

Managing Change in the Historic Environment: The Use and Adaptation of Listed Buildings

Introduction and Purpose of the Document

Background

Managing Change is a series of guidance notes issued by Historic Environment Scotland in our role as lead public body for the historic environment. They support national level policy for planning and the historic environment. Planning and other authorities should take them into account when making decisions.

Historic buildings enrich Scotland's landscape and chart a great part of our history. They are central to our everyday lives, creating a sense of place, identity and wellbeing. Some historic buildings are designated as 'listed buildings' because they have special architectural or historic interest.

Listed building consent (LBC) is required for any works that would affect the special interest of a listed building. The LBC process is normally administered by planning authorities.

This guidance note is a key consideration when significant alterations to a listed building are proposed. It is aimed both at applicants and at those making decisions on LBC applications for changes to listed buildings.

Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) states that 'listed buildings should be protected from demolition or other work that would adversely affect it or its setting' (paragraph 141). Historic Environment Policy (HEP) 4 identifies the principle that significant harm to specific assets should be avoided.

HEP 4

When considering changes to specific assets and their context, significant harm should be avoided. Opportunities for enhancement should be sought where appropriate. Where detrimental impacts are unavoidable, these should be minimised and mitigation measures put in place.

Purpose of this guidance

This guidance note is designed to support, promote and enable the continued use, reuse and adaptation of listed buildings.

The majority of listed buildings are in active use. Most require some form of ongoing active use to justify the cost of maintaining and repairing them, particularly as such costs can often be substantial.

Many listed buildings are still being used in their originally intended way – ranging from residential and recreational to industrial and transportation. The protection of the special interest of a listed building will need to be balanced with other interests, which will be, in part, defined by its current use.

This guidance is focussed towards cases where more significant alterations to listed buildings are required.

These are likely to fall in to one of the three following categories:

- comprehensive refurbishment of listed buildings so that they can remain in their existing use
- adaptation of buildings for new uses
- re-development of larger and more complex sites that may have a number of listed buildings or other heritage assets

If proposed alterations are less significant, our [other guidance in the Managing Change series](#) is likely to be relevant. This includes guidance on windows, boundary treatments, roofs, doorways, external walls and features.

This guidance focusses on the use and reuse of listed buildings. However, similar principles will, of course, be relevant for historic buildings more generally.

Potential applicants for comprehensive and significant schemes of refurbishment should ask for pre-application advice from the planning authority as early as possible in the process. In most cases, this will be the local council. The planning authority should then ask us to be involved where the building is listed at category A or B. If the planning authority is also the applicant, they should consult us for category C listed buildings as well.

Planning authorities should identify which planning and/or historic environment policies they will use to assess an application, and what supporting information will be required, and they should do this as soon as possible. This helps to avoid later delays. They should also seek our advice on these issues if applicable.

Key messages

1. Listed buildings cover all aspects of Scotland's history and highlight our national, regional and local distinctiveness. They make a significant contribution to the quality of our environment, providing benefits to our collective cultural, social and economic well-being. The benefits that they offer can only be secured by their continued use, reuse and active management.
2. Once a listed building has been lost it cannot be replaced. Demolishing a listed building is a last resort and should be avoided wherever possible –

there will always be a strong presumption to retain listed buildings. It is important to protect buildings and ensure they remain in use, or where this has not been possible, look to secure alternative sympathetic uses.

3. Decisions affecting listed buildings should be based on careful consideration and understanding of their special interest. While this will largely rest on the physical fabric of a building, all aspects of cultural significance should be fully considered.
4. Listed buildings will usually require alteration and adaptation from time to time to make sure they can still be used sustainably. They are therefore at risk when it becomes challenging to alter and adapt them as needed. Change can normally be successfully achieved without significantly harming the special interest of a listed building if change is approached carefully. Proposals that keep listed buildings in active use, or bring a redundant building back into active use, should be supported in principle as long as they minimise harm.
5. Extensive alterations to a listed building will almost always be a better option than demolition. If the only way to save a building is a radical intervention, we have to avoid being too cautious in exploring the options. This will be especially true if there is a risk that the building will be otherwise totally lost.
6. The reuse and adaptation of listed buildings is a positive active step. The presence of a listed building can help to stimulate regeneration and renewal in a creative and imaginative way. The retention and reuse of key historic buildings within an area can act as an engine of positive change. It can be a focus for the highest-quality new design – anchoring a new development and integrating it more successfully within its wider context.

Why the Use and Adaptation of Listed Buildings is Important

Listed buildings, designated as being of special architectural and historic interest, are important. They enrich Scotland's towns and landscape and are central to our everyday lives. They help us to understand and learn about our culture and history. They show us – in a physical, tangible way – distinctive differences in national, regional and local character. They help give us all a sense of place, identity and wellbeing.

