of visitors to churches and other religious and heritage sites is on the up
- millions of visits are made to churches every year
- churches are regularly in the top ten visited heritage sites in England
- churches are increasingly looking at tourism as a way of generating sustainable income to maintain and repair heritage buildings and of connecting with their community and encouraging volunteers (particularly true in rural communities where the tourism offer may be the whole village)

We of course would be more than happy to engage in further discussion, and provide greater clarity on any of the issues we address below or others that may arise for which you would value the views and opinions of the National Churches Trust and our partners and stakeholders in church tourism.

## Background

### Churches, chapels and meeting houses<sup>1</sup> in England

There are an estimated 15,000 rural churches in England only. This is broken down as: 10,199 Anglican churches (the only figure we know exactly based on Defra definitions) around 3000 Methodist churches, 400 Baptist churches, 250 United Reformed Churches and the remaining number made up from the Salvation Army, Congregational Federation, Roman Catholic Church and independent churches. In terms of UK coverage, the Arthur Rank Centre has a working estimate of approximately 20,000 churches in rural areas.

A majority of church buildings (around 70%) in rural areas are Grade I or II\*, making them the largest group of most important historic buildings in the country.

Churches, chapels and meeting houses are literally 'treasure houses' of heritage<sup>2</sup>, history and community. They are also the keepers of community heritage. Churchyards, in

---

<sup>1</sup> Church = for ease of reading, all potential member sites are referred to as 'churches', although membership will be open to all Christian places of worship (and perhaps even all places of worship over time).

<sup>2</sup> Heritage = again, for ease of reading all aspects of heritage will be referred to as 'heritage', although by this we mean not just architectural heritage but also social and cultural heritage

particular, are a veritable 'who's who' of the area. In addition, they are also keepers of traditions and rites practiced for generations.

There are around 10,000 faith sites of medieval origin in the UK, all built for the same purpose but no two alike. They are tangible expressions of the evolution of British culture, local heritage, family history and tales of human events and achievements, embellished with architecture, art and craftsmanship.

Every church has something to see, or a story to tell. Most have both.

### Church tourism in England

Churches and sacred places are enjoying renewed interest among visitors. Visits to churches and other religious heritage sites are increasing.

There have been a number of successful projects during the past 20 years. They have worked to encourage churches to be open, to have organised events and activities, trained volunteers and done some promotion and marketing.

Examples include:

- Regional projects have ranged from a couple of churches to those covering whole counties. Most have worked with tourism agencies and encouraged churches to be open and accessible, offered volunteers training, interpretation, leaflets and some publicity. Many have been funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), and all have been time limited.
- Trusts who own or hold churches in trust. For all, key aims include increasing use their buildings and opening for visitors.
- Some local churches trusts promote visiting churches. Only Scotland's Churches Trust works closely with their local tourism agency.
- The Church of England is exploring church tourism. Some dioceses have also promoted opening.
- The Methodist Church / Methodist Heritage promotes key Methodist sites to visitors.
- Some individuals have set up websites promoting churches they have visited / photographed. None are connected with tourism agencies.

Visits to churches have economic value to the church, the community, the area and the country. People spend money on travel, food and other items, and on accommodation if staying. The Churches Visitor and Tourism Association calculates that visitors to churches, not including accommodation, generate at least £350 million per year.

Visitors to cathedrals generate around one third of average day visitor spending (generating £91 million per year in visitor spend).

A few headline figures, gleaned from projects and research include:

- An estimated 75% churches are currently open for visitors  
*National Churches Trust Survey 2011*
- 40 million visits to churches per year  
*VisitBritain*<sup>3</sup>
- Each parish church typically receives 700-4,000 visitors each year  
*Trevor Cooper, Ecclesiological Society*<sup>4</sup>
- 55% of day trips include a visit to a cathedral/church  
*VisitEngland*<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Survey of Visits to Attractions, 2008. Domestic tourism statistics available from [www.visitbritain.org](http://www.visitbritain.org)

<sup>4</sup> How Do We Keep Our Parish Churches, 2004, Ecclesiological Society. Available from [www.ecclsoc.org](http://www.ecclsoc.org)

<sup>5</sup> England Fact Book: Key Statistics about English Tourism, 2009. Available from [www.enjoyengland.com](http://www.enjoyengland.com)

- With increased opening, marketing and events 150 churches in South Yorkshire went from relative obscurity to being the 7<sup>th</sup> most visited free attraction in the England between 2007-2011  
*Heritage Inspired*

Churches can attract ALL the segments of visitors that tourism bodies seek to welcome. These include the new VisitEngland<sup>6</sup> segments:

- Country Loving Traditionalists; walkers, cyclists, heritage enthusiasts, churchcrawlers, family history
- Fun in the Sun; rainy day activities
- Fuss Free Value Seekers; free places to visit and events
- Free and Easy Mini Breakers; cultural/city breaks, educational visits, 'champing'
- Aspirational Family Fun; family visits and activities

As well as some inbound segments:

- Visiting friends & relatives; family history, local heritage
- Youth & study; educational visits, local culture

## Current situation

*Country churches are attracting visitors in new ways and helping to refresh pilgrimage, the original low-carbon, spiritual holiday.*

*Anna McCrum, Senior Media Office, Archbishop's Council 2016<sup>7</sup>*

At present, there is some work within denominations and other organisations to encourage churches to be open and accessible and provide visitors with a warm welcome and engaging interpretation.

