

Historic Environment Working Group (HEWG)

Meeting Note: 14 May 2026



Summary of online HEWG meeting | 10am-noon | Thursday 14 May 2026

1. Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

Ian Baxter welcomed HEWG Members, including new participants Lydia Gibson and Alison Morris, and shared a note of the apologies received.

HEWG attendees:

- Gordon Barr - AHF
- Ian Baxter - HEWG Chair
- Rowan Burns - CA
- Jocelyn Cunliffe - AHSS
- Lydia Gibson - HA
- Simon Gilmour - SoAoS
- Diane Gray - NLHF
- Diarmaid Hearn - NTS
- Jonathan Hunt - HH
- Tyler Lott Johnston - BEFS Chair
- DJ Johnston-Smith - SCT
- Bruce Mann - ALGAO
- Alison Morris - EWH
- Jennie Munro - RTPi
- Niall Murphy - GCHT
- Bill Pagan (individual)
- Rachael Purse - SCHT
- Judith Roebuck - CoS

Guest speaker:

- Roger Curtis - HES

BEFS attendees:

- Hazel Johnson
- Derek Rankine

Apologies:

- Douglas Campbell - IHBC
- Sam Gallacher - SHBT
- Andrew Hopetoun (individual)
- John Lawson - ALGAO
- Euan Leitch - SURF
- Ann Packard - RSA
- Sarah Pearce - HN
- Silke Schneider - EWH

Total attendance: 21

2. Previous Meeting Note

The pre-circulated note from the 18 February 2026 HEWG meeting was agreed as an accurate record pending the following three corrections:

- P6 - the word ‘conversation’ was mis-spelled as ‘conservation’ in reference to a future public engagement plan by Historic Environment Scotland (HES);
- P7 - an online HES consultation was referenced as receiving a healthy response, but the remark in question had drawn attention to it being relatively low;
- P11 - a reference was wrongly made to Creative Scotland, instead of Arts Council England, as a suggested partnership link for the ReACH project.

It was agreed the meeting note would be corrected and made available on the [HEWG webpage on the BEFS website](#).

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 shared that BEFS has appointed a new role, a Net Zero Lead, following discussion at the November 2025 HEWG meeting on shaping the job description. The new HES funded three year post has been developed as a response to the challenges and opportunities ahead; to support the existing work of the sector, building capacity whilst avoiding duplication of effort, and driving a coordinated and holistic approach to Net Zero and the Climate Emergency.

Hazel confirmed [Olivia Elinchev](#), who recently worked within the Net Zero and Energy portfolio in the Scottish Parliament, was appointed following an early 2026 recruitment process. Olivia will be contacting HEWG Members in the coming weeks as part of a stakeholder mapping and engagement process.

Hazel said the [Tenement Maintenance Working Group in the Scottish Parliament](#), for which BEFS and Under One Roof are co-secretariats, are enthused about four of the six main parties in Scotland including tenement reform commitments in their 2026 election manifestos. [Scottish Housing News](#) has drawn attention to the development. The Working Group will continue to advocate for cross-party progress on implementing their three central recommendations in the new term of Parliament.

Hazel said BEFS has been tracking [built environment commitments in all major party manifestos](#), with some useful evidence of cross-party support for several BEFS Manifesto recommendations.

Hazel added that BEFS is planning to deliver two surveys. One will focus on BEFS Membership, and ask Members for views on all aspects of the organisation and its work including communications and services. Another will be delivered by BEFS on behalf of the [Places of Worship Forum](#), with the objective of gathering cross-sector views on [Ecclesiastical Exemption from Listed Building Consent](#). The goal is to explore a complex topic through a wide range of views from people who interact with places of worship including denominations, heritage bodies, planners, and building owners.

3.2 Policy Influencing Updates

Derek reported that BEFS has made several recent consultation responses which are available on the [BEFS consultations webpage](#) including:

- The Scottish Government’s Draft Infrastructure Strategy 2027-37;
- Accelerating Home-building in Scotland;
- A Tourism Inquiry by the UK Parliament’s Culture, Media & Sport Committee.

