DEVELOPING VISITOR ENGAGEMENT IN CATHEDRALS
INTRODUCTION

1a A 360° vision for mission

Is your building speaking in a language people can understand? The Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell

Churches today overestimate people’s knowledge and underestimate their level of interest. The Revd Dr Stephen Hance

Jacob said, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!’ Genesis 28:16

1b Postscript, autumn 2020: the impact of Covid-19

A growing challenge; a growing opportunity

Cathedrals are places of beauty, wonder, and rich heritage which have a special place in national life. They maintain a round of daily worship to which everyone is welcome and often host major occasions of celebration or commemoration, where people of all faiths and none unite for a single purpose. Their open doors welcome a wide cross-section of humankind, who are touched in numberless and unique ways by what they encounter.

That cathedrals are beautiful and awe-inspiring is no accident. They have been designed to heighten sensory responses, to teach and inspire, to evoke awe and emotion. Their soaring architecture, splendid art, and role as embodied history together draw many in; they also act to create and shape uniquely powerful experiences. Cathedrals are places of multiple, intersecting stories. For many people the most powerful outcome of a visit is discovering a connection which means that their own story becomes entwined with that of one of these special places.

Our cathedrals, with all their diversity, each have at their heart a Mission of Welcome for the millions of people who come through their doors each year. Their reasons for coming vary widely, and their understanding of Christianity, and the way it has shaped what they see around them, is these days equally varied. So the cathedral’s Mission of Welcome is a vital part of the Mission of Outreach.

Cathedrals today face great opportunities and challenges which require an approach which integrates mission and pastoral priorities with visitor management techniques. Mission welcome, understanding and enjoyment, are inseparable. The quality of a cathedral welcome can have a life-changing effect—for good or for ill.
Cathedrals are places of mission and hospitality, and of heritage. Sometimes we see these as being held in tension, but they belong together more than we sometimes assume. Research into the reactions of those who visit cathedrals shows clearly that when mission, hospitality and heritage are woven together, a richer, deeper response and relationship develops. However, we must recognise that the increasing unfamiliarity of the public with Christian belief and symbolism may hinder their engagement and enjoyment of religious buildings. As Professor Grace Davie has observed, "It is no longer a question of operating within remnants of cultural memory in terms of Christian understanding. In the case of a very large section of our audiences we are now in a situation of 'no knowledge' of Christianity." That doesn’t mean no interest or desire to explore spirituality but it does mean that we can make no assumptions as we communicate with our visitors and seek to give them a full welcome, which has to include opening up the meaning and stories which have shaped everything they see. Otherwise we are being exclusive, allowing those who happen to possess knowledge of Christianity to enjoy this rich shared heritage and spiritual treasury to the full, while excluding those who don’t.

Many people may enter a cathedral purely in search of a ‘heritage experience’ but find themselves responding to the beauty of the building, its peace and its spiritual significance, in ways which are new to them. It is therefore not only difficult but unhelpful to draw too clear a distinction between ‘pilgrims,’ ‘worshippers’ and ‘tourists’, since most people’s experience sits on a continuum and they may move from one to the other, even within a single visit. Scratch a pilgrim and you may well find a tourist; scratch a tourist and you may find a pilgrim in the making!

This guidance contained in this document reflects the fact that all churches periodically need to review their goals and resources to ensure that their mission (in all its senses) is as effective as possible for the widest possible range of audiences. It incorporates evidence, principles and practical initiatives which emerged from the recent large three-year joint research project carried out as a partnership between the Church of England and the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture at the University of York.

What is a Visitor Engagement Plan?
A Visitor Engagement Plan (VEP) is a holistic expression of a church’s identity, resources, vision, and mission which complements and intersects with planning in the areas of conservation and liturgy. It is therefore a valuable asset in the work of any cathedral. All the elements outlined below therefore need to be connected in both planning and delivering an effective welcome to visitors.

A VEP will also be an important supporting document when planning major projects or grant applications, and is likely to strengthen an application to the Cathedrals Fabric Commission or a Fabric Advisory Committee, but this is not its primary purpose and it should be prepared independently of any specific set of proposals.

It is also important to be clear about what a Visitor Engagement Plan is not designed to do. A VEP is only one of a suite of documents intended to enrich and articulate your understanding of your building, its use and potential, each of which has a specific focus. These documents should dovetail, but for the production of each one to be manageable it is important that they focus on their core topic. For instance, detailed consideration of the liturgical use of the cathedral should be considered in a separate Liturgical Plan; a full appreciation of the significance of the fabric, contents and archaeology of the cathedral and its setting should be considered in a Conservation Management Plan; and issues such as accessibility and environmental sustainability should be dealt with in more detail in specific policies. Further guidance on producing these documents is available on the ChurchCare website.

Why do you need a Visitor Engagement Plan, and how will it help you?
A VEP is central to a cathedral’s mission and needs to inform and intersect with other action plans which shape the cathedral community’s vision and future development. The process of creating a VEP offers an opportunity to: consult widely both within and beyond the cathedral community; review a cathedral’s resources, material, human and financial; review the use and potential of existing spaces; clarify mission priorities; establish a culture of welcome and openness; and identify ways forward which will maximise engagement.
with these extraordinary buildings while minimising harmful impact on the qualities which make them valuable to people. A VEP will recognise existing achievements and creativity, while asking how you can enhance what you are offering to make your welcome yet more effective. Often this will not require a major investment, but simply asking, “Will one more small additional step make a difference?”

