

Manifesto

2026



In Brief: Building Foundations

This is a Manifesto produced by Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS) to inform the 2026 elections to the Scottish Parliament.

On behalf of its diverse Members and stakeholders, who care for, celebrate and promote the value of Scotland's historic buildings, public spaces and infrastructure, the BEFS Manifesto calls on the next Scottish Government to create the conditions for a well-resourced, dynamic and effective built and historic environment sector.

This will deliver strong value for public money as preventative spend, delivering substantial progress as part of a holistic approach across multiple public policy portfolios, from environmental sustainability, skills and economic development to housing, poverty and health.

Scotland has pressing challenges and varying economic disparities across its urban and rural regions. Ultimately, the investments called for in this Manifesto, will help build a better Scotland by reversing decline and improving quality of life across all of our places. They will also greatly enhance the nation's environment.

The BEFS Manifesto features **15** practical policy recommendations that the Scottish Government can take forward in the 2026-31 term of Parliament to set foundations for the decades to come.



Policy Recommendations by Theme

This Manifesto calls on the Scottish Government to take **15** actions across five key themes:



Culture and Heritage



Climate Emergency and Net Zero



Repair, Maintenance and Retrofit



Training and Skills



Planning and Place-making

Policy Recommendations by Theme

01. Culture and Heritage

- Scale up built environment and heritage investment programmes, leveraging value across portfolios;
- Continue to support Historic Environment Scotland as the lead public body to leverage the benefits of the historic environment for Scotland's people and places;
- Adopt Fair Funding principles set out by [Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations](#) (SCVO);
- Make additional investments in historic and built environment data collection and research programmes.

02. Climate Emergency and Net Zero

- Investigate the international experience with Material Passport schemes and consider adopting a suitable model in Scotland;
- Holistic approach to existing and new climate emergency legislation; ensuring wider policy alignment, and consistent cross-party support beyond parliamentary cycles.





03. Repair, Maintenance and Retrofit

- Implement all three recommendations from the Tenement Maintenance Working Group: the establishment of Five Yearly Inspections, Compulsory Owners Associations, and Building Reserve Funds;
- Establish a Ministerial Oversight Group on Retrofit, to devise and deliver a Retrofit Delivery Plan;
- Increase provision of trained specialists to advise planning authorities on sustainability for the existing built environment.

04. Training and Skills

- Invest in a national programme for training delivery across a variety of traditional building and wider construction skills;
- Invest in preventative spend across built environment specialisms to meet Net Zero, place-making, and heritage targets, and to reverse the decline of essential skills;
- Recognise the cross cutting benefits of investing both in skills provision and training but also the culture shift required towards greater recognition of these skills as desirable careers.

05. Planning and Placemaking

- Explore development of the Fourth National Planning Framework into a fully interactive online resource that incorporates updates to guidance documents and signposts to linked policy initiatives;
- Commit to investment in, and enabling pathways to, bring vacant and derelict land and buildings back into use at scale;
- Integrate heritage and tourism activity and aspirations into Community Wealth Building action plans.

Introduction

About BEFS



As a strategic intermediary body for Scotland's built environment sector, BEFS draws together extensive expertise and knowledge on Scotland's historic and contemporary environment in a membership-led forum.

Our vision is for a strong historic and existing built environment sector in Scotland. One that is informed, that can debate issues in a constructive way, that can demonstrate its impact, that can advocate for good outcomes on the ground.

Our role is to support practitioners in addressing, together, the strategic issues and challenges facing Scotland's built environment. We do this by:

INFORMING: by providing information on the latest developments in relevant policy and practice we increase awareness of strategic policy developments.

DISCUSSING: by creating opportunities to meet we help practitioners share and develop perspectives on matters affecting their work.

EVALUATING: by building capacity in evaluation and performance measurement we help practitioners demonstrate the benefits of what they do.

ADVOCATING: by building capacity in advocacy and engaging with the Scottish Parliament directly, we help the sector shape legislation and policy priorities in a collaborative way.

Further information on BEFS activities, and how to get involved, is available on our website: <https://www.befs.org.uk/>

About the 2026 BEFS Manifesto

This BEFS Manifesto is produced with three objectives:

- To articulate BEFS Member and stakeholder views on what they would like the next Scottish Government to do differently concerning built environment policy;
- To share these views with the main political parties competing in the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections;
- To use the Manifesto as a basis for longer term policy influencing by BEFS across the 2026-2031 Parliament, and beyond.

A consultation process running from March to September 2025 engaged BEFS cross-sector Member bodies, several Working Groups facilitated by BEFS, and wider historic and existing built environment stakeholders in the development of the Manifesto. More information on our consultees is available at the end of this Manifesto.

The Manifesto consultations resulted in 15 policy recommendations in five interconnected themes that BEFS Members and stakeholders wish to see policy action in. The following section provides an overview of the consultation outcomes.

The Manifesto was produced by the BEFS Director, Head of Policy and Strategy, and Communications and Policy Officer. Please [click here](#) for background and contact information for the BEFS team.

Interconnected Themes in Depth

BEFS 2026 Manifesto is structured around five main themes, which are of core interest to our Members and stakeholders.

The built and historic environment, rural and urban, contributes vastly to the quality and character of Scotland's people and places.

It has been shaped by human and natural processes over thousands of years and encompasses our buildings and public spaces: ancient monuments, sites and landscapes; historic buildings; townscape; parks; battlefields; gardens and designed landscapes; and our marine heritage.

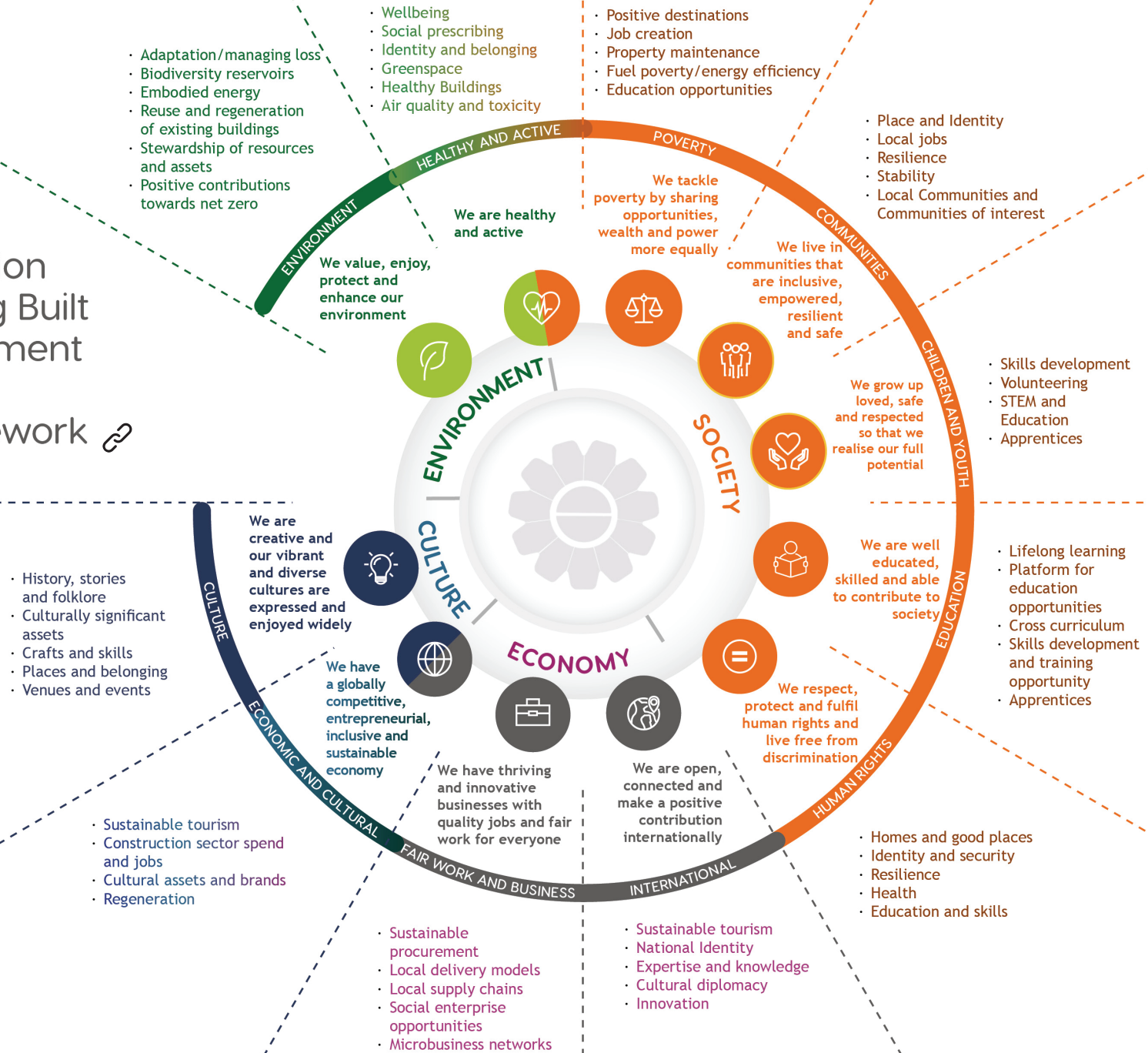
As the illustration overleaf shows, the historic and existing built environment is a diverse field that influences, and is influenced by, many of the public policy areas under the Scottish Government's control.