He said BEFS Members including the Landscape Institute, RTPI Scotland and SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum had also responded to some of these, and that BEFS is always keen to highlight Members' responses in its website and bulletin.

Derek said a future consultation of interest to HEWG, is a HES plan to refresh their [Historic Environment Policy for Scotland](#) (HEPS). Tess Grimmond in the Heritage Policy and Engagement Team at HES will join the August HEWG to share information on plans for stakeholder engagement.

Derek shared that BEFS policy colleague Jonna Meredith has developed a tracking tool to monitor all past responses to consultations and look at what happened after the consultation, and whether any BEFS asks or recommendations make it into the final policy. The tool is designed to help BEFS reflect on impact of consultation activity.

Referring to the [2026 Scottish Parliament election results](#), Derek said 64 of the 129 MSPs are new to the Scottish Parliament. BEFS will be delivering an MSP Engagement Plan to build relationships with both new and continuing MSPs to make sure they are aware of BEFS Member priorities and recommendations in the [2026 BEFS Manifesto](#).

In response to questions on the HEPS refresh, Hazel said it was triggered automatically by a five-year review period. Bruce said HES has appointed the consultancy Glic to undertake desk-based research on how HEPS has been used in practice to support the refresh. Simon and Bruce added there was potential overlap with [a withdrawal of planning publications](#), and ongoing conversations about restoring some advice notes through other channels such as new HES guidance documents or in HEPS.

3.3 Communications Update

Derek said BEFS is in the process of restructuring its website to make content easier to find; and that Member updates shared later in the HEWG meetings will be recorded for inclusion in the BEFS bulletin, events calendar and social media.

4 Discussion: Heritage Protection Implications of Glasgow Union St Fire

Ian noted the significant national debate generated by the 8 March 2026 fire in the B-listed Union Corner building next to Glasgow Central train station. The fire led to the partial collapse and demolition of the 1851 building, and severe disruption to transport services, local businesses and closure of some city centre streets. It provoked comment and reaction from politicians, national media commentators and many voices in the existing built and historic environment sector around what lessons can be taken to avoid a repeat of this situation in other heritage buildings.

4.1 Introductory Remarks from Niall Murphy, Glasgow City Heritage Trust

Ian invited Niall Murphy, who is particularly close to the building and the topic, to share some of his insights. Niall said he understood the building has five owners, and that he hoped it had a common block insurance in place as otherwise it will take longer to negotiate a settlement. Niall's additional points included:

Making common block insurance mandatory for multiple-ownership and multiple-tenant heritage buildings, particularly tenements, would be a good idea. This is demonstrated by the life-changing financial disaster that has befallen the owners of the 'B' listed tenement at Albert Cross in Glasgow's East Pollokshields Conservation Area, where there was no common block insurance, and in some instances owners had no buildings insurance.

This meant the owners did not have the money to repair their tenement after a fire destroyed the roof and upper floor in Spring 2020. The five year impasse thereafter resulted in the collapse of the tenement last summer. The owners now face an expensive demolition bill. Some have declared themselves bankrupt.

It is believed, subject to being confirmed by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's Fire Investigation Report, that the Union Street building either did not have a centralised fire detection and alarm system, or it didn't function. If that is correct, it is remarkable everyone who was in the building got out safely. This needs to be looked at; it may also have insurance implications.

The situation suggests that installing sprinkler systems in all vulnerable heritage buildings might be worth exploring. That said, this might have aggravated a fire with a lithium battery ignition source. Glasgow should therefore map potential uses that come with a high risk of fire, and what heritage buildings they are located in, especially if the building predates the 1890s changes to the Police Acts, which introduced compartmentalisation.

It is understood Glasgow City Council is now undertaking this exercise. The problem is that traditionally built pre-1890s buildings with massive load-bearing stone exterior walls and lighter-weight timber and plaster interiors are vulnerable to fire and difficult to compartmentalise. It would be better if they didn't have high risk uses within them.

