

Historic Environment Working Group (HEWG)

Meeting Note: 18 February 2026



Summary of online HEWG meeting | 2pm-4pm | Wednesday 18 February 2026

1. Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

Ian Baxter welcomed HEWG Members, including new participants Merlin Lewis and Catriona Melville, and guest speakers to the session and shared a note of the apologies received.

Attendees:

- Ian Baxter - HEWG Chair
- Marilyn Brown - SGLH
- Rowan Burns - CA
- Victoria Collison - HCS
- Jocelyn Cunliffe - AHSS
- Sam Gallacher - SHBT
- Jonathan Hunt - HH
- Merlin Lewis - SPAB
- Scott McGibbon - Pvotal
- Catriona Melville - NLHF
- Jennie Munro - RTPI
- Ann Packard - RSA MCICHN
- Bill Pagan (individual)
- Sarah Pearce - HN
- Jo Robertson - AHF
- Judith Roebuck - CoS
- Robert Toomey - RICS
- Joe Traynor - SCT
- Vivienne Whyte - SCHAT

Guest speakers:

- DJ Johnston-Smith - SCT
- Dara Parsons - HES
- Lizzie Swarbrick - SoAoS

BEFS attendees:

- Hazel Johnson
- Derek Rankine

Apologies:

- Gordon Barr - AHF
- Diane Gray - NLHF
- Andrew Hopetoun (individual)
- Euan Leitch - SURF
- Rob Lennox - CIFA
- Alison McCandlish (individual)
- Silke Schneider - EWH
- Lucy Stewart - SPAB

Total attendance: 24

2. Previous Meeting Note

The pre-circulated note from the 13 November 2025 HEWG meeting (available on the [HEWG page](#)) was agreed as an accurate record.

3. Sector and Policy Updates led by Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS)

Ian invited Hazel Johnson and Derek Rankine from BEFS to share updates.

3.1 General News

Hazel noted that the [Community Wealth Building Bill](#) was passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament. The legislation is designed to strengthen investment in local communities and places new duties on councils, health boards and other public bodies to focus on how wealth is generated, circulated and retained within local economies.

Aspirations include more procurement from local businesses, increased investment in local skills, and greater opportunities for communities to acquire vacant and derelict buildings. Hazel added that Scotland will become the first country in the world to legislate for Community Wealth Building, and that the Bill represents significant opportunities for the built environment and heritage sectors.

Hazel said the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO) in Scotland and Members of the Conservation Officers Group (COG) are among a number of BEFS stakeholders concerned by the recent removal of around 50 planning publications. The Scottish Government has acted on a 2025 Programme for Government commitment to declutter the planning system by removing what it termed dated national planning advice. A [blog published on 8 December](#) provides a list of Planning Advice Notes to be withdrawn, including Planning and Archaeology PAN2/2011 and Conservation Areas PAN71.

Hazel said the Scottish Government's view is that National Planning Framework 4 provides the most up-to-date Scottish Government policy, but archaeological bodies and COG Members have reported that the withdrawal of important guidance creates gaps, confusion, issues with the determination of planning applications, and negative implications for conservation areas. Hazel said she is aware some advocacy, lobbying and questions to government is taking place from ALGAO and others, and asked if any HEWG Members have any updates to share. No updates were provided.

Hazel shared that the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme is coming to an end. A late January [press release from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport](#) on a package of £1.5bn investment for culture and heritage over the next five years, included news that the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme would be discontinued on 31 March, and probably sooner, as the 2025/26 funding allocation is running out.

Hazel said the news came as a shock to the Places of Worship Forum (POWF), to COG and many others, who were concerned about the future as the announcement also stated the Fund would be replaced with a new programme, the Places of Worship Renewal Fund, that will only be available to projects in England. Hazel said on behalf of POWF, BEFS has written to the relevant UK and Scottish Government Ministers to highlight perceived flaws in evidence used in the evaluation process of the existing scheme, and to ask about the prospects for continuity of equivalent support in Scotland. She added that BEFS is in touch with bodies in Wales and Northern Ireland that are asking similar questions of the other devolved administrations.

Hazel reported that the [Visitor Levy Bill Amendment](#) is being scrutinised by the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee, with a Stage 1 debate set to take place a day after the HEWG meeting. The Amendment's main change is to provide local government flexibility with regard to setting fixed or proportional levy rates. Hazel added that Edinburgh, the first council in Scotland to approve a visitor levy, has provided [detail on the first round of spending programmes](#). From the £50m expected to be raised annually, £5m will be used to build homes, £3.8m will go towards accessibility and sustainability for venues, £3m for heritage asset, £700k for public art, and £1.15m for responsible tourism.

