

Environmental Task Group

Environmental Policy progress review

Basic Information

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Action required	Decision
Draft resolution(s)	Resolution 26 General Assembly directs the Environmental Task Group to consult on a travel and expenses policy for the URC which (i) encourages consideration of the purpose of travel and its environmental impact, (ii) introduces a carbon budget for international travel on URC business, and (iii) incentivises low-carbon travel modes, with a view that proposals should be brought to a future General Assembly, or to the Assembly Executive if necessary.

Summary of Content

Subject and aim(s)	Report on progress in implementing the URC's Environmental Policy and recommendations for next steps
Main points	There is a huge variety of levels of engagement with, enthusiasm for and knowledge of environmental concerns across the Church. Some impressive work is going on, but others have not yet actively engaged with these issues. Overall, the URC is not yet doing enough to fulfil its environmental commitments. The report highlights examples of good practice and makes recommendations for further progress.
Previous relevant documents	URC Environmental Policy (as adopted by General Assembly in July 2016 and updated by Mission Council in May 2019)
Consultation has taken place with...	Synods Assembly Committees

Summary of Impact

Financial	None, directly – though achieving all the commitments in the Environmental Policy would require significant expenditure
External (e.g. ecumenical)	Not significant

1. Background

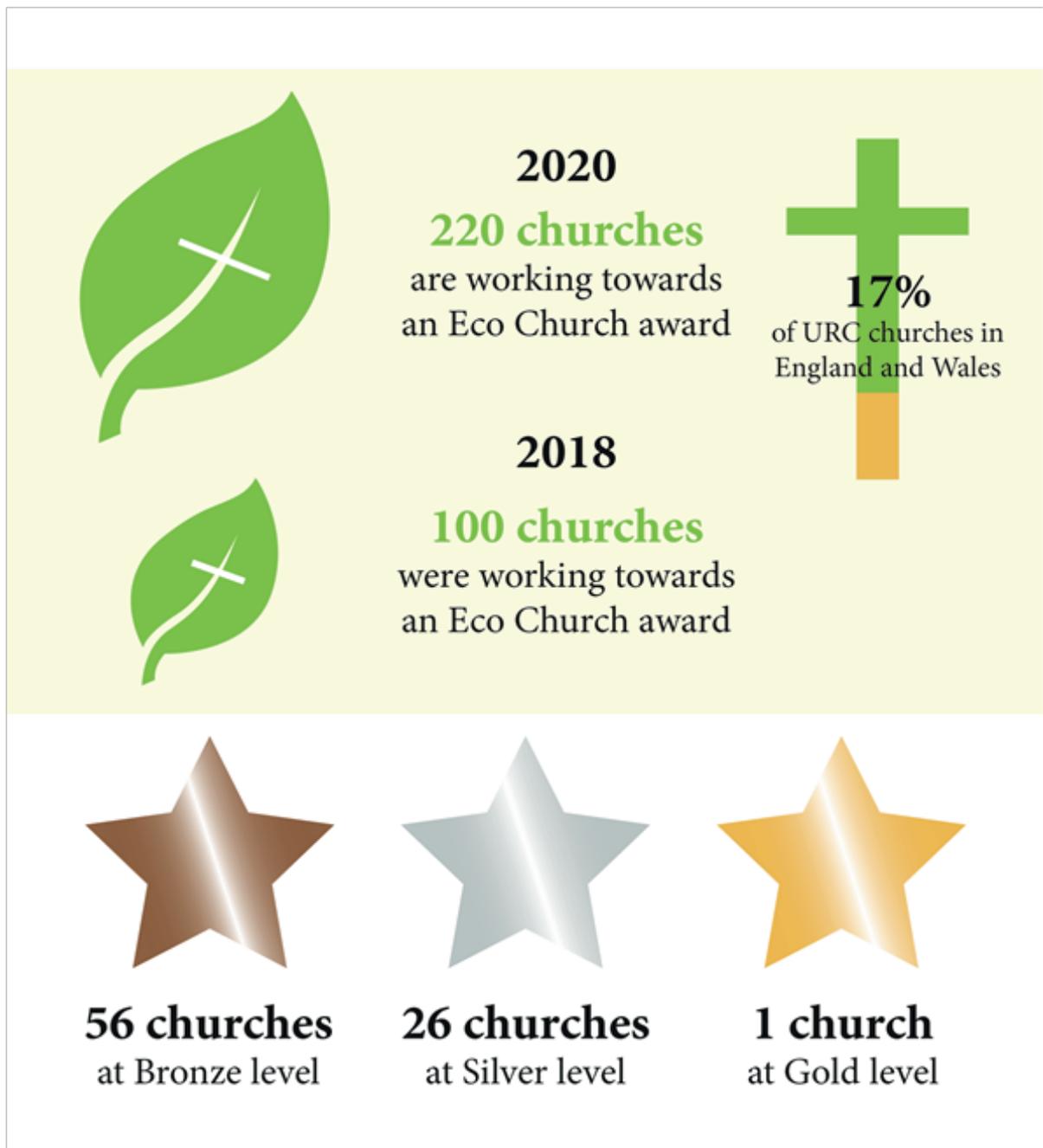
- 1.1 The URC's current Environmental Policy was adopted at General Assembly in 2016 and updated by Mission Council in May 2019. It commits the Church to 'shrink its carbon footprint (the total greenhouse gas emissions caused by the Church's activities) and to strive to protect and restore the environment' and to 'act urgently to reduce carbon emissions across the whole of church life in line with the target... of reaching net zero emissions of greenhouse gases by well before 2050'. It sets out specific actions which it encourages local churches, synods, and the Church as a whole to take forward in order to fulfil these commitments.
- 1.2 Recognising the increasing urgency of action in response to environmental concerns, and the importance of measuring this, the November 2019 Mission Council asked all synods and Assembly committees 'to report back to the environmental task group about their progress in implementing the Environmental Policy by 29 February 2020, with a view to a full report being made at the 2020 General Assembly and annually thereafter'. The environmental task group sent questionnaires to all synods and the main Assembly committees, asking for details of action they were taking on environmental matters, and for any specific support or resources they would find helpful to make further progress.

