Collaborating for Communities: Strengthening support for community heritage in Scotland – Summary Report

Background

On Thursday 19 March 2026 an in-person workshop entitled '*Collaborating for Communities: Strengthening support for Community heritage in Scotland*' was held at Made in Stirling in Stirling.

The workshop was hosted and facilitated by the Our Past, Our Future (OPOF) National Strategy team, with support from committee members of Scotland's Community Heritage Conversations (SCHC). In order to support delivery of the community focused priorities of OPOF, particularly Outcome Five: '*Communities have more opportunities to participate in decision-making about the historic environment*', the event aimed to:

- Share information to strengthen collaborations across organisations, maximising opportunities for community heritage participation
- Improve the data and evidence base for community heritage reporting in Our Past, Our Future
- Identify priority gaps and next steps for joint action to support resilient community heritage interests

Attendance

The event was attended by 31 attendees from 22 organisations, representing historic environment and adjacent sector organisations who provide support to community heritage organisations.

Summary of Workshop Content and Discussion

Welcome & Setting the Scene

Jilly Burns, National Strategy Programme Manager, provided the initial welcome to the event. She introduced the alignment with Our Past, Our Future, identified a working definition of community heritage and outlined the workshop aims.

There were then three short presentations:

Summary of Scoping Exercise and Emerging Gaps (Kirsty Haslam, National Strategy Coordinator)

All attendees were invited to share advance information about their organisation's support for community heritage. Mapping activity aimed to increase the potential for

collaboration and supported the identification of gaps in the sector's activity. This information was shared with attendees in advance along with a document briefly summarising other organisations that can, or do, provide support to community heritage in Scotland. Kirsty Haslam, National Strategy Coordinator, shared some initial reflections on this information which focused on:

- **Strengths and common themes**: strong and consistent commitment to supporting community heritage; extensive existing resources; forums, networks and events to encourage connection
- **Opportunities for collaboration**: potential to develop peer-learning; increased coordination of provision of resources and training; strengthening relations with adjacent sectors; co-ordination of existing data and evidence
- **Gaps & Questions**: refining communications/language; additional support required; deepening community participation; developing data and evidence to combat existing limitations

Data and Evidence for Community Heritage (Marjorie Perotto, National Strategy Data Analyst)

Marjorie Perotto, National Strategy Data Analyst, shared an overview of the existing data and evidence that can be used to understand the scope and impact of community engagement in Scotland's historic environment. She noted that the key indicators used in the OPOF Summary Baseline Report 2024 included the number of assets in community ownership, the availability of funding, tools and advice, case studies enabling participation, and resources to support community asset transfers.

Marjorie noted that the sector delivers much broader support for community heritage, but evidence is fragmented and it is challenging to evidence impact consistently. She noted that there is limited continuity in data collection, that community-driven work often goes uncounted in national data and that there is a lack of standardised measures, particularly for wellbeing activity.

Options to support the improvement of community heritage data and evidence could include:

- **Standards and shared measures**: providing a core indicator set with clear definitions, and a shared data dictionary, so we are working from a shared baseline and language across the sector
- **Templates and Tools**: pre-built templates, GPDR-consistent consent wording and light-touch analysis tools
- **Community Heritage support**: how-to guides and support for groups with limited digital access to allow community-led groups to make visible the scale of the local outcomes they are already delivering
- **Joined-up approach**: build from what organisations and communities need, starting small and growing in reaction to sector need

Supporting Thriving Community Heritage from the Grassroots: David Fayle, Scottish Community Heritage Alliance (SCHA) Committee Member

In 2024 and 2025, Scottish Community Heritage Alliance (SCHA) hosted 12 grassroots roadshows across Scotland, followed by six gatherings online. One of the aims of these roadshows was to hear from community heritage organisations about their challenges and priorities and to identify and report on issues unique to areas and common across the network.

The main issues identified were funding, volunteer recruitment & management, communications, succession planning, heritage at risk of loss, skills and training, networking and collaboration, and ensuring organisational survival and sustainability.

From these discussions, SCHA identified potential actions which David Fayle, SCHA Committee Member, outlined, acknowledging that SCHA had varied levels of ability to impact:

- **Guidance**: including mentoring from experienced / experts; relevant and targeted training; advice from peers; facilitate networking and collaboration (often at local level)
- **Resources**: Skills and Resources Sharing Platform for organisations to share equipment, knowledge or skills ('community heritage swap shop'); volunteering directory; diversification of funding resources, case studies of prime examples and skills to capitalise on opportunities; digitisation tools and support to use them
- **Institutional**: reduced opportunities for core, as opposed to project, funding & need for seed funding; plain language approach particularly for funding applications; more cohesive heritage sector; recognition for role and quality of grassroots heritage

Discussion One: Identifying Future Actions

In groups, attendees were invited to respond to the overarching question ***'Given the existing support, resources and data what actions or changes could we make to better support community heritage impact, sustainability and resilience?'.*** 'We' was defined as the historic environment and its adjacent sectors, partners and stakeholders.

