Churches: Good for the health, good for the NHS

Monday 14 October, 2024

RELEASE DATE - MONDAY 14 OCTOBER 2024 12 NOON BRITISH SUMMER TIME

PRESS RELEASE FROM THE NATIONAL CHURCHES TRUST

CHURCHES – GOOD FOR HEALTH, GOOD FOR THE NHS

The UK's churches provide essential health-related support services that would cost billions of pounds a year to deliver, 'The House of Good: Health', new research from the National Churches Trust shows.

From youth groups to food banks, from drug and alcohol addiction support to mental health counselling, churches directly provide or host a growing list of vital health related services for people in urgent need.

In the process, churches relieve huge cost pressures on the National Health Service, worth an estimated £8.4 billion each year. That's the equivalent to the cost of employing 230,000 nurses.

The £8.4 billion is how much it would cost the NHS to 'produce' the same level of health improvements provided by churches, equivalent to around 4% of total UK public health spending.

But this health dividend is at risk as an increasing number of churches are at risk of closure.

The report is set to launch in the House of Commons at an event sponsored by Ruth Jones MP on Tuesday 15 October 2024.

Welcoming the report, The Rt Revd and Rt Hon Dame Sarah Mullally DBE, Bishop of London, said:

"Churches and other faith groups play an extremely important role in the health and wellbeing of their communities, and in our collective health. "

"There is a church in every community, including the most deprived, and many have been serving their communities for generations. It is encouraging to see the value of their provision being recognised in this report, with inspiring case studies."

"The report helps to highlight the importance of faith group partnership, which will be vital in reducing health inequalities. Church buildings are important and rich assets in the delivery of this work, which we must look after, and for which we give thanks."

Will Watt, Allan Little and Jasmine Kazantzis from value and social impact consultancy, State of Life, co-authors of the report produced for the National Churches Trust, explain the economics behind their findings.

" Our approach involved using Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs), a value for money metric used by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to determine the healthcare value of four support services provided in church buildings: youth groups, food banks, drug and alcohol addiction support and mental health counselling."

"We also incorporated the positive health benefits experienced by volunteers, who not only contribute their time to support these services, but also improve their own wellbeing in the process."

"Whilst the £8.4 billion in cost relief is not directly visible to NHS commissioners, the range of healthcare support and services provided in church buildings will in practice reduce what is already and excess demand for health services."

"It is important to stress, that this is a conservative valuation. In reality, churches provide a much wider range of support, from warm spaces and lunch clubs to activities that alleviate loneliness, and a host of musical and cultural activities. All of these can be expected to contribute to health and wellbeing , and thus further relieve costs."

"Our research shows that church buildings provide significant cost relief, underscoring their vital role in

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care and wellbeing."

Claire Walker, Chief Executive of the National Churches Trust, said:

"The UK's 38,500 churches promote the positive mental and physical health that helps people thrive. They provide locations for health treatments. They prevent conditions that would otherwise send more patients through GP or hospital doors. They're our National Help Service. Our new research, 'The House of Good: Health' shows for the first time that the value of the health-related support services provided in church buildings is at least £8.4 billion a year."

"These findings and figures are remarkable. But they're also alarming. Because the UK's church buildings are dangerously underfunded, with many in the most deprived areas falling into disrepair and facing closure. Around 3,500 have closed in recent years,"

"Without urgent support, we risk losing this shock absorber for the NHS, and a vital safety net for the most vulnerable people in our society."

"Churches were providing health services long before the introduction of the NHS and continue to do so today. As healthcare costs rise, their role in preventative care becomes increasingly important. This is also true for buildings used by other faiths."

"By investing in church buildings and integrating churches into local health service provision through initiatives including social prescribing, we can alleviate pressures on healthcare budgets while delivering immense value to individuals and communities across the UK."

CASE STUDY

Alcohol is a major cause of death and poor health. In 2022, there were 10,048 deaths from alcohol-specific causes registered in the UK, the highest number on record. From 2021 to 2022, in the UK there were 342,795 hospital admissions that were wholly due to alcohol.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other so that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.

There are over 4,000 AA groups in the United Kingdom. Many of them meet in church buildings. In Cardiff five churches provide a space for AA groups to meet. These include St Martin's church in Roath, where a regular AA group of around 15 – 20 people meets every Friday.

One of the people who attends the AA Group at St Martin's church, who wishes to remain anonymous, said:

"I left Rehab filled with anxiety about attending an AA Meeting. I started attending a meeting at the local church. I came to realise the people there were non-judgmental and prayed for people like myself, in need. Having the AA Meetings in this church has helped me and others as well."

"The Vicar is familiar with the 12 Step Programme we follow and has been a great help, although he is not himself a member of AA. He greets and welcomes us, then leaves us. After the Meeting he is around and chats with those who remain behind."

"If I had not found this particular AA group at the church I believe that I would have been still suffering fear and soul sickness. A wonderful light is falling upon me now and a sense of relief that is indescribable."

The Vicar of St Martin in Roath, Fr Irving Hamer, explains:

"The AA Group use the Music Room which has easy access to the toilet, and basic kitchen facilities at their disposal. Many of the people comment on how much they appreciate the stillness, silence and beauty of the church – perhaps it helps calm and focus them for the AA Session or when they leave to return to their lives, work, family and other commitments. "

"A person who regularly worships here bakes cakes for the group; it's a sign of our welcome and hospitality to all who come to St Martin in Roath. "

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. The value of £8.4 billion was determined by survey results showing that 29% of church buildings either provide or host mental health counselling; 10.4% provide or host drug or alcohol addiction support services; 42.4% provide or host youth groups or activities and 58% provide or host food banks..

2. **Facts on church closures:** In England, there are now 900 places of worship on Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register – 53 churches were added in 2023.
3. In Wales, 25 per cent of historic churches and chapels have closed in the last decade.
4. The Church of Scotland is actively planning to close as many as 30-40 per cent of its churches.

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