The potential for rural churches to attract visitors is huge. Visiting churches is a popular pastime. But there is room for improvement. Poor information on opening times, ineffective promotion, few and ageing volunteers, security and interpretation of heritage are all concerns raised by and affecting rural churches more than their urban counterparts (which have more 'passing trade' etc).

The National Churches Trust has brought together a stakeholder group to develop a new way to market churches to visitors. Using online tourism marketing as a model, and gathering data from all partners, we aim to promote open churches, events and activities and engage with visitors with user generated data.

Our partners and stakeholders include:

Churches Visitor and Tourism Association, Church Tourism Study, Church of England, Churches Conservation Trust, Methodist Heritage, Roman Catholic Church, NADFAS, Small Pilgrim Places and Historic Religious Buildings Alliance.

We also aim to include data from current and completed tourism projects.

## Rural tourism inquiry: specific questions responses

### Marketing

For churches, there is no comprehensive visitor facing information about why, what and where to visit, how to get there, what to see and how to interpret it.

<sup>6</sup> VisitEngland, England visitor segmentation 2016 from <https://www.visitbritain.org/visitor-segmentation>

<sup>7</sup> Church of England, Holidays to Recharge the Soul 2016 from <http://cofecomms.tumblr.com/post/148692371457/holidays-to-recharge-the-soul-how-rural-churches>

Most Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) include some churches in their attraction listings. However, in practice these tend to be urban Cathedrals or those in the care of large heritage organisations such as English Heritage.

Where there has been a regional church tourism project, there may also be some parish churches listed. However, the information may be out of date, since projects close when funding comes to an end.

There are two main reasons why churches are not listed:

- Financial: membership fees for DMOs are beyond the reach of most individual churches. Similarly churches are rarely included in campaigns, as churches struggle to fund additional marketing cost.
- Numbers: most DMOs do not want huge numbers of churches listed. VisitEngland estimate that there are some 6,000 to 7,000 visitor attractions in England. If just half of English churches were listed it would make churches the largest group of heritage attractions (and attractions as a whole) by a long margin.

Despite the belief that most churches are closed, research shows that in fact the majority are regularly open at times outside normal worship (although usually for a limited time, and opening information is often unreliable).

The National Churches Trust annual Ride+Stride<sup>8</sup> event sees 10,000 churches open for visitors in September. Churches are also the largest group of buildings taking part in the annual Heritage Open Days, and various organisations run church open events across the country.

The National Churches Trust has identified a gap in provision of marketing support for churches, and information for visitors, and seek to negotiate and develop:

- A group rate for national and regional organisations
- An agreed system for prioritising and limiting the number of churches listed on DMO websites
- A dedicated and coordinated marketing approach for all churches, distinct from regional DMOs but with data available to them to use

We would welcome Defra involvement in this.

Churches, chapels and meeting house are a unique part of our national story. Our ComRes opinion poll (January 2016) into attitudes to church heritage showed that more than four in five Britons (84%) agree that the UK's churches, chapels and meeting houses are an important part of the our heritage and history.

## Access

Two key visitor groups for rural churches are walkers and cyclists. Therefore, the ongoing development and maintenance of England's network of footpaths and bridleways is essential.

Many footpaths follow traditional pilgrimage routes, tying them to local heritage and stories. These could be used to create easy to find and follow routes, with engaging stories which encourage visitors to discover the countryside, and its churches.

---

<sup>8</sup> Find out more at <http://www.rideandstrideuk.org/>

There is a huge opportunity to use technology to develop online guides and walking routes. Defra could also work through the National Churches Trust to encourage landowners, including churches, to engage with hobbies such as Geocaching ([www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com)), Pokemon Go etc.

## Funding and fiscal policies

The UK Campaign for Reduced Tourism VAT calls for a reduction in the rate of VAT on accommodation and attractions. Whilst this may not directly benefit income to churches, it does affect where and how long visitors stay, and how much they spend, which has an indirect effect on all the places they visit.

DCMS cut the funding of VisitBritain for 2014/15 by 5%. The sector receives just 3% of the DCMS budget yet contributes 9% of UK GDP. Rural tourism, especially free to visit, non-profit and part-day attractions common in rural areas (including churches), would benefit from targeted funding to market areas and themes.

Defra could work with the National Churches Trust to develop a package of support and improvements for rural churches, to enable them to attract more visitors. This could include using new technology, security, training, events management and interpretation development, as well as achieving the VisitEngland PIQAS quality standard. The National Churches Trust could negotiate group membership rates with DMOs and act as a delivery agent for Defra to manage a small grants scheme (as we have done with DCMS in the past).

