

Case Study - Scottish Redundant Churches Trust (SRCT)

1. The Organisation

“The SRCT is a charity that saves historic churches at risk. We work with communities to secure the future of their churches through expert conservation and creative regeneration.”

SRCT website

SRCT was established in 1996 and is a registered charity. It is a secular organisation and serves all denominations and faiths. It does not receive any statutory funding and is a very small organisation. In addition to its board of trustees, there is only one full-time member of staff (the Executive Director) and some minimal part-time support. The key parameters describing its remit include:

- The Trust owns seven nationally important redundant churches across Scotland
- Their historical and architectural significance means that wholesale conversion or change is not desirable or appropriate. However, there is a focus on ‘opening’ up the churches to the community, improving access and using the space for alternative uses (in addition to occasional use for worship).
- For each of the churches there is a friends’ group who are all volunteers.

The Trust faces three key challenges:

- I. How to conserve and protect the architectural heritage of its churches
- II. How to recruit and retain a sustainable volunteer workforce to support the work of the Trust
- III. How to secure funding to support objectives one and two.

2. Volunteering

The success of the SRCT model is dependent upon the contribution of volunteers working through a friends’ group for each of its churches. . A number of these groups were already formed prior to the SRCT taking ownership of a church, often as a result of local resistance to closure. Others were formed by the SRCT after acquisition, usually with assistance from one or two key members of the local community.

Currently the Trust engages with 180 volunteers across the organisation and its 7 churches, of which 12 are professional volunteers (trustees and advisers) and 168 are associated with its churches. Of those associated with churches, 28 are active on a daily or weekly basis, with 140 volunteering on an occasional or infrequent basis. In total, volunteers collectively contribute around 330 days per annum.

Volunteer characteristics:

- Typically volunteers have been members of the church prior to its closure and /or have a vested interest in the church often because of a long-standing family connection.
- They are often people who know each other before the formation of the Group. In some cases, Groups may originally have been ‘self-appointed’ and not open to all.

- They engage in a range of activities including arranging and hosting events, showing visitors around the church, undertaking maintenance, cleaning the church, etc.
- The age profile is typically 70+. This presents a sustainability issue for the Trust.
- Fundraising is important because the Trust receives no statutory funding. It therefore has to raise funding for both its core costs and those of its 7 churches.

Instead of trying to describe the volunteering across all 7 churches it was agreed that the case study should focus on one of its churches to highlight the contribution of a friends' group and the challenges, rewards and lessons learned from the perspective of the Trust. Cromarty East Church was selected because it best illustrates how an 'inherited' group can be transformed into a sustainable model.

3. Cromarty East Church Project

Historical context – Cromarty is a small historic town situated at the tip of the Black Isle on the south bank of the Cromarty Firth in North East Scotland. From the 1930s onwards the town had two Church of Scotland churches, the East Church (the historic place of worship for the former royal burgh) and the West Church. For many years services alternated between the churches, but by the 1980s the West Church had become the principal place of worship for the congregation. Limited resources were focused on the upkeep of the West Church, leading to a downward spiral of disuse and disrepair for the East Church. By the 1990s the church was in poor condition and generally kept locked except for occasional services.

In 1998 it was agreed that SRCT should take ownership of Cromarty East Church as it is a Grade A listed building of significant historical and cultural importance, dating back to medieval times.

Engagement phase – in 1999 the SRCT's newly appointed Executive Director visited the East Church to meet its Friends' Group. This was an un-constituted body of 8 volunteers, the majority of whom were quite elderly. They included the 90 year-old Mrs Newall, who had taught generations of local children in her time at Cromarty's school, and other 'elder statesmen' (and women) of the town. Some in the Friends Group could trace their connection to Cromarty, and to the East Church, back many generations. The volunteers were all self-appointed, having formed the group themselves, and there was a degree of resistance to opening up membership to the wider community. Many in the Group saw themselves as guardians of the church and were understandably protective of it after years of threat. Though the SRCT had concerns over the long term sustainability of the Friends' Group, the concerted efforts made by them to save the church, and their attachment to the building, made it desirable to retain their engagement and to work with them to build a strong foundation:

"The Friends' Group represented the foundation upon which the volunteering contribution could be built – they were our connection to the community. Although not necessarily representative of the community as a whole, as individuals they were well known and respected locally and we were grateful for their help, knowledge and influence." Executive Director, SRCT

The initial actions included:

- Opening the doors of the church every day. This one act alone had a very positive impact across the community – it was now perceived as a living building not a dead building. The only downside was sporadic incidents of anti-social behaviour by some young people in Cromarty who caused damage to the church.
- Establishing a good working relationship with Cromarty's new Church of Scotland minister, and ensuring that the East Church could be used for occasional worship and for weddings and funerals.
- Holding a 'handover' service, conducted by a former Moderator of the Church of Scotland, to mark a new chapter in the East Church's history and to which the whole community was invited.