3.2 Policy Influencing Updates

Derek reported that BEFS has made a number of consultation responses since the November HEWG meeting, and highlighted three submissions:

HES Properties and Collections Strategy - Towards Sustainable Stewardship: BEFS arranged a Members' consultation event on [the draft Strategy](#) in mid-January 2026 and used the outcomes from this event as the basis for a response to a [linked HES consultation](#). The [BEFS response](#) welcomed the draft Strategy's clear intent to improve collaboration and transparency, and reflected Members' concerns around a perceived disjointed nature between different sections of the Strategy, and raised questions about the scale of plans to remove assets from the portfolio.

2026-40 Climate Change Plan: BEFS participated in the Scottish Government's [2025/26 consultation on its Draft Climate Change Plan](#), which sets out policy actions for addressing and adapting to the effects of climate change in the 2026-40 period. [BEFS response](#) highlighted Members' views that the Plan was light on the detail on practical delivery. BEFS also spoke to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee about the Buildings Annex of the Plan in [an 18 November evidence session](#).

Future of Scotland's High Streets: In response to concerns about the evolution of town centres and high streets in Scotland, the UK Parliament's Scottish Affairs Committee [opened an inquiry into their future](#). An [in-depth BEFS statement](#) highlighted concerns and opportunities identified in Member engagements, including views on how policy-makers can best support aspirations to diversify town centre activity and reuse vacant built assets more promptly.

Derek said BEFS has also been busy meeting with policy-makers that have responded positively to meeting offers to learn more about the policy recommendations set out in the [2026 BEFS Manifesto for the Built Environment](#). He reported that earlier in February, he and Hazel visited the Scottish Parliament to speak with the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Energy, Gillian Martin, about the Manifesto. Among other policy topics, the Cabinet Secretary asked questions about the decarbonisation of buildings, material passports, and improving town centres by reusing vacant buildings. Derek added that [a major Ipsos opinion poll in late 2025](#) indicated that the state of town centres is now the second biggest concern for UK voters, which suggests it is moving up the priority action agendas of governments and political parties.

Derek said HES has launched [a consultation on Fair Work Across the Historic Environment](#). This survey is part of a wider programme of research exploring how Fair Work principles are understood and put into practice across Scotland's historic environment sector. HES want to build a clear baseline of current practice, identify where organisations are already delivering Fair Work in ways that work for them and better understand the barriers and support needs that exist; particularly for small,

community-based and volunteer-led organisations. The survey focuses on organisational awareness and approaches to Fair Work rather than compliance or assessment.

Derek said BEFS keen to hear from HEWG Members on their experience with putting Fair Work principles into practice, and their insights into how well fair work is being progressed or achieved in the sector. As the survey closes on 2 March, Derek requested information by email (derekr@bef.s.org.uk) within a week of the HEWG Meeting to help inform BEFS submission.

Derek said HEWG Members can review the [BEFS consultations webpage](#), and [the BEFS bulletin](#), for full information on past submissions and future business.

3.3 BEFS Recruitment of a Net Zero Role

Hazel thanked HEWG Members for helping to shape the job description for the new Net Zero Lead position on the BEFS staff team, and for sharing the job advert through their networks. Interviews were held last week and one candidate has been offered the role. The offer was accepted and discussions are underway towards an early April start date.

Jonathan Hunt asked if BEFS is able to share information on the general background of the individual set to be appointed in the role. Hazel said that the successful candidate has strong experience in public affairs and climate action, and a keen historic environment interest. Hazel thanked Robert Toomey of Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), in his role as BEFS Trustee, for his contribution to the process through the interview panel.

3.4 BEFS Plans for a Pre-election Hustings Event

Derek said that a pre-election hustings event will be taking place on the afternoon of Tuesday 7 April, kindly hosted by RICS in their Edinburgh city centre office. BEFS is inviting senior representatives from six parties to respond to BEFS Manifesto in opening statements, and to answer questions from BEFS Members on and around the Manifesto themes: culture and heritage; net zero and the climate emergency; repair, maintenance and retrofit; training and skills; and planning and place-making. Derek stated event invites will soon be circulated to HEWG Members by way of an Eventbrite booking link.

