Historic Environment Policy for Northern Ireland

Department for Communities Consultation

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in Northern Ireland.
For information only: Scotland, England, and Wales.

1 Executive Summary

The Department for Communities (DfC) recently consulted on proposals for a new Historic Environment Policy for Northern Ireland. The proposed policy would establish the strategic direction and priorities for the management, protection and use of Northern Ireland's historic environment.

The historic environment encompasses the physical remains of human activity over time, including archaeological sites and monuments, historic buildings, landscapes and other heritage assets – whether visible, buried or submerged. DfC identifies the historic environment as an important contributor to Northern Ireland's sense of place, identity and distinctiveness.

The consultation sets out a draft vision and 17 proposed policy aims, grouped around three broad themes: strengthening, connecting and innovating. These aim to support the protection and conservation of heritage assets while also recognising the contribution that the historic environment can make to communities, regeneration, tourism, sustainability, skills, education and wellbeing.

The proposals are relevant to district councils given their responsibilities for local development planning, place-making, regeneration, tourism and wider community development. The consultation also considers how the historic environment can contribute to sustainable development and support local communities.

APSE encourages its Northern Ireland member councils to consider the proposals in the context of their own local heritage assets, priorities and capacity, and hopes our member authorities responded to the consultation where appropriate. Responses were due by **Friday 23 October**.

Click here to read the full report.

2 Overview

The Department for Communities (DfC) is responsible for policy relating to the historic environment in Northern Ireland. While Northern Ireland has a range of existing legislation, policies, programmes and guidance relating to heritage, DfC is now seeking to establish a dedicated Historic Environment Policy to provide a strategic framework for the future.

The proposed policy forms part of the Department's wider Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme, which was established in 2024 to provide a more comprehensive approach to Northern Ireland's cultural policies. The programme is intended to support the conservation, protection and promotion of cultural heritage and the historic environment, alongside separate policy development covering areas including arts, museums and public libraries.

DfC states that development of the Historic Environment Policy has involved engagement with Executive departments, district councils and relevant arm's-length bodies, as well as research into practice elsewhere in the UK and internationally.

2.1 The proposed policy

The consultation proposes 17 policy aims, structured around three broad themes: Strengthening, Connecting and Innovating.

Strengthening: focuses on improving the protection, conservation and management of Northern Ireland's historic environment. This includes supporting the condition and resilience of heritage assets, improving knowledge and evidence, developing heritage skills and encouraging appropriate maintenance and investment.

The proposals recognise that climate change presents an increasing challenge for the historic environment. Historic buildings, monuments and landscapes can be vulnerable to changing weather patterns and other environmental pressures. The policy therefore considers how the historic environment can be managed in a way that improves its resilience while retaining its significance.

Connecting: considers the relationship between people, communities and heritage. DfC proposes greater opportunities for people to engage with and understand the historic environment, including through improved access, education, interpretation and participation. The consultation also recognises the contribution that heritage can make to local identity, sense of place and community cohesion.

Innovating: focuses on finding new ways to use and manage the historic environment and recognising its wider value. This includes opportunities for heritage-led regeneration, sustainable reuse and adaptation of historic buildings, tourism, economic development, skills and wellbeing.

The policy therefore seeks to move beyond viewing the historic environment solely in terms of individual heritage assets. Instead, it considers how heritage can form part of broader approaches

to creating distinctive, sustainable and successful places.

2.2 Relevance to local authorities

The proposed policy has clear implications for local government. District councils have an important role in planning and shaping the places in which people live, work and visit, and the historic environment forms part of this wider responsibility.

The Historic Environment Division of the DfC already works with councils in relation to Local Development Plans (LDPs), through providing evidence and advice on the historic environment and supporting local councils to take account of heritage when preparing LDPs. Councils are also responsible for considering the historic environment through development management and planning services.

The proposed policy could therefore provide a wider strategic context for councils when considering how local heritage contributes to their own priorities. This may include the role of historic buildings and places in town centre regeneration activity, tourism, local identity, community development and environmental sustainability.

The consultation also highlights the potential for heritage to support the reuse and adaptation of existing buildings. This could be particularly relevant where councils are considering how vacant or underused historic buildings and other heritage assets can contribute to regeneration and wider place-making objectives.

There are also practical considerations for councils. Effective management of the historic environment can require access to specialist knowledge, appropriate skills, funding, and technical expertise. DfC has identified skills and capacity as issues affecting the wider historic environment, while existing programmes have demonstrated the potential for partnership working the Department, councils, communities and heritage organisations.

For councils, the consultation therefore provides an opportunity not only to consider the policy aims themselves, but also to highlight the practical conditions needed for local government to contribute effectively to their delivery.

The policy may also have particular relevance to rural councils and communities. DfC has undertaken a Rural Needs Impact Assessment alongside the consultation, recognising that the historic environment can play an important role in rural communities and places.