As the Manifesto content demonstrates, the five main themes overlap and interconnect with each other and with the diverse and manifold policy agendas the built and historic environment contributes to - environment, tourism, education, heritage, communities, places, housing and many, many more.

With public finances under increasing pressure, the need for preventative spend and systems thinking to reduce the need for more expensive and complex interventions and 'fixes' later is greater than ever. BEFS Manifesto policy recommendations are designed to be implemented in the next term of Parliament, but with a view to acting as foundational work for longer term impact, including the current plan for Scotland to become a Net Zero economy by 2045.

BEFS calls on cross-party buy in to these recommendations across all five themes and their complementary alignment, and the recognition that preventative spend in these areas will contribute materially towards the long-term benefit of Scotland's people and places.

Demonstrating the Value and Contribution of Scotland's Existing Built and Historic Environment Across the National Performance Framework





01



Culture and Heritage

➔ Underplayed Policy Value

Culture and heritage is sidelined, underappreciated, underplayed and undervalued in public sector decision-making and policy prioritisation.

The value of investing in heritage for wider policy agendas, including those listed below, is not yet fully understood or appreciated by policy-makers:

- Blue and green infrastructure
- Climate change
- Community empowerment and community wealth building
- Derelict and vacant land and buildings
- Diverse audience engagement in heritage and planning
- Economic development and tourism
- Education, learning and skills
- Fuel poverty
- Health, wellbeing and social capital
- Housing supply
- Place-making, local living and 20 minute neighbourhoods
- Town centre regeneration

Cultural heritage and the historic environment can, and does, deliver across the policy spectrum. Scotland's heritage assets of all types and ages contribute positively towards society through health and wellbeing, Net Zero targets, the traditional skills that enhance our places and enable the provision of warm homes, and to local economies and their supply of long-term, skilled, employment.

A [2025 funding data review by Historic Environment Scotland \(HES\)](#) demonstrated that for every £1 pound invested in the historic environment via grants and funding from HES, a further £5.24 has been leveraged back into Scotland's historic environment. BEFS Member ALGAO Scotland [has calculated that](#) for every £1 spent on archaeology services in planning authorities, £15 is generated for the local economy. This shows that investment in heritage pays dividends.

Local visitor levies are a potential vital source of additional investment in protecting and enhancing the built and historic environment. Appropriate ringfencing of generated income would help support the places and heritage that attract so many visitors to Scotland, especially in rural regions with a stronger reliance on tourism income. In culture and heritage funding allocations, creative arts industries tend to benefit significantly more than the heritage sector. A more balanced, proportional approach would therefore be welcome.

Some national heritage-related funding programmes are seeing successful application rates drop below 20% in 2025, demonstrating an extreme discrepancy between demand and supply. Reducing this discrepancy would deliver strong and mutually beneficial outcomes for the next Scottish Government, the historic and existing built environment sector, and wider society.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will scale up the annual investment levels of built environment and heritage project funding programmes, leveraging value across portfolios.

➡ National Agency Support

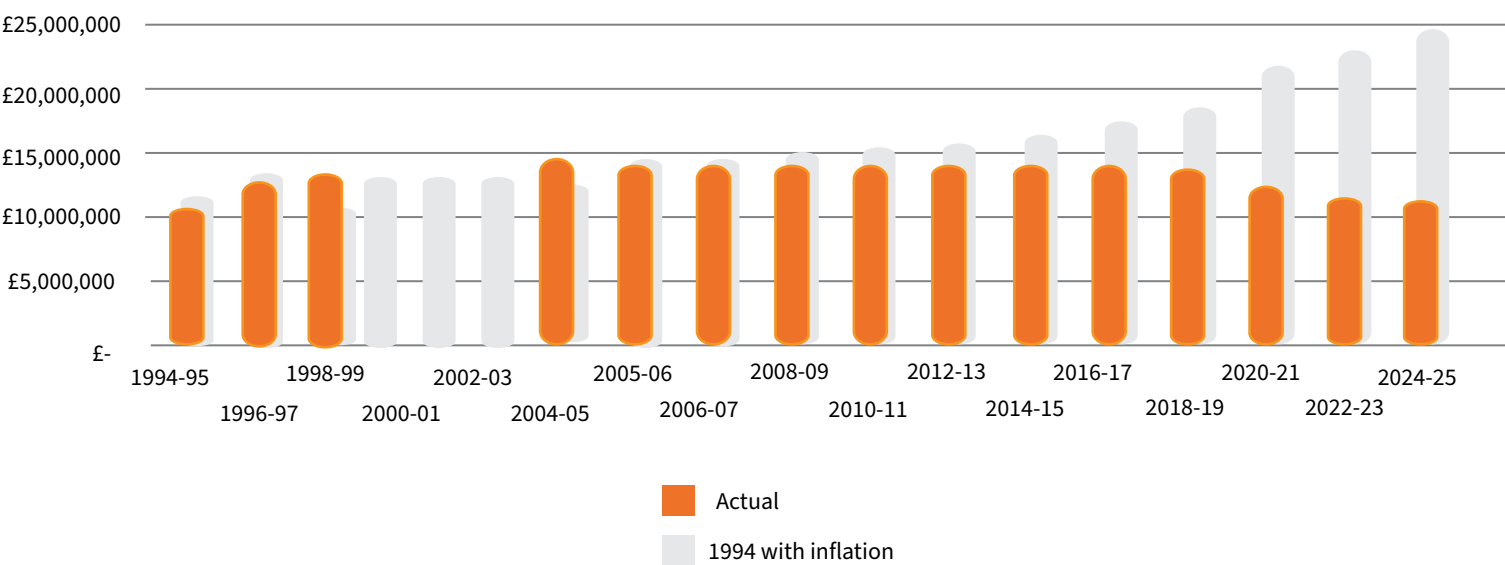
The lead public body for the historic environment is [Historic Environment Scotland \(HES\)](#), which has formal accountability to Scottish Ministers in addition to charitable status. This manifesto calls on greater support from Scottish Government to enable HES to properly and sustainably carry out its function as the lead public sector body for the historic environment, working strategically and with an eye to the long term.

HES - a key regular funder of BEFS - employs almost 1700 staff to support a wide range of specialist services across asset management, and promotion, conservation and repair, regulation and designation, research and advice, partnership projects and more. HES is also a leading player in the delivery of [Our Past, Our Future](#) (OPOF), the collaborative national strategy for the historic environment for 2023-2028. Both HES’ organisational objectives and the priorities set out in OPOF can and should deliver against multiple national objectives for Scotland’s people and places.

One of HES central functions is the distribution of around £12-13m per annum in grants to external bodies. This supports the care and repair of historic buildings and monuments, archaeological activity, and area-based regeneration and heritage improvement schemes. It also directly funds a number of national, regional and local initiatives that progress OPOF priorities.

HES is a successor organisation to Historic Scotland (HS), which was founded pre-devolution in 1991 as an executive agency of the Scottish Office. In 1994/95, the value of Historic Scotland’s annual external grant programme was £11.3m. It has remained broadly stable over time, as illustrated below, and was worth £12.4m in 2024/25.

HS/HES External Grants



If the HS/HES grant programme had kept pace with inflation since then, it should have grown to £23.4m by 2025/26. This £10m real terms budget decline, based on figures from annual HS/HES reports, is representative of an underinvestment in the sector that restricts its potential. In 2024/25, two thirds more was asked from HES than they could award.

In 2026/27 and beyond, a significant increase in the HES grant programme would respond to this inflationary and demand context, and deliver additional OPOF outcomes in the form of high impact, cross-policy project delivery. It will provide the sector with enhanced practical support to implement shared aspirations, and better-placed to tackle the multiple thematic challenges set out in this Manifesto.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will continue to support Historic Environment Scotland as the lead public body to leverage the benefits of the historic environment for Scotland's people and places; an increase in the annual funding distributed via HES' external grants programme will expand and enhance the impact of activity across the sector.

➡ Funding and Investment

Changes to the culture and heritage funding landscape with regard to both project and organisational funding are reducing opportunities, and making services and initiatives increasingly hard to sustain. Smaller charities, community groups and heritage trusts face increasing difficulties planning for the future amid uncertainty over public sector support and grant programmes, with implications for their staff and volunteer capacity and operating models.