3.5 Public Audit of Historic Environment Scotland (HES)

Ian stated that the Auditor General for Scotland published its [2024/25 audit of HES](#) on 16 December, and that the audit has been discussed in January and February meetings of the Public Audit Committee. As a Board Member of HES, Ian declared his interest in the audit process. Ian asked HEWG Members if they have any comments on the report they would like to share. No comments were made.

Ian said the HES Chair has appointed David Martin, who has wide-ranging experience in local government and in reporting to the Scottish Government, as a consultant to lead on a review of organisational culture and governance. This review is currently in an evidence gathering phase.

Sam Gallacher asked if the Chief Operating Officer in HES is likely to be engaging with the sector during their tenure. Ian replied in the positive, noting that the role is adding capacity and leadership to the HES Chief Executive's office, the remit for which includes engagement with external stakeholders.

4 HES Designations Strategy

Ian expressed gratitude to guest speaker Dara Parsons for joining the session, and asked him to elaborate on the launch of the new HES Designations Strategy and next steps.

4.1 Presentation from Dara Parsons, Head of Designations at HES

In the course of his presentation, supported by PowerPoint slides, Dara made the following points:

The starting point for the development of a new long-term HES designations strategy, entitled [Scotland's Protected Historic Places](#), was a review of the five types of designations HES is responsible for. These comprise around 8,000 scheduled monuments, 47,000 listed buildings, 360 gardens and designed landscapes, 40 historic battlefields and eight historic marine protected areas.

Of these, marine area designations are a little different, as HES doesn't hold full responsibility. This set sits with Scottish Ministers, but while HES isn't the ultimate decision-maker, it has a key statutory role in informing decisions. HES also works with the Scottish Government in giving advice around National Parks, and with UNESCO towards World Heritage Sites. Other designation types, including conservation areas, sit with local authorities and with the Ministry of Defence.

The review of the designations HES is responsible for explored the ecosystem of heritage protection that the agency operates within. As well as looking at gaps and opportunities, it asked if the current system is fit for the future. One key takeaway is a data analysis challenge, as the review showed HES has considerable issues with how its existing designations data is structured. With records dating back 100 years, much of what is currently available has been cobbled together over time, and is not up to modern standards. As such, much of it can't be usefully analysed. The review used word count and the age of records as a general indicator of utility; the shorter and older a record was, the less useful it was. Some records have 12 words or fewer.

Once the review process was complete, a detailed stakeholder engagement exercise followed. HES wished to reach out to a wide range of parties to learn if the review outcomes resonated with their experiences, and to ask if there was desire for wider change, such as a completely new designations system. Main Street were appointed as independent consultants to lead on these discussions. Main Street asked stakeholders about issues, challenges and opportunities, and they also looked into what research and statistics are available. Main Street prepared [a discussion document in September 2024](#) to support their engagements.

The [Main Street report](#) on stakeholder engagement around designations concluded that there isn't demand from the sector for extensive reform, but it picked up many issues for HES to address. This included calls for HES to do more in handling designations, to be more proactive, more focused, and to produce a higher quality of data. These outcomes were used by HES to develop a [draft Designations Strategy and a linked public consultation](#) in 2025. HES is grateful to BEFS for arranging a consultation workshop, and to all who participated in the workshop and wider consultation process.

The feedback from the consultation was used to develop and launch [the final Strategy](#). It was published before the festive break at the end of last year. It does not commit to radical change, but it shows a new purpose and vision in a ten year Strategy, which is really covering the nine years from 2026 to 2035. It is being delivered in phases, with the first 2026-28 period containing four key priorities: improving our information (for

HES); improving our service (for HES); understanding impact (for HES and the sector); and looking ahead (for HES and the sector).

The new Strategy is better suited to the current context than its predecessor, for example by embracing Geographic Information System mapping, which is an opportunity with possibilities that weren't available 10 or 20 years ago. The new Strategy will produce a clear baseline from which to make and measure improvements in data and impact.

HES accepts that too much of the previous approach was reactive, and the plan is to free up increased internal capacity for prioritisation and project work. One example of a priority that has been crowded out by excessive investment of staff time in reactive effort, is understanding 1980s heritage. The new Strategy will enable new research work focused on the 1980s to take place, to help shape decision-making on the many assets from this period that have yet to be considered for designation.

One big learning outcome from the review and consultation process, is that HES don't fully understand if designations work in saving heritage. Improving understanding on this could go a long way towards demonstrating the value of designations, and help make the case if it transpires further investment is needed. HES has access to a lot of research into the value of heritage, but not so much into the value of protecting heritage, which is something it wants to address.