4.2 Questions and Discussion

Ian thanked Niall for his input and invited comments and discussion. Exchanges included the following points from HEWG Members:

- Employing adequate numbers of qualified conservation engineers could help save built heritage post-fire, and stop building control from tearing down facades that could be saved with timely and appropriate expertise;
- We are in a 'ticking time bomb' situation where more heritage will be lost to fire because we are not learning lessons from, for example, the two fires in the Glasgow School of Art;
- A Fire and Rescue Service debrief will be required to fully understand the part played in the fire by the Union Street building's constitution and materials;
- The topic is being politicised, with some actors quick to apportion blame and others reacting uncooperatively or defensively, which obstructs the search for truth and learning outcomes, and obscures the path to reducing risks;
- There are fresh anxieties about other historic buildings in Glasgow, such as the nearby Egyptian Halls, in which little is known about the condition of electrical wiring in former retail unit ceiling voids;
- Politicians may overreact to the fire and add further rules, regulations and restrictions that prevent refurbishment and reuse of vacant buildings, which may end up counter-productively increasing risks of damage and dereliction;
- The sector may wish to discuss approaches to flexibility and some bending of rules around use restrictions, which may not be palatable to some, but which could increase commercial tenancy occupations, and in doing so reduce the risks posed by long-term vacancy, disinvestment, and neglect;
- Public ownership is not a solution to privately owned vacant buildings, if the public sector ultimately lacks the money to bring these buildings back into use;

- Historic assets on the Buildings at Risk Register are thought to be at the greatest risk of fire damage, but aren't subject to any special risk management protocols;
- HES has valuable influence in post-fire building control review processes, but HES and the wider sector may need to think about what more can be done towards pre-emptive building protection;
- It is understood the Fire and Rescue Service use plans of listed buildings if they are available, but this process should be investigated for improvements; a query on this could be made by HEWG to HES;
- Heritage building officers embedded within the Fire and Rescue Service could offer on-site consultation during incidents; training for Incident Commanders could also be beneficial;
- It would be good to learn more about the role of Trading Standards with regard to vape shops having appropriate fire detection systems in place, as they are becoming increasingly common tenants of historic buildings in urban centres;
- There may be learning outcomes to be gained from museums, which frequently think about fire risk with 'grab plans' and exit routes in place for quickly and safely removing artefacts, although much of the focus is on saving the contents rather than the building;
- New technology and volatile substances appears to be leading to increased risks, as evidenced by examples including an Inverness workshop fire that was caused by a lithium ion battery;
- There are legislative blind spots such as 'pop up shop' style events, that increase fire risk in vulnerable buildings, which needs to be addressed; visitors and guests bringing electrical bikes and scooters, which may not have any quality control, into historic sites to charge also needs to be looked at; as do practices of overnight charging of lithium batteries and power tools.

Hazel suggested given the level of engagement, HEWG Members may wish to form a short-life working group to take the discussion forward and form a set recommendations. This was agreed [**Action Point 1:** Action Points are listed at the end of the meeting note].

5 Historic Environment Scotland Operational Update from Roger Curtis

Ian introduced Roger Curtis, Interim Director of Operations at HES, who joined the meeting on invitation to update HEWG Members on his team's current activities and future plans. Roger's updates included the following:

HES is generally happy with current visitor numbers to its properties, and particularly with the high footfall in its top three attractions. The visitor offer is being maintained at a good level, but the quality across the board is not quite as high as HES would like. A continual challenge is, buildings and visitors alike benefit considerably from a building having the right staff on site, but recruitment and retention is not easy in some regions. HES is aware some visitor centres need modernising, but is sceptical about the value for money achieved from investing in expensive technology.

Another key challenge HES faces is the attrition of climate change damage, particularly to ruins exposed to the elements. More intervention is needed with regard to wallheads in particular. There is not only a cost issue, but access too. With roofed monuments, HES is not fully up to speed on maintenance; lime render finishes is one area in need of closer attention. HES is fully sold on the idea of investing in long-term protection, but there are implications of high up-front project costs on limited operational budgets.

