

Managing Traditional Buildings

DTAS Annual Conference 2026 workshop co-hosted by Historic Environment Scotland and New Futures – Former Places of Worship (part of Community Ownership Support Services (COSS))

Workshop description:

Although churches will be a theme, it will be relevant to any member looking to take on, or already managing, a traditional building not built with more modern forms of construction, such as village halls, houses, shops and schools. Hear from experts discussing their experiences and be able to ask a range of specialist panellists (including HES and DTAS's own Facilities Management Advisor from COSS) any question relating to all types of traditional buildings. The session will provide insight, guidance and practical tips on various aspects of their management to help support their long-term future as a community and heritage asset.

Our expert Panellists:

Willie Watt, conservation accredited architect

David Cook, chief exec, GBPT

Sarah Kettles, heritage consultant and project manager

Dennis Gowans, Crail Community Hall

Andrew Aldous, facilities Management Advisor, COSS

Moses Jenkins, Project Manager HES

The following information is a summary of the key discussion points from the two sessions, inspired by the questions asked by the DTAS member audience:

Q: What are the panellist's thoughts on repurposing older buildings rather than constructing new ones for housing?

- Importance of nuance in policy around development.
- Pros: the building is already there and standing – “the greenest building is the building that is there”.
- Before taking on a traditional building, you need to consider the state the building is actually in.
- It is important to look ahead to what you need to do in terms of legislation and funding if you are thinking of taking a building on – “get your ducks in order”
- Ask “How do I prevent decline? How do I make it wind and watertight?”
- Work with the existing owner, if you can, before transfer. Sometimes the owner can fix certain issues or, if not, can lower purchase price.

Retrofitting and energy efficiency:

- There are people who can guide you – Willie says 80% of their practice is on existing buildings and people have always inhabited and reused buildings.
- Old buildings do work differently than modern buildings and you must take that into account.
- HES advises on making buildings energy efficient while still avoiding mould and decay. Ventilation is key.
- HES has a useful [guide on retrofitting traditional buildings](#) and a dedicated conservation centre in Stirling: [The Engine Shed, Historic Environment Scotland](#)
- Scottish Govt building standards, with guidelines for fire and energy etc. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/building-standards/monitoring-improving-building-regulations/>
- If you are taking on the building through the Community Asset Transfer process:
 - You need to present a robust business case to the Local Authority (or other relevant authority).
 - Think about all the negative things you can imagine they could say and rebut them, so they have fewer reasons to say no.

Q: What things did they try that didn't work in making new buildings energy efficient?

The group shared a few things that didn't work and pointed out that there are lessons learned from trial and error:

- Always factor in ventilation in rooms, under floors, in roof spaces - otherwise you're inviting in mould.
- People see old buildings as a barrier; It can be expensive, especially if building is listed, but you can break down that complexity into manageable solutions.
- You must get the right specialist advice. If listed, then you will need to involve a conservation accredited architect. You can find a list on the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) website <https://find-an-architect.architecture.com/>
- Also speak to your Local Authority Conservation Officer and/or planner.
- There are no silly questions, if you have advisors and professionals always ask questions.
- You can ask questions of and challenge the owner of the building to try to get things done – for example, NHS agreeing to deal with the asbestos in a building the community were taking on.
- Some that are trying to get rid of buildings want to get rid of them quickly, so you need to do your due diligence pushing back and asking questions and not just signing on the dotted line.
- Follow up on asking questions before you take the building on. Always push back when they are still issues needing resolved.
- They are spending money if they're holding onto the building so use this to your advantage.
- Timescales need carefully considered - it can take a long time for them to get things done.
- Business Energy Scotland can help with an [energy efficiency audit](#).

- Always get a building condition survey right at the beginning- and get your own even if the local authority says they've done one. The [RICS website](#) can help you find a surveyor in your area.
- Make sure there is a generous contingency fund in the budget, because you will come across new problems. Funders expect to see a well-considered contingency budget. Don't disclose your full contingency pot to contractors as they will spend it. Keep some quiet. Also, it's not all for contract work.
- Funders can fund condition surveys and other development funding, e.g. [Scottish Land Fund](#), [Architectural Heritage Fund](#), [Historic Environment Scotland](#) and [National Lottery Heritage Fund](#)

Q: Can we put solar panels on a listed building?

and,

How can we marry heritage and climate change as priorities?

An audience member raised the challenges they faced as a community hub operating out of a B-listed building complex. Their solar project was rejected by their Local Authority as too ambitious (too many panels) which makes them raise concerns regarding council ambitions in terms of net zero for these buildings.

- These decisions are made on a case-by-case basis but you can have solar panels on significant heritage buildings and they are many examples, including Edinburgh Castle. Speak to your Local Authority for guidance. See HES guidance also (as above)
- You must maintain and clean them so physical access needs to be possible - something to consider in your management and maintenance plan.

Q. What do you do if you get past the point of your contingency funding and you are in crisis?

- Don't panic, take advice, think about options, and speak to your funders.
- Your funders can provide advice on contingency allocation. Don't hide things from them as they can help.
- When you are looking at the building, ask yourself what the unknowns could be – what has been done, what you know, what you don't know.
- “The dangers come from the things you can't see” – the more detailed of a building survey you have, the less surprises you end up with.
- You don't necessarily have to take the building apart to see what's going on. Architects have thermal imaging cameras, which are good for detecting leaks as well as heat performance.
- When you're doing your planning you also need to ask what surveys you should do – ask an expert what surveys need to be done.