A second major learning outcome is a shared aspiration for better systems to manage designations. The ten, or nine, year timescale was selected as a realistic window in which to shape the legislation required to deliver a long-term solution aligned with the Strategy's purpose and vision, which are:

Purpose: "To identify, protect, and provide information about Scotland's most significant historic places. Our work supports planning authorities, owners and others to make good decisions, ensuring our historic environment is well-managed for current and future generations."

Vision: "By 2035, our protected historic places will more fully reflect Scotland's rich and diverse cultural heritage. Protecting these places and providing accurate and accessible information about them will enable good decision-making, delivering better heritage outcomes and wider community benefits."

The "looking ahead" priority in the new Strategy sets out a plan for HES to initiate, by no later than March 2028, an inclusive conversation about shaping that long-term approach. The question for HEWG Members today is, how does the sector have that discussion on what we all need to get right to get the system we want in the long-term?

Thinking about heritage dating from the 1980s, like the [Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's purpose-built home](#) in Renfrew Street, Glasgow, what wider synthesis of reform is needed in the designations system to support preservation and protection?

HES will be undertaking a fresh policy and guidance review in the next two years that could help with those discussions.

4.2 Questions and Discussion

Ian thanked Dara for his input and invited questions.

Joe Traynor said HEWG Members on the call will be convinced of the value of protecting heritage, and that the Scottish Civic Trust finds designations particularly useful in preserving the “anchor” buildings that are of central importance to Scottish places. Joe said the question of what excellence is, and what is an exemplar of a particular theme or era or style, are difficult questions, and exploring these questions for a specific built asset often involves going on a complicated journey. What information does HES need from the sector to help navigate these journeys? Would it be helpful to set up a working group to take the thinking further?

Dara said there are a lot of strands to figure out, and that he is appreciative of the offer of support through a working group. He said digital evidence gathering is one approach being looked at to enable the sector to provide relevant information more easily. He added that HES is speaking to BEFS and other actors about building on existing networks, and gathering opinions and evidence from them about areas of improvement, and a working group might be a good way of taking that forward.

Rowan Brown said she was pleasantly surprised by the level of interaction and civic engagement taking place online on Citizen Space with regard to HES consultation activity. She asked if HES is able to comment on the demographics of, for example, those who contributed the 600+ responses that were made for the Properties and Collections Strategy consultation. Rowan noted the high level of engagement may speak to the often unsubstantiated fears some people have about living in, or repurposing, a listed building.

Dara said he was unsure if demographic data was available for respondents to general HES consultations, but that data may be held for those taking part in local consultations such as in Cumbernauld. He said data protection formalities affect the extent to which HES can request and report data, and that HES may look to create permissions so that it can record a greater level of detail in future, possibly using spatial mapping. Dara added that the Citizen Space portal doesn't yet make the most of these possibilities. He noted that a new HES website was in development, and as a key point of access to heritage protection information, it was being redesigned to give visitors the information they want and need more easily.

Sarah Pearce expressed an interest in learning more about the plan to focus more on the 1980s, and asked if this was related to the high levels of regeneration activity taking place at this time.

Dara said HES is, in general, around ten years behind the time horizon in which buildings constructed in the past 30 years are not normally considered for listing. This is why it still has to look seriously at the 1980s, even as most of the 1990s is appearing outside this 30 year horizon. This gap is not particularly unusual, as the early listings of 1950s and 1960s heritage took place in the 1990s. It speaks to “40 years old” as being the point at which appreciation of an era's architecture has started to mature and is ready for long-term consideration by the sector.

Dara noted that the Scottish Parliament and the Glasgow Armadillo are just two of the notable late 1990s buildings that will soon come into the designations system's orbit, while buildings from the early 1980s still need to be investigated. It shows HES needs to be systematic and efficient with a view to catching up, and the new Strategy is actively planning the reduction of passive, reactive work to help create capacity for this.

Jo Robertson drew parallels to a research dissertation she produced around 30 years ago, which sought evidence on whether designations work in improving protection. Jo said she reached a similar conclusion to the HES designations review, that while we measure all sorts of value in heritage, we don't appear to measure the specific value of designations. As the question has such relevance in the current context, it would make for an excellent workshop theme to support exploration.

Dara agreed and said HES has commissioned a literature review and scoping exercise on this, which will look at any evidence around what social, environmental and economic impacts are derived from making designations. He said Historic England have reported having a similar challenge.

Ian compared the process of investigating value of designations to exiting a car and looking under the bonnet to really study how it all works. He said the discussion provoked an open question that all HEWG Members would want to learn the answer to: what would happen if we decided tomorrow to stop designating?

