# Scotland’s protected historic places – consultation paper on a long-term strategy for heritage designation

# Overview

Historic Environment Scotland (HES) is looking for your views on our strategy for how we identify and legally protect Scotland’s most important historic sites and places.

Heritage designation is the system we use to provide legal recognition and protection for historic sites across Scotland. More than 55,000 sites are currently protected in this way.

The strategy sets out a long-term approach to delivering national-level heritage designations. We set out our vision for designations in 2035, our mission, and priorities for the three-year period 2025-28.

## Related

[About listing, scheduling and other designations](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/)

[Designation policy and selection guidance](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/publications/publication/?publicationId=8d8bbaeb-ce5a-46c1-a558-aa2500ff7d3b)

[Search for information on designated sites and places](https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/apex/f?p=PORTAL:HOME::::::)

# Why your views matter

We want to hear what you think about the proposed content of the strategy and the priorities we have identified.

We will consider the responses we receive and will use these to inform the final strategy.

# How to provide your views

We are inviting responses to this consultation by 1 July 2025.

Please respond to this consultation using our consultation hub,

<https://haveyoursay.historicenvironment.scot/heritage/designations-strategy>

The online survey (21 Questions) takes around 30-40 minutes to complete.

If you are unable to respond using our online survey, please complete this respondent information form and send it to

By mail:

Designations Service

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

EH9 1SH

By email: designationconsultations@hes.scot

If you have any questions about this consultation, please contact the email address above or call on 0131 668 8914.

## Next steps

Our next steps will be reviewing all the feedback and addressing your comments in the finalised version of the strategy, to be launched in Autumn 2025 and published on our [website](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/).

# Background

Delivery of national-level designations is a key function of Historic Environment Scotland (HES) and a foundation for a range of decision-making, from planning and land use decisions to maintenance of historic properties, and investigation of archaeological sites.

Heritage designation has been in place across the UK since the 19th century.  The context for our work has undergone huge change through the 20th century and this is continuing.  Society values heritage in different ways and how we operate has also evolved to reflect changing practices and priorities.

Delivery of national-level heritage designation is resource-intensive for HES and more widely. As with any other public body, we must think carefully about where to put our resources.

Since 2023, we have been working on a strategic review to consider if the current approach is the right one and fit for future challenges.

### What did the review involve?

We began by examining the state of the current designations and the challenges and opportunities.

Download our discussion paper: [*Towards a long-term strategy for heritage designation*](https://app-hes-pubs-prod-neu-01.azurewebsites.net/api/file/824f14ce-8be9-447c-badb-b2df00931f2e)*.*

We then partnered with MainStreet Consultants who interviewed more than 100 external heritage and planning stakeholders, from amenity bodies and developers to Heads of Planning Scotland.  We selected this grouping based on their knowledge of the system and we provided participants with the discussion paper in advance of being interviewed.

At the same time, we carried out internal staff engagement, including a range of colleagues who work closely with designated sites and their regulation and management. We also carried out public and stakeholder surveys about all our regulatory services, which provided further evidence.

Download MainStreet's report from the [HES website](https://app-hes-pubs-prod-neu-01.azurewebsites.net/api/file/71b0e935-c868-4dc6-8030-b2df0071d7c4)

### What did our engagement tell us?

The engagement found significant support for the existing national heritage designation systems and little appetite for major reform. It is recognised that heritage designation plays an important role in protecting Scotland’s most important historic places. However, while the work that HES does is highly valued there is demand for HES to change many aspects of our approach to delivery of national-level designation.

Our public survey demonstrated a poor understanding of our functions and impact and some heritage stakeholders perceive conflicts with management challenges and priorities such as climate goals. There is frustration with outdated and inaccurate records affecting decisions and a recognition that our service, as is more widely the case across the heritage sector generally, is under pressure. This has resulted in an increasingly reactive approach and inconsistent coverage. Complex processes and outdated IT hinder delivery of new designations and record improvements. Measuring impacts and better communication are needed.

### How we have developed our strategy

When we considered the issues being raised alongside our own analysis of data and our understanding of gaps, challenges and opportunities, we decided that a clear long-term strategy is essential to the delivery of these functions.