The benefits of deeply rooted, integrated planning include:

- understanding your building in order to make best use of it for mission, welcome and public engagement, and enhance the appreciation of its heritage;
- being able to demonstrate reasoning and ‘joined-up’ thinking to congregations, local consultees and funders;
- reaching the best decisions for future developments, including any changes to the buildings and the ways in which spaces are used; and,
- sustaining vision and implementation through and beyond developments and projects.

Who is responsible for creating and implementing a Visitor Engagement Plan?

In order to be truly effective, a VEP needs to draw on the insights of the whole cathedral team (clergy, lay staff and volunteers), in close consultation with the congregation, the local community, the diocese, and visitors themselves. External advisors can support the process, but if a VEP is to be effective, deliverable and sustainable, it must grow out of and reflect the vision, overall mission strategy, experience, and practical insights of the cathedral community. If it is anticipated that a VEP may involve changes to buildings which might require consent, it is advisable to seek advice from the CFCE, your FAC, Historic England and other statutory bodies at an early stage to inform thinking and planning and thereby avoid difficulties later in the process.

Postscript, autumn 2020: the impact of Covid-19

This document was already largely complete when the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic changed so much about the scope and nature of our behaviour and interaction with one another in public. In returning to this document in the autumn of 2020 we have asked ourselves whether it needed to be recast to reflect the radical changes that have come to our experience of places of worship, amongst other public buildings.

We ultimately decided against doing so, for two principal reasons.

The first reason is that official advice on public safety measures relating to Covid-19 has been in constant flux since the outbreak of the disease and will continue to be updated as more is understood about the transmission and treatment of the virus, as levels of infection rise and fall, and, in due course, with the distribution of a vaccine. For this document to enshrine obsolete or counterproductive advice would make it worse than useless.

The second reason for leaving the document alone is that is that its aim is to help you write a Visitor Engagement Plan, and not to present you with one ready-made. It is formed primarily of questions for you to ask about how visitors experience your building and engage with its heritage and Christian mission. While Covid-19 may have affected the answers you may give to many of these questions, it has not changed the questions themselves. You will not need our prompting to add, when considering each of the issues discussed below, the further vital question of how the risk of transmission of the virus can be minimised for your visitors and staff.

Specific guidance on Covid-19 for cathedrals and churches is available on the Church of England website and is under frequent review.
Developing a VEP is a chance to learn more about the cathedral’s existing resources (including people, buildings, features, furnishings, activities, wider social and geographical context, and convening power). It is also an opportunity to undertake wide-ranging consultation, both inside and outside the cathedral community, forge new partnerships, and create goodwill. A VEP will value what has already been achieved and look for creative opportunities to build on it. It is important to ask what is important about the cathedral to those who worship, serve, live nearby, come for civic occasions, and/or are drawn by its art, architecture, spiritual power, and role as living history book. To be deliverable and sustainable a VEP needs to be rooted in a cathedral community’s core identity, daily life, wider context, and vision for the future.

Not all VEPs will conclude that major changes are required. The first step is to assess the full potential of existing spaces and assets and then, where appropriate, to trial low-cost, low-tech interventions. If physical changes to the building or its furnishings do appear desirable, it is important to consider the potential impact of these, not only on the fabric but on the experience which the building currently offers visitors.

A VEP needs to consider that cathedrals have always had a range of roles and appealed to a multiplicity of audiences in different ways: we therefore need to ensure that different kinds of activity and engagement can co-exist positively and creatively today. A useful concept to bear in mind when creating a VEP is that of ‘adjacency’, the power of being near to something. Cathedrals house different activities, often simultaneously and in close proximity, and the boundaries between these activities may be potently fuzzy. This is particularly important with regard to worship and devotional practice, given how many visitors value being present in the cathedral when services are being held even though they may not appear to be actively engaging. We must be careful not to place barriers (physical or psychological) between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ but allow those unfamiliar with cathedral practice to learn by watching, listening, and imitating, and to engage at their own pace.
Visitor engagement and mission

Since visitor engagement is so critical to a cathedral’s mission, the following issues need to be uppermost in your mind as you work on a VEP: How do we speak engagingly about the glories of the cathedral and the faith that continues to inspire it to such a diverse audience? What opportunities are there for extending our reach? - and at the same time, how do we help people, especially those who have little connection with Christianity, to see the cathedral as more than a beautiful historic building? What can we do to help everyone connect with the faith that has inspired the beauty of the building, the creativity that fills it, and the continuing traditions of distinctive worship that still give it life?

The questions below unpack these challenges in more detail. The rest of this document considers individual aspects of Visitor Engagement Planning and poses more detailed questions about specific topics, but these ‘core questions’ are relevant to every topic. It may help you to think of these questions as constituting a ‘SWOT’ (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) Analysis for visitor engagement at your cathedral.