5 Research in Action on Church Heritage

Ian noted HEWG interest in the pressing context for church transitions, with an estimated 800-plus churches facing risk of closure by 2030. A new initiative, Research on Action in Church Heritage (ReACH), has been created in response. Ian said the two project managers, Lizzie Swarbrick of Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (SoAoS) and DJ Johnston-Smith of Scotland's Churches Trust (SCT), will explain what ReACH is seeking to achieve and its plans for 2026.

5.1 Presentation from Lizzie Swarbrick, ReACH Research Manager, SoAoS

Lizzie said she would take the lead in delivering an overview presentation, supported by PowerPoint slides, and that DJ would join her to answer questions about the project from HEWG Members. A summary of Lizzie's presentation follows:

Churches are an important part of Scotland's heritage. They are often the biggest buildings on Scottish streets, providing a wonderful diversity of architecture, artefacts and monuments. They form vital social and religious centres for many of our communities. They are among the oldest heritage buildings we have, and many are the only public gathering space left in some settlements.

Despite their standing, they are facing an urgent protection challenge. Community Ownership Support Scotland (COSS) have estimated that 869 churches are currently listed as closed or at risk of closure by 2030. A further 300 have closed since the pandemic, which means around one third of Scotland's churches are set to be closed during the current decade.

The collaborative ReACH partnership was formed by SoAoS and SCT to help respond to this pressing situation. The project has two years of support from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Pilgrim Trust. The research will be undertaken in three Strands.

Strand 1 will focus on rapid collation of existing data on the 869 at-risk churches. Various project partners are providing support for this. Relevant existing data sets, including those developed by COSS and Places of Worship in Scotland, are being consulted to remove any risk of duplication.

The Strand 1 process is also identifying gaps in knowledge. In general, Scotland's churches have not been comprehensively studied, and as a result we have many

“unknown knowns”. A Heritage Action Group, comprising cross-sector experts, has been convened by the project to explore and address these gaps. The Action Group will help guide the project’s focus by sharing data and expertise on under-studied areas like stained glass, church organs, and other heritage features.

Strand 1 will also help prioritise sites for further study by assessing the rarity and vulnerability of the architecture and assets of at-risk churches. With such a range and volume of heritage features and artefacts, a prioritisation process is a necessity. In this respect, churches are comparable to Scotland’s rich and diverse natural environment, for which responsible stakeholders are continually prioritising.

St Nicholas Church in Aberdeen is just one example of unique endemic heritage, with its granite structure and palimpsest of Romanesque, late medieval and 18th century architecture. Another more recent example is Kildrum Parish Church in Cumbernauld, designed by Reiach and Renton in the 1960s; Reiach served as an assistant to Frank Lloyd Wright. It is a B-listed church with original furnishings. It was sold by the Church of Scotland in 2025 and its future plans are unclear.

Churches have long been seen as places of safe-keeping for arts and artefacts, but amid the current rate of closures, transitions and disruption, this convention is being challenged. What happens to a church’s artworks, pews, organs and other material culture when a sale goes through? This is a major part of Scotland’s story that is at risk of being lost, and addressing this challenge is the motivation behind the establishment of ReACH.

Some examples of valuable artefacts facing major risks are the early 16th century tomb to Alexander Ogilvy in Cullen Moray, and the 15th century altarpiece from Fowlis Easter in Angus. Both of the churches housing these artefacts are closing. There is an open question as to what will happen to them.

Material culture provides incredibly useful insights into many areas of Scotland’s social history. Burntisland Parish Church in Fife, for instance, has 18th century pews designed for shepherds to facilitate their dogs sitting at their feet. It also has a sailor’s loft with its own entrance. Croick Church in the Highlands has windows engraved with messages from people who sheltered in the building during the Highland Clearances.

At-risk churches, and their material culture, provide a great depth of social value and invaluable intangible cultural heritage for Scotland’s people and places. Before Inverness Old High Kirk was sold, the church was packed for popular services such as Christmas. But transition does not have to mean heritage is lost. Govan Old Church in Glasgow, for example, now has a museum and archaeological site. It provides a range of public events and community archaeological opportunity, while hosting worship for Church of Scotland and Orthodox congregations.

Strand 2 of ReACH will undertake full heritage recording of ten selected sites using SCT’s Rapid Recording Methodology alongside expert input. The University of Stirling’s Social Value Toolkit will also be used to deliver a comprehensive assessment of the social value of these sites. In addition, Strand 2 will present all project outcome information in an open-access database. This stage of the project will also prioritise communicating the richness of Scotland’s church heritage to wider stakeholders.