Q. Where do we go for funding when our traditional buildings' heritage status is not considered strong enough to qualify for Heritage Fund and HES funding? And, must buildings be Listed?

- Aside from the main funders, you can also apply to grants from small trusts and foundations. [Funding Scotland](#) is a useful funding search engine to see what is available in your area/category.
- You can tell a good story about the heritage of a building, even if it's not recognised as a heritage building. Interpretation (such as panels, booklets) can help with this.
- Find unique and interesting stories associated to your buildings heritage and this can also help with fundraising e.g. [Bedrule church](#) and the [Turnbull clan](#)
- Being able to demonstrate the building's value as a heritage asset is very important. It might not be A-listed but can be incredibly important to the local community. Various category B listed buildings have been successful in funding applications.
- Building utilisation helps getting access to funding – if the building is busy that helps you get funding. For example, Crail church focused on demonstrating its value to the local community by keeping using it.
- You can ask HES for a building to be listed. More on designations and requests [here](#)
- Research the intangible cultural heritage connected to the building and capturing local stories is also a great engagement tool. There are various resources to help you with this such as [Living Memory Association](#), [Our Heritage](#), [Our Future](#) and [UNESCO](#). [Leith St Andrew's Trust](#) has done this well
- Also build in heritage related skills, heritage interpretation and community benefit into your application. Funders want activity plans and engaging people in finding out about their history and heritage is perfect for this. For more info on funders' requirements watch our finance and funding workshop [video](#) or sign up to the next session on [eventbrite](#)

Q: What are we doing to make sure communities aren't just taking on liabilities instead of assets?

- The need to save a building can be very emotive but you need to have a viable end use. It is challenging when people want to save a building because of its heritage but don't have a long-term plan for it.
- Mostly, preservation groups are repurposing buildings and giving them new life rather than preserving them as-is.
- Ask the question "what do you want to do for your community?". The building is just a tool to provide a useful service for the community.

- Make sure you are consulting with experts as getting that rational opinion is very helpful.
- Speak to local elected members, ask about getting relevant reports; You need to keep asking questions.
- As a development trust, carefully consult your own constitution and financial position. Are you able to take on another asset without adding too much strain?
- Some groups have taken on an asset before having a robust business plan in place. This has largely been due to short timelines to buy the building, such as with churches, and is a concern due to the risks.
- You are liable for making the site secure and safe from the moment you take it on – insurance is not enough. The owner should have an EICR certificate and asbestos management plan, and you should be able to get both of those things from them as soon as you take on the building. [COSS's Facilities Management Service](#) can guide you through this and arrange a visit for more advice.
- [National Churches Trust](#) has funding towards repairs for those wanting to retain their church as a place of worship or have that as an element of use.
- [REACH](#) (Research in Action on Church Heritage) has resources for those who can't take on a building but want to record it.

Q: Maintaining a building – what is out there to support Development Trusts to manage a traditional building, so it doesn't degrade?

- A business model that relies on grant funding is not sustainable – You need to start thinking of it like a business, incorporating maintenance costs into business planning and any grant funding is a bonus, rather than to be relied upon.
- You need to start raising the capital to cover the maintenance costs without relying on the maintenance costs
- You are responsible for that building in the long term and therefore you need a sustainable plan for utilising it and maintaining it.
- SPAB (Society of Protection of Ancient Buildings) has some excellent resources to help you look after your traditional building including a [maintenance calendar and toolkit](#). They also have some excellent in person training events across Scotland. DTAS is supporting one at Bedrule Church so come along, if you can. Bursary for travel available. Sign up [here](#)
- Again, as above, refer to [COSS's Facilities Management Service](#)

Q: What happens going forward, how do we bring people together and serve them on these continuing issues?

- DTAS previously had a Facilities Management network but it didn't have the take up at the time. If there's sufficient interest then we can bring that back so let us know! Contact Andrew@dtascot.org.uk

- DTAS has drop-in sessions for both the member support and the churches programme, that bring people together to discuss key topics throughout the year. Churches team also has a rolling programme of workshops focusing on these issues, with a church focus. You can sign up on [Eventbrite](#).
- A suggestion was posed to invite the panel back to do more specific training sessions and DTAS will coordinate this so again, look out for this on our eventbrite page in the near future.
- You can become a member of the [Heritage Network](#) which shares peer learning.
- Various city heritage trusts provide traditional training and maintenance. For example, [Stirling City Heritage Trust](#) has an excellent traditional building health check scheme.
- Groups could go in collectively on key items that could be shared, for example an infrared camera.
- It was suggested that the Church of Scotland's building officers could produce frameworks detailing the trusted tradesmen they use for maintenance tasks. DTAS's churches team will investigate the possibility of this.
- Learning from others who have done it and sharing their experiences, both good and bad, is really useful. The [Community Learning Exchange](#) can fund for you to visit such groups and pays for their time as well. Speak to your DTAS contact for a referral.