Core questions

- How are we integrating mission, welcome, worship, heritage interpretation, our civic roles etc?
- Who are our visitors?
- Who aren’t we reaching and why?
- What do our (current and potential) visitors want and need? How do we know?
- How effectively are we using interpretation (conventional and/or digital) to offer all visitors the chance to understand the Christian story which has shaped our building and our community?
- How effectively are we encouraging spiritual exploration on site and subsequently? If people become interested in learning more about the Christian faith, what are we offering them?
- What are we currently doing to enhance engagement with the many aspects of the building and its community life while ensuring that different kinds of provision (e.g. heritage interpretation, group activities, and quiet spaces for prayer) can coexist positively and as part of a greater whole? How can we build on this?
- What do we offer our visitors to take away to help fix their visit in their memories?
- What are our ‘assets’ (including staff and volunteers, the building and its features and furnishings, our activities, our wider social and geographical context and convening power, and our financial resources)?
- What spaces do we have and are they being used to their maximum potential?
- What local resources are available to us (including people, skills, local expertise, local initiatives, funding)?
- What regional and national resources are available to us (other cathedrals, expertise, professional bodies e.g. the Deans’ Conference, the Cathedrals Administration and Finance Association, Cathedrals Plus, the Association of English Cathedrals, the Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England, published guidance, statutory advice, creative ideas and initiatives, funding bodies etc.)? See Section 11b, Tools and Resources.
- How does our VEP relate to our other missional policies and practices and to our Liturgical and Conservation plans?
- What are our short, medium and long-term visitor engagement goals?
- What simple, low-level, low-cost interventions can we pilot to test and clarify the most effective ways to engage visitors? What ‘quick wins’ could we achieve?
- What possible interventions might have longer-term implications for the fabric or furnishings of the buildings which would require discussion and/or permissions?
2a Welcome

Our cathedrals are stunningly beautiful on the inside but can appear somewhat forbidding from the outside, especially to the newcomer. People unfamiliar with visiting churches may have little idea what is inside, or what might happen to them if they try to enter. It is therefore very important to look at our cathedrals from all possible perspectives and ask what messages we are sending to those thinking about coming in.

Welcome is not just something that happens at the door: it should begin before people visit, using online resources and wider publicity; be clearly signalled as they approach the building; continue throughout their time in the cathedral; and include an invitation to return or maintain a connection. Effective welcome involves helping people to feel relaxed, sending them signals of encouragement through smiles and greetings, providing clear helpful invitational signage, and supporting them in exploration and engagement through layered accessible explanation. Having to pay to enter a cathedral can be a barrier to some; however, research evidence shows that what matters most is not whether a cathedral has an admission charge, but how welcome and entry is handled and exploration supported, so that people don’t simply come to look at the building, but are open to being moved and changed by it.

Although we know that people choose to visit cathedrals for a range of reasons, research shows that it is vital not to pigeonhole them as ‘tourists,’ ‘worshippers’ or ‘pilgrims’, as their responses frequently change and broaden even while they are inside our buildings. It is therefore very important to regard all those who come through the doors simply as people, that is as individuals who have the capacity to respond in a multitude of ways, especially in situations which may be new to them. They need to feel at home so that they cease to worry about doing something wrong or being embarrassed by lack of knowledge, and start being able to let the space, its beauty, its peace, and its stories, wrap around them. The ways in which individuals are welcomed and supported can either help them start or develop a spiritual journey or put them off churches for life.

Many people today want to find meaning in places or attach their own meaning to places; and, even in a ‘post-Christian’ or indeed ‘post-secular’ society they still need ritual to frame their lives, express their feelings, grieve, celebrate or find comfort and hope. Even those who would describe themselves as of ‘no religion’ are still interested in prayer, meditation, commemoration and pilgrimage. That is why they are lighting candles in such numbers, leaving prayers even if they have never done such a thing before, and joining in when offered things to do which they find significant and helpful.

Core questions of particular relevance to Welcome:

- Who are our visitors?
- Who aren’t we reaching and why?
- What do our (current and potential) visitors want and need? How do we know?

Specific questions to ask about Welcome:

- How do people encounter and experience our cathedral now?
- How is welcome signalled in our precinct and wider setting through external furnishings and invitational signage?
- Is our entrance clearly marked? What do people encounter immediately as they enter?
- How open is our welcome? How are our volunteers encouraged and trained to provide a consistently inclusive and ‘open-ended’ welcome to all? See Section 11b, Tools and Resources.
- How does the process of entry (whether visitors pay an entry fee or not) help visitors feel at home and encourage wide-ranging exploration of heritage and spirituality?
- How is charging handled or donating encouraged?
- If charging for entrance to the cathedral or a part of it, do we use space on tickets or other materials to thank visitors for their contribution and encourage them to appreciate all the dimensions of the building?
• How are people encouraged to attend worship and use the building for prayer and personal reflection? Do the processes of entry facilitate this? In cathedrals that charge for entry, is there a separate, easy, quick-to-use entry point for locals and those simply wishing to pray or light candles? Is private prayer apparently restricted to particular areas?

• How do we ensure that there are always clearly signposted quiet spaces available for prayer and reflection?

