

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE GUIDANCE (V.2026)



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

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WHAT IS INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE?

We define the historic environment as ‘the physical evidence for past human activity’. This means the historic environment is made up of physical objects. But those physical things are informed by many things that we can’t touch or feel. These intangible elements provide physical buildings, monuments, and landscapes with their identity, and inform our understanding of their value and significance.

[UNESCO’s Convention](#) on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) defines ICH as ‘the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage’.

UNESCO state three more important things about ICH:

- it is ‘traditional, contemporary, and living at the same time’
- it is ‘constantly changing and evolving’
- it ‘can only be heritage when it is recognised as such by the communities, groups, or individuals that create, maintain, and transmit it’

These statements recognise that ICH is not something static but instead something practiced and kept alive by people and communities, who adapt their practices to suit changing needs or contexts. The statements also focus attention on working to keep those current practices alive and in use in the present day, or on reviving practices that have fallen out of use, rather than on simply researching or trying to understand customs that were practiced historically. For this reason, ICH is often referred to as ‘living culture’ or ‘living heritage’.

ICH can come in many forms and guises. UNESCO identify five ‘domains’ to help us think about how ICH appears. These domains are simply a guide to thinking, and specific instances of ICH might touch on more than one domain:

- Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage
- Performing arts
- Social practices, rituals, and festive events
- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- Traditional craftsmanship

Scotland and ICH

In December 2023, the UK Government announced its intention to ratify the 2003 UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage. We are working closely with Scottish Government, the UK Government’s Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS), and Scottish partners to implement the convention following

ratification. However, at the moment the UK is still not a signatory to the Convention, and no formal systems or processes for listing or safeguarding ICH exist in Scotland. We are committed to supporting ICH and its practitioners in the interim though, and to helping safeguard it where our role and remit allow us to. We've published a [Policy Statement on ICH](#), and undertake work across our organisation to deliver against its priorities. [Our Past, Our Future: The Strategy for Scotland's Historic Environment](#) also recognises the value of ICH to the historic environment, as does the [Historic Environment Policy for Scotland](#).

How does ICH and the historic environment relate to each other?

There are many places where ICH and the historic environment connect. The most obvious is through traditional crafts, where the skills involved in building and repairing structures are essential to our ability to conserve many of our most loved buildings and monuments. Folklore - including songs, poetry, and stories - is also essential to helping us understand the history and significance of historic sites and landscapes, and how people understand and value them. Lots of buildings and monuments were also designed as places for rituals, customs, and performance and, while in many cases those traditions have died out, communities across Scotland still practice some of these customs in the present day. In some cases, new performances and practices have even sprung up in connection to sites or monuments, adding to our country's rich culture. As a result, not only does ICH inform our understanding of the historic environment and help us to keep it in use, but the historic environment can in turn help to keep ICH alive.

How do we support ICH?

We want to help 'safeguard' ICH. Safeguarding is about transferring not just skills and knowledge but also the meaning behind cultural expressions, and the context within which ICH is performed or used. Safeguarding might therefore include:

- Identifying - understanding ICH as *ICH*
- Researching - understanding more about a form of living heritage
- Recording and inventorying ICH - making available information about how ICH is practiced, how its use might have changed over time, and how it continues to change in the present day
- Transmission - helping to promote the sharing and uptake of ICH
- 'Valorisation' - celebrating ICH, advocating for its value, and helping people to understand and champion that value
- Business planning - helping people to make sustainable economic use of ICH

Because ICH as a term covers such a broad array of cultural practices and traditions, at HES we focus our resources on ICH as it relates to, and engages with, the historic environment. As such, while we will fund activities relating to ICH

safeguarding these must have a strong connection to the historic environment in Scotland to be eligible for our grants. And while we can and will fund projects focusing specifically on safeguarding ICH that connects to the historic environment, we encourage projects that work to safeguard both tangible and intangible heritage together: for instance, work that seeks to conserve a building or monument as well as a traditional skill or local folklore.

For funding applications that involve ICH, we'll look for evidence that you've thought about the ICH you're working with and the needs of the people who practice it, and that you've considered things like the preservation and accessibility of documents and records resulting from your work, or whether you might need to run events in Gaelic, Scots, BSL, or any of Scotland's other languages.

