

Reducing the risks

English Heritage is committed to securing a year-on-year reduction in the number of heritage sites at risk as part of our national plan for the protection of England's historic environment (National Heritage Protection Plan 2011-2015). This will be challenging given the number of assets now on the Register and the different kinds of risk they face. Each asset type and individual case will require its own approach and solution.

There are, however, some general approaches that are relevant to all assets at risk. Resolving cases requires working in close partnership with owners, local planning authorities and other relevant organisations and partners. Advice and understanding are essential. Historic Environment Records, maintained by local authorities, are repositories of information on local historic assets. They underpin the work of local authority historic environment services and can help improve the protection, conservation and management of heritage assets.

Maintenance of heritage assets is essential if they are not to become at risk, and to prevent those that are already at risk from decaying further and thereby escalating the cost of their repair and consolidation. Buildings, for instance, decay rapidly when left empty. Avoiding vacancy through short-term lets or schemes that provide protection through residential occupation are low-cost ways of maintaining buildings until permanent solutions can be found. English Heritage has published guidance for owners on options for maintaining vacant buildings (*Vacant Historic Buildings: An Owner's Guide to Temporary Uses, Maintenance and Mothballing*).

English Heritage provides on-line advice and guidance to local authorities, owners and managers of sites through the Historic Environment Local Management (HELM) website www.helm.org.uk.

LISTED BUILDINGS

Buildings at risk

English Heritage's role in securing the future of buildings at risk is primarily to provide practical advice, guidance and resources to local authorities, owners and developers. Our involvement in cases is determined by the importance of the building and the complexity of the issues. We can help with analysis of the issues, investigation of the feasibility of options and brokering solutions. Although buildings at risk will continue to be a priority for English Heritage repair grants, grant aid is limited in relation to demand. Grants from other public sources, notably the Heritage Lottery Fund, continue to be essential in helping secure the future of buildings at risk.

In very exceptional cases, English Heritage may acquire and repair a particularly important building at risk, where it is clear that the scale and complexity of problems are such that direct involvement is the best way of securing the building's long-term future.

Local authorities have a primary role in protecting the historic environment. The creation of a local heritage at risk register is the first step in tackling neglected buildings in order to assess and monitor the scale of the problem and prioritise resources and action. Local authorities can also take action to secure the preservation of historic buildings through the use of statutory notices. Some local authorities have a successful track record, but generally these powers are under-used. It is essential that local authorities make best use of their powers to secure buildings at risk, to 'stop the rot' and prevent the costs escalating beyond the point where it is economic to repair. For this reason, English Heritage has published revised guidance (*Stopping the Rot*) for local planning authorities on taking action to save historic buildings.

To help local authorities make more frequent and timely use of their statutory powers, English Heritage runs grant schemes to underwrite a significant proportion of the irrecoverable costs involved in serving Urgent Works Notices and Repairs Notices.

Building preservation trusts can be the key to saving many buildings at risk. Some trusts cover geographical areas; others specialise in particular types of building or are formed to save just one building. Determined individuals and trusts have saved numerous buildings at risk, working in partnership with other organisations such as local and national amenity societies, including SAVE Britain's Heritage, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Georgian Group, The Victorian Society and the Twentieth Century Society.

Places of worship at risk

Regular maintenance helps to keep buildings and places of worship in good condition but those that are in poor or very bad condition need help to minimise the risks to both the structure and the contents. Keeping drains and gutters clear so that water is taken away from the building efficiently is the most important thing that congregations can do as it stops small problems in the building fabric developing into unnecessary crises. English Heritage supports the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings's *Faith in Maintenance* scheme, giving volunteers practical local training and on-going support. It also encourages the establishment of gutter-clearance projects, enabling congregations to get good quality work done at reasonable prices by reputable contractors.

Where major structural repairs are required, the Repair Grants for Places of Worship scheme helps under resourced buildings in urgent need. The Listed Places of Worship scheme is another source of funding for repairs and maintenance that is available more widely, while local and national charities can offer small grants.

Many congregations wish to adapt and change their places of worship to encourage wider community use alongside worship and faith-focussed events. English Heritage supports the efforts of congregations to keep their places of worship in use wherever possible and welcomes proposals for appropriate new facilities such as kitchens and toilets that are sensitive to the building's special character.

English Heritage is aware of the need for practical, hands-on help to be given to individual congregations and is working with partner organisations to enable this. Support Officers are employed by local denominational groups but part-funded by English Heritage. They give advice and encouragement to congregations so that they can achieve repair projects, develop necessary new facilities or re-engage with the wider community, depending on local circumstances and needs.

SCHEDULED MONUMENTS

The continuing success in reducing the number of monuments at risk, even in difficult economic times, demonstrates the value of the dialogue that the initiative has fostered between English Heritage, owners, managers and other partners. More and more owners and managers of scheduled monuments are addressing their long-term care on a regular basis. Over half of all scheduled monuments are now on land subject to an agreement under Natural England's Environmental Stewardship agri-environment scheme, administered on behalf of Defra. Work in the coming years with Defra and Natural England will concentrate upon ensuring that the right options are being used in

the correct way, maximising the conservation benefits whilst at the same time delivering value for money. We will also work closely with the Heritage Lottery Fund to help identify those important monuments deserving of grant aid for major stabilisation or repair work.