• How clear is our communication (internal and external)? How user-friendly is our signage? Does it help or hinder?

• How adequate, attractive and clearly signposted are our facilities (including accessible toilets, baby changing spaces, café, shop etc)?

• What ‘takeaways’ can we offer? Prayer cards; an invitation to visit again; highlights of the cathedral year with key events, etc…

• Communication is two-way: how is visitor feedback being gathered?

• Do we have volunteers who say farewell / au revoir, as well as hello?
2b Accessibility

Inclusive access is a vitally important element in extending welcome in the widest sense. This includes not only physical access for those in wheelchairs and with other mobility impairments, but the particular needs of those with autism, dyslexia, visual or auditory impairment, or dementia. The *Equality Act 2010* makes it clear that access relates to human experience across a wide range of issues, including learning and emotional challenges. Ensuring full access to cathedrals for all therefore needs to embrace those who have varying educational and language backgrounds and those for whom cathedrals and Christianity are completely unfamiliar territory.

This will mean reviewing physical elements such as signage, lighting, hearing loops, creating safe, reassuring, quiet spaces, and the provision of interpretative tools for a range of learning styles and capacities. More information can be found in the Historic England document *Easy Access to Historic Buildings*.

A helpful place to start, and a gateway to future capital funding, is to consider commissioning an *Access Audit* of the cathedral, its precinct and other buildings used by the public and/or staff. The *National Register of Access Consultants* provides a list of accredited individuals who provide access consultancy and access auditor services.

Forming a *Cathedral Access Group* is another valuable opportunity to engage with those who are passionate about improving access for all. There may be existing members of the cathedral congregation and community who will offer great insight into barriers—both physical and non-physical—and suggest improvements. Sometimes the most important change can be a change of awareness or ‘culture’: for a person in a wheelchair to be part of the offertory procession, or to read from the nave floor to demonstrate that they can’t access the lectern, is a powerful gesture which can lead to positive changes.

Even small, easily implemented changes, such as increasing the size of the type in the notice sheets for example, can make a big difference to those whose experience will be improved, and who will feel seen and valued as a result.

**Core questions of particular relevance to accessibility:**

- Who are our visitors?
- Who aren’t we reaching and why?
- What do our (current and potential) visitors want and need? How do we know?
- What spaces do we have, and are they being used to their maximum potential?

**Specific questions to ask about accessibility:**

- Do we have an Access Group?
- What provision do we make for physical access?
- What provision do we make for those who are visually impaired?
- What provision do we make for those with autism, dyslexia or dementia?
- What provision do we make for those from a range of educational backgrounds and levels of knowledge and understanding?
- What provision do we make for different age groups and for speakers of different languages?
In the Middle Ages, daily services were not hidden away: the power and beauty of worship could be seen and heard, flowing through the building to touch everyone present. Research shows that this experience is still immensely powerful and greatly valued by many visitors today, even those who may not have a religious background. It isn’t an artificial creation of atmosphere; it is bringing what lies at the heart of the building and the community to life in ways which can touch people deeply. It is important not to appear to hide away weekday services but to allow people to come close to them, not only to see what the building is actually for (so many people ask “Do you still have services here?”), but to see, experience, and learn from watching others from they might consider to be a ‘safe distance.’ It is also important to make services more accessible by briefly explaining, for example, the content of Evensong, how long it lasts, and so on. Liverpool Cathedral offers a good example of how to do this on their website.

For those who are very familiar with buildings and with worship, it can be difficult to see the potential barriers perceived by newcomers. Ensuring that a cathedral’s welcome and signage encourage participation is key. Signs saying: “The cathedral is closed for worship” or “No entry beyond this point: Service in progress” suggest that worship is only for an ‘in group.’ Welcomers have been known to try to turn away people wishing to attend services, particularly if they are under forty, on the assumption that they would not be interested.

Notices need to have invitations built in to reassure and encourage engagement. There is a world of difference between a notice stating, “This Chapel is reserved for private prayer” and one which says, “You are welcome to use this chapel to enjoy a time of peace, reflection and quiet prayer”. If you wish people to regard your cathedral and its chapels as ‘spaces of invitation’, you need to offer not only permission but encouragement to enter. They also need to look and feel ‘safe’ in the sense of not putting individuals on display. How many spaces are there in your cathedral where people can try being quiet and reflecting on their lives and needs, without feeling they are exposed to scrutiny? Do your chapels look as they are only for the initiated, are they primarily used for storage, or are they attractive, inviting spaces where anyone could feel welcome? We may need to maximise our human-sized spaces—and create more—rather than being content for people to feel awe at the size and beauty of the building but leave without engaging with its Christian message.

Core questions of particular relevance to worship, personal devotion and reflection:

- How are we integrating mission, welcome, worship, heritage interpretation, our civic roles etc?
- How effectively are we using interpretation (conventional and/or digital) to offer all visitors the chance to understand the Christian story that has shaped our building and community?
- How effectively are we encouraging spiritual exploration on site and subsequently? If people become interested in learning more about the Christian faith, what are we offering them?