After an initial group discussion, groups selected two priorities to feed back to the room. These priorities were used to inform the selection of themes for discussion in the afternoon discussion.

The identified priorities were:

- **Regional approaches** (to bridge local and national): recognising the diversification of regional need, increased focus on developing regional collaboration, partnerships and opportunities for shared learning/ funding
- **Heritage Identity & Messaging (advocacy about 'what heritage does'):** sddress heritage's 'image problem' as rigid and backward looking; tailor messaging to groups who don't feel they engage with heritage; better outreach to young people (although definition of 'young' varies)
- **Accessibility of sector:** sector language and sector can be alienating for organisations, particularly those who may not see themselves as community heritage organisations
- **Community-led policy**: importance of being led by community need, and centring communities – policy should derive from community-led priorities, and heritage should learn from other sectors
- **Data**: with a focus on collection of meaningful data that supports communities; develop support to establish shared metrics and reduce burden of data collection and reporting
- **Grassroots (impact)**: understanding the level and quality of impact of grassroots activity, and ensuring this is recognised and celebrated
- **Meet communities where they are**: providing support that responds to the needs and capacity of individual groups, and seeks opportunities for collaboration
- **Shared learning exchange**: share case studies and provide mutual support

Additional themes that recurred across group discussions were:

- **Community capacity & capability:** provide long-term support with a focus on skills and volunteer development. Support to consider income generation. Recognition that building capacity differs from building capability, and that organisations also need sufficient capability in place to fully benefit from capacity-building activities.
- **Funding**: review accessibility of language, smaller funding pots; understand on-the-ground need and encourage funders to come to communities rather than expect communities to navigate complex systems; longer-term funding models
- **Collaboration across and beyond the heritage sector**: to avoid duplication, support partnership working and simplify support infrastructure for community heritage organisations

Over lunch the National Strategy team combined identified priorities to take forward into the afternoon session.

Discussion Two: Prioritising Future Actions

Six identified priority themes were shared in two rounds with attendees, with a focus on who, what and when these priorities could be achieved. Attendees had the

opportunity to feed into each priority, with groups building from a preceding groups discussion.

A summary of each discussion is provided below, noting that the 'when' was consistent across priorities with an acknowledgement that all activity should be ongoing, build from what we have and include engagement with adjacent sectors:

1) Community Capacity / Capability Building

Who: Community heritage organisations and community anchor organisations, community heritage support organisations, third sector and community support bodies (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO), Scottish Community Alliance (SCA) etc.), education / skills development organisations, local authorities

What: Targeted work to include:

- Support for skills training, volunteer development and succession planning
- Advocacy for longer term funding
- Encouraging innovative thinking / commercialism

Need to be based in understanding of needs of individual community groups.

2) Shared Learning Environment

Who: Input from all organisations who support community heritage interests, with requirement for a lead or working group

What: Four avenues identified:

- Accessible online platform for learning resources (see Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) Training Programmes for reference), sorted by theme and to include opportunities to learn from what hasn't worked
- Online media library of case studies and interviews with practitioners; guidance and support films; potential for funders to incorporate into evaluation (i.e. recording project throughout)
- In-person meetings to develop community of practice with possibility of organised exchange visits
- Mailing List to promote support activity / training across the sector

3) Other Ways of Working (Regional / Cross-Sector)

Who: Community heritage organisations and community anchor organisations, community heritage support organisations, funding bodies; Bio Regional groups were identified, as well as MGS Geographic Forums; Discussion of University of Stirling Social Value Toolkit.

What: Identification of importance of peer-to-peer support and linking support with local place plans where these exist. Discussion on role of quantifying value of culture and heritage, included highlighting of cultural capital work and social value impact assessments.

4) Data and Evidence

Who: Need to join up data asks - scale of funders and national reporting asks (like OPOF) exceeds capacity of community heritage organisations to deliver.

What: Actions include:

- Advocate for a set of common indicators for funders (aligned to National Performance Framework and UN), with focus on narrative / lived experience of community project
- Acknowledge caution around shared dataset with need to credit properly & develop trust
- Ensure data collected is for strategic purposes and is used
- Provide targeted support for this (templates etc.)
- Flagged Landscape Observatory project from Protected Landscapes Partnership

5) Improving Heritage Image and Engagement

Who: Senior leadership in heritage organisations; Engagement points-of-contact with particular reference to volunteer managers and those involved in projects that explicitly focus on heritage i.e. Keep Scotland Beautiful's Our Heritage, Our Future project.

