

Designing places with people

# Transforming historic places of worship through community engagement





This resource has been designed for people who look after historic places of worship and wish to learn how to engage worshippers, as well as other existing and potential users of the space, in thinking about changes to their building and how the changes will affect the spiritual and pastoral function of the place and its sustainability in the future.

Whoever the custodians of a historic place of worship (e.g. a congregation, a friends group, or a trust), decisions about its future should involve all those who are or could be part of the life and sustainability of the building. Engaging the worshippers as well as other users of the space, such as people who run activities or services (such as a food bank, a cafe or a theatre group), can help gather useful knowledge about the building and its function and understand different needs and aspirations. Involving local people and groups, such as a school or a local organisation that runs community services, also helps understand the potential of the place. Community engagement makes a place relevant and important to more people and as a result it contributes to creating a stronger community and a more sustainable future for the building.

The resource will help you develop a basic understanding of what community engagement in design means in the context of historic places of worship, and how to navigate this process by taking into account special considerations around heritage, faith and community that these places incorporate. The resource aims to cover the following key questions:

- What does community engagement in the design of your place of worship mean?
- Who should engage in design decisions about your place of worship?
- How will you practically engage people in design decision-making?

## What does community engagement in design mean?

In very simple terms, community engagement in design means bringing together different people who have a stake or an interest in the building to share knowledge, experiences and views about the place and its future.

This includes thinking about the fabric and facilities of the building, the way it is used and the people that it affects. It is useful to think about community engagement as involving others in answering the following questions:

### **Why are changes needed or wanted?**

What are the assets of the building and its people, what problems exist and what aspirations you collectively have for the future of the building?

### **What changes are needed or wanted?**

What changes, however small, will make the building better and more appropriate for its users?

### **Who needs to be engaged?**

Whose needs and aspirations should be taken into consideration and who will benefit or become affected by the suggested changes?

### **How will people be engaged?**

How will people be involved in defining changes and the reasons behind them?



## What topics will you need to explore?

Community engagement in design is about exploring and connecting everyone's knowledge, experience and skills in order to agree why changes are needed and how your building can accommodate them. This means working with communities that use, or want to use, the building to share knowledge and views about its value, its function and its future potential. It also means inviting others to participate in decisions and actions to realise future plans. Together you can balance different perceptions, needs, and aspirations, by considering worship and prayer, historical and architectural constraints alongside the local vision. Here are the key topics that community engagement in design should cover:

### **Understanding your building (current and potential):**

How do people perceive the building and what emotions does it evoke? What elements of your building and its fittings are architecturally or historically significant? What are the different spaces available and how are they used? How do different activities (worship, prayer or otherwise) work together? What opportunities exist for the spaces to work better? What are the constraints and opportunities the space offers?

### **Understanding your community (current and potential):**

Who is the building serving? How do different users/communities co-exist in the space? Who may be interested in the building in the future and who would you like to reach? Who can contribute to the life of the building in the long term? How do their aspirations relate to the needs of the faith community?



Reflection on these topics will help you clarify and corroborate your building's significance and formulate a more informed understanding of your requirements and aspirations and what needs to change to meet them.

This will then contribute to the compiling of your Statements of Significance and Need, which are part of the process of obtaining permission to make any changes. They are where you evaluate the significance of what you have, what you need and why. Both you and your building advisory bodies need to understand the impact your proposals will have on the building and whether that impact is appropriate: if not, is there another, less intrusive way of achieving the same outcome?

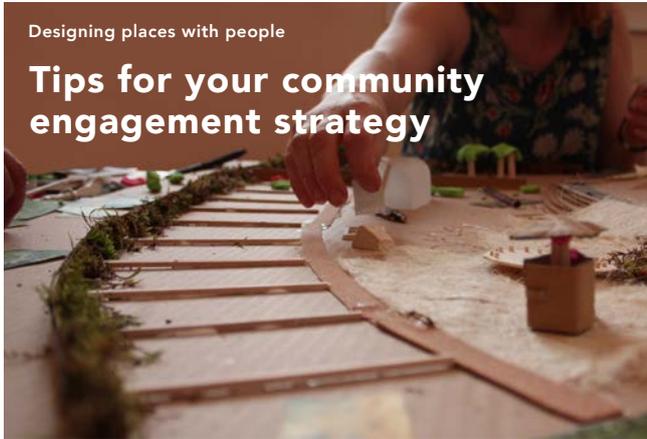
## When to engage communities?

Community engagement should be a continuous process that runs throughout the life of a design process, from inception to realisation. It may be useful to think of engagement as a strategy, but also as a series of activities for engaging people.

An **engagement strategy** typically involves a number of activities from one-to-one conversations with users of the buildings to public events with the wider community. A strategy involves carefully thinking about different questions and objectives and setting a plan to meet those objectives at different times by involving different people.

An **engagement activity** is a specific activity or action that you take in order to meet a set objective and respond to one or two of the key questions. For each activity, it is important that you carefully consider the specific question that you want to answer and the people that you want to engage.