Our strategy aligns with other relevant sector and organisational strategies in plans, such as [Our Past Our Future](https://www.historicenvironment.scot/our-past-our-future/), our Corporate Plan '[Heritage for All (2025-28)](https://hescot.sharepoint.com/sites/dc/dp/projects/Corporate%20Plan%20Project%202025-28/For%20Publication/HES%20Corporate%20Plan%202025_Final.pdf)', and [HES Equalities Outcomes Report 2025-29](https://hescot.sharepoint.com/sites/dc/dp/stratplan/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=/sites/dc/dp/stratplan/Equalities%20Strategy/HES_Our%20Equality%20Outcomes%202025-29.pdf&parent=/sites/dc/dp/stratplan/Equalities%20Strategy).

### Contents

The draft strategy includes the following sections:

1. Vision
2. Mission
3. Approach
4. Priorities 2025-2028

Our survey questions ask for your feedback on the strategy. We are also inviting comments on the potential impacts of the strategy on people and business.

## About you

Thank you for your interest in our work. Please indicate how you wish your response to be handled.

**Question 1: Our privacy notice explains your rights and our role in protecting the information you share with us. Please confirm that you have read the privacy policy and consent to the data you provide being used as set out in the notice (required)**

[**Privacy notice**](https://haveyoursay.historicenvironment.scot/privacy_policy/)

* Yes
* No

**Question 2: What is your name and email address?**

* Your name
* Your email address

**Question 3: Do you use heritage designations?**

* Yes: for my work
* Yes: for research and/or interest
* Yes: as an owner of a designated site or place.
* No: I’ve heard of designation but have not used your information or services
* No: this is the first time I’ve heard of designation.

**Question 4: Are you responding as an individual, or on behalf of an organisation, business or community group?**

* As an individual
* On behalf of an organisation, public body or charity
* On behalf of a local authority
* As a private business, such as an architect or developer
* Representing a community group
* Other

**If you're responding as an organisation, business, or community group, please enter the name here.**

**Question 5: Historic Environment Scotland would like your permission to publish your consultation response. Please indicate your preference.**

* Publish response with name
* Publish response only (without name)
* Do not publish response

**Information for organisations only:**

The option *'Publish response only (without name)'*refers only to your name, not your organisation’s name. If this option is selected, the organisation name will still be published.

If you choose the option *'Do not publish response'*, your organisation name may still be listed as having responded to the consultation in, for example, the analysis report

**Question 6: We may wish to contact you to discuss your response, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for HES to contact you again in relation to this consultation exercise?**

* Yes
* No

## Vision, mission and approach

The strategy outlines a refreshed approach to delivery of national-level designation in Scotland. As part of this, we think it is useful to define a vision of success by 2035, and a mission which explains our purpose. We also set out a clear approach to delivery.

### Vision

‘By 2035, our protected historic places will more fully reflect Scotland's rich and diverse heritage. Protecting these places and providing accurate and accessible information about them will deliver better heritage outcomes and wider community benefits.’

### Mission

‘Historic Environment Scotland (HES) leads on identifying, protecting, and providing information about Scotland's most significant historic places. Our work supports planning authorities and others to make informed decisions, ensuring our historic environment is well managed for current and future generations.’

### Approach

‘We will lead the long-term conversation about heritage protection in Scotland. We will look ahead and ensure heritage protection is responsive to our changing society and environment. We will collaborate with partners, set priorities, develop our staff, invest in research and technology and adopt innovative approaches. We aim to provide a proactive and accessible service that instils public confidence.’

**Question 7: Do you support the vision, mission and overall approach (Yes, No)**

**Please provide any comments.**

**Question 8: We propose changing how we refer to designation in our strategy and communications. We often use this term to describe the legal recognition of historic sites. However, evidence indicates that the terms ‘Designation’, ‘Designations’, and ‘Designate’ are poorly understood by the public. We think it would be beneficial to make more use of the word 'protection' for its clarity of purpose. For example, 'designated historic sites' could become 'protected historic places’, and 'designation records' could be 'protected place records'. Please give us your views.**

## Priorities (2025-2028):

We have set out four priorities as strategic objectives to focus our work during the period of the HES corporate plan 2025- 2028.

**Objective 1: Looking ahead** - HES will lead a collaborative and inclusive conversation to develop and publish long-term (10-year) priorities for heritage protection by March 2028.

