

Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Oral evidence: Protecting Built Heritage, HC 594

Tuesday 4 November 2025

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 4 November 2025.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dame Caroline Dinenage (Chair); Mr Bayo Alaba; Vicky Foxcroft; Damian Hinds; Dr Rupa Huq; Anneliese Midgley; Jo Platt; Jeff Smith.

Questions 128 - 187

Witnesses

[I](#): Eilish McGuinness, Chief Executive, National Lottery Heritage Fund; Matthew McKeague, Chief Executive, Architectural Heritage Fund; and Geoff Parkin, Interim Chief Executive, English Heritage.

[II](#): Sarah Buckingham, Director of Historic Properties and Environment, Jersey Heritage; Jennifer Cooke, Director, Smith Jenkins Planning & Heritage; and Councillor Julie Jones-Evans, Chair, Local Government Association's Culture, Tourism and Sport Board.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Eilish McGuinness, Matthew Mckeague and Geoff Parkin.

Q128 Chair: Welcome to this morning's meeting of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. For our first panel today, we will be hearing from some of the key funders and stewards of the UK's built heritage. We will look at how current funding models are supporting the sustainability of our heritage assets and the resilience of the sector, and we will also look at skills and training and community engagement. To do that, we are joined by Eilish McGuinness, chief executive of the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Matthew Mckeague, chief executive of the Architectural Heritage Fund, and Geoff Parkin, who is the interim chief executive of English Heritage. Welcome to all of you.

Before we begin, may I remind all Members to declare any interest at the point that they ask their questions?

I will kick off with you, Eilish. How is your organisation adapting grant-making strategies to respond to rising costs and inflation when it comes to heritage projects?

Eilish McGuinness: Thank you. It is great to be here. We have responded by our 10-year strategy, Heritage 2033, which was designed exactly to respond to a challenging external environment. Post-covid, we saw cost increases, shortages in skills and volunteers, and changes in visitor and societal visiting of heritage sites. We responded by making it a 10-year strategy. We listened to the people with heritage interests and across the sector, who valued that stability over 10 years. We continued to make sure that resilience was at the core. We have four investment principles. We simplified it, but we wanted to be a bit more ambitious around place-based funding. Our organisational sustainability has at its core sustainability in the future.

We advise applicants about setting up projects. We have a two-stage process around development funding so people can test that. In addition to our heritage strategy, we had about 2,400 and we currently have in delivery, who faced cost increases through no fault of their own. We have responded to that in two ways.

First, we responded by giving grant increases. Last year alone, we have given £30 million because costs in construction have increased enormously, and people could not plan because it happened so quickly. The second thing is us giving more advice. We have a register of support services. We give advice on costs, which also helps.

We have responded strategically but also practically and pragmatically to projects in delivery.

Q129 Chair: Thank you. Matthew, how are you adapting your strategies to support people with rising costs?



Matthew Mckeague: One of our main specialisms at the Architectural Heritage Fund is as an early-stage funder. We get involved at the beginning of projects around feasibility and early stages of projects. At that early stage, we have project viability grants, which help organisations to work out what they want to do with the building. We also have project development grants, which take projects that further bit forward to developing a capital project. Trying to get things right and having that funding at the early stage is important.

Through DCMS, we are running a programme called the Heritage Revival Fund, helping to fund organisations. We only fund charities and social enterprises, which tend to be smaller organisations. We work out at that early stage what they want to do with the building and what the capital costs will be. It is about trying to do detailed work with them at that point. We are also adapting. If projects need to come back for further funding, they can come back and try to work out if the cost plan has gone over budget or whatnot. Getting that support in the early stage is important in projects dealing with rising costs and the cost-of-living crisis.

Running buildings is one of the main challenges for organisations at the moment. We run a business support service called RePlan, which is helping organisations to adapt their business plan if elements of it are not working or they need help to develop new products or services.

It is not just about the funding. It is also about the advice and guidance that organisations have. These buildings can be incredibly complex and running them can be challenging, but as well as the funding we see getting the right advice and guidance as important to getting costs as clear and on budget as possible for capital projects, and then also on running the buildings. Particularly when organisations need to change what they are doing, that is key as well.