Community engagement may be useful for generating ideas or bringing together different views. When you already have some answers to certain questions, engagement can help collect evidence or feedback on your proposals. For instance you may believe that a key issue is limited accessibility for older or disabled people - community engagement can help you build support for this and collect feedback about potential solutions.



There are two complementary resources that provide more details on how to develop an engagement strategy and how to embed useful research and data collection in community engagement activities.

Both resources are available to download from the Empowering Design Practices website.

## Who should engage in design decisions about a place of worship?

Making changes to a historic religious building requires the involvement of many different people. In a functioning place of worship, changes need to take into consideration the needs of the worshippers and the wider community, as well as requirements associated with its status as a heritage asset.

It is often very helpful to create a 'building group' to lead a design project and oversee community engagement. This group may include members of your faith community and other users of your building. In some cases, you may want to include members of local community organisations or other external partners from the private or public sector whom you are hoping to work with on projects affecting your locality.

Here are some key groups of people that you may want to consider inviting to your engagement activities:

- Worshipers
- Religious leaders and officers
- Current users of the building other than the worshippers
- Potential users or friends of the building from the local community
- Denomination and heritage statutory bodies
- Experts providing advice and support with specific issues (e.g. heritage experts or architects)



Engaging with your denominational organisation or faith group early on in the process will probably help you better explore the historic and religious significance of your building and the constraints surrounding any change in its fabric or use. These bodies can generally offer practical advice and help you understand where difficulties may arise, but may also provide examples and inspiration from previous projects.

Remember, you cannot undertake any changes to your place of worship until you have obtained the relevant permissions, which may involve both denominational and secular planning authorities. In the first instance, ensure you check with your relevant building advisers at Diocesan, District, Synod or national level to find out what you will need to do and who you may have to consult with. Here are some key groups or organisations that you may have to engage with depending on your particular context:

- Heritage bodies that have a statutory role, e.g. Historic England
- National Amenity Societies with a statutory role e.g. Victorian Society
- Local authority planners and conservation officers

You may also find it useful to contact your local historical society as they may be able to help you with explore and understand the history of your building.



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## How will you engage people in design decision-making?

There are many different ways to engage people in design decisions about your place of worship. Your creativity is the only limit! Here are some typical types of engagement:

**A conversation:** organise one-to-one or small group conversations around specific questions. A conversation may take place after worshipping, through visiting people, or more informally in parallel with other activities.

**A space:** set up digital or physical spaces where people can leave comments or feedback in their own time and at their convenience. A digital space may be a facebook group, a website forum or an online survey, whereas a physical space may be a feedback book or box available near the entrance of your building.

**A meeting or workshop:** organise meetings and workshops where people come together to explore ideas or shape answers to specific questions.

**A public event:** organise events that would attract the wider community to share views and ideas. These can be held in your own building or can be part of other local places or events (such as a festival or a market).



## Elements for consideration

In the following pages you will find some examples of different types of engagement. For each engagement activity you should specify the following:

- **Your objective and key question(s) that you need to address:** you may need to collect perspectives on the key assets and challenges of your building; gather feedback on suggested ideas; generate new ideas; or test ideas in practice. Remember that you don't need to answer all your questions in one engagement activity.
- **Who will you try to mobilise and engage:** for each activity think about the targeted audience - for example is an activity open to everyone, or do you need to bring together certain people or groups at different times (e.g. young people, congregants, or potential business partners)? Don't dismiss people you feel are difficult to engage. For example, children can give refreshing insights on how a space is perceived or used, and have creative imagination that can help inform the future. People who do not attend worship, might also have useful insights about what is needed or desired in the local area, in terms of spaces and activities or services.



- **How will you invite and draw people in:** whenever you plan an activity that is likely to take a couple of hours of someone's time, make sure to make it worthwhile and consider offering support such as catering and/or childcare. Think about different ways to reach different people (personal invitations, emails, social media, posters). Also take into consideration when and where the activity will be delivered and how you can make it more inclusive (for example weekends may be more appropriate for families, whereas weekdays may be more appropriate for experts). Consider accessibility and comfort (e.g. the perks and difficulties of running an event outdoors).
- **How will you record views and ideas:** consider recording information in different ways. For example, have someone to take notes during an activity, ask people to use pen and paper to record their views and take photos of produced ideas and outputs.

See our complementary resources for more details about community engagement activities.

## Conversations

This is the most 'primitive' but also fundamental form of engagement. Having conversations with as many users and stakeholder groups as possible is a great way to understand how people see the space and what they like or dislike.

Although you should have specific questions to drive the conversation, it is important to be open and let the conversation flow. Be curious about the views and experience of others and ask follow-up questions to understand their values and ideas.

Conversations can often help reveal the roots of misunderstandings and can help raise your awareness of the important issues, assets and opportunities that exist in your place which may not have been immediately obvious to you.

These conversations may take place after worship in a one-to-one fashion or in small groups. You may also choose to visit people in different places, or seize the opportunity of other gatherings, such as a local festival, or a regular cultural or social activity.

Keeping conversations going throughout your project is also very important. Through conversations you can inform people about developments, you can test ideas and visions, and build valuable networks and relationships to create a strong community around you.