The continued use of buildings is sustainable and 'green'. The use and reuse of buildings retains their embodied energy expended in the original construction and sourcing of materials. Retention saves carbon associated with new-build, including costs in new materials, transport, demolition, landfill and new infrastructure.

The best use of a listed building is almost always going to be the one for which it was designed. Keeping a building in the same use helps us to understand what the building was originally designed for. It can also help to protect any associations and special meanings that the building has – part of its intangible value.

Historic school buildings are a good example of listed buildings which have met the evolving needs of successive generations. They can provide a clear link to the past and sense of continuity between families and generations. Many of these buildings remain in use as places of learning, contributing to the identity and distinctiveness of local communities.

New uses may enable us to retain much of the fabric and special interest of a building, but they will always have an impact on its intangible value. The process of conversion will have some impact on cultural significance, regardless of how well it is handled. The continued use of a listed building for its original function will normally be the best way to retain its cultural significance.

Sometimes listed buildings are abandoned in favour of new buildings before their owners or users have fully explored options to reuse or adapt them. Reuse of a building is an opportunity to retain the best qualities of the building, whilst also providing high quality, new and upgraded facilities. The refurbishment of listed buildings should not be seen as a compromise, or somehow an inferior option.

Incorporating an existing building within an overall scheme might require additional thought and consideration, but can lead to a more considered, imaginative and ultimately successful development. There is a long and successful history of reusing listed buildings for a variety of new uses. Historic buildings are readily suitable for adaptation to new uses, and features such as tall floor to ceiling heights and robust traditional construction can make them more adaptable and desirable.

How to Secure the Continued Use or Reuse of Listed Buildings

Understanding Significance – know your building

Most applications for alterations to listed buildings are approved. This fact shows that listed buildings are not incapable of change; and it shows too that it is not only applications for minimal alterations that are successful.

However, there is the potential for conflict. This is much more likely if the owners of the building, and the decision-makers, do not fully understand the special interest and significance of the listed building. Understanding what is important about a listed building is an essential first step in understanding how to protect its special interest.

The particular qualities of a listed building which contribute to its special interest and significance will, inevitably, vary considerably. All listed buildings will include the physical evidence of the past preserved in their fabric, and some elements of their fabric may make a large contribution to the building's interest. They will also all have a certain architectural style which can be 'read' and understood – this might reflect local, national, or even international movements.

Some types of buildings are rarer than others, and some buildings will have survived with fewer changes – which will mean they are closer to their original design,

structure and appearance. Buildings with a more public focus, such as schools and churches, and even pubs, may have wider associations and meaning within a community.

Lots of buildings are multi-phased. Buildings may have been successively extended, modified and added to over the years. In urban areas, the current boundaries of a site may have resulted from a connection of once separate buildings. In these cases in particular, it is unlikely that all the parts of a building or site have the same level of interest. Anyone responsible for looking after listed buildings should have an understanding of the significance of a building or a site's component parts before planning changes to it.

Normally, the best way for owners to communicate the significance of a building is through an illustrated written statement, often called a conservation statement. The length and detail of a statement will depend on individual circumstances. In some cases a minimal statement should be sufficient. In more complicated circumstances, such as large buildings (or groups of buildings) with a complicated history of development, a more comprehensive statement might be needed.

Conservation statements can sometimes be incorporated into other documents, such as design statements. Many planning authorities now ask for design statements as part of the LBC process. In other cases, it can be more helpful to produce a standalone document – this can allow the content to stay the same, even if the development proposals change and evolve.

If a listed building has a recent (or recently updated) list description this will likely provide a detailed overview of significance. In some cases this will mean that a more detailed assessment is not required. List descriptions can be found via the [Historic Environment Portal](#) on our website.

We have also prepared [a guide to researching historic buildings](#), which looks at the resources available for investigating the history of a building.

Approaches to Intervention and Adaptation to Allow Continued Use

We will maintain a list of case studies which will illustrate the range of interventions that have helped enable listed buildings to remain in use, or have helped secure an alternative new use.

An initial batch of case studies is currently being prepared and will be published alongside this guidance.

Owners should consider all options to allow the continued use of a listed building. The adaptation, alteration, extension and even partial demolition of the building are all options which can, in the right circumstances, form part of the solution.

A solution may involve one, or a mix of, the following approaches:

- 1) Minimal intervention

- 2) Adaptation
- 3) Extension
- 4) Selective demolition
- 5) Enabling

Owners should investigate each approach carefully. Through this process, the vast majority of listed buildings can be adapted to either maintain their existing use, or secure a new one.