ICH is a new area of focus for our grants, and the landscape for ICH in Scotland is changing all the time. We will be tracking and monitoring our support for ICH and the outcomes our funding helps to realise and using this information to channel and improve the way we support ICH in conjunction with Scotland's other public bodies.

What ICH will we support?

At HES we talk about 'ICH in Scotland' rather than 'Scottish ICH'. We feel this concept best respects the diversity of Scotland's communities and the variety of cultural traditions practiced by people across the country. As such, while any form of ICH we fund *must* connect strongly to the historic environment in Scotland, we do not discriminate between forms of ICH or the people who practice them. You simply need to tell us how the ICH you want to work with connects to the historic environment, how the activities you're planning will help to safeguard it, and what plans you have to ensure the preservation of any records or documents resulting from the work. So, consider what you're trying to achieve and the needs of practitioners, and think about where the right home for your project outputs will be: keeping outputs as close to practitioner communities as possible will often be the best approach, as long as capacity to ensure their long-term preservation exists. You should also let us know if your project requires languages other than English and demonstrate how you plan to meet the accessibility needs of participants.

Any ICH projects we fund must align with our [Grants priorities](#), and with the criteria and eligibility requirements of [our Historic Environment Grants \(HEG\) programme](#).

Examples of ICH projects we might fund include, but are by no means limited to:

- Work that helps to document or pass on traditional skills connected to the historic environment in Scotland
- Work that helps to record or celebrate living cultural traditions or practices associated with the historic environment
- Work that helps to record or share folklore, songs, poems, or music connected to the historic environment, where those cultural traditions have an important role in helping us to understand the significance of a building or site, or the values that people accord to it
- Oral history projects, where this helps us to understand or record living heritage practices

What ICH won't we support?

In line with UNESCO's approach to ICH, we will not fund or work with ICH where traditions or customs cause harm to others, or where they might violate fundamental human rights. As outlined above, we also won't fund ICH that doesn't connect strongly with the historic environment in Scotland.

Examples of ICH projects we would not fund include, but are by no means limited to:

- Work involving folklore, poetry, stories, songs, crafts etc. that do not connect strongly to the historic environment
- Festivals, customs, or events that do not have an integral connection to a historic environment asset
- Projects that use the historic environment as a backdrop for production or sharing of food, unless food production or specific recipes are integrally linked to the history or identity of a particular building or site
- Projects purely concerned with protecting or promoting language – while we welcome projects in languages other than English, language itself is not a form of ICH

If you aren't sure if your project would be eligible for our funding, please check with us at grants@hes.scot.

Things to consider when working with ICH

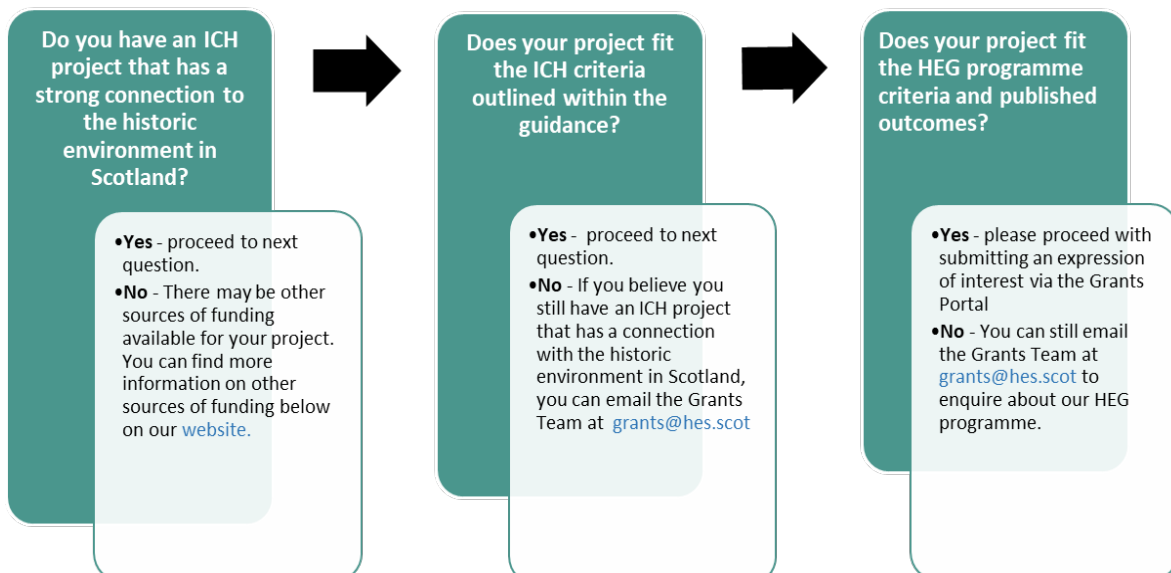
ICH is not always the easiest of concepts to grasp. So, when putting together your project plans you might want to consider the questions below. We've also compiled a short list of resources and links at the end of this document, through which you can find more details on these themes and examples of good practice.