Specific questions to ask about worship, personal devotion and reflection:

- How welcoming is our worship, especially to those for whom it may be a new and important experience?
- Is our worship hidden away or visible as the centre of our life?
- How intelligible and easy-to-use are our service leaflets for people who are unfamiliar with worship?
- How are visitors encouraged to observe and gradually be drawn into weekday and Sunday services? Is seating available nearby?
- Are notices about services invitational rather than forbidding? Do they make it clear where services are taking place?
- How effective are we in creating spaces which offer peace, a sense of safety, and the opportunity for enhanced mental, emotional and physical wellbeing?
2d Heritage

The heritage of our cathedrals is both tangible and intangible. Their architecture and the beauty of the crafts and artistry that adorn them, of all periods, represent the pinnacle of this country’s built heritage. We do well to celebrate this, and there are times when it is indeed appropriate to draw attention to this rich tradition for its own sake.

One distinctive aspect of the built heritage of our cathedrals is that fact that it continues to develop. Moreover, this is only one aspect of the ongoing Christian tradition that cathedrals embody. Cathedrals and churches are unusual amongst heritage buildings in that they remain in continuous use for their original purpose: the patterns of daily prayer and worship that have taken place in cathedrals for centuries, the communities that live and work in them, and the roles that cathedrals continue to play in their local areas and the life of the nation, are themselves very significant aspects of their heritage.

The past, within our cathedrals, is part of our present and looks to the future, in a way that is radically different from ‘the heritage of the past’, which we enjoy in so many other contexts. How, then, can you present the heritage of your building in ways that speak to its ongoing purpose, as well as to its magnificence and beauty? How, can you integrate this living heritage into your Mission of Welcome and Outreach and make it come alive?

Heritage brings many people through the doors of cathedrals and shapes the experience of everyone who visits. It is a central aspect of the unique experience that cathedrals offer: an asset, not a barrier. ‘Heritage’ and ‘mission’ should be seen as complementary, not conflicting.

Core questions of particular relevance to heritage:

• How are we integrating mission, welcome, worship, heritage interpretation, our civic roles etc?

• How effectively are we using interpretation (conventional and/or digital) to offer all visitors the chance to understand the Christian story which has shaped our building and our community?

• What are we currently doing to enhance engagement with the many aspects of the building and community life while ensuring that different kinds of provision (e.g. heritage interpretation, group activities, and quiet spaces for prayer) can coexist positively and as part of a greater whole? How can we build on this?

• What are our ‘assets’ (including staff and volunteers, the building and its features and furnishings, our activities, our wider social and geographical context and convening power, and our financial resources)?

• What simple, low-level, low-cost interventions can we pilot to test and clarify the most effective ways to engage visitors? What ‘quick wins’ could we achieve?

• What possible interventions might have longer-term implications for the fabric or furnishings of the buildings which would require discussion and/or permissions?

Specific questions to ask about heritage:

• What parts of our heritage are people most drawn to?

• Which elements of our heritage speak most strongly of the cathedral’s meaning and purpose?

• What opportunities are there for us to enhance the presentation of our building’s heritage (for instance through works of conservation)?

• How can we ensure that all visitors enjoy the cathedral’s heritage to the full by giving them the tools to understand the beliefs and practices which have shaped it in the past and continue to do so?

• What other groups may be able to support engagement with heritage?

• How can we use the heritage of our building as a missional tool in the present?
2e Visitor Management

For people to engage with your building spiritually and imaginatively is it important that they are not distracted by practical hurdles such as confusion over their route through the building or where to locate facilities; finding their movement impeded by a crush of other visitors or badly sited furniture and exhibition materials; or by uncertainty over where they are allowed to walk or to sit, or what they are or are not allowed to touch.

Careful consideration should therefore be given to every aspect of a visitor’s practical and physical experience of your building, beginning before they arrive (by ensuring that visitor information, including information for visitors with special accessibility needs, is easily found on your website and maintained unobtrusively throughout their visit. This must be founded on a clear understanding of your building and its site and the story that you are trying to tell about them, derived from documents such as a Liturgical Plan and Conservation Management Plan.

When new facilities or further spaces are added it is important to consider their effect upon the overall flow and experience of visitors throughout the building and site.

Core questions of particular relevance to visitor management

- Who are our visitors?
- What do our (current and potential) visitors want and need? How do we know?
- What are we currently doing to enhance engagement with the many aspects of the building and community life while ensuring that different kinds of provision (e.g. heritage interpretation, group activities, and quiet spaces for prayer) can coexist positively and as part of a greater whole? How can we build on this?
- What spaces do we have and are they being used to their maximum potential?

Specific questions to ask about visitor management

- How do people encounter and experience our cathedral?
- Where are visitor-facing components such as a welcome/information desk, shop etc. best located?
- What are the most effective ways for visitors to move around the building so that it can speak to them most powerfully? How do we facilitate this? Do we have a visitor flow diagram which works with the design and purpose of different parts of the building?
- How effective are we in creating spaces which offer peace, a sense of safety, and the opportunity for enhanced mental, emotional and physical wellbeing?
- How inviting are our spaces (such as chapels) and our signage?
- Are our facilities clearly signposted? Are they easily reached from every part of the building?
Enhancing Experience

Human interaction with the world, including in the realm of spirituality, is channelled entirely through our senses. Engagement with sacred places such as cathedrals is therefore shaped not only by belief, instruction, and group influence, but also by our physiology and psychology. Sensory experience is thus not an optional extra in learning and responding; it is the only way either can be achieved. The senses, in combination with emotion, are deeply connected to the formation of memory, and to driving reasoning and decision-making. Ensuring that our buildings offer a range of opportunities for sensory engagement is therefore vital to creating transformative experiences.