Annual and other short-term funding arrangements with short notice periods of discontinuation or significant reductions create challenges for the sector with regards to instability, uncertainty, service decline and poor resilience. There are worsening challenges in securing funding to initiate new heritage projects, and to maintain existing ones, as well as across fundraising for capital works and revenue-based project elements.

Not only is there high demand for competitive funding applications in the public and voluntary sector, but other forms of resourcing activity, such as income generation, crowd-funding and philanthropy are difficult to make a success of in practice. This situation is exacerbated by inflation and rising repair, maintenance and insurance costs. There are several alternative funding models proposed by the Scottish Government, which are yet to be tested or implemented. These include a 'percentage for the arts' scheme cited in the 2023 refresh of the Culture Strategy for Scotland Action Plan, including suggesting corporate social sponsorship and Scottish philanthropy. Little support for, or guidelines on, these alternative models have been offered to date.

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations [Fair Funding in Scotland campaign](#) calls for funders to implement a set of standard principles, including longer-term support of three years or more, and flexible core funding. These changes will help support improvements in capacity, project sustainability and the quality of outcomes in culture and heritage.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government and its agencies will adopt the Fair Funding principles set out by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

➡ Data and Research

A major built and historic environment policy priority should focus on improving the quality and quantity of useful information on the existing built environment, including both designated and undesignated heritage assets. There are many examples of missing or poor-quality records and information, and unmet research demands.

One route towards improving current records and creating new ones is to pilot new techniques and technologies. Crowdsourcing and democratisation can be valuable and cost-effective route to improving data collection, supported by appropriate digital tools and the growing involvement of community groups, charities, individual volunteers and academics in heritage research and promotion. Public bodies could do more to support these processes by opening their data and making them more accessible to the sector and the public. Through mapping Scotland's built environment assets, including low-data areas such as industrial heritage, non-listed buildings, and undesignated landscapes, it will be possible to build a holistic picture of massive areas of our social and economic heritage. A systematic and organised understanding of how formerly vacant and derelict sites have been reused is also vital.

Crowd-sourcing initiatives such as '[Glorious Gardens' initiative](#), led by BEFS Member Scotland's Garden and Landscape Heritage, and artificial intelligence tools and digital systems like [OASIS](#) and [Trove](#) have an increasing role to play in the future. They are not, however, a panacea for the data gap challenge. Caution

is needed around complexity and nuance. Clear criteria, templates and review processes, and fair and open existing and new systems, should be used in tandem with public contributions, AI tools and digital initiatives to manage the quality and relevance of submissions.

[Scotland's Historic Environment Audit 2024](#) (SHEA) outlines key data gaps in the sector. It found information is lacking on volunteering numbers, mapping of sector organisations, public health aspects of the historic environment, community impact, emissions, community engagement, diversity, working conditions in the sector, measuring social benefit, and historic environment assets outwith listed status and the currently paused [Buildings At Risk Register](#). In addition, criteria for 'at risk' lists should be modernised, given they are often the central driver of decision-making on where to target limited funding. Locally held data and knowledge should also be recognised as an important asset, with the potential to be instrumental in informing local decision making. The Local Authority maintained Historic Environment Records should be used more frequently, if not in a statutory capacity then as a material consideration on planning decisions, given their critical role in informing land management and change.

The provision of better information does not in itself lead to improved outcomes for heritage protection. Improvements in data collection and information sharing should therefore be aligned and integrated with OPOF objectives and wider strategic policy.

Data and research are different - actions and investments must be coordinated to improve both the quality of current information available to the sector, and the ongoing research and analysis processes needed for updates and maintenance, alongside practical use and application.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will make additional investment in historic and built environment data collection and research programmes.

➡ Places of Worship

Scotland's places of worship are facing a national emergency. The divestment of religious estates, particularly churches, has major implications for Scotland's people and places, physically, economically, socially and environmentally.

Places of worship, both in and out of worshipful use, play important roles in the landscapes of our cities, towns, and villages as civic institutions. They are a vital part of our local, regional, and national cultural heritage, holding particular significance for communities and providing central contributions to pride of place and intergenerational connection. From streetscape to vital local service, this issue is now a national civic concern rather than religious or denominational. It's about all our places, and their people, regardless of faith or inclination.

With many places of worship transitioning out of worshipful use, investing in the reuse and adaptation of these buildings is necessary to align with existing policies regarding heritage, wellbeing, net zero, successful places, and more. Additional investment in grant programmes, including to support maintenance and repair, acquisition and refurbishment by community owners, and other project development elements, is needed to prevent their deterioration and decline.

There is strong danger of missed opportunity if the right support and expertise cannot be accessed at the right time. This expertise, and the associated funding, will often involve structural engineers, surveyors, architects, solicitors and others with a thorough understanding of ecclesiastical buildings.

Many vacant places of worship are being transferred into new ownership for intended reuse, only to become vacant again due to lack of expertise input.

The scale and urgency of the challenge for places of worship needs to be recognised in budgetary decision-making, as part of a package of additional investments in heritage funding. This needs to be reflected in a holistic and uncomplicated policy landscape which is

accessible to organisations, individuals, local authorities, and other partners.

There is added value in investigating international models for transferable learning, for example [Romania's Ambulance for Monuments](#) and a similar [Pro Monumenta initiative in Slovakia](#) that emphasise the connectedness of co-operative maintenance and skills training in protecting the historic environment.



Beyond Buildings

Despite the immediate visual associations the built environment often invokes, buildings are just one class of assets within it. There is an equivalent need to care for the entire sector, which also incorporates infrastructure, parks and gardens, designed and natural landscapes, ancient sites, antiquaries, memorials, battlefields and monuments. All of these sectors have distinct challenges and opportunities, and will benefit from the policy recommendations set out in this Manifesto, including enhanced access to project funding, improvements in data, action on skills capacity, and integration within Community Wealth Building. As with the historic and existing built environment as a whole, the contributions of some areas to wider society tend to be undervalued and overlooked.

The Archaeology Forum, a collective of organisations including BEFS and six of its Members, state that for every £1 spent by local authorities on archaeological advisers, [£15 is returned to the wider economy through tourism and construction](#). BEFS Member Landscape Institute Scotland [reports that the landscape sector](#) provides £24.6bn to the UK economy in Gross Value Added, and is growing almost twice as fast - 18% compared to 10% since 2010 - than the wider UK economy average. BEFS Member War Memorials Trust states that there are

more than 8000 war memorials in Scotland, while Historic Environment Scotland's designations strategy provides protection for more than [8000 scheduled monuments](#) including prehistoric ruins, burial mounds and carved stones.

There is limited recognition of the existing and historic built environment in other key areas of national policy. [Agriculture is one example](#). The sector delivers ecosystem benefits including improved habitats, carbon retention and soil health that is not fully acknowledged. Better integration of the historic environment across the piece, especially in times of scarce funding, will deliver a great deal of added value for the Scottish Government.

Each of Scotland's unique landscapes tells a story of human influence with respect to their design, development and management. Scotland's waterways, fields, forests, wetlands, and hedge systems are created and have been managed by human activity, playing distinct roles as wildlife corridors, safe havens, and metrics of ecosystem health. These landscapes are one of our greatest assets, but they are subject to change, including new developments, land management, and the effect of climate change.

A holistic approach must be taken when approaching the historic and natural environment; such as the benefits to biodiversity that can be achieved, to the protection of rural heritage, and ensuring heritage aspects are not lost in considerations around planning, development and use change considerations. It is also the case that some forms of agriculture development can be detrimental to heritage. Enhancing heritage provisions in land use, agri-environment and related elements of the policy and funding landscape is one channel through which positive change could be made.

A joined up approach, beyond buildings - addressing resources, data and skills gaps across all historic and existing built environment specialisms - will lead to major positive impacts for Scotland's economy, climate and quality of life.



02



Climate Emergency and Net Zero

➔ Climate Emergency

The ability of our existing buildings to withstand changing external conditions is a serious concern. The wellbeing of residents, the preservation of built heritage, and the affordability of increased maintenance and investments in new adaptation and mitigation technologies all depend on climate-proofing our built environment. Further action is necessary to avoid the long-term harm that disruptions such as flooding and storm damage have already caused to people, places, and local economies in different parts of Scotland.

Our buildings are not yet ready for increased frequency of extreme weather events and more challenging general conditions such as higher annual rainfall and hotter summer temperatures. While some key policies such as the [Scottish Government's Climate Change Plan](#) and [Historic Environment Scotland's Climate Action Plan](#) recognise the severity of the context, a scaling up of project

investment activity is needed to deliver change. This must start by ensuring that Scotland's buildings are wind and watertight, promoting a culture of maintenance and repair as the first bastion in ensuring they endure for many years to come. Alongside this, retrofitting and adaptation investments, prevention measures including against flooding, and supporting quick and effective repairs, while preserving important heritage features, are all needed to build essential resilience.