There is strong public appetite for learning more about church heritage, as demonstrated by the recent ReACH open day and tour at St Mary’s Whitekirk in East

Lothian. 200 people attended this event in February, which was used to record the church's heritage and social value, and which illustrates the high level of local interest in learning and sharing.

Strand 3 of the initiative will focus on the longer-term, and create legacy value beyond ReACH's two year lifespan. The project team will work with others to ensure that heritage has a sustainable future when buildings transition to different uses. The project will create toolkits for communities facing church closures, and plan next steps. SoAoS and SCT are determined to create maximum value from what is a relatively short-term initiative.

The popular late 2025 ReACH Launch Symposium, which included a panel discussion with Craig Stanford (HES), Victoria Collison (Historic Churches Scotland), and Dr Richard Oram (University of Stirling), shows the experts and sectors that are keen to come together to respond to the challenges ahead. ReACH will be doing all it can to help, and to that end, there are two questions for HEWG Members:

- Would you like to join the Heritage Action Group?
- Would you like to discuss being part of a collaboration towards next steps?

Visit the project website - <https://churchheritage.scot/> - to learn more about these opportunities, or contact the project team directly at: churches@socantscot.org.

5.2 Questions and Discussion with Lizzie Swarbrick and DJ Johnston-Smith

Ian thanked Lizzie for her presentation and invited questions for Lizzie and DJ.

Sam Gallacher enquired on the pace of change with regard to church closures: is this stable, or accelerating? Lizzie said COSS is doing effective work in tracking closures and sales. COSS report that it is not happening in a steady stream; rather, closures are alternating between trickles and waves.

DJ added that the end of each calendar year generally brings a big wave, as congregations plan for one last Christmas celebration in the building before closure. He said on average, with 342 having closed since 2020, there has been one closure a week so far this decade. DJ said that 11 churches closed on 31 December 2025, and a handful more since then, which is broadly in line with typical 2020s closure rates. He noted that of the 2000 or so congregations in churches that are not at immediate risk and not the direct focus of ReACH, these could make use of existing SCT toolkits to help support their sustainability.

Sam asked a follow-up question, on whether there were toolkits available for community buyers of churches. Lizzie said yes, a network of support bodies including COSS and the Heritage Network (HN) help with general advice, business planning support and more, all with a view to building a sustainable future. DJ said ReACH, COSS, SCT, HN, Historic Churches Scotland and other players all work together to provide church owners with advice and support on heritage, sustainability and any other practical guidance they need.

Jocelyn Cunliffe asked DJ about [a Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme blog](#) he produced for SCT, and invited him to share the concerns it expressed about misleading information in the UK Government analysis of the programme with HEWG.

DJ said the consultants appointed to undertake the review should have reached out to the sector in Scotland for reliable information, rather than simply having a quick look on the Internet. He said the main problem is the consultants used the Places of Worship in Scotland (POWIS) database as a baseline for analysis, but POWIS records count assets with any religious significance like wells, caves, ruins and place names as places of worship. POWIS states there are 11k places of worship but SCT research logs around 2800 active places of worship in Scotland, and it is the 2800 figure that has relevance to the Grant Scheme purpose. SCT and others are lobbying the Scottish Government and HES on this.

Rowan asked: how much support is ReACH receiving from the museum sector with regard to recording and presenting? Lizzie said there is a sense many people think HES and Scotland's museums will be ready look after any church artefacts that are removed during transition. In fact, museums state they are "full to bursting". There is a storage issue and a resources challenge for them. While we can't rely on museums to take church heritage into storage and display, ReACH is in regular contact with them.

Lizzie added that even if storage was available, the place, building and artefacts all suffer when removals and relocations happen. A lot of loss ensues, including context, significance and local access. ReACH is in touch with museums, with [the Scottish Oral History Centre](#) and many other heritage bodies on preserving intangible cultural heritage as well. The project team are keen to engage with as many players as possible in the museums and galleries sector.

Rowan said if it wasn't already doing so, ReACH could make useful links with the cultural asset teams in HES and in Creative Scotland, as both are keen to stop valuable heritage and art from leaving the country. DJ said the museum-community information flow needs to be two-way, because congregations are continually being told that their heritage is considered relatively unimportant, while ReACH can prove that it is important.