1) Minimal Intervention

Minimal intervention is defined as being the least necessary works to allow the use of a building. This is therefore a conservation-based approach and will generally involve retaining most, if not all, of the building and its component parts. It should also repair and restore existing features, internally and externally, where necessary. Where alterations are proposed, these will be more minor in nature and may include the following:

- internal redecoration and refurbishment
- upgrading of services within a building
- like-for-like replacement of component parts
- small-scale alterations

This is very close to maintaining the status quo – or the ‘do-nothing scenario’. Some listed buildings can be more easily refurbished. However, with many non-domestic buildings there will be other interests, likely to focus on the needs of the users of a building, which will mean that additional changes or interventions are needed.

Buildings that are used for education or health care are particularly likely to need additional alterations to remain in active use. This reflects the huge changes that have taken place in these work areas in the time since many historic schools, hospitals and other facilities were built.

2) Adaptation

The first step towards finding a practical scheme of adaptation is to look critically at the existing building to see what alterations are feasible. It will normally involve working within the existing building envelope, focusing more on internal alterations. Smaller scale additions and removals might also be required.

The interest and quality of an interior will vary in every listed building. Some public buildings, like town halls, may have very important interiors. For the most part, buildings that are not used as homes, such as schools and hospitals, will have interiors that are more utilitarian, and designed for use rather than appearance. They may therefore be capable of more radical change, including the removal of internal walls to create larger spaces.

Non-domestic buildings are also more likely to have been internally altered a lot in the past. These alterations can impact on their original character and appearance, and may mean that they are now capable of a greater degree of change without harm to the factors that led to the building's being listed. However, if the interior is of particular importance it is best to look at other options first.

Further guidance on internal alterations is provided in our [Managing Change Guidance Note on Interiors](#).

In certain circumstances, adaptation can provide opportunities to restore the appearance and special interest of a listed building. Conservation-based approaches can involve removing later additions of little interest on the exterior of a building. It can also include positive changes internally, such as taking down later partitions and suspended ceilings, which can help to restore a building to its original plan-form and room proportions. Such works can often revitalise old buildings, giving them a new lease of life. Successful conservation-based solutions on one part of a site or building can sometimes be balanced by more interventionist changes or additions involving less-significant elements elsewhere within the scheme.

3) Extension

Many listed buildings have the capacity for some form of extension. In some cases, particularly non-domestic situations, buildings can successfully accommodate sizeable additions. Extensions should not overwhelm the original listed building – they should normally be subordinate in terms of height, scale and massing. They should not be put on the main or principal elevations. The existing characteristics of the site and buildings will determine what size and location is appropriate for any extensions.

Sometimes an extension is essential to keep the listed building in use. In these cases, the decision-maker will have to balance this against any adverse impacts. There will also be some circumstances where all elevations of a building have been designed to be visible and appreciated. In these cases, other options for the site may have to be considered, including excavation for new facilities, or new free-standing buildings in the grounds.

4) Selective Demolition

Selective demolition is a different consideration from substantial demolition, which would involve the total or substantial loss of a listed building.

Selective demolition involves the 'sacrificial' removal, or demolition, of parts of a listed building in order to enable the significant parts of a listed building not to be lost. Later extensions of little interest, or even less important component parts of the original building are likely to be the best candidates for removal.

Most buildings have a primary 'display' frontage or principal façade, and often the building's flanks were also intended to be seen. Important frontages were treated

accordingly, with enhanced architectural treatments, such as decorative carving and dressed stone. These features are part of the special interest of the building, and should be kept.

Sometimes the extent of removal of fabric can be radical. The most extreme form of this is known as 'façade retention'. This term refers to the removal of all but the principal façade or façades of a building, with an entirely new structure built behind.

Façade retention schemes will not normally be appropriate because of the degree of loss they entail. However, in the right place, a façade retention scheme might be an appropriate course of action. This is usually in an urban context, particularly when the façades are of such special interest that they could continue to be a listed building in their own right.

Façade retention will normally only be appropriate if the interior has already been lost or is not of special interest. The advantage of façade retention is that it gives complete freedom to provide a new internal layout behind.

5) Enabling

In planning, 'enabling development' has a very specific purpose; it allows development to take place which would normally be contrary to planning policies, in order to obtain a desired objective. This might include the reuse of an historic asset, particularly if it would mean saving it from continued deterioration and loss.

In such cases the enabling development should be the minimum necessary to secure the asset's future. In many cases the opportunity for enabling development will depend on the availability of land, which can only be developed once. The completion of the enabling development should therefore be tied into the reuse of the historic asset, such as by a planning / legal agreement.