When creating your project plans, you should consider:

- Is this really ICH? – are you proposing to work with *living* cultural traditions, that are being practiced in the here and now?

- How does the ICH in question connect to the historic environment? Is the historic environment fundamental to the ICH in question, or is any connection more incidental?
- Is your project idea more about using the historic environment as a backdrop to ICH, such as for sharing food or recipes or ways of making? Unless there's a strong link between those practices and the historic environment asset in question, we are unlikely to fund such activity.
- How will your proposed project help to safeguard ICH? If the ICH in question is at risk, how will your activities help to understand and/or address those risks?
- What action will you take to ensure the long-term preservation and accessibility of any records you produce from your work? Does your organisation have an archive to deposit material in, or do you have agreement from another organisation (e.g. a local museum or local authority archive) to deposit your material with them?
- Are any ethical issues likely to arise from your work? UNESCO have a [handy checklist](#) that can help you to consider what these might be and how to address them.
- If you aren't a community practitioner of ICH, have you consulted with practitioners and included them in the design of your project?
- Which of our grant outcomes will your project help to realise?

How to apply



CASE STUDIES

The examples below highlight a few of the ICH projects that we've funded in the past.

Bridgend Farmhouse – Designed Landscape

Grant awarded £4,992

This project focused on traditional skills training, using a 13th/14th century stone wall requiring repairs as a training site and delivering a stone wall restoration training programme. The Skills Development Co-ordinator (separately funded through the Scottish Government's Investing in Communities Programme) recruited trainees, liaised with the stonemason responsible for training, built partnerships, and provided work/life skills support.

The project targeted people from the area facing disadvantage, such as health inequalities, low educational attainment, poverty, and isolation, providing valuable skills training and enabled people to engage with heritage.

The work will help to safeguard ICH by helping to pass on traditional skills, and by improving the working conditions of ICH practitioners.

Coalfield Communities Landscape Partnership – Voices from the 'Lost Villages'

Grant awarded £70,000

This project worked with the Scottish Oral History Centre and aimed to capture the memories of those who were born and brought up in the 'Row Villages' in the East Ayrshire coalfields, using a cross-generation approach involving local school pupils & other groups to record the history of life in these communities.

Methods include oral history training for local communities, schools & other groups; recording interviews through film & audio; testimonies archived in Ayrshire & Glasgow; contribution to other projects within the community.

The project helped to safeguard ICH by increasing understanding of local traditions and customs, recording them, and making information about them more readily accessible.

ANNEX A: OTHER SOURCES OF FUNDING

Creative Scotland

Creative Scotland is Scotland's public body for the arts, screen, and creative industries. They offer funding to support both individuals and organisations to deliver creative activity and support creative organisations to enhance their business sustainability. Creative Scotland funding for ICH would typically be provided to support the use and celebration of creative and artistic ICH practices, although individuals can request support for research costs where research will inform resulting practice or creative responses.

You can find out more about Creative Scotland's funding on their website at <https://www.creativescotland.com/funding>

Museums Galleries Scotland

Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) is the national development body for Scotland's museum sector. MGS support Scotland's museums and galleries through strategic investment, advice, workforce development, and advocacy. MGS's main grant funding is only available to accredited museums, although they occasionally offer funding more widely. MGS funding for ICH would typically be provided to support the management of a museum's collections relating to ICH, or for projects using ICH to realise one of their grant outcomes. MGS are also an Expert Non-Governmental Organisation Advisor to UNESCO on the international ICH Convention, and we work regularly with them to put on skills and knowledge sharing events about ICH.