Bill Pagan said his town, Cupar in Fife, is losing both of its Church of Scotland churches. He said the local congregations lacked knowledge and understanding of how to prevent closure and preserve heritage, which shows how important and necessary ReACH is.

Lizzie said both ReACH and the wider sector are being open about having to rush to catch up with the rapid pace of change. Ideally, a project like ReACH would have started five or ten years ago to help communities that are in danger of losing their churches. A huge and unfamiliar process is involved for communities in that position, which may be suffering from shock, panic and grief. It is an emotional time for congregations and community groups, they are the real superstars we should be doing more to celebrate in the sector.

Vivienne Whyte said that when Kenmore Parish Church in Perth and Kinross closed, it seemed the community were last to be informed, and given just one week's notice. For congregations uncertain about the future, ReACH could help church groups prepare for short notice periods. Vivienne asked: For artefacts that are fixtures in listings, is the concern over the impact of post-transition building adaptation, or about being stripped and removed altogether? Do designations and listed building consents prevent loss? Where is the highest point of risk - is it pre-sale?

Lizzie said the last question is one of the biggest for the ReACH project. She said she was aware of a grey issue in the planning system around fixtures and moveable objects,

and it is proving challenging to work out what is happening in practice and what should be happening according to planning policy.

DJ said sometimes congregations and communities know what is happening to their building with regard to potential sale, and sometimes they don't - there can be a disconnect between congregation and community, but in some places the congregation is the community. DJ said HES listing records are ultimately not good enough, they don't capture enough of the items of significant heritage value. Some of the records are 100 years old and significantly out-of-date.

He added that Vivienne's planning questions link to a question vexing the [Places of Worship Forum](#) around [ecclesiastical exemption from listed building consent](#). Questions are being raised around continuation, and a messy understanding around its purpose and implementation in some parts of the sector. DJ said our churches are mini-museums, which are becoming victims of a theological shift in which some denominations decide they don't need buildings for their faiths. This leads to a big question for Scotland: what do we want to do with these buildings and artefacts?

Victoria Collison said there is massive value of having church recording being done everywhere, by congregations and owners using the toolkits to develop and communicate their offer to visitors and their value to heritage stakeholders and funders. The process of recording is an investment in the building's future. Lizzie said she agreed strongly, and that recording has value in itself, regardless of the fate of the building.

Judith Roebuck said that the Church of Scotland does not asset strip, and that in its view, ecclesiastical exemption stops when a building stops providing a worship service. Judith said when that happens, listed building consent is needed, although there is evidence of inconsistency in how local authorities understand this. Judith clarified that congregations sometimes disregard Church of Scotland advice, and that in Kenmore, the local congregation were provided with the standard notice period of one year, not one week, and that a feasibility study had been undertaken by the community in the notice period.

In concluding the session, Ian said ReACH was a very important project for the sector, and that it is positive to see the cross-sector collaboration across the social, community and faith value of church heritage. Ian encouraged those who wish to get involved or share information, to contact Lizzie and DJ (churches@socantscot.org).

6. Member Updates

Ian invited HEWG Members to share any relevant from their organisations.

Rowan Burns said the Cockburn Association is concerned with the [proposed demolition of Argyle House in Edinburgh](#).

Jo Robertson said the Architectural Heritage Fund is [celebrating its 50th anniversary](#) with a UK-wide travelling exhibition that will visit Glasgow. It will be held in The Briggait on 141 Bridgegate St from 30 April to 16 May. The UK Government confirmed that the Fund will receive £46m for England-only heritage investment activity in [the same press release](#) on funding for culture that confirmed the discontinuation of the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme.

Ann Packard said the Royal Society for the Arts is delivering a [Heritage Matters event](#) on 27 March in Edinburgh, in partnership with Europa Nostra. There will also be a linked invite-only meeting involving several HEWG Members.

Sam Gallacher said the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust has [published its 2026-29 Strategy](#), following a successful launch event in January in Edinburgh. The Strategy will help strengthen SHBT's partnership role. SHBT has also been tracking with interest the [City of Edinburgh Council's Visitor Levy](#) plans. SHBT feel that the Levy is moving in the right direction, as long as the money raised is spent in the right way.

Jocelyn Cunliffe said the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland is engaging with HES on ecclesiastical exemption, and it is hoped HES will follow up with the Scottish Government. The [AHSS lecture programme](#) is continuing with a [9 March event on architecture and urbanism in late Georgian Edinburgh](#). The AHSS is celebrating its 70th anniversary this year, and the architect David Bryce will be featuring at an anniversary event taking place on 30 October in Edinburgh.