2. Responses

- 2.1 Ten synods and all Assembly committees responded to this request, as did URC Youth Executive and several other subcommittees, teams and task groups. The responses were analysed alongside centrally collected data. The environmental task group is grateful for all the information provided.
- 2.2 The progress review highlights a huge variety of levels of engagement with, enthusiasm for and knowledge of environmental concerns across the Church. Some incredible work is going on, but others have not yet actively engaged with these issues. Overall, the group is very encouraged by the level and content of the responses. We hope this summary of the results will be a way of celebrating success and sharing good practice (see highlighted boxes), and also provide a stimulus to further action.

3. Local churches

- 3.1 The Environmental Policy, in section 5.3, encourages local churches to consider environmental issues in their use of buildings, land and energy, and in their worship and teaching; to help church members to make lifestyle changes; and to engage in political and community action around climate change. In support of this, it recommends that churches participate in the programmes and award schemes offered by Eco Church (in England and Wales) or Eco-Congregation (in Scotland).
- 3.2 As at February 2020, 220 United Reformed Churches were registered as working towards an Eco Church award. This represents 17% of URCs in England and Wales. The number of URCs on the programme has more than doubled since the beginning of 2018, when just 100 churches were registered.



3.3 At the time of writing, 56 churches are at Bronze award level, 26 are at Silver award level, and one is at Gold award level. We congratulate all churches that have received awards.

Special congratulations to St John's Marsh Green (Edenbridge) in Southern Synod, which was the first URC to receive a Gold award from Eco Church, in October 2019. The church generates its own electricity from photovoltaic panels on the roof, uses rainwater for toilet flushing, banks ethically, has its own nature reserve with a wildflower meadow to improve habitats for wildlife, and runs regular eco-events.

3.4 In Scotland, there are 12 URC Eco-congregations, representing 27% of churches in the Synod of Scotland.

- 3.5 Congregations report that these programmes provide inspiration, information and tangible stepping stones as they grow in environmental awareness. We would strongly encourage all churches to register with the relevant scheme and to work towards each award.