**Objective 2: Improving our information** - by March 2028, enhance the clarity and accuracy, accessibility and useability of our data and substandard designation records so that Scotland’s historic protected places are better understood and valued.

**Objective 3: Improving our service** - redesign our public offering to deliver timely decisions, publishing details of a revised approach in 2025/26.

**Objective 4: Understanding our impact** - by March 2027, capture and communicate baseline evidence and insights into the impacts of the current systems of heritage protection.



**Question 9: We have identified four priorities for HES in delivering the designations strategy over the next three years. Do you agree with them? (Agree, Disagree, Neutral, Not sure)**

**Please provide further comments on the priorities**

## Objective 1 - Looking ahead

**HES will lead a collaborative and inclusive conversation to develop and publish long-term (10-year) priorities for heritage protection by March 2028**

Stakeholder feedback shows limited interest in major legislative changes but supports a more strategic and proactive HES. We aim to establish a clearer and more forward-looking focus by working with others to review our collective approach and explore alternatives, to set priorities, and to examine our principles through research and inclusive engagement.

**Initiatives:**

* Maximising opportunities for engagement and evidence-gathering through Talking About Heritage (2025-26), the reviews of *Historic Environment Policy for Scotland* (HEPS) and *Designation Policy and Selection Guidance* (DPSG).
* Strategic engagement with amenity bodies, local authorities, and academia/researchers.
* Using digital platforms for engagement in our work.
* Investing in and promoting research and collaborative projects to build understanding and evidence in emerging areas for heritage protection, including understanding and addressing gaps.

**Success measures:**

* We have evidence to set long-term priorities.
* We have published an agreed set of priorities.
* We have demonstrated inclusivity in the process.

**Question 10: Give us your views on our proposed initiatives under this objective, and how we intend to measure progress?**

**Question 11: Our intention is to lead the strategic conversation about the whole system of heritage protection across Scotland to ensure an integrated and comprehensive approach. This includes aspects led by local authorities. We think that any discussions about the long-term future of heritage protection should adopt a ‘whole-system’ approach. For example, including how undesignated sites are managed in the planning system, and how locally and regionally important sites and places such as conservation areas are recognised and protected.**

**Do you agree with our proposed approach to enabling discussions about the whole heritage protection system? (Yes; No; Not sure)**

**Please provide any comments**

## Objective 2- Improving our information

**By March 2028, enhance the clarity and accuracy, accessibility and useability of our data and designation records so that Scotland’s historic protected places are better understood and valued.**

Many of our 55,000 protected place records and spatial data don't meet current standards, impacting people, communities, and businesses.[[1]](#footnote-2) We aim to improve at scale by benchmarking our records, engaging with our users, enhancing our data management, undertaking targeted record reviews, and through technical innovation.

**Initiatives:**

* Engaging with users to inform them about known issues with our records, encouraging feedback on inaccuracies, and prioritising areas for action.
* Creating a strategy to enhance protected place data and records to meet [MIDAS standards](https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/technical-advice/information-management/data-standards-terminology/) and to be Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable in line with the [FAIR Principles](https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles/).
* Piloting new technologies and approaches to help us scale record improvements as we adapt to an era of open data, data mining, and AI.
* Reviewing and prioritising records with inadequate descriptions or statements of significance, especially in areas of high development / landuse pressure.

**Success measures:**

* Numbers of records meeting level 4 standard (see related information)
* Documentation available online since 2018 meets public bodies accessibility requirements ([WCAG 2.2](https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG22/))
* Improvements made to data and records to align with FAIR Principles
* Gathering public feedback on our records.
* Improved understanding of how technology can help us to update our records.

**Question 12: Give us your views on our proposed initiatives under this objective, and how we intend to measure progress?**

## Objective 3: Improving our service

**Redesign our public offering to deliver timely decisions, publishing details of a revised approach in 2025/26.**

Over the last two decades, much of our focus has been on responding to external proposals.  While valuable, this can be inefficient and may not reflect long-term priorities. Responding to public requests will still be important but we will re-shape our service so that we can make timely and transparent decisions through effective prioritisation and engagement, and by streamlining processes and innovation.