What: Suggested activity included:

- Evidencing of value of heritage skills to encourage engagement
- Ensure clarity around alignment with community priorities
- Dedicated schemes to partner with parallel sectors, or match-make people to opportunities (Heritage Network, Step on Board initiative as an example)
- Review language and requirements of volunteering opportunities and job descriptions
- Work with target audiences (i.e. young people) to co-produce activity in relation to their needs / want
- Integrate understanding of heritage into school learning
- Seek opportunities to popularise / mainstream using traditional and social media

6) Grassroots-Led

Who: Community Heritage Organisations and Support Organisations

What: Types of activity could include:

- Embed co-production based on need to respect local knowledge and approach as conversation of equals
- Familiarise with Community Place and Archaeology Plans

- Develop communication channels to engage communities where they are (local magazines, social media); share resources across organisations and ensure communities know the support and resources available and who to approach for support
- Unrestricted funding and straight-forward funding application process; community-driven funding decisions
- Invest in community wealth building

Discussion included a focus on whether the responsibility to reach out lay with community heritage organisations or support organisations. There was an acknowledgment of a shared onus but recognising the limited capacity within community heritage organisations.

Post-event Feedback

Feedback was gathered from participants following the main workshop via a post-event questionnaire, by email, one-to-one conversations and two optional drop-in feedback sessions. Key feedback topics are outlined below and are being integrated into the Recommendations Report.

Across all formats, attendees emphasised:

1. Value of Cross-Sector Learning & Desire for Ongoing Dialogue

Participants particularly valued the opportunity to network and connect with both heritage and adjacent-sector colleagues, including funding, community development and local authority partners. There is a clear desire for continued cross-sector working.

Many highlighted that navigation of the sector can be challenging, even for experienced heritage sector colleagues, and opportunities, such as this event, which help to clarity who is doing what and where collaboration can be strengthened, are valuable.

2. Need for Clearer Signposting and Sector Navigation

Multiple attendees stressed that communities can struggle to locate the right skills, technical support and funding information, and that these groups want clarity on where, and from who, to access resources. There is therefore a need for:

- Clearer signposting of existing resources, particularly through engagement of heritage organisations with third sector organisations and local authorities.
- Better visibility of technical advice (i.e. surveying, insurance, listed building requirements)
- More accessible communication from national bodies

- Increased awareness of existing networks and resources to reduce potential for duplication of effort

3. Language and Framing

Participants repeatedly noted that:

- 'Heritage' terminology can be exclusionary, and 'grassroots' as a term can feel diminishing and is not preferred by many community heritage groups
- Many groups undertake heritage activity without identifying with the label. These groups are often not aware of the existing support available from heritage-specific organisations
- Clearer plain-English definitions (heritage, community heritage, support vs funding) are needed.
- One participant noted that tourism should be framed broadly (including domestic/day-trip audiences) in discussions of community heritage
- There is a need for a clearer articulation of the role heritage plays in supporting wider rural and local outcomes (youth engagement, depopulation, community wealth building)

One drop-in session emphasised that overly narrow language risks alienating the very communities the sector aims to support.

4. Data, Evidence and Long-term Impact

Attendees echoed the need for shared metrics and simple templates as well as better recognition of community-led impact and contribution, including of volunteering which is often undervalued or invisible in current metrics.

There was also a need for increasing clarity on why data is collected, and for approaches that includes long-term cost-benefit or 5–10-year post-project value.

Participants stressed that the sector often collects too much data without a clear strategic purpose or visible outcomes.

5. Regional Support and Local Authority Engagement

A gap identified in feedback discussions was the disconnect between heritage organisations and local authority structures, with local authorities often having good networks to communities on the ground, and the ability to share information on heritage support with colleagues and community groups.

Strengthening existing regional networks – without imposing unnecessary new structures – was widely supported.

6. Capacity, Skills & Technical Support

Participants emphasised:

- Communities need technical support as much as funding advice

- Support often drops off after initial development stages
- Volunteer and community members are a significant part of the visitor / heritage experience in Scotland

There was a strong appetite for learning exchanges, mentoring and skills-sharing models.

Next Steps

This report, along with its recommendations, will be shared with the OPOF Steering Group. Resulting feedback will be circulated to encourage strategic action among relevant stakeholders and funders.

It is recognised that, while many organisations provide support for community heritage, there is currently no single strategic coordinating body with the capacity to drive forward action in the medium to long term. To mitigate this, initial coordination of the recommendations can be provided by the OPOF National Strategy team, which will seek to identify and work alongside lead actors and support organisations to embed the changes identified as necessary. Activity will aim to align with existing organisational priorities, with the potential for organisations to advocate to funders for strategic investment where gaps are identified.

It is acknowledged that a lack of progress against these recommendations would have implications for the successful delivery of OPOF outcomes, particularly:

- **Outcome 4:** Organisations that care for the historic environment have the right skills and are more resilient
- **Outcome 5:** Communities have more opportunities to participate in decision-making about the historic environment
- **Outcome 6:** The historic environment is more diverse and inclusive
- **Outcome 9:** Increased engagement with the historic environment, with a focus on activities that enhance wellbeing

Conversely, effective implementation of the recommendations presents an opportunity to take a more strategic approach to support and delivery. This will help ensure that communities are better supported to shape, sustain, and benefit from their heritage over the long term.

Kirsty Haslam
National Strategy Coordinator
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