The restricted public finances context and the challenges of other policy priorities are creating massive barriers to change at pace. Climate change is, however, an emergency and an existential threat for the built environment. This threat needs to be treated with greater urgency and higher investment levels by policy-makers, in both addressing the issues and allowing the built environment to present solutions.



➡ Energy Performance

Fully valuing the embodied energy in our existing buildings and infrastructure and integrating full-carbon lifecycle considerations will complement national and local policies driving maintenance, retention, reuse, and repurposing of our existing built environment. Consumer confidence needs to be raised in the understanding of reliable systems, with the assurance that advice is accurate and impartial, and interventions will be well-suited to building type with skilled installation choices available. Further policy and practice changes are needed on Net Zero if Scotland is to meet ambitions for a just transition, climate targets, social responsibilities and a circular economy.

Delivering Net Zero for Scotland's buildings is predicated on home-owners, businesses, suppliers, manufacturers, charities and community groups possessing a clear understanding of who needs to do what, and by when. There are open questions on what heat systems will be recommended, what training needs to be in place, and what schemes will be available to help alleviate costs, and support skills training. In the context of historic town centre streets and existing infrastructure, there needs to be local procurement of materials and appropriate supply chains in place.

➔ Circular Economy

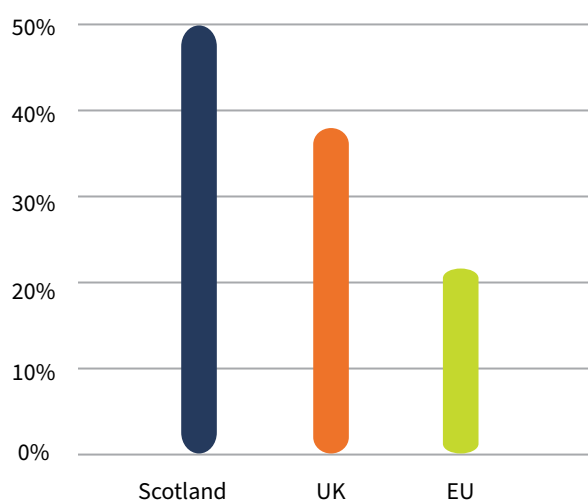
A meaningful transition to a circular economy requires a holistic strategy and cross-portfolio working. A two-fold approach to responsible stewardship of Scotland's historic and existing built environment is needed: better maintenance, retention, and reuse of our existing buildings; and mechanisms that promote circularity of building materials.

The embodied carbon present in the Scottish historic and existing built environment is immense. The appropriate reuse of materials to repair and maintain Scotland's existing and historic building stock, as part of a fabric-first approach, is fundamental. Regional hubs and

networks that support reuse of construction materials can help ensure suitable local materials can be recycled where possible.

A 2020 Building Research Establishment report notes [52.9% of Scottish housing was built pre-1946](#). The comparator figure for the UK is 38%, and 22% in the EU. As illustrated in the below chart, this demonstrates the scale of climate and socio-economic outcomes that could be derived from expanding maintenance, appropriate retrofit and circular construction practices in Scotland.

Proportion of Housing Stock Built Pre-1946



Acquiring the appropriate data for built environment assets will be key to meeting Scotland's ambitious targets for a green recovery. Traditional properties form a fifth of Scotland's overall housing stock; the construction industry is responsible for half of all waste in Scotland. When assessed appropriately, our existing built environment presents an enormous opportunity to provide climate solutions and reduce carbon emissions.

Understanding the transformational role that indigenous sustainable and low carbon materials can play in delivering Net Zero, reducing carbon miles and removing barriers to sustainable local procurement would pay dividends.

Material passport schemes, culture change towards reuse, fiscal incentivisation, appropriate tax relief, and implementing best practice standards across multiple sectors, can all help drive improvements. Local planning authorities need to be fully supported to deliver against any statutory targets set for a circular economy.

The pilot version of the UK Net Zero Carbon Building Standard, which calls on developers to consider end-of-life uses of materials used in new constructions, can also provide an operational template for future development.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will investigate the international experience with Material Passport schemes and consider adopting a suitable model in Scotland.

➡ Heat in Buildings Bill (HiB)

Net Zero cannot be achieved without adaptation of our homes and buildings. Given the vast number of historic and traditionally constructed buildings in Scotland, the vital role that the heritage and existing built environment sector has to play in this journey cannot be understated.

Regular maintenance, repair and wider focus on improving the fabric of homes, so they are more able to transition to clean heat, is needed. Within HiB and linked legislation, it will be important that maintenance, repair and fabric first approaches receive appropriate attention. Without a windproof and watertight building, any interventions may be detrimental to both the building and occupant health. Without this starting point, actions will not result in the energy reductions expected, failing to improve building performance, negatively impacting on occupant health, and failing to meet fuel poverty aims.

Secondary legislation will be necessary at many points along the journey to the HiB. Access and clarity around the appropriate options,

responsibilities, and stakeholders is essential to avoid unintended consequences. To be achieved, HiB and wider targets for Net Zero requires a shift in approach and mindset. The new Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) regulations, consultations on Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) and the Heat and Energy Efficiency Technical Suitability Assessment (HEETSA) can be effective proposed pathways. It remains crucial that there is alignment of approach across the policy landscape; this will involve investing in the right skills across disciplines, but not in isolation, ensuring consumers have access to the right options - and know what they are.

A policy of maintenance and repair, incorporating a fabric-first approach, will pay dividends, and help to support the transition to Net Zero. Flexibility and consideration towards different building typologies and contexts is also important - a strict, one-size fits all MEES approach could be damaging. A robust skills supply chain to maintain all of Scotland's homes - from the traditionally built to the off-site modular, and everything in between - is vital.

Policy Ask



To ensure that existing and nascent legislation addressing the climate emergency is holistic in approach and aligned to the wider policy landscape. It will recognise the longer term nature of implementation, which will demand cross-party buy in across multiple parliamentary cycles.

03



Repair, Maintenance and Retrofit

➔ Building Condition

Scotland's proportion of pre-1946 housing stock - 52% - is the highest in the world. This means that the overall condition of the Scottish building stock demands particular attention and understanding. Not enough is being done to recognise this in policy and investment decision-making.

In 2023, 45% of dwellings had some disrepair to critical elements, and 28% of pre-1919 dwellings had an urgent disrepair to critical elements. The same [2023 Scottish House Condition Survey](#) reported that 71% of all pre-1919 buildings are rated D or worse in Energy Performance Certificate (EPC).

The connection between Net Zero goals and building conditions is indisputable. The performance of building fabric is linked to building condition. Fabric

efficiency has a huge impact on the efficiency and condition of all buildings. Maintenance and repair especially of traditionally constructed buildings, goes hand in hand with heating solutions. An expansion of the information and data available about building conditions, including fabric rating will better enable owners to make informed energy efficiency decisions.

A fabric-first approach to repair and maintenance, alongside appropriate retrofit, and EPC reform, presents further opportunities to harness and recognise the benefits of the historic and existing built environment's contribution towards Net Zero. There is currently no policy within guidance or legislation that addresses the need to improve building condition through regular maintenance.



Historically, the management of transitions in Scottish industries has been conducted without adequate planning for a sustainable Scottish economic, cultural, and environmental landscape, often leaving local communities economically vulnerable and industrial heritage assets poorly managed. In [Scotland's Historic Environment Audit 2014](#) it was reported that prehistoric and Roman heritage assets in Scotland were generally in better shape than our industrial heritage. This is a striking reality check when considering the comparative age and embodied carbon potential of industrial assets.

