

Supporting the Transition to Net Zero in the Faith Sector: Church Opportunities

Purpose and Scope

This note provides guidance for Local Authorities seeking to engage with, and support, faith-based organisations—particularly churches used by the community—in delivering Net Zero outcomes. It draws on practical lessons from York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority’s Net Zero Fund, a fund established as part of the Combined Authority’s devolution deal.

Background

The faith sector incorporates over 42,800 buildings used for worship in England & Wales¹, many of which are used by the community. Whilst governance structures and strategies for Net Zero vary, there are similarities across different faiths, in that many buildings are large, historic, and significant in terms of heritage and architecture, and they play a role in community life by providing a central venue for community service or activities and social cohesion.

Many UK churches, particularly older ones, were designed with large, south-facing roof slopes to maximize sunlight for interior warmth and light, lending themselves to solar PV installations. Churches can be taller or more prominent than other buildings in a locality and therefore can have prime exposed roofs.

Challenges

Common issues identified for Churches in particular are:

- Whether assets are owned centrally or locally, churches tend to have **significant energy needs and retrofit potential**.
- **Lack of technical expertise** within local church governance structures leaves churches vulnerable to poor advice which can prove very costly. For example, a willing and enthusiastic congregation heard a heat pump was needed to ‘become net zero’. The church leadership team found a heat pump installer, and worked hard to raise funds. Unfortunately, not having undertaken feasibility work, the church were unaware that a heat pump was not an appropriate solution for their listed gothic building. Unsustainably high running costs and a poor heat output, can lead to reinstatement of gas boilers and disengagement with ‘net zero’.
- **Limited funds:** like other voluntary sector organisations dependent on donations and member giving, many churches are financially constrained. Therefore finding internal resources for feasibility and development

¹ Number of places of religious worship in local areas, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics

finance is extremely challenging; development costs are not an attractive sell to Church leadership teams. They may instead seek to bypass feasibility and development stages to reach capital solutions sooner.

- **Barriers to accessing funding:** Grant processes are often complex and inaccessible for small, volunteer-led churches, and leadership teams are often unaware of opportunities.
- **Piecemeal and isolated approaches** mean that churches often start from scratch, missing opportunities for shared learning, strategic planning and aggregated solutions.
- **Complexities of permissions and tariffs:** the planning process, including the ecclesiastical permissions process, grant funding cycles and grid approvals seldom align which means projects can be caught in a vicious circle, making them hard to deliver.

Local Authority Support

Local authorities can support faith groups by capacity building in the following ways:

- Encouraging knowledge sharing and peer learning
- Connecting churches with their regional Net Zero Hub, local energy networks, and Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations such as Community Energy England, Council for Voluntary Services.
- Supporting demonstrators to showcase success
- Providing small grants for feasibility work delivered by trusted suppliers
- Extending solar and retrofit homeowner solutions to Churches.

Case Studies

North Yorkshire Council

Decarbonising Community Buildings Fund – co-benefits achieved through an individual community building project.

In Scarborough, a Church in the North Yorkshire coastal community which experiences high levels of deprivation, received funding to install a thermally efficient roof as part of their decarbonisation goals, helping to reduce the church's energy bills and carbon footprint. Social benefits were also delivered as the Church was able to increase its community offering, providing improved storage for a school uniform bank, continuing free cooked breakfast club to mitigate school holiday hunger and providing a home for local support groups tackling issues such as domestic violence.

- **Advantages:** direct impact, low cost grant made a big local impact.
- **Disadvantages:** one grant – one site, therefore high effort for one individual church to identify contractors etc. The grant could only support a proportion of the work and therefore much time spent securing other sources of funding by church, and high level of LA time to administer fund.

York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority

The Combined Authority provided development and capital funding through its £7m Net Zero Fund, secured, through as part of the devolution deal. A £740,565 grant enabled a £1.1m decarbonisation project across 20

community use churches to come to fruition, demonstrating the benefit of a bundled approach to accelerate the journey to net zero.

Outcomes: 184Kwp Solar PV, 196kW battery storage, 5 heat pump units alongside energy saving measures, LED, insulation and double glazing, enabling 20 churches to continue providing a home to community larders, dementia cafes and uniformed organisations, by reducing bills and improving the fabric of the buildings.

- **Advantages:**

- Development and capital funding enabled churches with challenging buildings to move from feasibility (RIBA stage 1) to capital works (RIBA Stage 5), with the professional expertise they needed.
- By bundling, or aggregating sites, solutions could be delivered at a much lower cost than as individual projects, and as a larger project, was much more attractive to suppliers and other grant makers.
- The Diocese/District involved had developed their asset base and identified a pipeline of projects, therefore if one site were unable to proceed due to technical or non-technical barriers, another could take its place

- **Disadvantages:** to deliver a project covering multiple churches, a convening organisation was needed (in this case a District/Diocese level entity) which may rule out some denominations and faith groups.

Summary

With Local Authority-led comprehensive support, including for feasibility studies, Churches can deliver high-impact, community-rooted decarbonisation, helping Local and Combined Authorities meet climate goals while strengthening social infrastructure.

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