Sarah Pearce said the Heritage Network is devoting a lot of time to outreach activity at present, and is focusing on "cold spot" places which have not received significant support for local community heritage. The extremely high level of interest in heritage trainee opportunities was demonstrated by 150 applications from Scotland alone for three recently advertised UK positions. Buildings insurance continues to be a big challenge - to the extent that some building owners in the Heritage Network have decided to go without it altogether. The UK-wide [Heritage Network Conference 2026](#) will take place in Belfast on 27-29 September.

Victoria Collison said the closure of the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme, which ran out of 2025/26 funding shortly before the HEWG meeting, was a major concern for Historic Churches Scotland. HCS is planning a community recording project in Croick Church in the Highlands. The Church has 50 years of visitor books, which captures detail of many international visits. The community is planning on digitising this into a searchable online database to support public interest in local heritage and family history.

Vivienne Whyte said Stirling City Heritage Trust's [Traditional Buildings Health Check Scheme](#) is continuing to deliver positive impact. SCHT is also continuing to work with Stirling Council on vegetation clearance in historic assets, and is continuing to encourage more women to consider careers in construction and built heritage. SCHT has submitted a funding application to HES, and is awaiting a decision.

Marilyn Brown said Scotland's Landscape and Garden Heritage is concluding the valuable [Glorious Gardens in East Lothian](#) initiative, which actively trains volunteers to research, survey and record unlisted sites and promote their conservation. It is hoped the success will be replicated in other parts of Scotland.

Bill Pagan reported that residents in Cupar, Fife, are being forced to look into an asset transfer for a historic local building, which carries a high risk of failure given the scale, as it would be the biggest urban asset transfer in Scotland to date. He said the physical heritage challenges in the town is one reason why it is keenly driving forward aspirations to utilise digital recording of intangible cultural heritage to help deliver increased tourism.

DJ Johnston-Smith said the Scotland's Churches Trust [website directory](#) is being rewritten and the new iteration will be launched later in 2026. SCT continues to have a high workload assisting church owners and managers with a wide range of day to day management issues in addition to crisis response and long-term sustainability support.

Judith Roebuck said the Church of Scotland shares concerns with the discontinuation of the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme, and is actively lobbying the Scottish Government for an appropriate future settlement for Scotland. CoS has been busy encouraging congregations to use the remaining 2025/26 programme funding. It has also been a demanding period for CoS in dealing with a number of closures.

Victoria clarified that while she correctly stated the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme is showing £0 remaining, a waiting list system is in operation and it is still accepting 2025/26 applications.

Jenny Munro said the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland has [published a 2026 Manifesto](#). The 'Planifesto' is being accompanied by publication of [a series of thinkpieces](#) and engagement with policy-makers, including at the upcoming Scottish Greens party conference. RTPI will be engaging with Scottish Government consultations on [infrastructure](#) and [house-building](#), among others. Rachel Fisher, previously a senior figure in the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, is about to be welcomed as [the new RTPI Chief Executive](#). The [Scottish Young Planners Conference for 2026](#) will take place in Edinburgh on 24 April.

Catriona Melville of the National Lottery Heritage Fund said a forthcoming 2026-29 delivery plan will set out priorities for the next three years. Consultation and development has been completed and it is set for publication soon. £7m of funding was confirmed this month for [high street heritage projects](#) in four Scottish towns. NLHF has commissioned a survey of parks and gardens.

Merlin Lewis said the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings has secured [three years of continued funding from HES](#) to continue its Church Maintenance Days. Building on successful 2024/25 pilots, the project will support training days in churches across Scotland, to help with plans for continued use. SPAB hope to share a schedule of initial Church Maintenance Days at the next meeting of HEWG.

Joe Traynor said the Scottish Civic Trust launched [its My Place Awards](#) in early February, and encouraged HEWG Members to share the information with their networks and to consider applying. The category awards include community champions and climate action, and the closing date is 29 April. There is set to be an increased focus on health and wellbeing in My Place over the next three years. [Doors Open Days](#) volunteer support is expanding. A grants programme for venue accessibility enhancement is in development. The Tobacco Merchant's House in Glasgow recently [celebrated a major birthday](#) and a "£250k for 250 years" fundraising initiative is underway.

7. Any Other Business

No items were raised.

Next HEWG: Online (Microsoft Teams) on Thursday 14 May 2026, 10am-noon.

End of meeting note by Derek Rankine, BEFS: derekr@bef.org.uk 5 March 2026