The skills, the materials utilised, and how they function mean that traditionally constructed buildings cannot be assessed and maintained in the same way as modern construction. This does not mean that they can't perform - merely that there can't be a one size fits all approach to understanding

Scotland's buildings. Just one example of an appropriate assessment and support for homeowners is the HES-funded Traditional Building Health Check Scheme run by Stirling City Heritage Trust since 2014. Investment in and wider adoption of the Traditional Building Health Check Scheme model, which also requires an investment in data and skills, has the potential to deliver a step change in regular inspection, monitoring and repairs with high quality conservation standards

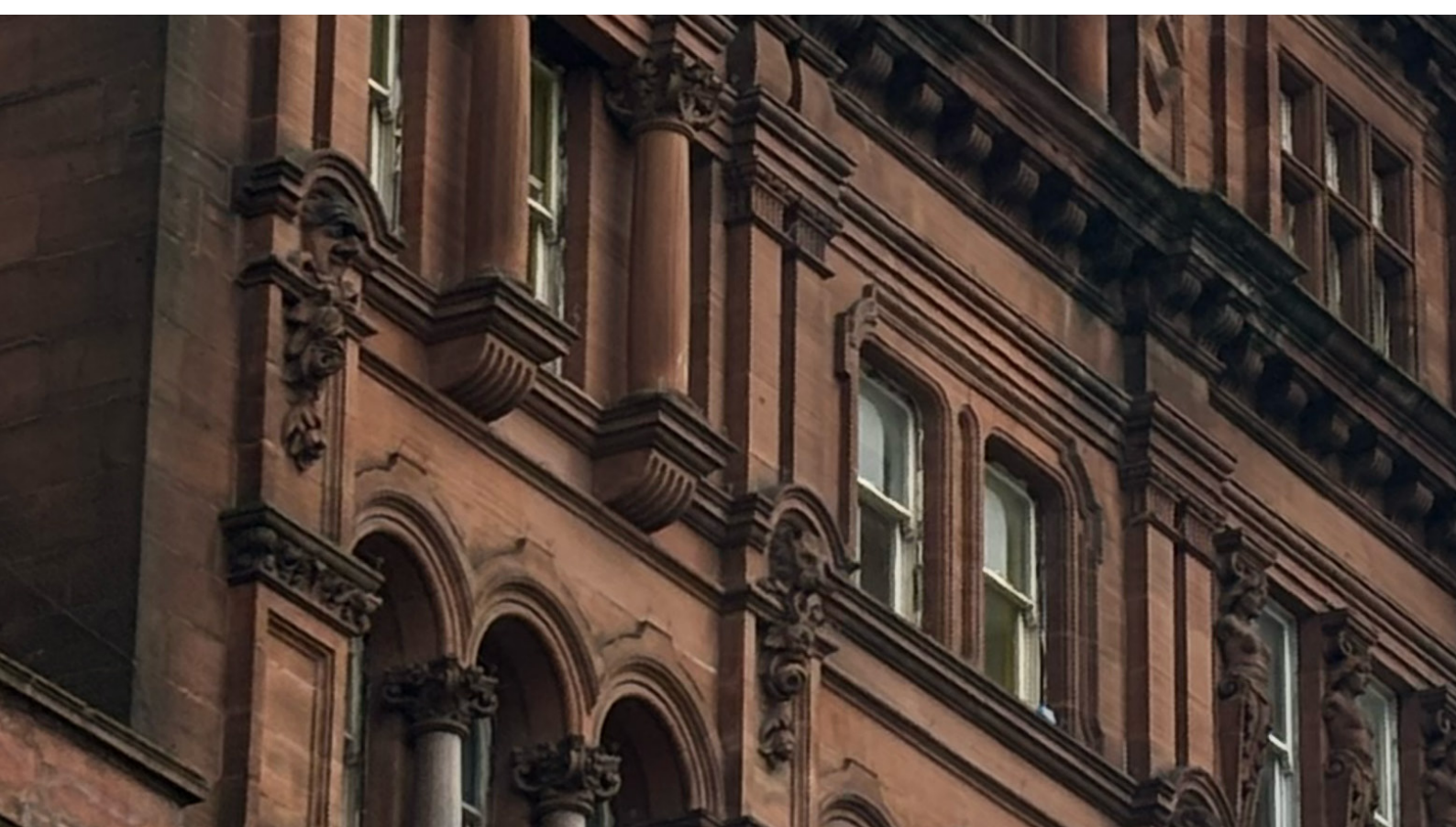
Local government capacity and funding pressures are hindering efforts to effectively maintain much of our historic and existing built environment. Capacity support and investment from national government can be usefully complemented by active monitoring and oversight processes.



➔ Tenement Maintenance

In 2024, the Scottish Parliament [declared a national housing emergency](#). 13 local authorities have also declared housing emergencies. Among other challenging findings, the latest [2023 Scottish House Conditions Survey](#) report indicates that: disrepair of critical housing elements is evident in 45% of properties; there has been an estimated 3% annual rise in the proportion of Scottish households in fuel poverty, to 34%; and 27% of dwellings do not meet tolerable standards. In a [2025 article on Glasgow's Tenemental Challenge](#), tenement maintenance, repair and retrofit advice Under One Roof stated that Glasgow has some of the least energy efficient tenements in Europe.

The 895k properties defined as tenements, around one third of which were constructed before 1919, have been the focal point for the [Tenement Maintenance Working Group](#). The Scottish Parliamentary Working Group, formed in 2018, brings cross-party MSPs and leading housing, property and heritage organisations together to find solutions to aid, assist and compel owners of tenement properties to maintain their buildings. BEFS shares secretariat duties with Under One Roof. Since publishing a [recommendations report in 2019](#), the Working Group has been lobbying for the implementation of three central policy proposals, and has been busy researching and exploring how they will work in practice, advocating that putting these recommendations into practice will significantly enhance and improve the maintenance of tenement housing across Scotland.



One recommendation is to establish Compulsory Owners Associations. Their purpose is to bring tenement owners together as legal entities that can deal with building issues, manage maintenance and repair budgets, and enter into contracts for works.

The second recommendation is an obligation for the common parts of tenement housing to be inspected every five years. These inspection reports will set out repair needs and are to be made available to prospective owners and tenants as a complement to Home Reports. They will also provide much-needed building condition data to researchers, policy-makers and other stakeholders.

The Tenement Maintenance Working Group also recommends the establishment of building reserve funds, akin to a pension for a building. These will help resource sizeable tenement maintenance and repair bills through affordable regular payments; the current suggestion is £50 per owner per month. Taken together, these developments offer policy-makers a practical route map towards improving the conditions of tenement properties. This series of recommendations was [responded to by the Scottish Government](#), and a Workplan for actions from the Scottish Government has been formed. The Scottish Law Commission is actively developing a [draft Bill on Compulsory Owners Associations](#), which it plans to present to the Scottish Government in 2026 for consideration.

A renewed commitment to driving forward all three Tenement Maintenance Working Group recommendations in the 2026-31 Parliamentary term, will lead to tangible long-term improvements in the condition of the housing stock, and address some of the key factors that are exacerbating the present housing emergency. Better tenement management would also assist in supporting a more coordinated approach to retrofit in these buildings.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will commit to implementing all three recommendations from the Tenement Maintenance Working Group: the establishment of Five Yearly Inspections, Compulsory Owners Associations, and Building Reserve Funds.

➔ Retrofitting Older Properties

Retrofit of older properties to increase residents' comfort, reduce fuel poverty, improve energy efficiency, and reduce carbon emissions is not happening quickly enough, and at the quality and scale required.

A practical response to this situation is under active consideration by the Retrofit Roundtable, a group of key built environment sector stakeholders including BEFS. Through regular meetings and Parliamentary gatherings, the Retrofit Roundtable, which is facilitated by the Chartered Institute of Building, investigate and promote solutions to the retrofit challenge emerging from the sector. Its [2023 Meeting Scotland's Retrofit Challenge](#) report highlighted the urgent need for stepping up action on retrofit to meet fuel poverty, building maintenance and Net Zero commitments and targets. While being realistic on the cross-policy complexity of retrofit and the varied effectiveness and costs of new technologies and processes, the report identifies a need for improved joined-up policymaking to overcome barriers and capitalise on opportunities to make serious progress.

To break down policy silos, the Retrofit Roundtable call on the Scottish Government to create a Ministerial Oversight Group on Retrofit. This Oversight Group will have the authority and remit to work across the full range of relevant policy directorates, Ministers and Cabinet Secretaries, to develop the resources and programmes to meet the retrofit challenge in the short and longer term. The Retrofit Roundtable also wish to see

the Oversight Group devise and implement a Retrofit Delivery Plan, to provide: clarity of funding across public sector portfolios and external funders; retrofit solutions tailored to the needs of particular building types long-term targets driven by evidence; measurement tools to track progress; and consideration on meeting the challenge on workforce capacity and skills, and the quality of retrofit works.

A Retrofit Delivery Plan could set a robust framework for appropriate and effective solutions. It is not difficult to find examples of inappropriate or poor quality retrofit works, which may lead to severe problems such as poor air quality, damp and mould emerging years after installation, and which may also have negative implications for building deterioration. The Delivery Plan could usefully promote the following of the retrofit hierarchy - highlighted in the 2023 Retrofit Roundtable report, from which the below diagram is taken - in delivering appropriate solutions.

BEFS also works with the [Existing Homes Alliance](#), a coalition of housing, environmental, fuel poverty, consumer and industry organisations that share a mission to improve existing homes. The Alliance is calling on the next Scottish Government to maintain and build on Home Energy Scotland and support the growth of locally-based retrofit services to [support people with in-depth planning and coordination of home upgrades](#).