Post-Reformation, English cathedrals remain strikingly beautiful but present a more austere and stripped-back beauty than the rich, multisensory experience offered to medieval worshippers. Those entering cathedrals in the Middle Ages would have found the great interiors broken down into many smaller, more ‘human-sized’ spaces, with many devotional focal points: altars, brightly-painted images, banners, wall paintings, banks of flickering candles, and offerings. There individuals could find a place to bring their particular needs, kneel in prayer, touch the stone or wood, make gifts, and light candles. A cathedral would have been vibrant, colourful, full of sensory stimuli inviting a response—and probably rather cluttered, by today’s standards.

Recent research makes it clear that there is still a need for holy places to supply focal points, opportunities to use prayer cards and leave prayers, light candles, and carry out small symbolic actions, such as placing small stones, cockleshells or other items in significant places. Most cathedrals still have small chapels, which offer relatively private, ‘safe’ spaces for those seeking peace and comfort, but these are not always furnished and signposted in a way which encourages their use. It is also possible to create and signpost other small areas for reflection, perhaps beside a statue of the Virgin and Child, or near a candle-stand, by carefully placing a few chairs and a basket of prayer cards, or a prayer tree. All such interventions can be flexible and easily adapted when major events are held.

Core questions of particular relevance to enhancing experience:

- How effectively are we using interpretation (conventional and/or digital) to offer all visitors the chance to understand the Christian story which has shaped our building and our community?
- How effectively are we encouraging spiritual exploration both on site and subsequently? If people become interested in learning more about the Christian faith, what are we offering them?
- What are we currently doing to enhance engagement with the many aspects of the building and community life while ensuring that different kinds of provision (e.g. heritage interpretation, group activities, and quiet spaces for prayer) can coexist positively and as part of a greater whole? How can we build on this?
- What do we offer our visitors to take away to help fix their visit in their memories?
- What spaces do we have and are they being used to their maximum potential?
- What simple, low-level, low-cost interventions can we pilot to test and clarify the most effective ways to engage visitors? What ‘quick wins’ could we achieve?
- What possible interventions might have longer-term implications for the fabric or furnishings of the buildings which would require discussion and/or permissions?

Specific questions to ask about enhancing experience:

- What focal points, sensory experiences, and simple but meaningful activities and resources (such as prayer cards) do we offer to bring spaces alive for those interested in reflection, ‘mindfulness,’ or spiritual exploration?
- If candle-lighting and leaving prayers are offered, are there seats available nearby?
where people can sit and reflect on these activities?

- To what extent do we connect our spaces (such as small chapels) with particular audiences (e.g. families, or the bereaved)?

- What steps could we take to enhance the invitation and the experiences offered to visitors of all ages? See Section 11b, Tools and Resources.

- What simple, low-level, low-cost interventions can we pilot to test and clarify the most effective ways to enhance visitor experience?

- What do we offer people to take away to reinforce memories and promote further exploration?

- What small memento, such as a prayer card, could we offer to attendees of big events as a memory of their experience and a reminder to return?

- Do we allow/encourage appropriate photography? (Research shows that photographs provide an ongoing connection and memory with a place, and can also extend the experience to others. Thus, the photo of a candle lit for someone who is ill can be a powerful tool for showing care and building faith.)
Interpretation

We are familiar with interpretation in the context of museums and art galleries: the various tools, whether printed, audio-visual or interactive, which, when we are presented with things from a time, culture or other context different from our own, help us to understand what we are looking at and why it is considered significant.

Every cathedral already makes use of interpretative tools, if only in the form of wall-texts and catalogues for their own temporary or permanent exhibitions, or of maps or printed guides to their building. It is important to regularly review your interpretation, however, to check that it still says what you want it to about your building—and that your building is still saying what you want it to about You.

The need for increased interpretation of, and new approaches to interpretation in cathedrals has increased over recent years. Historically, religious buildings were themselves intended to be ‘read’ by those who visited them: wall paintings, images in stained glass, decoratively carved wood and stone, and very architecture of the buildings themselves, were designed to embody religious principles, retell Christian stories, and record the histories of the people who had built and sustained these extraordinary places. As public familiarity with Christian symbolism, biblical narratives and religious history has waned, so the language in which cathedrals communicate has become less intelligible.

In this context, interpretation is an act of translation: it unlocks the meaning of your building and its contents so that people can learn about, appreciate and be inspired by its historic significance and Christian message. It should be remembered that information is not the same as interpretation, and that it is important to have clear themes and areas of focus so that visitors are not overwhelmed and can follow the story you are trying to tell.

However, it is equally important to note that the information you choose to share and to omit about your building can speak volumes, particularly in relation to contested heritage. Interpretation enables you to contextualise and reflect upon aspects of your building and its history that may now be problematic.

