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Church House: a charity journey to net zero

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Please give a brief summary of your award submission

| We are a charity running a 7-storey grade II listed building in Westminster. Our goal was net zero by 2030 at the latest and to create a building of light, deeply rooted in the community refurbished with sustainable materials. We transformed five floors of office space, adding new entrances, a wellbeing room, a faith room, and inclusive facilities. The refurb has been net zero and the building also.

Section 1: What you achieved

- What results are you getting and what has the feedback been?
- How are you measuring the benefits?
- How are you sustaining the momentum/ outcomes?

We have achieved a remarkable transformation through the refurbishment of our Grade II listed building, resulting in a modern, accessible, and environmentally conscious space. The project has led to a carbon-negative refurbishment, with a 6% improvement in temperature control thanks to cork wall spraying, and a significant reduction in carbon emissions. We sequestered 1,260 tonnes of CO₂ through the choice of materials and installed over 6,000 square metres of cork flooring, which alone has sequestered over 1,000 tonnes of CO₂. The use of carbon-absorbing paint resulted in a CO₂ saving of 6.96 tonnes compared to industry-standard alternatives. Additionally, we incorporated reception feature walls made from 100% recycled plastic, notably from washing machines, and applied natural clay plaster with low embodied carbon.

The refurbishment has significantly enhanced the building's functionality and appeal, introducing open-plan offices, unobstructed windows, and modern study booths and breakout areas. These improvements have attracted new tenants and increased rental income while fostering a more collaborative and welcoming environment for staff. To sustain these positive outcomes, key team members have undertaken carbon literacy training, furthering their commitment to sustainable practices. We have also developed best practice case studies and briefings to support churches, cathedrals, and bishoprics across the Church of England, sharing our insights and successes. By maintaining open communication with tenants and building users throughout the process, we ensured that everyone remained informed and engaged. The project has not only improved the building's carbon footprint but also inspired our team and trustees to adopt more sustainable practices in their own lives. This commitment to sustainability and community engagement has reinforced our role as a leader in environmentally responsible building management, setting a benchmark for future initiatives.

Section 2: Why you did it

- Why are you doing what you are doing and what did you hope to achieve?
- How does this initiative support the strategic direction and values of your organisation?

The decision to refurbish the building was driven by the Church of England's commitment to achieving carbon neutrality across all its buildings by 2030, as mandated at the General Synod in 2022. This goal includes Church House, the CoE administrative headquarters (our building). Recognising the urgency, we immediately embarked on a project that not only aimed to bring the building in line with these environmental targets but also to reflect the strategic direction and core values of our organisation.

Our initiative focused on transforming the building into a model of sustainability, making it not just a functional space but a symbol of our commitment to ethical stewardship and environmental responsibility. By upgrading five floors of office space, creating new entrances, and incorporating environmentally friendly materials such as cork flooring and carbon-absorbing paint, we aimed to reduce our carbon footprint significantly. These choices were deliberate, ensuring that every aspect of the refurbishment supported our goal of a carbon-negative building. Additionally, we integrated modern, accessible features like open-plan offices and inclusive facilities to enhance the building's usability and appeal, aligning with our value of offering practical solutions that benefit all users.

The refurbishment also reflects our organisation's broader strategic focus on sustainability and community engagement, one of the five pillars of our strategy. By prioritising eco-friendly materials and energy-efficient systems, we are not only meeting our environmental obligations but also setting a standard for other Church of England properties. Our efforts demonstrate that it is possible to combine historical preservation with modern sustainability practices, serving as a case study for other churches, cathedrals, and bishoprics aiming to achieve similar goals.

This initiative also embodies our core values. 'We behave in an ethical way', which is evident in our commitment to reducing our environmental impact and promoting sustainable practices. 'We look after our building' by ensuring it is fit for purpose and future-proofed against environmental challenges. 'We care for our people' by creating a healthier, more comfortable work environment that supports their wellbeing. 'We offer solutions' that are not only practical but also forward-thinking, addressing both immediate and long-term needs. Finally, 'we do an excellent job' by executing a complex refurbishment that meets the highest standards of sustainability, accessibility, and community focus. Through this work, we aim to inspire others within the Church and beyond to embrace the challenge of carbon neutrality with the same level of commitment and excellence.

Section 3: How you did it

- How did you go about achieving the results you did?
- How did you structure your way of working?
- How did you go about involving stakeholders, gaining their buy in and support?
- How did the team pull together to achieve an excellent outcome?