Retrofitting older buildings for energy efficiency is a relatively modest investment

gains to alleviate a wide range of issues, just some of which are carbon emissions, fuel poverty, health and wellbeing, and improved preservation of key community, tourism and architectural assets. Growth of the retrofitting

industry will simultaneously create skilled jobs and training opportunities, to the benefit of local economies across Scotland's urban settlements, rural regions and islands.

Figure 1
Hierarchy of retrofit:
taking a fabric first
approach



Diagram source: [Meeting Scotland's Retrofit Challenge: Solutions from the Industry](#), The Chartered Institute of Building *et al*, 2024

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will establish a Ministerial Oversight Group on Retrofit, to devise and deliver a Retrofit Delivery Plan.

➔ Tax Considerations

Incentivising the refurbishment of buildings over demolition and rebuild is crucial for the future sustainability of the sector. It should be embedded throughout the building standards and planning regimes in Scotland. A long-term stewardship of built assets, with regular maintenance and retrofit plans, and a flexible view of how that building can be used while protecting its cultural heritage, is vital.

The historic and existing built environment sector has made a long-standing call for enabling, through conservation and continued use, the full potential of Scotland's built heritage asset by removing unequal application of Value Added Tax on restoration, maintenance and conservation works. While new-build development projects are incentivised with a 0% VAT rate, the redevelopment and refurbishment of historic buildings pay the full standard rate. Land-owners are often faced with either-or choices: demolish and rebuild, or adapt and re-use. When these new-build vs re-use choices emerge, heritage, climate change and community engagement policies should favour reuse, but the financial levers often push the outcomes in the direction of new-build.

The current 0% VAT on new build and 20% VAT on refurbishment and repair does not help the re-use and adaptation of buildings which could become well-placed homes, workplaces, and service amenities in already well-connected places and population centres. The present tax contrast is a damaging barrier that hinders the preservation and sustainable use of our rich and diverse built and historic environment, and further increases the vulnerability of many heritage assets that have unique importance to local people and economies.



VAT is a reserved policy area under the control of the UK Government, but an elimination, or significant reduction, to the VAT rates on refurbishment and repair in the 2026-31 term of the Scottish Parliament, could have major heritage, wellbeing, and economic benefits. [A calculation from BEFS Member the Institute of Historic Building Conservation](#) states that a 5% VAT rate on heritage repairs and maintenance could result in a £15 billion boost to the wider UK economy, creating almost 100k new jobs across the UK, and reducing carbon emissions by a quarter of million tonnes.

BEFS Member Historic Houses has estimated that [£7m in economic benefits](#) could be realised from a VAT rebate on historic listed buildings in the UK that are open to the public for at least 28 days per year. A 2024 research report into [VAT on Listed Buildings](#), commissioned by Historic Environment Scotland, also highlighted the potential value of a VAT rebate scheme for historic assets.

Tax decisions are major drivers of decision-making on public and private investment. A change on VAT for repair and refurbishment, however, is not a silver bullet that will automatically bring building standards up to standard. Any change on VAT incentives should therefore be delivered as part of a wider package of investment and cultural change for approaches to shared and collective stewardship and continued use of our existing built environment assets.

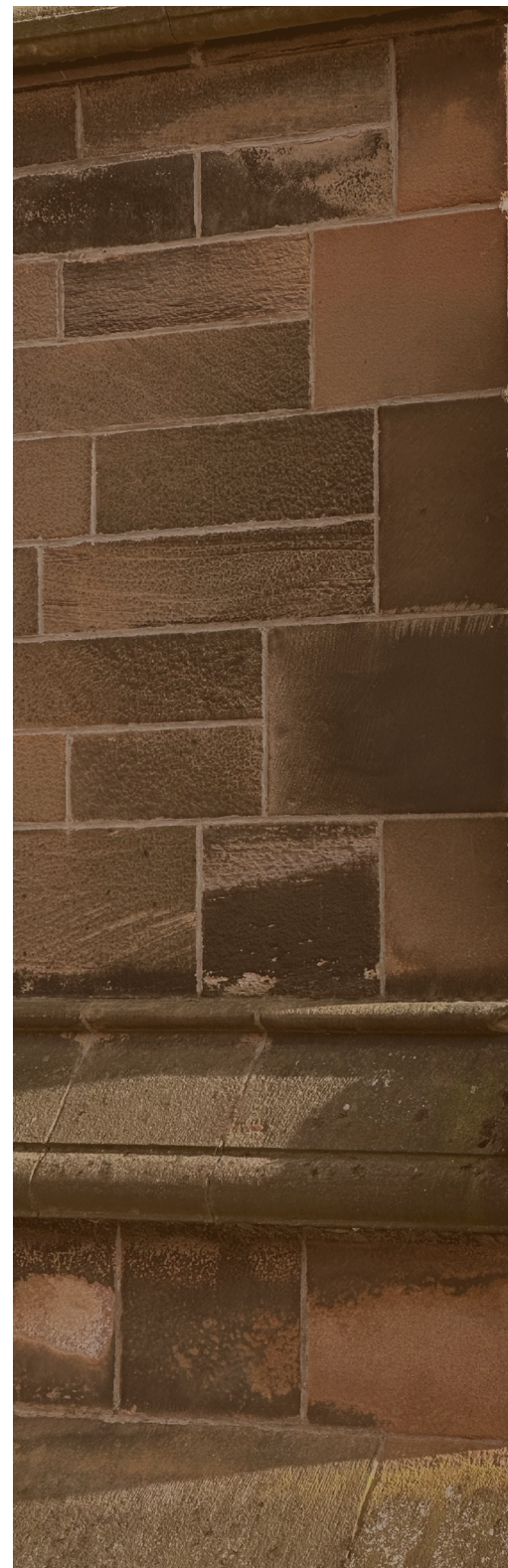


➔ Protecting Historic Buildings

More could be done to protect and make full use of historic buildings, which need to be managed appropriately. They have massive importance nationally, contributing much to the visitor economy, and are invaluable to the communities who live, work, and spend their leisure time within and around them.

Historic buildings, including but not limited to those with listed status and/or located in conservation areas, regularly become at risk of demolition through redundancy, deteriorating condition, and other factors. To highlight the scale of the challenge, of the 47,639 listed buildings in Scotland, there are 2214 buildings on the Buildings at Risk Register (BARR). [Historically, 22% of buildings that have been listed on BARR have been demolished](#), which statistically suggests that around 500 buildings are at risk of demolition in Scotland today. BEFS actively campaigns for the productive reuse of vacant buildings - constraints around enforcement given the private ownership of many of these properties has been long identified as a barrier to good outcomes, and a missed opportunity.

Wider incentives and mechanisms for investment in the built environment sector are needed to prevent our most important buildings from becoming dangerous and at risk of demolition. Nationally, not enough is done to maintain our buildings - as the [2023 Scottish House Condition Survey](#) makes clear. The survey reported that 45% of dwellings have disrepair to critical elements, such as roof coverings or the structure of external walls, which mean they are not weather-proof, compromising structural stability, and failing to prevent deterioration of the property.



Significant investment - albeit modest in the entire public spending context - in specialist training and skills is needed now, to avoid even bigger costs in future to the public purse in relation to our heritage and climate. There are similar issues here as with other building-related challenges, including cladding and RAAC. As we move towards retrofit - including that of our existing building stock - this skills gap will become more and more apparent. The conditions must be created for the right skills, in the right place, at the right time.

BEFS recognises the need not to place undue burdens on already stretched planning authorities. Public finances and local authorities are under increasing pressure to deliver statutory services in a period of fiscal constraint. The need has become clear

for a greater number of trained individuals with appropriate qualifications that planning authorities can engage as required. Core accreditation in conservation engineering is one route to this, but it is not the only one.

Historic buildings should be retained and re-used wherever possible, given the value accrued in doing so to many public policy areas, from culture, heritage and economic development to health, climate change, and place-making. Ensuring that the appropriate specialist skills are in the room to inform these decisions will help prevent unnecessary demolition and degradation, saving more of our invaluable historic buildings for the benefit of our current population and future generations.



➔ Materials and Supply Chains

Half of all waste produced in Scotland comes from construction and demolition. A culture change is needed towards maintenance, retention, reuse, and repurposing of existing heritage assets, and away from the common default to ignore, replace, or dispose of them. BEFS has long advocated for incentivisation for reuse of our existing built heritage and its component materials, and to implement a material passport scheme to feed into a circularity of materials.

The scale of challenges to bringing vacant and derelict land and buildings back into use is a concern. The challenges include: lack of access to traditional skills and trades such as ironwork, stonemasonry and glasswork; planning system delays and complications; inadequate supply chains; and the high cost of some retrofit technologies.

The Scottish Government has previously established principles of inclusive town planning that involve durable materials with whole life costs considered. This should be fully implemented in practice to aid national Net Zero goals.

[Research from 2021](#) indicated that for every £1m directly spent on maintaining, repairing, and improving existing buildings, 21 full-time equivalent jobs are supported nationally.