3 Consultation Questions

The consultation questions are categorised as follows:

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The consultation questions are available in full below:

1. Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?
   Individual; Organisation

2. If you are responding on behalf of an organisation, please provide the organisation's name.

3. Consent to publication of consultation responses. (We will remove any personal names / personal data from any published responses).
   I agree that all or parts of my consultation response may be published;
   I do not agree that my consultation response is published

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with our draft vision?
   Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

5. Please provide us with any comments you may have on our draft vision.

6. **Aim 1:** Developing best practice to identify and safeguard our historic environment.
   Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

7. **Aim 2:** Developing a highly skilled workforce to conserve and sustainably develop our historic environment.
   Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

8. **Aim 3:** Investing in the capacity of owners, volunteers and organisations to care for and use historic assets to meet their needs.
   Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

9. **Aim 4:** Empowering communities to adapt, enhance and re-use historic assets, drive regeneration and shape distinctive places.
   Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

10. **Aim 5:** Using heritage assets to contribute to Programme for Government outcomes including a Stronger Economy, Better Homes, Healthier Lives and Brighter Futures.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

11. **Aim 6:** Maintaining and managing the historic environment in the face of environmental challenges.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

12. **Aim 7:** Supporting inclusive and diverse access to historic places for everyone.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

13. **Aim 8:** Exploring the potential for historic places to support wellbeing and quality of life.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

14. **Aim 9:** Aligning the care of heritage assets with distinctive places, landscapes and seascapes, supporting biodiversity.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

15. **Aim 10:** Proudly showcasing, promoting and marketing our unique historic environment locally and internationally.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

16. **Aim 11:** Embedding transboundary and international cooperation into the historic environment.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

17. **Aim 12:** Partnering with government departments, public bodies and agencies, as well as asset owners, landowners and volunteers, to use the historic environment creatively.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

18. **Aim 13:** Reaching out: supporting heritage education and activity for inspiration, learning and enjoyment.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

19. **Aim 14:** Evolving our shared understanding through accessible research, surveys, records, artefacts and archives.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

20. **Aim 15:** Emphasising the contribution of our historic places to peace, community cohesion, good relations and healing through heritage.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

21. **Aim 16:** Collaborating with others to provide an evidence base for the catalytic effect of heritage investment.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

22. **Aim 17:** Driving innovation and enterprise so that the historic environment and people who access and use it benefit from research, new technologies and new ways of working.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

23. An assessment should be made of the capital needs of the Heritage, Culture and Creativity (HCC) sectors and a strategy to address them developed.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

24. A programme of research should be implemented to explore the social and economic value of the HCC sectors, (including the contribution of the sectors which support the historic environment) to the priorities established in the Programme for Government and other Government policy and programmes.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

25. An assessment of skills requirements across the heritage/historic environment sector should be undertaken, in the context of a wider HCC review and a strategy to address need developed.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

26. Work should be undertaken across the HCC sectors to develop new networks with a view to catalysing new potential and building innovative new projects and partnerships.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

27. Work should be undertaken to support the HCC sectors adapt to the current funding environment by exploring the means to maximise revenue streams beyond public funding and by applying existing, available, funding options.
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

28. Please provide us with any comments you have on the proposed HCC Programme-level Actions.

29. Do you agree that the strategic environmental assessment of Historic Environment Policy has identified any key positive and/or negative impacts with regard to other environmental strategies, policies and programmes?
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

30. Please provide us with any comments you have, including possible unintended consequences of the proposals and any practical difficulties you foresee in implementing them.

31. Do you agree or disagree with the approach outlined in the SEA to Metrics to measure the impact of Historic Environment Policy?
    Strongly agree; Agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Disagree; Strongly disagree

32. Please provide any comments to explain your answer, or any suggested alternative metrics.

4 APSE Comment

APSE welcomes the opportunity for Northern Ireland's local authorities to contribute to the development of a new Historic Environment Policy.

The historic environment can make an important contribution to the places and communities that local authorities serve. Its role extends beyond the protection of individual heritage assets and can support wider local authority priorities including regeneration, place-making, tourism, community development and environmental sustainability.

APSE encourages Northern Ireland member councils to consider how the proposed policy aligns with their existing local priorities and the particular heritage assets and challenges within their areas. Councils may also wish to consider the practical implications of the proposals, including the availability of funding, specialist skills, technical advice and capacity to support effective implementation.

The consultation also provided an opportunity for councils to share their experience of working with communities, heritage organisations and other partners to protect and make use of their local heritage.

5 How can APSE help?

APSE will continue to monitor the development of the Historic Environment Policy and share relevant updates with its Northern Ireland network.

All APSE members can access the APSE Northern Ireland network, which provides updates, information, and opportunities to engage with colleagues across local government in Northern Ireland. Members can keep up to date with regional activities, events, policy developments, and networking opportunities by visiting the Northern Ireland members' area. You can access the network using this link: APSE Northern Ireland

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Sign up for APSE membership to enjoy a whole range of benefits

APSE member authorities have access to a range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular network meetings, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The networks are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Networks are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all in-person meetings end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE Network meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area, please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national networks include:-

- FM and Building Cleaning
- Catering (School Meals)
- Cemeteries and Crematoria
- Highways and Street Lighting
- Housing, Construction and Building Maintenance
- Social Value, Procurement and Commercialisation Network
- Parks, Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance
- Renewables and Climate Change
- Roads, Highways and Street Lighting
- Sports and Leisure Management
- Vehicle Maintenance and Transport
- Veterans and Military Champions Network
- Local Government Reorganisation Network
- Waste Management, Recycling and Street Cleansing

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