Longer-term issues under active consideration include planning for mechanical and electrical maintenance and replacement, undertaking net zero adaptations, and handling major roof repair works. A capital investment programme is in place to resource upgrades such as new boilers, cooling and fire detection systems in higher risk properties. Low-carbon heating is a high imperative.

All of these priorities place major burdens on HES resources, and compliance costs are increasing all of the time. As the [draft Properties and Collections Strategy](#) illustrated, HES is having to think carefully about what it can and can't do in future. A final Strategy is in development and will be launched soon. Financial allocation and prioritisation approaches will change as a result, and the new Scottish Government may wish to shape the future direction of travel.

In summary, HES is having to navigate a difficult journey with strong headwinds. This may lead to an even greater concentration of pressure on the large, revenue-generating sites to resource the wider HES portfolio.

5.2 Questions and Discussion with Roger Curtis

Ian thanked Roger for his update and invited questions:

Q: Is there a deliberate attempt in HES policy and strategy to move language away from 'care' and 'guardianship' and towards 'cultural assets' and 'heritage attractions' to emphasise a growing reliance on income-generation for sustainability?

A: HES is generally trying to keep away from formal language in public consultations, and is open to discussion on different ways of using and caring for our monuments with appropriate custodians. 'Guardianship' is a consensual arrangement, and HES is wary about using this when talking about, for example, buildings like churches, a lot of which are coming out of one use and going into another. It needs the right set of circumstances to come together for HES to pass guardianship to a responsible owner.

Q: Why is the post 'Interim' Director of Operation?

A: Roger has been covering the post on a temporary basis since November in the absence of his boss. The ongoing HES review is expected to determine how long the interim arrangement will last.

Q: Why are we seeing so much temporary fencing to close off parts of HES sites?

A: Safety is a vital priority for staff, volunteers and visitors and HES takes care to balance access to historical sites with risks. Heras fencing is used as a less invasive approach to restricting access where necessary, but is becoming less common as the masonry inspection process has speeded up this year and is functioning well.

Q: How does HES promote the visitor offer to non-HES heritage tourism sites?

A: HES is very keen to help give visitors a joined-up offer, such as a one or two day itinerary to a Scottish region that includes visits to HES properties alongside other places, venues and landscapes. Visitors tend to follow established paths, and visitor numbers tend to be quiet when you step off this 'runway'. The north east of Scotland, Peterhead and north Aberdeenshire, is one area with rich heritage but low visitor numbers. HES is working with others to entice more international visitors to Aberdeen to venture further north.

Q: Is HES looking to do more community empowerment and support community wealth building as part of its changing approach? Does HES want to manage or genuinely empower the community groups it engages with?

A: Yes, to a degree, but local community engagement requires managing and resourcing, and in HES and the wider public sector, capacity is patchy. It is easier to support these processes in high population centres through short-term initiatives; longer term and rural engagement is more difficult. HES community engagement activity works best when shared outcomes link to its core purpose, which is looking after Properties in Care and supporting the historic environment sector.

There were further exchanges between HEWG Members that included the following:

- Other asset managers, including the National Trust for Scotland, recognise the sector-wide challenges highlighted in the update;
- The ageing demographics in heritage volunteering, community groups and landowners, adds a time and resource challenge for partner bodies;
- The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations would make a natural partner for HES on strategy, compliance and community empowerment;
- The [Our Past, Our Future](#) team is planning a workshop and report on good practice in community collaboration;
- It is understandable for HES to focus on growing or maintaining income from bigger sites, but it must also work to protect all of its heritage assets from the changing climate;
- The ongoing HES review will look at organisational bandwidth and the extent of the HES remit. It is expected to be made available to the public when it is published in the summer. Those wishing to feed comments in, can do so via the HES Chief Executive's office;
- There are live discussions in HES Board and Committees, on what state care and heritage portfolio management means in the 21st century;
- HES is likely to emerge from the review with continuing support as a managing agent of state care, but with a tight financial situation.