**Initiatives:**

* Reviewing and streamlining our processes. As part of this, we will explore greater use of technology to automate or expedite tasks.
* Formalising our prioritisation of external requests according to the level of heritage risk and impacts on people and communities.
* Adopting a dynamic risk-based approach for research and assessment. This is likely to result in shorter assessments, records and reports.
* Investing in technology and new approaches to enhance public engagement with our decision-making.

**Success measures:**

* We have published a revised approach to external proposals
* We measure participation in our consultations
* We report on delivery in our annual Planning Performance Report to the Scottish Government.

**Question 13: Give us your views on our proposed initiatives under this objective, and how we intend to measure progress?**

**Question 14: When we set out a revised approach for handling external requests, we think we will need to be more selective to deliver the greatest impact with our available resource. An approach could be to prioritise new designation requests for under-represented sites, especially in high development/ landuse pressure areas. What do you think of this approach?**

**Question 15: We are also likely to prioritise reviewing existing designations that we think are no longer justified or those where inadequate records are having a negative impact on their management especially in high development/landuse pressure areas. Requests for less impactful cases, like address/category changes and minor corrections, may not be priorities. What do you think of this approach?**

## Objective 4: Understanding our impact

**By March 2027, capture and communicate baseline evidence and insights into the impacts of the current systems of heritage protection.**

Feedback indicates that the benefits and impacts are unclear. We aim to enhance understanding of these through research and engagement.

**Initiatives:**

* Exploring information sources on heritage protection impacts
* Commissioning research to fill knowledge gaps
* Creating opportunities for public feedback on our decisions
* Expanding our communications through various channels.

**Success measures:**

* We will be able to begin to measure the impacts of heritage protection
* We are reporting on our findings.

**Question 16: What are your views on the proposed initiatives under this objective, and how we intend to measure progress?**

**Question 17: By March 2027, we aim to gather baseline evidence on the impacts of heritage protection to enhance understanding. Please share your views on the research themes we are considering:**

**Economic:** impacts on property values and property maintenance costs, investment attractiveness and tourism.

**Wellbeing/social/community**: effects on sense of place, public participation, representation of diverse cultural values, and community use of heritage sites.

**Environmental**: contributions to net zero commitments, biodiversity, and broader ecological strategies.

## Impact assessments

We would like to understand the potential impacts of our strategy on people and businesses.

We have carried out screening for [environmental impact assessment](https://app-hes-pubs-prod-neu-01.azurewebsites.net/api/file/74869815-632d-4dc4-9dec-b2df0071abd1) and conducted preliminary assessments on [equalities](https://haveyoursay.historicenvironment.scot/%2B%2Bpreview%2B%2B/heritage/designations-strategy/supporting_documents/Equality%20Impact%20Assessment%20Full%20%20Draft%20Designations%20Strategy.pdf) and [islands communities](https://haveyoursay.historicenvironment.scot/%2B%2Bpreview%2B%2B/heritage/designations-strategy/supporting_documents/Designations%20Strategy%20ICIA%20Draft%20Designations%20Strategy.pdf) impacts.

Through consultation, we are gathering stakeholder views on these aspects and on any business impacts and will reassess based on our findings.

**Question 18: What impact do you think our strategy would have on people with the following characteristics (Positive impact; Negative impact; No impact; Not sure):**

* Age
* Disability
* Gender reassignment
* Marriage and civil partnerships
* Pregnancy/maternity
* Race
* Religion or belief
* Sex
* Sexual orientation
* Socio-economic background

**Please tell us more in the box below**

**Question 19: What impact do you think the plan might have on people in island communities (Positive impact; Negative impact; No impact; Not sure).**

**Please tell us more in the box below including how any impact might differ from mainland communities?**

**Question 20: What impact do you think the strategy might have on the competitiveness of Scottish business, the third sector or on the regulatory context (Positive impact; Negative impact; No impact; Not sure).**

**Please tell us more in the box below**

## Anything else?

**Question 21: Please provide any other comments on our strategy in the box below.**

1. We propose to audit our records annually against level 4 of our proposed benchmark standard. This standard incorporates the following: Site Name/ Address, Category of Listing, Mapping, Grid Reference, Detailed Description, Detailed Statement of National Importance or Statement of Special Interest, Thesaurus Term. Internal evaluations in November 2023 indicate that 7% of our 55,000 records meet this standard. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)