Acknowledging racist, homophobic or antisemitic imagery, or memorials to historical figures whose views or actions we now condemn, rather than ignoring or disguising them, creates opportunities to consider these matters in a Christian context of repentance and forgiveness, and to offer a powerful message of welcome to communities who have been marginalised in the past.

Interpreting a cathedral requires an approach that weaves together the historic, architectural, artistic and spiritual aspects of the building and connects these with the living community that the cathedral has housed through the centuries. These intersecting stories need to be presented in ways which engage the visitor and help them to see that by visiting they have become part of the cathedral’s long history, and to feel that the Christian story which has shaped the history and the beauty which they see can also enrich their lives.

Interpretation can come in a variety of forms: printed leaflets, catalogues and wall-text; fixed or portable audio-visual guides or displays, perhaps with interactive elements; tactile exhibits that allow visitors to touch (and even smell!) real or simulacrum artefacts; and talks and tours given by guides. Each offers opportunities for engagement with different audiences, and they will also have different implications in terms of cost, ongoing maintenance and adaptability, accessibility, and impact on the fabric and appearance of the cathedral building.

Providing interpretation throughout a building, whether in the form of fixed displays or interpretative tools that move with the visitor, will involve different factors (and raise different expectations) than an exhibition in a particular area of the building or dedicated exhibition space. Where possible, it is important to ‘layer’ content, providing simpler explanations suitable for all visitors, supported by deeper explorations of topics for those who wish to go further.

When considering interpretation for your cathedral, it is important to weigh these factors carefully. Consider the pros and cons of your existing interpretation scheme and the further possibilities open to you: for instance, wall-texts or interpretation totems are a relatively inexpensive option, but can produce visual clutter, and are typically available in only one language; printed materials are easy to produce in a range of languages, but being typically discarded after use, may have negative
environmental consequences; digital touch-screens can engage a wide range of visitors through layered content which is easy to update and produce in multiple languages, but only one visitor or group can control them at a time; and so on. Always conduct a full options appraisal before commissioning anything.

**Core questions of particular relevance to interpretation:**

- How are we integrating mission, welcome, worship, heritage interpretation, our civic roles etc?
- Who are our visitors?
- Who aren’t we reaching and why?
- What do our (current and potential) visitors want and need? How do we know?
- How effectively are we using interpretation (conventional and/or digital) to offer all visitors the chance to understand the Christian story which has shaped our building and our community?
- What are we currently doing to enhance engagement with the many aspects of the building and community life while ensuring that different kinds of provision (e.g. heritage interpretation, group activities, and quiet spaces for prayer) can coexist positively and as part of a greater whole? How can we build on this?
- What simple, low-level, low-cost interventions can we pilot to test and clarify the most effective ways to engage visitors? What ‘quick wins’ could we achieve?
- What possible interventions might have longer-term implications for the fabric or furnishings of the buildings which would require discussion and/or permissions?

**Key questions to ask about interpretation:**

- What existing interpretation do we offer? How effective is it, and how do we know?
- How well does our existing interpretation weave together the history, art and architecture of our buildings, and the stories of the people associated with them, with the Christian story which shapes our past and present?
- What stories and elements of the building will help visitors to relate personally to what they see and experience?
- What are our options for providing additional interpretation in the form of printed, audio-visual or interactive elements, or guided tours and talks? What are the pros and cons in terms of accessibility, short- and long-term cost, and visual impact?
- How are we ensuring that our interpretation effectively communicates Christian concepts, stories and symbolism to audiences who may be unfamiliar with them?
- Do we offer simple (but not simplistic) explanations of the theological and liturgical meaning behind aspects of the building and its furnishings, as well as their architectural history?
- Taking account of our particular context, what provision should we make to ensure that our content is accessible to visitors whose first language is not English?
- What contested heritage does the cathedral contain, and how is it presented? How could it be made a means of engagement and reflection?
- What do we want our visitors to take away in terms of understanding and the desire to explore further and/or visit more churches?
- Do we need permission from our Fabric Advisory Committee or the Cathedrals Fabric Commission to install any new interpretative tools?
Permanent and temporary exhibitions and events

A permanent exhibition area within your cathedral or an associated building can allow you to interpret your building without cluttering the wider worship spaces and display significant objects in secure circumstances. A secure exhibition space built to suitable environmental standards also creates the possibility of borrowing objects from other collections.

The creation of a permanent exhibition needs to be supported by a robust business plan. You should consider how long the infrastructure will last; how often the content will be reviewed and refreshed, who by, and with what resources; and whether the exhibition will be included as part of the general entry to the cathedral or will be covered by a separate charge. Any permanent addition to the cathedral will require permission from your Fabric Advisory Committee and potentially the Commission.

Temporary exhibitions and events offer exciting opportunities to present your buildings in new ways without necessarily requiring long-term changes to your buildings that would be likely to require formal consultation and permission from your Fabric Advisory Committee or the Commission (though you should seek the advice of your FAC in any case). Such events can allow people to see your buildings differently and can be effective in attracting visitors who may not have visited your cathedral before.