This is 40% higher compared to new-build. A maintenance-first and a fabric-first approach will help to support the transition to Net Zero, but this is not possible without adequate skills capacity and a robust supply chain.

Investing in local materials and supplies will breathe life into Scottish supply chains, and can pay dividends for our circular economy, Community Wealth Building, and Net Zero goals. For example, rural and island communities with the resources to produce the slate and stone needed to maintain traditional buildings would benefit immensely from an investment in quarries to create new jobs and space for traditional skills in action. This aspect of investing in the rural economy is particularly powerful when considering how much community-owned land is in rural Scotland - 99.5%, according to the [Community Ownership in Scotland 2023 report](#).

Approaches to supply chain challenges have tended to be viewed as a problem that will organically resolve itself in the just transition. A dedicated national programme is needed to assist the development and establishment of strong supply chains in Scotland. This involves appropriate funding to support local circular economies and Community Wealth Building principles.



Training and Skills

➔ Skills Capacity

Accessing traditional building skills and training courses across the trades is a widely recognised problem with maintaining our historic and traditionally constructed buildings across urban, rural and island Scotland.

Typical difficulties include specialist contractors being booked up months in advance, being unable or unwilling to quote for certain works, or declining to travel to some parts of the country. The good practice standard of finding three competitive quotes can be impossible in situations where sourcing one is hard enough. This creates delivery issues on the ground for funding, timescales and reporting obligations, sometimes challenging project viability altogether.

Traditional building skills are vital for the maintenance, repair, and refurbishment of much of our urban environment. As skilled practitioners - across masonry, joinery, thatching, glass, ironwork and more - are becoming harder to find, our buildings will continue to crumble and deteriorate. This is not just about bricks and mortar. Well-maintained historic places bring many benefits to communities, including supporting local economies, boosting health

and wellbeing, contributing to climate change targets, and much more. When the buildings are at risk, so are these benefits.

Traditional construction training is not a niche, 'nice to have' specialism, but an essential service required for the health of all buildings and preventative maintenance. Actions must be taken to prevent Colleges and training providers from reducing or stopping the provision of these courses.

In a fast-changing world with a busy policy landscape, evolving Net Zero approaches, and emerging technologies and techniques, it is vital that those in the traditional skills industry need to have access to continual opportunities and incentives to learn, develop, and share their knowledge with the next generation. As things stand, not enough do. Training infrastructure and support is needed for a new generation of skilled workers. Traditional skills must be mainstreamed.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will invest in a national programme for training delivery across a variety of traditional building and wider construction skills.

➔ Skills Gap

Many historic and existing built environment specialisms, such as heritage management, construction, conservation, digital and retrofit, have their own skills capacity issues, with gaps in the training required to maintain the built environment. Planning departments are also overstretched, and in-house experts required to support some planning process requirements, such as archaeologists and ecologists, are either under resourced or don't exist.

Statistics from BEFS Members Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) Scotland and the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) Scotland demonstrate a loss of built environment sector capacity in local government and planning authorities. RTPI Scotland highlighted a [28.6% reduction in planning spend](#) from 2010-2023, while ALGAO Scotland statistics evidence a decrease of 38% archaeological officers, from 32 to 20 full-time equivalent staff, between 2005-2025. Illustrating a similar shortage in the engineering sector, in their 2025 skills analysis survey, Scottish Engineering reported that by the end of 2027, [the industry needs 58% new engineers across 31 specialisms](#). They described the growing skills gap situation as [“facing an economic disaster”](#).

The latest [Historic Environment Scotland Stonemasonry Survey Report](#), which reported that the nation had around 360 skilled stonemasons in 2023, highlighted concerns about a general lack of support for the field, including in the realms of training provision, the fittingness of current skills to industry needs, and the ability to meet future demand.

Research published by [Skills Development Scotland in 2022](#) found that green skills gaps is another long-term and systemic challenge. Investing in filling these gaps will let the Scottish Government fulfil and deliver on its plans for local climate adaptation and nature recovery, which means that provision for skills and training is a key part of Scotland's Net Zero aspirations and commitments.

The [2024 Skills Investment Plan for the Historic Environment](#) identifies industrial heritage as a key problem area, which needs a framework for specialist technical and material skills. The Plan identifies that 65% of employers are concerned about traditional and specialist skills shortages, and the associated economic loss. Older buildings may have additional complexities and skill requirements. As we don't currently have all of the skills we need, investing in a future pipeline of these skills is essential to delivering Net Zero and maintaining our cultural heritage.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will invest in preventative spend to increase capacity across built environment specialisms - from construction, craft and retrofit to planning, conservation and intangible cultural heritage - to reverse the decline of these essential skills and ensure national targets for Net Zero, place-making and heritage can be met.

➔ Intangible Cultural Heritage

BEFS argues that more could be done to explore, record and celebrate the close relationship between the physical components of Scotland's built environment and the generation-spanning traditions, histories, narratives and associations connected to them.

The particular value of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in improving knowledge sharing, strengthening cultural identity, building pride of place, furthering community empowerment and progressing sustainable economic development - including through tourism and traditional skills - is a rich source of opportunity and inspiration for the sector. Digitally recorded ICH, and pulling together local and regional knowledge and resources into accessible information channels, needs further resourcing and attention.

The teaching of traditional building and specialist craft skills such as thatching, with sharing of expertise from one generation to the next, retains valuable skilled workers in local places. It enhances skills capacity, the quality of the built environment, and local economies in alignment with Community Wealth Building principles. More support for local specialist training will progress ICH and the effective maintenance of historic buildings simultaneously.

There are positive developments in ICH, including the UK ratification of the [UN Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2024](#), the [ICH Scotland online resource](#) by Museums and Galleries Scotland, and [Historic Environment Scotland's collaborative approach](#) to sharing good practice and international developments with ICH practitioners in Scotland. These developments are welcome but further information on how they can be most effectively integrated into practical change is needed.

In general, more consideration from the Scottish Government as to how ICH policies and resources could be strengthened and aligned with wider national aims such as wellbeing, and as part of more widely recognising the cross-cutting value of the historic environment, would be welcome.



➔ Workforce Expansion and Diversity

A linked challenge concerns the size and diversity of the workforce in the historic and existing built environment sector. In traditional building skills, the wider construction industry and elsewhere, BEFS Members and stakeholders have identified issues with demographic balance and sustainability, particularly with regard to young people, women and people from ethnic minorities entering the sector and, more generally, retention in the longer term.

There is a systemic lack of exposure to, and encouragement towards, historic and existing built environment skills in our education and employability systems. In addition, there are diminishing opportunities to enroll on these courses in academic institutions or to join specialist apprenticeship programmes, with negative implications for the long-term skills pipeline.

Young people and women often aren't exposed to traditional building crafts and trades or encouraged to consider them as career paths. To address this, the provision of more hands-on opportunities to try them out

could help steer more people towards the essential trades that are lacking in capacity. An ageing workforce will exacerbate these existing skills shortages.

The incorporation, embedding, and mainstreaming of an equality and human rights-focused approach to governmental and public sector policy-making and service delivery could help improve diversity in the sector. A strategy is needed with clear ways to hold decision-makers accountable in the existing historic and existing built environment context, the planning system, and the circular economy.

A diverse, healthy and sustainable built and historic environment workforce is an essential component to meaningful progress in so many pressing policy priorities - just some of which are sustainable development, providing homes, jobs and infrastructure, achieving Net Zero, delivering wellbeing benefits for Scotland's people, and providing places and buildings they enjoy living, working and socialising in.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will recognise the cross-cutting benefits of investing both in skills provision and training but also the culture shift required towards greater recognition of these skills as desirable careers.



Planning and Placemaking

➔ Spatial Planning

Scotland's spatial planning system is a key mechanism for protecting and enhancing a rich and diverse historic and existing built environment. It preserves heritage assets, sets a framework for decision-making on appropriate adaptation, and encourages the productive reuse of vacant buildings.

The clear emphasis on protecting historic assets and recognising the value of "Scotland's rich heritage, culture and outstanding environment" in the fourth National Planning Framework is a welcome mechanism through which to further built environment sector objectives - to the wider benefit of people and place. The role of statutory designations, scheduled monuments, conservation areas, Local Development Plans and other elements in providing legal protections and informing decision-making are also key.

These positives are, however, restricted by major challenges including capacity limitations in planning authorities. This is a long-standing problem that degrades the speed and quality of decision-making and reduces the resources available for constructive exchange between planning officers and the wider built environment sector. In its [2023 research briefing on Resourcing the Planning Service](#), BEFS Member RTPI Scotland highlighted a 28.6% drop in local government expenditure on planning in Scotland since 2010. The main outcome of a 2024 Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's progress review into delivery of the Fourth National Planning Framework also highlighted widespread capacity challenges.