From 1999 – 2005 the Church 'ticked along' with its doors open and it was used for occasional events such as concerts, a flower festival, and a children's opera. Meanwhile, the SRCT began working with LDN Architects and a specialist conservation adviser to develop a comprehensive repair scheme, whilst with the limited resources at its disposal, doing its level best to prevent further deterioration of the building.

Development phase – from the very beginning SRCT recognised that saving the East Church would require more than voluntary support on the ground. The building was in urgent need of major restoration. Very little money had been spent on the building for decades and it was now damp and deteriorating. Some earlier work such as the harling of the building in cement had exacerbated problems and caused greater damage. However, in 2005 the church's fortunes began to change with the award of a grant of £26,600 from the Heritage Lottery Fund towards the cost of planning and developing the repair and conservation of the East Church. This was followed up by a Stage 1 application to the HLF in June 2006. The HLF application coincided with a further significant breakthrough - the selection of the East Church as one of the Scottish projects featured in the BBC's Restoration Village series. With the help of a substantial public vote, the East Church gained a place in the series grand final in September 2006. This conferred the following benefits:

Restoration Village Open Day



Photo © SRCT

- It raised the profile of the church within the Cromarty community so that there was increased pride in their historical and architectural heritage, and a wider sense of ownership of 'their' church. This was also the start of a wider volunteer engagement;
- It raised the profile of the church with external parties such as funders. Volunteers fronted the publicity on the Restoration Village programme; and
- It provided a funding contribution. Although they did not win the final, there was a windfall of £45,000 allocated to some runners up.

Restoration Village Final – Cromarty Supporters



Photo © SRCT

A Stage 1 pass for a grant of £641,000 was awarded by the HLF, together with development funding of £24,200. This was followed by a grant award of £340,000 from Historic Scotland in July 2007 and an HLF Stage 2 pass in November 2007. Funding from Highland Council, the Church of Scotland General Trustees and charitable trusts completed the £1.3 million funding package. Work began on this complex and lengthy project in September 2008 and encompassed not only the extensive repair and conservation of the fabric of the building but also its contents and the surrounding graveyard. The project included training in traditional skills, an education programme for children, and a wide range of audience development activities. Local people were actively involved throughout the project, with regular site visits and guided tours to see the progress of work.

The church was opened to the public in April 2011. It is important to give credit to the local community and volunteers who not only sustained the church at its lowest ebb, but who then worked with the SRCT to bring the building back to life. The support of volunteers and the Cromarty community as a whole was instrumental in securing funding for the project and its successful delivery.

Audience Development Plan – SRCT emphasised the pivotal role which the HLF played in their requirement for an Audience Development Plan. This ensured that the SRCT, the Friends' Group and the wider community engaged external audiences in a planned and more proactive basis than would otherwise have been the case. As a consequence the following measures were implemented:

- The HLF funded a part-time post of Community and Education Officer to lead the rollout of the Audience Development Plan
- Newsletters – regular newsletters with updates on the project and associated activities were published and distributed within the community.
- Project noticeboard – a noticeboard within the town where local people and visitors could keep up to date with project news and upcoming events and activities

- Open days, guided tours, workshops and activities – a series of events for a wide range of participants ranging from conservation professionals and contractors to home-owners and special interest groups.
- Youth education programme – which included regular school visits for P.1 to P.7 school children to site to see progress, including archaeological excavations within the church during which a number of skeletons were uncovered. Older children were also engaged through the involvement of Cromarty's Youth Group with projects such as film-making and heritage recording.
- Contractor involvement – the project's main contractor, together with conservation specialists and members of the professional team all actively supported and participated in the audience development programme. The cooperation of the main contractor was particularly important, allowing safe site access and accommodating visits and activities within their work schedule.

Volunteering contribution – this audience development activity had a very positive impact on the community, the Friends' Group and volunteering more widely. With the Community and Education officer leading the audience development activities and acting as the local point of contact for contractors, the role of the original Friends Group changed. With some members now too elderly to assist with events such as open days and school visits, new volunteers came forward. At the same time, interest in the church and a desire by people to support it both practically and financially enabled membership of the Friends to be opened up to all. By the time the East Church reopened to the public in 2011 the original Friends Group member and loyal caretaker of the building, Willie Hogg, had sadly died. A rota system for the daily opening of the church and for its day-to-day care was put in place and, again, new volunteers came forward to meet the need. There are now 17 volunteers playing an active role in the care of the East Church. Although the majority are retired, there are a number of younger volunteers including a young boy who regularly accompanies his parents (and who enjoys ringing the church bell!) A further group of around 15 volunteers organise the annual Art and Flowers Festival.