6. Member Updates

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

ALGAO: Bruce Mann said he understands from conversations with colleagues in the Scottish Government and HES, that the withdrawal of [Planning Advice Notes](#) will not be overturned, but HES has a serious interest in producing some form of replacement. He said he would welcome further collaboration in keeping pressure and momentum up. Bruce noted the Our Past, Our Future steering group is waiting for post-election clarity around the next heritage Minister and their priorities, and added that an upcoming CoSLA meeting will explore heritage approaches in local authorities. Hazel noted that the [Conservation Officers Group](#) may wish to contribute to that discussion.

SoAoS: Simon Gilmour said the Society continues to fundraise for its new [Heritage Hub building](#). It would be pleased from groups who would consider making a financial contribution, and also from groups who would like to use the Hub once established.

SCHT: Rachael Purse reported that five year HES funding has been confirmed for the Trust, as part of [a £19.5m package for City Heritage Trusts](#). The funding will resource SCHT's core work as the leading heritage organisation in Stirling and further promotion

of its [Traditional Building Health Check](#), which other City Heritage Trusts have expressed an interest in. The funding package is particularly welcome as it will enable all of the Trusts to grow and work together. The Trust is continuing [to distribute grants](#), and is delivering a city centre vegetation survey in partnership with Stirling Council, which will be followed by a clear-out of overgrown areas.

AHSS: Jocelyn Cunliffe commented that the Society is pleased to see the [Places of Worship Forum](#)'s planned survey on Ecclesiastical Exemption move forward. One current area of concern is [that the Cherish project](#) is finding that building standards in Scotland are not as good as in England, and generally not up to the quality required. A live case is [Brunton Hall](#), which is subject to a demolition order, which the Society believe is not the right approach, and which is more vulnerable as it is not listed and not in a conservation area. Local press coverage is highlighting the building's architectural, cultural and community value. Similar is true of [Argyle House](#), for which HES paused a decision on listing owing to the advanced stage of development plans.

William Napier is working on a skills deficit article for future publication. The [AHSS 2026 Conference](#) will celebrate the architect David Bryce on the 150th anniversary of his death. It will take place on 30 October and will be followed by study visits on 31 October. AHSS case panels are concerned with the inconsistency of lodging comments on various online portals, and are keen to liaise with others in the sector in advocating for change.

CA: Rowan Burns said the Association held its [151st AGM and Guest Lecture](#) two weeks before the HEWG meeting. It will coordinate [Doors Open Day in Edinburgh](#) on the last weekend in September, those interested in participating are encouraged [to get in touch](#). Managing over-tourism is a key theme of [Festival of Europe](#) activity in Scotland in May.

The Association shares AHSS concerns about Argyle House, and is averse to demolition, believing the embodied carbon climate change argument has been negatively affected by mysterious carbon calculation methods. The lack of public engagement in decision-making is also concerning. Comparisons with how continental European cities protect their World Heritage sites and historic buildings are unflattering to Edinburgh. CA is also a tenant which is directly affected by the planned demolition, and which feels its voice hasn't been heard.

AHF: Gordon Barr reported that the [50th anniversary exhibition](#) would continue in Glasgow until mid-May before moving to Cardiff and then to London later in the year. The anniversary event in Glasgow's Briggait, which some HEWG Members attended, had proved successful, and coincided with AHF Scotland posting its busiest ever year in terms of applications and funding, thanks to expanded support from HES and from the William Grant Foundation. An annual report with full information will be [posted on the AHF website soon](#). New developments include a dedicated funding pot for energy efficiency adaptations in historic buildings.

CoS: Judith Roebuck said church closures carry on, and there are conversations with HES about the potential of taking some key properties into Guardianship. Dunfermline Abbey, Paisley Abbey and St John's are part of these discussions.

