

A Government-funded pilot programme to repair and enhance England's listed places of worship has been launched by Michael Ellis, the Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism.

The £1.8 million scheme, to be managed by Historic England, will see expert advisers working with all faiths and denominations.

They will help local volunteers manage and maintain eligible listed buildings, such as churches, synagogues and meeting houses in the pilot areas, and explore options for their wider use to serve communities and strengthen local relationships.

The 18-month-long pilot scheme will run in Suffolk and Greater Manchester - respectively one region predominantly rural and the other more urban, to test the implementation of recommendations made in last year's Taylor Review: Sustainability of English Churches and Cathedrals.

The review concluded that church buildings play a "vital role" in providing public services and a sense of identity to communities across the country, and that they should be opened up to help ensure a more sustainable future for the sites.

The pilot programme recognises that any faith group caring for a listed building faces special challenges and that many congregations are keen to share good ideas, develop skills and increase the number of people who can help to keep these architectural gems fit to serve their communities.

Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism Michael Ellis said: "Historic faith buildings are a key part of our rich heritage and it is important they are protected.

"Every year thousands of volunteers dedicate a huge amount of time to their upkeep, but many need high levels of maintenance and repair.

Through these pilots in Manchester and Suffolk, we will unlock the wider community potential of listed places of worship and provide practical guidance to help preserve these much-loved buildings."

Bernard Taylor, Chairman of the English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review, said: "There are more than 12,000 listed Church of England churches across the country and they are a major part of our both our local communities and national heritage, offering places of worship and social hubs providing many vital support services.

"These assets need looking after and as my recent report made clear, we must do all we can to ensure we do not simply rely on the goodwill of local volunteers. We need a long-term vision for how these buildings will continue to be cared for and protected for future generations.

Therefore I welcome this pilot programme and its associated funding as the next important step in creating a more sustainable future for our church buildings across the country. I hope these pilots will provide the evidence for the full implementation of my recommendations post 2020."

The Bishop of Worcester, Dr John Inge said: "Church buildings are a crucial part of the community life of this nation and provide much-needed social outreach and community facilities, however they receive no regular Government funding. This fund will model a 'stitch-in-time' approach, addressing urgent repair needs before they become costlier.

“In working with the Government on addressing their long-term sustainability, we’ve heard many stories of churches that understand their Christian mission in terms of service to the whole community. We hope this pilot will pave the way for that vital work to be sustained and increased.”

Duncan Wilson, Chief Executive of Historic England, said: “We are committed to supporting congregations who care for these extraordinary places of worship and are pleased that the pilot will be looking not only at the buildings themselves, but also at how they can be imaginatively used so they can once again be at the heart of local communities.”

Chairman of the Church Buildings Council, Sir Tony Baldry, said: “This pilot is a very positive development; so too is the Government funding.

“The Church and Government must continue to work together to look after the repair and maintenance of listed church buildings as cost-effectively as possible, and also to encourage a wider sense of ownership among the community. We look forward to a constructive ongoing dialogue to achieve this.”

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has appointed independent monitors to prepare an evaluation report to be published when the pilot programme ends in March 2020. This will provide important information about the impact of the scheme, the lessons learned from it and the wider issues relating to historic places of worship.

Source URL: <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/pilot-scheme-fund-stitch-time-repairs-churches-and-places-worship>