A second challenge relates to the multiple priorities that the National Planning Framework and wider planning system is seeking to contribute to and align with. As a 2025 [blog from the BEFS Director](#) demonstrates, the interconnected policy landscape around planning and the built environment is multi-layered. This has created a challenging operating environment, which have been exacerbated by difficult economic realities for all sectors at present. There are tensions and contradictions between key policy areas such as protecting historic assets, biodiversity, local living and rural revitalisation, and the wider interpretation and understanding of objectives and hierarchies. Updated policy guidance for archaeology is also required.

The establishment of a National Planning Improvement Hub, investments in the Scottish Planning system that is set to create a pipeline of new planners via bursaries, graduate programmes, and a new Town Planning School are welcome. There is some optimism that these investments will help alleviate capacity pressures and improve skills and experience, but some years will pass before the outcomes are realised.

In the medium term, providing guidance and signposting to supportive documents and external policies, could prove helpful in resolving some hierarchy-related tensions and mixed interpretations. Considering that the fourth National Planning Framework is a fixed document, it may be less well-suited to the present digital era. Translating its content into a fully interactive web resource, as recommended by BEFS Member the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland, may provide benefits in supporting use across

sectors, and incorporating recent and ongoing updates to guidance documents, as well as signposting to external policy areas.

[The Infrastructure Commission Report](#) published in 2019, recognises existing buildings and homes as valuable infrastructure assets. It noted a need to link the private and public sectors, particularly in terms of procurement and financing, more effectively around the delivery of infrastructure improvements. The planning system in general, could benefit from a stronger presumption of reuse over new-build. Historic Environment Records could also be given more weight in assessments. Public agencies must work with the planning system to improve the economy and change some political attitudes towards planning. Planning should not be seen as an obstacle to economic growth, but a driver of sustainable economic development.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will develop the fourth National Planning Framework document into an interactive and frequently updated digital resource.

➡ Place-making Considerations

Place-making describes the various efforts and initiatives that are undertaken to ensure a geographic community's physical assets and amenities are maintained and developed in line with local needs and aspirations, and which are respectful of the distinctive characteristics of each area. Effective place-based approaches are holistic, collaborative, and considerate of a place's function and identity. They provide positive outcomes for health and wellbeing, sustainable economic development, and long-term resilience against climate change and other threats.

Taking better care of our Scotland's built assets and 'everyday heritage' alongside heritage visitor attractions, and doing more to celebrate them and promote engagement with local people and visitors, is an important place-making action point. Improving the appeal and offer of town centres, providing greater access to green spaces, waterfronts, designed and no designated landscapes and other public spaces, and enhancing urban connectivity are also imperative.

The cross-portfolio value of bringing empty buildings and vacant land back into productive use in our villages, towns and cities is considerable and often underappreciated. [The Vacant and Derelict Land Task Force](#), a collaboration of 30 cross-sector bodies led by the Scottish Land Commission and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, investigated

the key contemporary challenges inhibiting progress, especially in smaller sites, and produced a recommendations report to the Scottish Government in 2020.

As the Task Force noted, there is 11,000 hectares of vacant and derelict land and buildings in urban Scotland - almost twice the size of Dundee (the Dundee City Council boundary contains 6,300 hectares). The challenge of repairing and bringing historic buildings back into productive use is considerable given the scale, but reducing this total will create major added value for our people, places, economies and environments. A wider application of the Task Force's recommendations, utilising learning outcomes from their research and pilot testing, is needed to deliver this.

Towards addressing the Housing Emergency, reuse over a default towards new-build must be a firm commitment. Alongside this, a wealth of added value can be unlocked addressing the Climate Emergency, anti-pollution and biodiversity targets, avoiding unnecessary waste, and developing more green spaces, designed landscapes and attractive waterfronts. There are also myriad additional benefits for local economies, tourism, community development, pride of place, health and wellbeing, skills and employment, town centre improvement, and much more.

Place-based approaches are growing in influence in national policy, as evidenced by a series of policy initiatives including the Place Principle, Local Place Plans, 20 Minute Neighbourhoods and Local Living, Community Wealth Building, the Town Centre

Action Plan, community led regeneration, and the Place-Based Investment Framework. To maximise cross-policy value and impact, historic and existing built environment and heritage interests must be fully reflected in place-based policy and practice.

Policy Ask

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The Scottish Government to commit to investment in and enabling pathways to bring vacant and derelict land and buildings back into use at scale.



➔ Rural Dynamics

Rural Scotland faces particular challenges with regard to place-making. A low supply of good quality jobs, limited access to skilled contractors, a shortage of affordable housing and depopulation trends create additional barriers for efforts to improve the built environment, leverage its benefit as a national asset and access its amenities. The value of rural Scotland's historic environment to the entire nation cannot be understated.

Remote rural and island dynamics generally make interventions around infrastructure, services, energy efficiency, and repair and maintenance works more costly, time consuming and difficult. These areas, including farmland, are rich with heritage assets and serve as a major driver of Scotland's tourism industry, and these additional challenges must be taken into close consideration by built environment policy-makers in planning for the future.

BEFS Member Landscape Institute Scotland has called for a [landscape led approach to development](#), as an integrated approach to shaping beautiful places. The approach takes the current rural context into account, while delivering wider policy objectives for climate adaptation, nature restoration, economic growth, housing and health.



➔ Community Wealth Building

The built environment is a focal point of regeneration strategies enabling pride of place, sustainable economies, good quality of life, and adaptive buildings suited to new futures. There are further gains to be made in aligning the spheres of tourism and heritage through improved collaboration and holistic, cross-policy strategy. Well-maintained, active and accessible heritage buildings enhance a place's distinctive identity and tourist offer. This includes the creation of jobs at visitor attractions, and other economic benefits to the many local businesses, including hospitality and retail, that benefit from tourism.

There is a clear line of influence between Community Wealth Building, heritage, tourism and economic resilience. The local procurement of maintenance contracts for historic buildings can reduce costs while upskilling contractors and supporting local economies. There are, however, significant barriers to progress with regard to vacant, derelict, vulnerable or under-utilised historic buildings, including access to funding for

purchase, refurbishment and maintenance. There is a reality that many local and community-led organisations do not have the capacity or governance to effectively manage all of the capital and operational needs of a long-standing empty building that is often in pressing need of repair.

The Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill includes an obligation for local authorities and other public bodies to produce and implement Community Wealth Building action plans. Leading public sector stakeholders responsible for developing these action plans must work closely and collaboratively with prospective projects and partners in the sphere of heritage tourism and community ownership, to help ensure the highest chance of long-term success.

The ability of local authorities to lead, support and deliver Community Wealth Building action plans, requires an improved level of resourcing across multiple local authority departments that are currently stretched.

Policy Ask



The Scottish Government will ensure that all Community Wealth Building action plans integrate built environment and heritage aspirations.

Consultees

BEFS appreciates the time of all Members and stakeholders that contributed to the Manifesto consultation process through one-to-one meetings with the BEFS Team, partnership discussions, Working Group sessions and email feedback. BEFS is particularly grateful to representatives of the following organisations for their time.

Archaeology Scotland	National Lottery Heritage Fund
Architectural Heritage Fund	National Trust for Scotland
Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland	Places of Worship Forum Scotland
Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers Scotland	Planning Aid Scotland
Built Environment - Smarter Transformation	Pvotal Consultancy
Chartered Institute for Archaeologists	Ridge Foundations
Chartered Institute of Building	Retrofit Roundtable
Church of Scotland	Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland
Community Ownership Support Service	Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
Conservation Officers Group	Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce Fellows Media, Creative Industries, Culture and Heritage Network
Development Trusts Association Scotland	Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland
EALA Impacts CIC	Scotland's Churches Trust
Existing Homes Alliance	Scotland's Gardens and Landscape Heritage
Glasgow City Heritage Trust	Scotland's Towns Partnership
Heritage Network	Scottish Council of Jewish Communities
Historic Buildings Trust	Scottish Episcopal Church
Historic Churches Scotland	Scottish Civic Trust
Historic Houses	Society of Antiquaries of Scotland
Landscape Institute Scotland	Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings
Institute of Civil Engineers Scotland	Stirling City Heritage Trust
Institute of Conservation Scotland Group	SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum
Institute of Historic Building Conservation	Under One Roof
National Churches Trust	War Memorials Trust
National Federation of Roofing Contractors	

While the Manifesto content largely draws on the outcomes of consultations, the organisations and groups listed in this section do not necessarily support all of the policy recommendations presented.

End of 2026 BEFS Manifesto

Produced by Hazel Johnson, Director, Derek Rankine, Head of Policy and Strategy and Jonna Meredith, Communications and Policy Officer, in October 2025.

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For further information on BEFS, visit our website: <https://www.befs.org.uk/>