Progress is also reliant upon better understanding. As a result, as part of the National Heritage Protection Plan – which sets out English Heritage's commitment to safeguarding heritage up to 2015 – the Conservation of Scheduled Monuments in Cultivation project will be rolled out nationally from 2011 onwards. The project, already successfully trialled amongst farmers in the East Midlands, will address what is still the biggest threat by far to monuments – their gradual degradation and loss through arable cultivation. Some causes of risk are neither so obvious nor dramatic in their effects however. Heritage at risk shows that unmanaged tree, scrub and bracken growth is the most widespread cause of long term damage to both urban and rural monuments, even if the effects are not as visible or immediately destructive as other processes. Further work will therefore be needed to better understand how these effects can be minimised.

In all cases, however – whether for rural or urban monuments – close co-operation with owners and land managers is still key to making further progress in ever more challenging circumstances.

REGISTERED PARKS AND GARDENS

Inclusion on the *Register of Historic Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest* brings no additional statutory controls, but there is a presumption in favour of the conservation of all designated assets in the planning system. The Government's Planning Policy Statement 5 *Planning for the Historic Environment* (PPS 5) and its supporting Practice Guide helps planning authorities to assess and mitigate the impact of development on our irreplaceable heritage of designed landscapes.

English Heritage can engage only with the proposals for change to the highest graded designed landscapes and where the impact on historic significance is greatest. Our landscape architects can help tailor plans and funding packages for individual landscape features as well as strategies for the whole site. We will continue to tackle the skills crisis facing historic parks and gardens through sector-wide initiatives.

English Heritage encourages the development of conservation management plans for registered historic parks and gardens, especially those in multiple ownership. We are keen for bursars and estate teams to use management plans to help conserve important but fragile landscapes in the care of schools, hospitals, hotels and other institutional owners.

REGISTERED BATTLEFIELDS

As with registered parks and gardens, this designation brings no additional statutory controls, but there is a presumption in favour of conservation of registered battlefields in Planning Policy Statement 5.

English Heritage will continue to work with owners to develop management plans for registered sites and, in appropriate cases, contribute towards the cost of management plans. We will develop positive landscape strategies with owners and partners such as Defra. In some circumstances, we may encourage the conversion from arable to pasture of especially sensitive locations to protect battlefield archaeology from the effects of ploughing and as part of a wider drive to prevent unauthorised or damaging metal-detecting.

English Heritage will also continue to encourage greater access to battlefields and improve their amenity value and visitors' appreciation of the impact these historic events had on our development as a nation.

Local authorities can also invite comments from the Battlefields Trust on planning applications affecting the setting of registered sites.

PROTECTED WRECK SITES

At the strategic level, the major sources of risk to designated wreck sites have been identified. In terms of high-priority sites, practical requirements have also been implemented through conservation management plans.

Risks to protected wreck sites can often be reduced through education, provision of marker buoys, or planning policies that take full account of their national importance. However, some sites require significant resources to stabilise their condition or to carry out detailed archaeological assessments of their conservation requirements. Although English Heritage has statutory power to allocate funds to promote the preservation and maintenance of protected wreck sites, its financial resources can solve only a small proportion of the problems.

In spite of the inherent difficulties with caring for this type of site, careful management must be maintained if we are to avoid the loss of wreck sites. It is therefore close co-operation between the owners of protected wreck sites (where known), authorised divers and all organisations charged with care for the marine and coastal environment, that will make the real difference to their long-term survival.

Practical advice on the management of historic wreck sites, whether at the coast-edge or under water, is available from English Heritage (maritime@english-heritage.org.uk) and from www.helm.org.uk

CONSERVATION AREAS

The risks to conservation areas are difficult to address as they cover large areas of land: they include the spaces between buildings and trees as well as buildings and structures and therefore involve many different owners. Looking after them is a responsibility shared by those of us who own homes and businesses in them and those of us whose job it is to manage the spaces between the buildings or make decisions about their future.

The conservation area survey provides us with an understanding of what is particularly affecting the character and appearance of our conservation areas: what is working well or what is putting them at risk. Strong planning policies, guidance and a clear management strategy for individual conservation areas are critical in managing change in these areas. This is difficult at a time when local authorities across the country are reducing the number of staff managing changes in conservation areas. There are, of course, opportunities for members of the local community to engage, either individually or through groups such as civic societies or conservation area advisory committees which are proven to help achieve positive action.

Armed with the information provided by the surveys, we, local authorities and other partners will have the evidence to direct resources much more accurately towards those conservation areas at greatest risk. We will also want to target those with the greatest potential to improve the quality of life and economic prospects of people in the villages, towns and cities of which they are such crucially important components.