Grant aid

Where the cost of works is higher than the end value, the difference is referred to as the 'conservation deficit'. Where proposals show a conservation deficit, grant aid may be able to help. Under our [Historic Environment Repair Grant program](#) we can offer grants from £10,000 - £500,000 to support conservation-standard repair projects. You can also find advice on further sources of funding [on our website](#).

Minimising Risk to Empty or Underused Buildings

When a group or organisation moves out of a listed building, the building will often stand empty for a period of time. This is more likely to be the case in situations such as a school relocating, where the building may need a new use before it can be used again.

Once a building is empty or underused it is immediately at risk. It is often challenging to spend money on a building with no readily identifiable use. This means that maintenance and minor repairs may stop, and the building can quickly fall into a cycle of decline. In the most severe cases, this can lead to loss. Unmaintained buildings can quickly deteriorate, and often attract other risks such as vandalism and arson.

It is therefore vital to minimise the time a building remains empty. One of the best ways to do this is to start planning for the period in which the building will be empty well in advance of moving out.

A quick turnaround from one use to another is likely to be better for the building and more financially viable. However, this is not always possible; and often time is required to consider and develop schemes for alternative uses. In many cases, this can be happening at the same time as marketing and a change in ownership which can further complicate and extend the process.

The only way to maintain and repair a vacant building and prevent it falling into disrepair is proactive management. This is also the best way to make it more attractive to potential new owners. Empty buildings can be viewed negatively and seen as eyesores, their potential masked by disrepair.

In such cases the goodwill of the community towards a building may seep away if nothing is seen to be being done. Although 'mothballing' an asset may be successful in the short to medium term, it is not a long term solution.

A range of actions can be taken to help manage the risk and to buy time to allow a long term solution to develop. These can be broadly grouped as temporary fixes, and "meanwhile" uses.

Temporary fixes normally involve the pragmatic use of cheaper non-traditional materials in repair works. This might include plastic rainwater goods instead of cast iron, felt instead of lead (particularly if theft is an issue) and metal sheeting or even tarpaulins in roof repairs. Short term security measures or aesthetic works (for example, painted shop boarding) may also be helpful. Works of this type can tide the building over and will be reversible once a longer term solution to reuse the building is found.

A "meanwhile" use is the occasional or temporary use of vacant buildings or land until they can be brought back into long term viable use. These can often be for socially beneficial purposes, such as temporary offices for a charity or hostels. Maintaining a building in some sort of use, even as storage, will assist in safeguarding its long-term future.

Further and more detailed advice can be found within our [Buildings at Risk Toolkit](#).

Finding a New Use

Normally, when a building changes use, it will involve a change of ownership. This will often happen when schools, hospitals or businesses relocate, for example. With large sites, experienced developers will often be needed, due to the scale of works and finance required.

When putting a building or site to the open market there may be competing interests. The existing owner will want to maximise its sales value; potential new owners will want to make a profit; decision-makers will want to preserve the listed building, in line with planning policy.

The reuse of listed buildings will have planning implications, such as complying with the policies and land allocations within the Local Development Plan. There may also be other constraints which should be identified and made clear to all parties from the outset.

An effective way to manage expectations, and secure a good outcome, can be to promote a positive case for any development through the initial sales and marketing process. One way of doing this is for the planning authority to produce a planning brief, which can stand alongside a conservation statement. This should set out what is likely to be achievable for the site – and give prospective buyers more certainty.

A planning brief can cover a single building or, more commonly, be used to guide development over large sites which may include numerous heritage assets. These documents should form part of the sales literature, which may also include contact details for individuals involved within local authorities and, if applicable, ourselves.

Wherever possible, sites should be sold and retained as a whole, rather than subdivided into lots. This allows a more co-ordinated redevelopment. In sites which have larger areas of open ground, some form of enabling development may be required to achieve the reuse of a listed building. Dividing the site into separate lots would potentially remove this option and put the reuse of the asset at risk.

If possible, a planning brief should be in place (and the sales process initiated) before a listed building becomes empty. Briefs can also be used for sites that have been vacant for a long time and where it has been difficult to secure redevelopment. In some cases it may be helpful for the local authority to undertake a more comprehensive masterplanning exercise.

Where there are multiple buildings on a site, it is sometimes worth considering whether the removal of less significant buildings is possible in the interests of making the overall site more attractive to potential new owners. It may be helpful to progress consents regarding these less significant buildings before marketing takes place.

Valuing a Listed Building

For sites that contain listed buildings, the valuation has to presume their retention and take account of likely costs in repairing and reusing the buildings. Prospective purchasers should not pay a price inflated by the listed building's anticipated demolition.

If a buyer has assumed that a listed building can be demolished, this can result in significant delays. These delays can result in further deterioration in the condition of the building. The best way to make sure that any business decisions the buyer makes are fully informed is through pre-application advice at the beginning of the process.