



Item: 1

St Magnus Cathedral Sub-committee: 17 March 2026.

Visitor Experience Overview.

Report by Director of Enterprise and Resources.

1. Overview

- 1.1. This report provides a general update on the visitor numbers, offering and experience, identifying complexity in the donation and retail offering to visitors and tourists as an issue for members' consideration.
- 1.2. St Magnus Cathedral is an important spiritual site and local landmark as well as a popular visitor attraction supporting Orkney's tourism sector.
- 1.3. The key organisations related to the operation of the Cathedral are Orkney Islands Council, The Church of Scotland (and the St Magnus Centre), and the Society of The Friends of St Magnus Cathedral.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. It is recommended that members of the Sub-committee:
 - i. Instruct the Director of Enterprise and Resources to review the donation facilities and retail offering within St Magnus Cathedral, consider options for consolidation and streamlining, liaise with relevant stakeholders, and present recommendations to the St Magnus Cathedral Sub-committee, in due course, on how the offering could be most effectively rationalised.

3. Background

- 3.1. St Magnus Cathedral is managed by Orkney Islands Council on behalf of the people of Orkney. This includes responsibility for maintaining the fabric of the building, as well as staffing and operation of the building for visitors.
- 3.2. The 2025/26 operating budget for St Magnus Cathedral is £301,300. In addition, there is a budget allocation towards repairs and annual maintenance of the Cathedral, managed by the Council Property and Capital Programme Service.
- 3.3. The Cathedral is non-denominational, with the resident congregation being Church of Scotland (following the 1929 agreement).

- 3.4. The St Magnus Centre is a separate entity under the auspices of the Church of Scotland which operates the St Magnus Centre building located behind the Cathedral, and raises funds for activities of the congregation.
- 3.5. The Society of The Friends of St Magnus Cathedral is a charity, originally formed in 1958 when it became apparent that additional funds would be required for the long-term maintenance and development of the Cathedral. The main objective of the Society is to raise funds to ensure the preservation of St Magnus Cathedral as an inspiring place to visit and worship.
- 3.6. Over the last sixty years the Society has contributed over £1.75 million towards Cathedral projects. It presently supports both staff and maintenance costs.
- 3.7. The Council, the Church of Scotland, and the Society of The Friends of St Magnus Cathedral therefore all play a key role in the life of the Cathedral. This is reflected in membership of the St Magnus Cathedral Sub-committee.

4. Visitor Offering and Experience

- 4.1. The Cathedral is open to visitors free of charge every day of the week from April to September and Monday to Saturday from October to March. A Church of Scotland service takes place at 11:15 each Sunday, and the Cathedral is utilised for a wide variety of other events and ceremonies throughout the year.
- 4.2. In 2025, 203,383 visitors were recorded for the Cathedral. This is a reduction of around 17% as compared to 2024, but reflects the experience at other sites across Orkney for 2025, as well as a change in the methodology used to calculate visitor numbers where visits for services/wedding/funerals and paid concerts are now excluded from totals to get a more accurate number for general visitors.
- 4.3. 2025 was a successful year in terms of tour offerings. The uptake on upper-level tours and graveyard tours remained consistent despite the lower visitor numbers, whilst ground floor tours and monthly 'special theme' tours were added to the roster. The school offering was also promoted this year, and 20 guided tours to schools/educational institutions were carried out as a result. The tours do not play a large role in terms of income generation, but are central to other aims of the service, including accessibility and educating and informing residents and visitors.

5. Donations and Retail

5.1. At present there are five organisations with capacity to generate income from donations and sales within the Cathedral. This includes seven donation points (four cash, two card, one QR code), and three pay points for goods sold (all cash, no change given). A summary of the donation and payment options in the Cathedral are set out below.

Stakeholder	Payment options	Use of funds
Orkney Islands Council	2 card donation points. 3 cash donation boxes.	Cathedral operations and maintenance.
Society of the Friends of St Magnus Cathedral	2 cash boxes for brochure purchase, doubling as donation points.	Society funds, to be used for Cathedral operations and maintenance.
St Magnus Centre	Sales table with cash box for payment, doubling as donation.	Church congregation costs (consumables etc) and towards St Magnus Centre operation costs.
Church of Scotland	1 donation box for lighting electric candles.	Donations go to a variety of local, national and international charities.
Orkney Pilgrimage	1 cash donation box, and one QR code donation point.	St Magnus Way maintenance, signage and interpretation.

5.2. The above organisations all have other means and methods of receiving donations and/or making sales in other locations and online.

5.3. Visitor Services staff in the Cathedral have noted that, whilst visitors are generally keen to donate and purchase available goods, they often find:

- i. Visitors not having any understanding of the different uses of money depending on which box they place their donation in.
- ii. Visitors having card, but no cash, and therefore being unable to purchase good or brochures, and only able to donate to the Council.
- iii. Visitors having cash, and seeking to combine purchase of souvenirs and brochures with donation, but being told they have to provide a separate payment into different boxes to achieve this.

- 5.4. There is a degree of overlap in the use of funds from several of these organisations, and it is possible that rationalising collection of payments into one fund, to be later dispersed between stakeholders, could be a more coherent approach. Maintaining or enhancing the offering to visitors, whilst providing increased flexibility and coherence in payment and donation types, could lead to a greater overall level of income from visitors.
- 5.5. It is recommended that the Director of Enterprise and Resources should review the donation facilities and retail offering within the Cathedral, consider options for consolidation and streamlining, liaise with relevant stakeholders, and present recommendations back to the St Magnus Cathedral Sub-committee on how the offering could be most effectively rationalised.

For Further Information please contact:

Sweyn Johnston, Head of Enterprise and Economic Growth, extension 2348, Email sweyn.johnston@orkney.gov.uk

Implications of Report

1. **Financial:** This report may impact the level of donations received, and a rationalisation of donation methods whereby the Council distributes funds to others may place additional burdens on the Council's Finance team.
2. **Legal:** No immediate legal implications, however, if a change is to be made to the arrangement of donation and retail options in the Cathedral, it would be prudent to formalise this by way of legal agreement.
3. **Corporate Governance:** None
4. **Human Resources:** None
5. **Equalities:** None.
6. **Island Communities Impact:** None.
7. **Links to Council Plan:** The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Council Plan strategic priorities:
 - Growing our economy.
 - Strengthening our Communities.
 - Developing our Infrastructure.
 - Transforming our Council.
8. **Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan:** The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the following Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priorities:
 - Cost of Living.
 - Sustainable Development.

- Local Equality.
- Improving Population Health.

9. **Environmental and Climate Risk:** None.
10. **Risk:** None.
11. **Procurement:** None.
12. **Health and Safety:** None.
13. **Property and Assets:** None.
14. **Information Technology:** None.
15. **Cost of Living :** None.

List of Background Papers

None.