## Planning and regulation

Recent changes to the regulations governing the placement of tourist signage, making them locally managed and more affordable, is welcomed. However, many churches are unaware of the opportunities available to them, and perhaps consider tourism signage to only mean a brown sign off a main road. We would welcome clear and concise advice from Defra on the various options available, which we can share with churches.

## Infrastructure and skills

The huge and varied stock of incredible heritage churches is cared for almost entirely by volunteers. Many struggle to manage repairs and maintenance, and whilst they recognise the heritage value of their building and that visitors are keen to come, they lack the skills or time to welcome visitors and interpret heritage. One issue is the lack of suitable inventories, images and film to promote churches, which would help churches contribute attractive marketing materials to DMOs.

Opportunities exist for people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, faiths and levels of mobility to get involved, whether or not they attend church. The National Churches Trust would welcome the opportunity to develop a comprehensive training package, in partnership with others to train local volunteers and also engage with work experience or back to work programmes. Defra could work with the Department of Works and Pensions to offer bursaries for unemployed people to volunteer in churches and develop tourism related skills.

There is also a need for wider tourism training within rural areas. This should include welcoming, researching heritage, producing interpretation, IT, tour guiding, events planning, maintenance and networking with other attractions.

Comprehensive and up to date visitor research is vital if churches are to have a strong voice in the tourism sector. We would welcome Defra working with us and the newly established Tourism Intelligence Unit at the Office of National Statistics to develop suitable and useful visitor surveys, and with partner churches to encourage participation from visitors themselves.

## Local environment and character

*'Heritage is one of Britain's special defining assets'*  
*Heritage Lottery Fund, 2002*

*'Churches and cathedrals are such a familiar part of our landscape that it is possible to take them for granted. They do, however, make a vital contribution to Britain's heritage, attractiveness and economy.'*  
*Andrew Duff, Inspired Northeast*

Churches are an essential part of our rural landscape and can define and underpin the character of a place. It's easy to see the widespread acknowledgement of this, both informally by looking at the number of village signs or local companies who use the church to define their place/brand, and formally by the fact that the largest group of listed buildings in England are churches. It is hard to imagine the English countryside without its churches and they should be included in all rural tourism consultation and development.

There are a number of projects across the country, helping churches to 'go green', and all denominations have general advice and targets to reduce their carbon footprint by 2050.

Churches, tourism projects and denominations are also keen to explore and promote sustainable transport options, particularly with regard to tourism. The Church of England has a partnership with Sustrans to develop cycling routes between churches (and other attractions, pubs and accommodation) across England, but many such partnerships have been made on a local scale between churches and providers.

Churchyards are special places, and often sought out by visitors. They contain a rich diversity of life including distinctive and veteran trees. They also provide a tranquil place for quiet reflection. Small grants for churchyard improvements and bio-diversity could improve the marketability of rural churches to the gardening or wildlife tourist. The National Churches Trust would be keen to discuss managing such a programme on behalf of Defra.

## Defra role

VisitBritain's ambition to attract 40 million visitors by 2020 is challenging. Rural churches can play a role in helping to achieve this, but only with the support of volunteers, and by working with local communities and other attractions to develop and market unique and sustainable visitor experiences.

Defra supports and understands our local rural communities and should engage with other government departments and the tourism sector to help them appreciate the unique opportunities and needs of rural communities and rural tourism organisations.

As mentioned earlier DCMS has cut funding for VisitBritain, and DMOs are also facing annual cuts. There is the opportunity to develop joint funding with DCMS, and the National Churches Trust, to focus on rural tourism, with churches as a key constituency. Churches have long been the focal point for communities, and can take up this role once more with regard to tourism.

Defra could also work with the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to find alternative economic solutions to churches. Pilot projects could include installing pods for use as tourist accommodation; installing solar panels and heat pumps; installing kitchens and toilets and exploring and testing new income sources for churches. The National Churches Trust is currently working to support churches to develop, but would warmly welcome a partnership to increase the impact of our work.

Defra could work with DCLG to encourage county councils to integrate churches in tourism and leisure strategies.

There is also the opportunity to work with the National Archives, local archives and other organisations to develop a church archives and interpretation project to improve the quality of interpretive and genealogy materials available to church visitors.

## Conclusion

Churches are already a key part of the tourism sector in rural England.

However, they need ongoing support from organisations like the National Churches Trust, and greater engagement with the tourism sector and government agencies such as Defra in order to reach their potential.

As the national charity working with all churches, chapels and meeting houses the National Churches Trust is perfectly placed to work with Defra to be a voice for rural church tourism, and develop partnership projects or grant schemes where possible.

We look forward to reading the conclusions drawn from this consultation and engaging with the outcomes planned as a result.

For further information:

Sarah Crossland  
Church Tourism Manager

The National Churches Trust  
7 Tufton Street  
London  
SW1P 3QB

Tel: 020 7222 0605

Email: [sarah.crossland@nationalchurchestrust.org](mailto:sarah.crossland@nationalchurchestrust.org)