From the outset, we engaged a great sustainable architect who understood our vision and was instrumental in guiding the project to align with our goal of achieving carbon neutrality. The architect's expertise in sustainable design ensured that every aspect of the refurbishment, from materials to mechanical systems, supported our environmental objectives. To make this vision a reality, our trustees approved additional spending to ensure that the refurbishment itself was carbon neutral.

Structuring our way of working was crucial. We established a clear governance framework, with monthly project meetings chaired by a trustee, providing oversight and ensuring alignment with our goals. These meetings were essential for tracking progress, addressing challenges, and making decisions in a timely manner. Additionally, we held quarterly stakeholder meetings that included tenants, neighbours, and representatives from other listed buildings in the area. This open line of communication allowed us to keep everyone informed and involved. Tenant tours of the site were also organised to show them the progress firsthand.

One of the most remarkable achievements was that no tenant had to move out during the refurbishment. This was possible due to the open relationships we maintained. Our team was highly coordinated, ensuring that the refurbishment work could proceed without disrupting the daily operations of the building. This was particularly challenging as the building houses a working conference centre, which continued to host a full schedule of events throughout. The team worked closely with the venue staff to ensure that disruption was minimised, allowing conferences to proceed smoothly.

We also went the extra mile to accommodate the specific needs of our tenants. For example, one tenant regularly records podcasts in the building, and we made special arrangements to ensure that they could continue their recordings without interruption. Weekly communications were sent out to all building users, providing updates on the work, any potential disruptions, and what to expect in the coming weeks. This proactive communication was a key factor in maintaining tenant satisfaction and trust, and as a result, all tenants chose to stay with us through the refurbishment and beyond.

The success is a testament to the strength and cohesion of our team. Everyone involved pulled together with a shared commitment. We had to adapt quickly to unexpected challenges, such as discovering that the building's internal walls were much thicker and more difficult to modify than anticipated (bomb proofed!). However, the collaborative spirit and problem-solving approach of the team ensured that we could overcome these obstacles without compromising on quality or sustainability.

The refurbishment of our building was not just about updating a space; it was about aligning our physical environment with our values and strategic direction. Through careful planning, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and a strong team effort, we were able to achieve a carbon-neutral refurbishment and building that meets the needs of our tenants and positions us as a leader in sustainable building management, and we are possibly the only grade II listed building to be net zero in the UK.

Section 4: What you learnt

- How was learning captured, actioned and shared to benefit others?

We gained invaluable insights into sustainable building practices, stakeholder engagement, and the complexities of working within the constraints of a historic structure. These lessons were systematically captured, actioned, and shared to ensure that the knowledge we gained would benefit the wider community.

We created best practice case studies which detailed aspects of the refurbishment, from the choice of materials to stakeholder management, and were specifically designed to support other buildings within the Church of England. We provided a valuable resource for other organisations looking to undertake similar projects, helping them to avoid common pitfalls and adopt successful strategies.

Our commitment to sharing knowledge extends beyond the church community. We are considering applying for awards, like this one, to gain recognition for our work.

Presentations were another vital tool for knowledge sharing. We delivered presentations to a range of audiences, including the Government Property Department, where we also conducted tours of the building to demonstrate the practical application of our sustainable strategies. These presentations provided an opportunity to showcase the innovative use of materials such as cork spray wall insulation and carbon-absorbing paint, which were key elements of the refurbishment.

Our architect played a central role in this knowledge-sharing effort. They are currently exploring the possibility of a master's degree based on the study of cork spray wall insulation, a material we used extensively. Their research will contribute to the broader body of knowledge on sustainable construction and could influence future building practices.

One of the most tangible outcomes of our learning was the decision to incorporate a green clause into the building's leases. This clause mandates that all tenants, as well as the conference centre, use carbon-absorbing paint, cork insulation and lime based plaster thereby extending the environmental benefits of the refurbishment throughout the building's lifecycle. This policy change reflects our commitment to sustainability and ensures that the building will continue to contribute to our carbon-neutral goals long after the refurbishment has been completed.

The refurbishment project was not just about improving our physical space but also about learning and evolving as an organisation. By capturing and sharing our experiences we have positioned ourselves as leaders in sustainable building practices. Our efforts have created a ripple effect, influencing not only our tenants but also the wider community, and we continue to seek new opportunities to share our knowledge and contribute to the global sustainability movement.

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