4. Synods

- 4.1 The Environmental Policy, in section 5.4, mandates synods to encourage and support local churches in the areas outlined above, and also look at the environmental impact of the buildings and resources for which they are responsible, and develop and implement an environmental policy or charter.
- 4.2 Synods are invited to apply for an Eco Synod award as a way of measuring their progress. By February 2020, seven synods were registered as working towards the Eco Synod award (Wessex, West Midlands, South Western, Northern, East Midlands, Wales, Southern).
- 4.3 As of February 2020, all synods have now appointed or designated a Green Apostle or equivalent, to champion this agenda. Their impact has been felt in many places and their work is enormously appreciated.

With strong leadership commitment, sustained profile and a proactive approach to follow-up, West Midlands synod has made the most progress in encouraging take-up of the Eco Church scheme, with 39% of local churches registered with Eco Church; 18 of these 44 churches have received an award.

- 4.4 Eight synods have taken action to divest from fossil fuel investments, following the Mission Council decision in May 2019. Some local churches have also reviewed their investments and moved to divest from fossil fuels.

Synod of Scotland have committed to commission energy performance audits of all Synod-owned manses, with an aim to achieve a minimum of a 'C' rating. West Midlands Synod have also begun a programme to undertake energy audits of manses and church buildings, and to look at their suitability for solar panels and electric car charging points.

5. Assembly Committees

- 5.1 The Committees each have their own remits, but collectively can play a significant role in helping the Church to reduce its carbon footprint and take forward other commitments in the Environmental Policy.
- 5.2 Overall, eight committees reported that they had considered the implications of environmental issues for their work since 2016, but only four had looked at the Environmental Policy specifically. Several committees commented that the task group's questionnaire had been a helpful prompt to consider these matters for the first time.

The Education and Learning Committee has drafted a Green Charter and detailed environmental statement setting out changes it plans to make to its work and programmes in order to reduce carbon emissions.

5.3 Committees were asked to report on their activities in the following areas relating to section 5.5 of the policy:

- **Carbon budgeting, target-setting and monitoring:** Several committees have made concrete commitments to monitor or reduce emissions, but none have yet set a specific target. The Education and Learning committee will set a target once it has established its carbon footprint.
- **Advocacy and campaigning:** The Church has been active in advocating for more national and international action on climate change, particularly through the work of Church and Society/JPIT and Commitment for Life. The Children's & Youth Work Committee promoted the global climate strike, and climate activism and ecological issues have also been covered extensively in the URC's communications, including *Reform*.
- **Energy use, buildings, and stewardship of resources:** The Education & Learning Committee is encouraging the Resource Centres for Learning to attain high environmental standards, and the Retired Ministers' Housing Society (RMHS) Board has embarked on a programme of insulating all older housing stock. The Finance Committee has overseen the implementation of the change in ethical investment guidelines relating to fossil fuels made by the May 2019 Mission Council. Many committees are printing and posting fewer papers and materials, and making more use of electronic communications, with positive environmental benefits. The Communications Committee has reduced the use of plastic packaging in procuring printing and merchandise, and opted for surface rather than airmail shipments.
- **Travel and meeting arrangements:** The Mission Committee has recently decided that for travel undertaken within Europe on behalf of the URC, the default should now be to travel by train, unless there is a compelling reason not to do so. A carbon-offsetting scheme is in place for all international travel booked through Global and Intercultural Ministries.

A number of committees are considering the environmental policies of the venues they use for meetings and events, and the accessibility of locations for public transport. The Children's & Youth Work Committee have developed an eco checklist for potential venues, with questions covering energy ratings and sources, recycling and plastic use, and menu choices. At Youth Assembly 2020, one meal was fully vegetarian for everyone, and reusable mugs were provided instead of single-use plastic cups.

Several committees are now looking at meeting physically less frequently and making greater use of videoconferencing, while recognising that it does not work well for all types of discussion and decision making. Since the survey was carried out, the coronavirus emergency has accelerated the familiarity of many of us with new ways of meeting and working virtually.