## Meetings and Workshops

Meetings and workshops provide a more focussed way to gather and debate views and ideas with your worshiping community, users of the building and the wider community (e.g. local organisations, schools, friends groups). Be clear about your agenda when you invite people and make sure to make the event interesting and constructive for everyone. Follow a simple structure, e.g:

**Introductions:** start with an introduction that sets the objectives and expectations for the meetings and ideally create some time for participants to introduce themselves.

**An activity:** engage participants in an active way. For instance, a very common model is to ask participants to individually write down some thoughts (e.g. using post-its or cards) and then ask them to share their thoughts with others and organise the individual contributions into a shared picture.

In this process you can cluster the contributions, combine them or identify areas of conflict that you will need to resolve. It is useful to encourage people to express themselves in different ways. For instance, participants may annotate pictures using post-its or draw their ideas. This creates a more playful and collegiate atmosphere and includes those who may not feel comfortable writing or speaking in public.

**Conclusions and next steps:** allow time for reflection at the end of the meeting or workshop and discuss next steps or communications that need to take place.



## Public Events

Public events are the best way to invite people from the wider community to share their views, ideas and feedback, and to network with one another. They can also be a very effective way to raise awareness about your plans and garner financial or practical support. Public events can be advertised through websites and social media, as well as through posters and leaflets placed at public spaces such as libraries or supermarkets. Here are some typical models of public events:

**Exploration events:** these have the objective of exploring views and ideas about different questions. For instance, you may set up tables where people can annotate pictures of the building and surrounding area or draw their ideas for the future, or provide a separate space where people can have informal conversations.

**Prototyping events:** these help you test ideas for changes to the building. For instance you may prototype the creation of a kitchen area that would offer tea and coffee at specific times for a certain period of time to test feasibility and interest from the community, or you can try separating spaces using large sheets or cardboard to get a feel of how such a space may look, or function. Be sure to capture feedback from users and visitors.

**Feedback events:** these are useful when you simply want to communicate proposed options, plans or outcomes and receive feedback. In this case you may need some way to explain your decisions, and create a way for people to contribute their comments. You may also include a workshop or informal conversations to discuss proposals.



## Spaces

Creating spaces for people to engage in a light-touch way and in their own time, whether online or offline, is also valuable. Not everybody can attend a meeting or workshop, or feels comfortable voicing their ideas and views in the open.

You may need to use different tools to engage such people. For instance you may use a **visitors book** where people can record their impressions and ideas, **a feedback wall or table** in your building where people can leave their views and ideas on different topics using post-its or stickers, or **a feedback or voting box** focussed on a specific idea or issue.

Digital tools, such as **online surveys** (using tools such as Google survey or Survey Monkey) or **digital forums**, can also be a good way to reach people who do not visit the building or prefer to contribute more anonymously.

It is important to provide different options so that you get a broader and more diverse range of responses. For example, digital tools may be useful for those who do not come to your building or prefer to think about issues in their own time, but not everybody is technology savvy.



## Transforming historic places of worship: some final points

Because of the very nature of historic places of worship, there are some important considerations to bear in mind when seeking to inspire and engage others in exploring potential changes to your place of worship.

In any engagement activity, whether a conversation or a public event, you need to allow people to share their knowledge, experiences and enthusiasm about the building and the activities they see happening in it.

However, it's important to recognise that places of worship mean different things to different people, and it will be useful to frame thinking about the future of your building in relation to your faith values and practices, the heritage and history of the place, and the community that it serves (or could serve).

Here are some things to consider when you engage others in thinking about and planning transformations to your place of worship:

- Map out the current and potential stakeholders and users of the building, from within and outside your worshipping community.
- Reflect on your faith values and mission. Explore the types of activities that you want to see in your building and define your 'red lines': which activities could promote and which might compromise your faith practice and values?



- Explore how you can use the history and heritage of the building to invite other people in and to create a better place. Think about the potential impact of any changes on the architectural and cultural heritage of your place.
- Think about the sustainability of the building in the long term and how its physical properties and a spectrum of activities can be used to help maintain its function as a place of worship in the future.

# Acknowledgements

## Photo credits

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Front cover: London study tour, Bromley by Bow Centre

Inside front cover: Visiting the Sheffield Buddhist Centre, photo by Justine Gaubert

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Inside back cover: Meeting at St John's Church Stadhampton

Back cover: A poster at Stratford upon Avon URC

This resource was produced in 2019 by the Empowering Design Practices research project.

**Text written by:** Katerina Alexiou, Vera Hale and Theo Zamenopoulos, The Open University

**Design by:** Katerina Alexiou, Vera Hale and Theo Zamenopoulos, The Open University  
Grace Crannis, Sophia de Sousa and Myra Stuart, The Glass-House Community Led Design

**Advisors:** Sophia de Sousa and Becky Payne

Empowering Design Practices is a research project exploring how community-led design can help empower those who look after historic places of worship to create more open, vibrant and sustainable places that respect and enhance their heritage. Working within this context, the project aims to develop insights and mechanisms (approaches, resources, training) to support community-led design and the development of places that connect and serve their communities.

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