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8 December 2009

Dear Gordon,

Consultation on Historic Scotland Guidance Notes – Managing Change in the Historic Environment

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this consultation.

The Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS) is a forum that brings together 21 non-governmental organisations – both professional and voluntary – that work within the built environment sector. The purpose of BEFS is to raise awareness of policy issues within the sector, encourage debate and share information, with a view to influencing policy and legislation.

In this response BEFS would like to draw attention to some general points, and refer to responses submitted by individual members for commentary on the individual guidance notes topics.

General comments on the guidance notes

BEFS welcomes the guidance developed on 'Setting' and on 'Micro-renewables'. BEFS supports the positive work Historic Scotland is already undertaking with regards to historic environment and Climate Change, and encourages Historic Scotland to ensure the approach to historic buildings is sustainable, and as far as possible minimising impact on climate change.

BEFS also welcomes Historic Scotland's intention to develop further guidance notes to cover the entire historic environment.

Purpose of the documents

The draft notes generally are well laid out, easy to read, and more accessible than the old Memorandum. There is however, a fundamental issue regarding the audience for these notes that needs to be addressed.

It is our understanding that these notes are intended to be used by all audiences: the general public, planners and other practitioners alike. In their current form they do not meet the needs of professionals in the sector. Much detailed information and guidance from the now withdrawn Memorandum is not covered in the draft guidance notes. If important detail is lost, the usefulness of these leaflets in helping to guide and support good decisions and practice will be less and the stated aim of maintaining the conservation standards of the Memorandum will not be met.

Planning Authorities need clear statements of policy for development planning. While interpretation of policy is done by individual local authorities, statements on the principles underlying such decisions are clearly needed, at a level of detail beyond what is in the SHEP. If national policy is weak there is a high risk that local decisions are also weak and inconsistent.

BEFS welcomes in part the statement made by HS at the workshop 11th November, that some of the material from the Memorandum, which will not be included in the new Guidance Notes, will be kept available on the Historic Scotland website. However, as long as this is for information purposes only, it cannot be of the same usefulness and will not provide the support requested by practitioners.

It is the view of BEFS Members and Subscribers who have endorsed this letter that Historic Scotland will need to thoroughly amend the contents and language (see below) of these notes to meet the needs of planners and other practitioners. If that does not happen, Historic Scotland will need to accept that these guidance notes in practice are not likely to be used by all audiences as intended, but primarily by the general public.

We are not convinced that these notes should target the general public. People wishing to undertake work on historic buildings for example, will need to work with their Local Authority and there should be explicit advice to this effect. Most Local Authorities have their own planning policies and detailed supplementary guidance which will have important and practical implications for their proposals.

BEFS urges Historic Scotland to revise its timetable for the publication of these guidance notes, and take the time required to ensure that the published guidance notes are adequate and fit for purpose.

Suggested improvements

BEFS would like to recommend some improvements which are generally applicable to all topic notes, regardless of the final audience.

Language

The language used in these documents is too weak; terms like 'can', 'could' and 'could be' are used rather than 'should', 'must', and 'are'. If these notes are to be used as policy guidance, a clearer statement of principles needs to be made.

Glossary

There is a strong need for a glossary. This could be a basic list of definitions relevant to the specific topic included in each leaflet, with a reference to a more extensive on-line glossary.

References

The notes would strongly benefit from cross-referencing. There are many examples of issues, which are closely related to several topics, but for which guidance is only included in one of the leaflets (eg guidance on roof extensions is relevant to roofs, extension and windows and solar panel installation relevant to both micro-renewables and roofs). In such cases there needs to be a reference to where guidance can be found in the leaflets where guidance has not been included. Similarly, if there is a need to seek guidance in several different topic notes, that should be clearly stated.

There is a need to review the references to external documents, on-line information sources or organisations to ensure they are comprehensive.

There needs to be clarity about the status of references made: would references to external organisations, case studies etc be sanctioned by the Ministers?

Case Studies

The introduction of examples of good practice should be developed and either referred to within the documents or held in an online repository alongside the guidance notes.

Illustrations

The use of illustrations in the leaflets is welcome. While the images used in these draft notes are generally good, it would be even better if they directly related to the text, for instance providing examples of good (or unacceptable) practice. Pictures generally catch the attention of readers which makes it important that they contribute to conveying the message rather than just brighten up the leaflet.

Consistency

Greater care is needed to ensure that the terminology used is consistent all through the Guidance Notes, as well as consistent with terminology used in the planning system.

Since these guidance notes are meant to cover all areas of the historic environment, the language used should be carefully checked throughout to ensure its appropriateness for all historic environment related areas (for instance by using terms like 'asset' 'place' or 'features').

It would be useful in all leaflets to include an analysis section (similar to the 3-step assessment in Setting), which outlines recommended actions and considerations. This recommendation is especially important if the notes are used by the general public.

Process

These documents would have benefited from early consultation with stakeholders, for instance on format, audience, and even practical focus groups looking at specific wording. It seems to BEFS that this consultation process has highlighted the need for advance planning and timing in relation to other Government consultations - to ensure a useful dialogue with stakeholders.

Historic Scotland has lately been involved in fruitful early and continued stakeholder engagements and consultation processes, especially on the Marine Bill but also on the Historic Environment Bill. We strongly recommend the former as a model way of working in the future.

We hope these comments are useful – please get in touch if you require any further clarification. We would be grateful if you could keep us informed on the outcome of this consultation process.

Yours sincerely



Pernilla Rinsell
Forum Co-ordinator

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