Activities that challenge preconceptions of the nature and purpose of sacred spaces can also be controversial, however, and it is important to consider carefully your messaging around these events and how you will manage any negative publicity that you may generate, or the surprise (and possible disappointment) of visitors who have a preconceived notion of what the cathedral will look like. You should consider how day-to-day life and regular worship in the cathedral might be affected by a major installation, both in terms of the use of the space and the increase in visitors that might result, and the potential for pressure on existing staff and volunteers.

Similar issues are raised by special events such as the commercial hire of the cathedral, or even building and conservation works or archaeological excavations. Such events may simply be seen as a necessary disruption that must be worked around, but carefully presented and interpreted, they can also connect people with the cathedral in new ways.

It is up to each Chapter to decide (with input from the wider team) which events and exhibitions are suitable for their cathedral and in line with its ethos and mission. Written policies on these matters, making clear who in the cathedral will exercise this decision-making power and the principles that will shape a decision in any given case, will bring clarity, consistency and accountability to this process and help you to manage the expectations of those wishing to use the cathedral.

Core questions of particular relevance to permanent and temporary exhibitions:

- How are we integrating mission, welcome, worship, heritage interpretation, our civic roles etc?
- Who are our visitors?
- Who aren't we reaching and why?
- What do our (current and potential) visitors want and need? How do we know?
- What are we currently doing to enhance engagement with the many aspects of the building and community life while ensuring that different kinds of provision (such as heritage interpretation, group activities, and quiet spaces for prayer) can coexist positively and as part of a greater whole? How can we build on this?
- What spaces do we have and are they being used to their maximum potential?

Specific questions to ask about permanent and temporary exhibitions:

- What are our aims (missional, financial or otherwise) in creating a permanent exhibition area?
- What impact might a permanent exhibition space have on access and use of that part of the cathedral or its precinct?
- What are our aspirations for borrowing and/or displaying precious and fragile items, and what
additional security and environmental requirements will that impose on the design of an exhibition area?

- Is the creation of an exhibition area supported by a robust business plan and a strategy for the ongoing programming of content?

- What are our missional aims in staging events and temporary exhibitions? Why are we holding these events here and what mission opportunities do we see?

- How will a temporary exhibition or special event affect regular day-to-day life at the cathedral? Is there a risk that some visitors will be discouraged from visiting for the duration of the event (or perhaps disappointed by their experience if they do) and how should that be managed?

- How can we advertise (online and locally) that access to some areas of the cathedral will not be possible due to a special event (such as a corporate or civic event, funeral, royal visit etc.)? How should we contextualise such temporary disruption in relation to the mission, ongoing life and financial sustainability of the cathedral?

- How will we integrate the temporary exhibition or event with worship?

- What long-term effect do we hope these will have on visitors? What are we giving them to take away to build an ongoing relationship with and interest in the cathedral and the wider Church?

- How far are we linking temporary exhibitions to our own collections or aspects of the building which visitors could explore?

- What new equipment will be needed and where will it be stored?

- Will expansion of these activities require changes to the building or have implications for movement into and around it?
Right: **Southwell Minster**
3a  Creating your Plan

**Timetable:**

- Putting together a team which represents all necessary constituencies
- The contributions which can be made by consultants
- Consulting widely
- Research exercises to undertake (see below)
- Seeking advice from FAC, CFCE, Historic England etc.
- Relating VEP to other key plans
- Decision-making
- Testing approaches
- Creating a roadmap with milestones, development and implementation stages
- Training staff and volunteers

**Research Exercises**

- Imagine you are visiting the cathedral for the first time: it’s the trip of a lifetime and you’ve flown thousands of miles. You’ve looked at the website: what would you expect?
- Imagine you grew up three streets away but have never been in: what encouragement would you need?
- As you approach your cathedral from the outside, what encouragement to enter do you see?
- What or who is the first thing that greets people when they step inside?
- Is there a space where visitors can get their bearings before choosing to engage with welcomers or deciding which way to go?
- Try being, or using, a ‘Mystery Shopper’
Use the headings provided in this document to create your Plan:

- Describe your vision, mission and goals and the team which has created your VEP and the team that leads/serve the cathedral
- Welcome
- Accessibility
- Worship, personal devotion and reflection
- Heritage
- Visitor Management
- Enhancing experience
- Interpretation
- Permanent and temporary exhibitions and special events
- How does the VEP connect to your other strategy documents?
- How does the VEP integrate into your Communications strategy?
- How will your volunteers be trained and supported in delivering these goals?
- List of useful resources

**VEP action plan template**

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<th>(what do you want to achieve?)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>(what are you going to do?)</td>
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<th>Resources</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Start date</th>
<th>Due date</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Review/ Evaluation</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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28 APPENDICES
3b Tools and resources

*Pilgrimage and England’s Cathedrals, Past, Present and Future: research, evidence and guidelines*

- Reports and Presentations
- Publications:
  
  

**Guidance from the Cathedrals Fabric Commission**

- *A User’s Guide to the Care of Cathedrals Measure*
- *Conservation Management Plans*
- *Liturgical Plans*

**Guidance from Historic England**

- *Caring for places of worship*
- *Making changes to places of worship*
- *New facilities in places of worship*
- *Easy Access to Places of Worship*