- **Promoting an environmental theology:** It was good to hear from several committees and groups about ways they were taking this forward in their work.

6. Challenges and recommendations

- 6.1 While undertaking this progress review has undoubtedly been a useful exercise, not least through the conversations it has prompted, it has not provided evidence that the URC is yet doing enough to fulfil its environmental commitments. We have highlighted points that encourage us, but progress overall is piecemeal and is really only just starting in many areas. That provides a challenge to us all.
- 6.2 As a task group, we do have concerns that some current policies and practices, especially around buildings and travel, which form the largest part of the Church's carbon footprint, are not aligned to our long-term goals of sustainability and carbon neutrality. For instance, the Retired Ministers' Housing Society has a blanket policy of not purchasing properties with solar panels, and very few synods have made assessments of the environmental performance of manses. Until recently, the only limits placed on international and UK travel were financial ones, with very little use of carbon budgeting and nothing to incentivise lower-carbon travel choices such as car and taxi sharing.
- 6.3 In other areas, progress is held back by a shortage of relevant knowledge and advice. In some instances, this need can be met by pooling knowledge and sharing good practice, such as around environmentally-aware meeting venues and use of videoconferencing. In other cases, such as improving the heating and energy efficiency of older buildings, sources of specialist advice will be needed, and offering dedicated funding for this at synod level may be a way of accelerating progress. Across the board, greater attention to target setting and monitoring would be beneficial.
- 6.4 It is apparent that some further coordinated work would enable greater progress in some areas, so we make the following recommendations:
- The development of a travel and expenses policy for the URC which encourages consideration of the purpose of travel and its environmental impact, introduces a carbon budget for international travel on URC business, and incentivises low-carbon travel modes. It is proposed that the environmental task group should consult on this, particularly with the Mission Committee and Finance Committee, with a view that proposals should be brought to a future General Assembly, or to the Assembly Executive if necessary.
 - Development of a 'meetings charter' for both face-to-face and virtual meetings, to help committees consider the purpose and function of meetings, and the best ways in which to meet. We welcome the Education & Learning Committee's proposal to lead on this.
 - Research on meeting and event venues with good environmental policies, and questions to ask venues. We have asked the Action Learning Group of Church House administrative staff to take a lead on this, building on the knowledge and good practice that already exists, and to share the results with other staff and synods.

- Training and guidance on videoconferencing. We have encouraged the Church House Communications team, IT team and Action Learning Group to continue to develop and share this widely.
- An update to the Environmental Policy to incorporate additional issues such as biodiversity and species loss, and embed the policy more deeply in the Church's ways of working, with greater accountability. The environmental task group plans to work on this over the final two years of its term of service, and to bring proposals for an updated policy to the General Assembly in 2022.

6.5 In addition to the specific points noted above, we make the following general recommendations for synods and committees:

- Please do continue reflecting on the Environmental Policy and developing specific plans in response.
- It is very helpful to set targets and indicators around the commitments made, and to monitor progress regularly. This can feed into future annual progress reports that the environmental task group will collate.
- It has proved highly beneficial to appoint green advocates or task groups to take responsibility for championing environmental concerns within each group.
- Do invite the environmental task group for support in all of this.

7. Final reflections

7.1 The varied levels of engagement with this issue in the Church reflect attitudes in society more generally. We are all at different stages in the journey of understanding our environmental impact and discerning appropriate responses to the climate crisis, both individually and corporately. Sometimes this makes discussions about the choices we might make in response to environmental concerns uncomfortable ones, especially when they are presented as a 'zero sum' game. While some choices will be difficult, others will create positive opportunities from which we will all benefit.

7.2 We need to acknowledge that some of this discomfort comes from fear, and some comes from having different starting-points from others. Experience suggests that the more we have the conversations about these issues, acknowledging our fears and our differences, the easier it gets, and the more that areas of agreement emerge. As a community of faith, we have resources to draw on which will help us in this – not least the call to live hopefully in the present climate.