

The COVID Historic Environment Resilience Forum (CHERF) gathered five times between 12 June - 8th July 2020 with the intent to create a collaborative space to plan, coordinate, and communicate high-level sector-wide strategies and guidance for rebuilding, recovery and strengthening resilience in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Forum is chaired by BEFS Vice Chair, Ian Baxter, and coordinated by BEFS with additional resource from HES.

Each meeting attempted to address the following questions, with the mid to long term in mind:

- What contribution can heritage make to the country's recovery?
- What is the threat to heritage?

Over 200 individuals from 113 organisations attended the online discussions and the notes from each themed meeting are available on BEFS website: [Reopening Venues](#), [Construction & Conservation](#), [Civic Scotland & Volunteering](#), [Statutory & Policy](#), [Education & Research](#).

The Threats

The unprecedented situation arising from the economic shut down in mid-March mean that the short term consequences remain of prime concern to many participants. Impact on organisational and personal income due to reduced visitor numbers and the inability to hold events is unavoidable and the impact this will have on employment within the heritage sector will likely not be fully understood until the job retention scheme closes on the 31st October 2020. There will be a delayed response in the public sector as the recession impacts upon national and local government budgets. The very immediate human consequences of the pandemic and subsequent economic recession are therefore at the forefront of many minds.

Beyond the impact to people employed in the heritage sector the primary threat forecast to physical heritage also arises from the economic downturn. Loss of income may result in the closure of sites and museums resulting in the potential dispersal of collections, or neglect and loss. Reduced income also likely to impact on building maintenance and the potential for any new capital, restoration projects.

Concerns were expressed that redundancies will result in the loss of expertise from organisations, institutions and authorities particularly in relation to the statutory planning system. Further issues were raised about deregulation being explored in an attempt to rush an economic recovery, possibly borne out by the Scottish Government's intent to 'Carry out a comprehensive review of national planning policies and the extension of permitted development rights, removing the need to apply for planning permission for priority areas of development, to support economic recovery... and explore options to alleviate planning restraints'ⁱ.

2020 has had a major impact on heritage volunteering which is primarily physically based and undertaken by an older demographic. Strong concerns were expressed about whether they would return to volunteering in 2021 and how the necessary shift to online activity may exclude them.

Physical distancing presents huge challenges for heritage education and outreach, although the online engagement is a perhaps a temporary solution and outdoor activities may become possible. The consequences for heritage academia remain uncertain at present but it has the opportunity to provide the evidence for heritage's role in recovery.

Recovery

Much of what was raised regarding the role that the heritage sector can play in recovery was familiar, including the economic and environmental benefits that investing in our existing building stock could deliver and the social and wellbeing benefits arising from participation in heritage. It was striking that the content of the discussions mirrored those of the *Our Place in Time* (OPIT) working groups and as a result we have aligned the CHERF meeting notes with the activities of the working groups in the table of [Annex A](#), with the addition of relevant non-heritage agendas.

The relationship between *Our Place in Time*, the *Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland* and *Scotland's Archaeology Strategy* may benefit from clarification. Is the Scottish Strategic Archaeology Committee the equivalent of an OPIT working group?

The open nature of the CHERF meetings revealed a general lack of awareness of the OPIT working groups and perhaps highlighted the opacity of the working groups' outputs. A lot of conversation centred on how to mainstream approaches across local and national government directorates which was also highlighted in the *Evaluation of the Delivery Impact of Our Place in Time* in September 2019.ⁱⁱ

Three themes did recur that are perhaps inadequately covered in *Our Place in Time*.

Relevance: There were repeated discussions of how to evidence that heritage is 'relevant' to current societal needs. The cultural value is understood but it was recognised that this may not satisfy the aims of some decision makers and making explicit the contribution heritage makes to the environmental, economic, and social pillars of sustainability is necessary. This does relate to mainstreaming and again reflects the content of some of the OPIT working groups, but it needs drawn together, succinctly, with added imperative in the face of budget setting and the 2021 Holyrood election. The recent paper from the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce *Heritage for Inclusive Growth*ⁱⁱⁱ is one approach.

Exclusivity/Inclusivity: The 5 discussions took place at the height of the Black Lives Matter activity and just after the toppling of the Colston statue in Bristol and the need for the heritage sector to engage in this was frequently referenced. It has led to wider discussions of what and how we designate as heritage and who participates in and is employed in the heritage sector. While OPIT is implicitly inclusive, and there are individual initiatives to address exclusion, there is a lack of a strategic approach across the heritage sector to break down barriers a number of groups face.

Localism: Lockdown and travel restrictions has made everyone a lot more aware of their local area and local organisations and this was particularly notable in the discussion with the Development Trust Association Scotland. Necessity has resulted in greater collaboration between small organisations and it has reinforced the existing themes of the community empowerment agenda but there was suggestion of a need to further this within the heritage sector. At a strategic level there is a focus on Scotland's national branding in which heritage plays a powerful role. But this is not delivered consistently for communities across Scotland, has a focus on tourism and therefore local heritage aspirations remain unmet. Issues were raised around values, control, and accountability. The Carnegie UK Trust's report, *Building Back for the Better*^{iv}, reiterates the need for the focus on the local and the introduction of Local Place Plans to the Scottish planning system hold potential. But how is this reflected in heritage decision making and funding?

The 2019 evaluation of OPiT made the following recommendation:

a key issue to consider going forward for OPiT is the extent to which OPiT should consider becoming a more focused/targeted/prioritised strategy for the future

and highlighted the ‘communities/community empowerment agenda’ as an additional amendment to OPiT. Is it time for OPiT to have *regional delivery strategies* that reflect the differing needs and priorities across Scottish communities?

The COVID Historic Environment Resilience Forum brought together a wide range of participants at a particularly challenging time for everyone. The pandemic has brought to the fore pre-existing issues and the call to ‘build back better’ should not merely be an opportunity for the heritage sector to seek to be centre of the recovery, it is also an opportunity for heritage to reflect on how it can build itself back better.

Over the coming months CHERF will continue to act as a space to share ideas of what that better could be.

ⁱ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/economic-recovery-implementation-plan-scottish-government-response-to-the-advisory-group-on-economic-recovery/pages/6/>

ⁱⁱ <https://dcresearch.co.uk/media/uploads/cat-20/our-place-in-time-evaluation-report-2019-1.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2020/the-rsa-heritage-for-inclusive-growth.pdf>

^{iv} <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/building-back-for-the-better-a-perspective-from-cukt/>

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