AS: Gavin MacGregor said [a recent CiFA Conference in Edinburgh](#) indicated a groundswell of support on doing more to use the public benefit argument to show the value of archaeology. A paper on approaches towards demonstrating value is expected

to follow. The [Archaeological Research in Progress Conference](#) will take place on 23 May in Dumfries, and will cover all periods from pre-history to skateboard parks. The organisation is using NLHF funding for work on resilience and meeting community need.

RTPI: Jenny Munro reported that a new [Chief Executive, Rachel Fisher](#), formerly of DEFRA in the UK Government, is in place. Rachel visited RTPI Scotland staff and Members in her initial weeks. RTPI Scotland has made submissions to the Infrastructure Strategy and Home-building consultations and will publish these soon. Post-election engagement planning is in development to continue to promote [the Planifesto vision](#). A post-election RTPI Member breakfast is taking place in Edinburgh on 12 June, and will [open for bookings soon](#). The next edition of [Scottish Planner](#) will appear in mid-May, and will have a rural focus. The [Planning Excellence Awards ceremony](#) will take place in Greenock on 15 June.

HA: Lydia Gibson said [The Heritage Alliance](#) is pleased to have agreed a reciprocal Membership arrangement with BEFS, and that there is good overlap with BEFS Members and their equivalents in England. Like BEFS, the Alliance's work includes engaging in public consultations, focusing on those that are England-only or UK-wide, including the recent [tourism inquiry by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee](#). Current activity includes finalising a Place-making report, featuring case studies and a review of literature, which is due in September. An advice report on academic partnership work is also in development. The Alliance is also expanding its policy focus from nationwide activity into English regions, including mayorships.

HH: Jonathan Hunt said Historic Houses Members are preparing for a rise in staycations resulting from jet fuel shortages and instability in some international regions. Members continue to demonstrate concern for uncertainty and restrictions on short-term lets. The Annual General Meeting will be held in early June near Perth.

Bill Pagan (individual): There is local optimism in Cupar, Fife, for raising the first round of funding for [a community asset transfer of the Cupar Building](#). Cupar Development Trust will be interested in learning more about HES plans to empower communities that engage with historic buildings.

SCT: DJ-Johnson Smith said [the ReACH Project](#) is actively developing a social value toolkit. SCT is [continuing to monitor church closures](#); it has counted 400 since 2020 and anticipates as many as 450 more by 2030. A recent visit to Scotland by the Diocese of Toronto further illustrates that this is an international problem. The [closure of the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme in Scotland](#) is a major concern. SCT will continue to advocate for a replacement programme.

NLHF: Diane Gray said the [Heritage 2033](#) ten-year strategy is entering a new 2026-2029 delivery period, with the delivery plan due for publication later in 2026. This is not expected to be a huge departure from the current approach, but may feature some changes to the current set of [strategic initiatives](#). A new Trustee for Scotland, [Heather Reid](#), has taken up post and is meeting with stakeholders including HES and the National Library for Scotland. A partnership event with DTAS on [New Futures: Former Places of Worship](#) will take place in Edinburgh on 28 May.

EWH: Alison Morris reported that five year funding support from HES has been confirmed. The [Edinburgh Visitor Levy funding](#) includes public realm improvements for old town closes and graveyards. EWH is continuing to develop and progress existing

projects, and plan for the next three-year and five-year delivery periods with its respective funders.

7. Any Other Business

Two items were raised:

- Simon asked HEWG Members to think about their priorities for public sector reform, given multiple pre-election party manifestos featured policy commitments on this;
- Bruce said a new Culture Bill also looked likely, presenting a further consideration for HEWG as to how we shape this.

Next HEWG: In-person in [The Crannie Community Hub](#), 9 Cranston Street, Edinburgh, on Tuesday 25 August, 10am-noon.

Action Points

1. BEFS will invite HEWG Members to establish a fire safety and heritage short-life working group, with a view to forming a set of policy and practice recommendations.

End of meeting note by Derek Rankine, BEFS | derekr@befsf.org.uk | 18 May 2026