Examples of volunteering roles include:

- Keeping the church open (365 days of the year)
- Routine maintenance and cleaning of the church (a monthly social event for volunteers involving tea and cake)
- Leading guided tours of the church
- Hosting events in the church – weddings and functions; third party events such as the Black Isle Words Festival, the Cromarty Fiddle Festival and Cromarty Harp Village; and the church also hosts their own community events such as the Art and Flowers Festival
- Assembling exhibitions either in the church or in partnership with Cromarty Courthouse Museum
- Helping to fundraise
- Running open days
- Recording projects – researching aspects of the history of the church and graveyard

Kirkyard recording project



Photo © SRCT

Guided tour of Cromarty East Church



Photo © SRCT

4. Assessment of Cromarty East Church Project

Sustainability – although the East Church operates on a ‘shoestring’ it is now sustainable. The finances balance and, combined with the support of the Community and Education Officer post (now funded by SRCT) and the Friends’ Group, the future for the church looks bright.

Benefits of volunteering – clearly, the biggest contribution is the role of the volunteers in helping to deliver a sustainable long term solution for the East Church. However, there are other important benefits:

Primary 1 site visit with contractor



Photo © SRCT

- Stronger community engagement – in particular the youth engagement programme with P.1 – P.7 and older children should deliver long term benefits in reduced anti-social behaviour and through the recruitment of the next generation of volunteers for the church.
- Wellbeing benefits for volunteers – the active engagement through the church helps to keep volunteers engaged with the community and it also uses their skills and experience. This confers important wellbeing benefits, especially for the older age cohort.

- Economic benefits – the East Church is now part of a wider tourism offer for Cromarty including the Courthouse Museum, the National Trust for Scotland’s Hugh Miller’s Birthplace Cottage and Museum , eco- and dolphin tourism. About 20,000 visitors a year come and visit the church and this will have spin-off benefits for the wider economy

(food, retail and accommodation expenditure) and other tourist attractions (due to tourists visiting multiple sites).

Challenges – the biggest challenge by far has been the lack of finance. The £1.3m cost of repairing and conserving the East Church was met by grants from a range of funders, but the current operating finances are hovering around break-even. If there was any ‘one-off’ major expenditure this would present real problems to SRCT. Ways of increasing earned income through use of the church are being actively pursued by the SRCT, but the building’s relative fragility and conservation requirements place limitations on what is possible. Increasing visitor donations through text and other mobile giving services is also being investigated as per-head giving by visitors is relatively low.

The other big challenge which arises from the lack of finance is the fact that SRCT has virtually no money to invest in volunteer management and development. At present it provides a modest monthly payment to fund the Community and Education officer post for half a day a week. The only other resource is the Executive Director based in Edinburgh, who has to cover all the functions of the Trust across 7 churches. These staffing challenges are exacerbated by the geographical remoteness of some of the churches, including one in Orkney.

5. Lessons from Cromarty East Church

The objective of this case study was to learn from Cromarty East Church how an inherited friends’ group could be turned into a sustainable volunteering model. The key lessons are:

- **Secure the core team** – on taking ownership of Cromarty East Church the Executive Director made it a priority to work with and consolidate the existing team without imposing changes which could potentially alienate established volunteers. This is the foundation upon which to build.
- **Give a focus for the team** – work with the team to identify practical steps and volunteering roles. In the case of the East Church this was as basic as opening its doors to the public 365 days a year.
- **Engage with the community** – widen the reach of the Friends’ Group through engaging the community in its work. For the East Church this had the double benefit of:
 - Opening up the church to the community – school children, parents, etc. This built up the visitors to the church and supported the audience development plan; and
 - Attracting members of the community to become volunteers. This improved the sustainability of the Cromarty East Church Friends’ Group by bringing in new skills, experience and resource to support their increased workload.
- **Manage the volunteers** – one of the most critical lessons learned has been the key role of the Community and Education Officer who can provide leadership and support. Living locally and being a member of the community is invaluable.
- **Publicity and recognition** – raising the profile of the Friends’ Group is helpful. In the case of the East Church there was an element of serendipity as it was able to capitalise on the publicity generated from the BBC Restoration Village programme.

- **Partnership working** – finally, it is important to build relationships with partners who can support you and where you can support them. The ‘win-win’ outcome is important. In the case of the East Church this included the HLF, other tourist attractions in Cromarty and the Black Isle, the local school, and community organisations engaging with the Church.

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