You can find out more about MGS's funding on their website at <https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/fundings/> or their work around ICH at <https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/advice-article/introduction-to-intangible-cultural-heritage-ich/>

National Lottery Heritage Fund

The National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) are the largest funder for heritage in the United Kingdom and offer support for a broad range of projects that connect people and communities to heritage. They will support ICH projects where that work is community-led or involves collaboration or co-production with communities, and where activity delivers against their priority outcomes.

You can find out more about NLHF's funding for ICH at <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/funding/good-practice-guidance/intangible-cultural-heritage-guidance#heading-5>

Heritage Crafts Association

The Heritage Crafts Association (HCA) is a UK-wide charity that works to support and safeguard traditional heritage crafts. Their work helps to identify crafts at risk and ways that practitioners can be supported to share or pass on knowledge and skills related to their work. The HCA offer a small amount of funding for projects that support and promote crafts listed on the [Red List of Endangered Crafts](#).

You can find out more about the HCA's funding, and a checklist of other potential sources of funding for traditional crafts, at <https://heritagecrafts.org.uk/funding/>

Scotland's Regional Enterprise Agencies

Both [Highlands and Islands Enterprise](#) and [South of Scotland Enterprise](#) offer support to businesses, social enterprises, and community trusts working in tourism and the creative industries. Neither will fund ICH projects, but they can support organisations who work with ICH if you're looking to expand your business or use ICH as part of your organisation's social mission.

ANNEX B: OTHER RESOURCES

UNESCO

UNESCO have a raft of material and resources that can help you learn more about ICH. Their constellation of living heritage is a great way to explore more, and you can find it at <https://ich.unesco.org/dive/constellation/>

UNESCO also have a list of good safeguarding practices for ICH that might help you to consider the right approach in safeguarding the ICH you work with. You can find out more about this at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/register>

TRACS Wee Guide to ICH

Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland (TRACS) is a co-operative network which champions traditional music, song, storytelling, dance, crafts, customs, and local languages in Scotland. They bring together forums on Traditional Music, Storytelling, and Traditional Dance, run the Scottish Storytelling Centre in Edinburgh, and run projects across Scotland relating to ICH. TRACS have developed a short guide to ICH with some useful links, and you can find it at <https://tracscotland.org/news-post/newsid/24850-a-wee-guide-to-intangible-cultural-heritage/>

HES How to Record Oral Histories Guide

The HES website has a series of resources for people and communities looking to understand and record heritage, whether tangible or intangible. A good place to start is our *Talking About Heritage* guidance, which you can find at <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=3ff44de6-4154-4e48-bb78-ae8a016c450b>

We've also produced some advice specifically for recording oral histories, which you can find at <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationid=71d62eff-8172-4dc9-9847-aafc01236193>

Oral History Society Guidance

The Oral History Society also have some handy advice on conducting oral histories, and particularly around how to deal with the legal and ethical issues surrounding recording. You can find out more at <https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/>

Scottish Council on Archives' Community Archives Toolkit

Managing records and collections relating to ICH can be a challenge, especially for smaller organisations. But the Scottish Council on Archives have produced an excellent set of resources that can guide you through the process, from first steps to more detailed guidance on managing and sharing digital records. You can find their toolkit at <https://www.scottisharchives.org.uk/community-archives/scottish-community-archives-toolkit/>

ANNEX C: DIAGRAM TEXT ALTERNATIVE

Do you have an ICH project that has a strong connection to the historic environment?

- Yes – go to next question.
- No – there may be other sources of funding available for your project. You can find more information on other sources of funding on our website.

Does your project fit the ICH criteria outlined in the guidance?

- Yes – go to next question.
- No – if you believe you still have an ICH project that has a connection with the historic environment in Scotland, you can email the Grants Team at grants@hes.scot.

Does your project fit the HEG programme criteria and published outcomes?

- Yes – please proceed with submitting an expression of interest via the Grants Portal.
- No – you can still e-mail the Grants Team at grants@hes.scot to enquire about our HEG programme.