Q130 Chair: Do you see access to advice and guidance as one of the biggest challenges that people and organisations experience when they are in the process of applying for funding? What are the main obstacles that they have to overcome at that stage?

Matthew Mckeague: A good amount of advice and guidance is out there from the likes of AHF and the Heritage Fund. We also work with partners at Historic England and other organisations such as the Heritage Trust Network. There are good sources of advice and guidance out there, relatively well spread regionally. It is about making sure that continues to be there for organisations, particularly organisations that might be doing a project only once with a building that they are bringing back into use. They might only ever do it one time. In Southend, we have been working with Age Concern around a department store. They will probably not do that type of project again. Organisations may not know how to deal with a grade II building or have not done a conversion of a department store to an alternative use, need advice and guidance to be there. It is there. It is about making sure that it continues to be there for the sector.



Q131 **Chair:** Eilish, are there any other challenges that organisations face when they are at the point of applying for funding?

Eilish McGuinness: To confirm, we too give early advice in partnership. We have engagement teams who give that advice early on. There is something about giving people realistic expectations of what it is to deliver a heritage project, which can be quite challenging. We use our experience from 30 years of delivery to make sure our processes support people in that.

The challenges, as we have discussed before, are definitely the cost of living and definitely the fact that construction costs are increasing. It is important to flag that it is not evenly distributed geographically. We have some geographical differences about people bidding and tendering for jobs and value for money. As I say, we have a register of support services and experts who give advice.

The skills challenge is one that we have addressed directly in our strategy. We can support skills, and our projects help, I guess, to have a supply of skills. We have some great projects like Calverley Old Hall in Leeds, where there has been a detailed number of skills.

However, the big issue is not just heritage skills. It is all the skills around governance, business support, and digital. All these things we recognise as skills that need to be supported, and we have funded those in line with heritage funding. We have done quite a lot of digital training, and we continue to support projects and organisations to adapt to a changing environment. We can look at governance. We can look at business planning. They are all important in delivery of a project.

Q132 **Anneliese Midgley:** Thanks very much for coming in and giving evidence to us. You have talked a bit about how your organisations are adapting to the grant making strategies and the challenges. What do you think the answer is? What changes do you think could make funding schemes more accessible, particularly for the smaller and volunteer-led organisations? That is to all of you, whoever wants to go first.

Eilish McGuinness: I will go first. Our strategy and our funding comes from national lottery players, and we are keen to have a breadth of funding. Our heritage goes from the smallest projects right up to major capital schemes.

I talked about our four investment principles. They are for everything: saving heritage, protecting the environment, inclusion, access and participation, and organisational sustainability. We are proportionate in what we ask. Smaller organisations can apply for what they need. We also have engagement teams. We are a quite devolved organisation. Some 80% of our funding is decided at local and area level, and we have engagement teams who help those smaller organisations.

I should have said at the outset that we fund all sorts of heritage. I know this hearing is about built heritage, but we fund stories and memories.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Through experience with the High Streets HAZ programme, we can see that engagement of communities is critical. The Heritage Fund was quite instrumental in putting people and communities at the centre. We have to make our application process simpler, and we have done that; we have to continue to make sure that it is simple, and we have to be proportionate in what we ask people to deliver.

Partnerships are important. Matthew has talked about the work the Architectural Heritage Fund does, and we can work in common with that. Another thing that we can do is third-party grants in a heritage place or in a specific region. We do micro-grants to communities to help them decide what they want to do. An important part of what we do is we want communities to co-create these heritage projects and to be involved. If communities value what they have, they will sustain it longer.

Matthew Mckeague: We tend to focus our funding on the top 30% most deprived areas, as measured by the indices of multiple deprivation. At the moment, 66% of our funds in England, through our Heritage Revival Fund, are going into the top 30% most deprived areas. A key focus for us and our work is helping organisations in those areas to bring forward projects and to develop schemes involving historic buildings. They are often areas with greater levels of vacancy, alongside the deprivation issues that these places are experiencing.

Focusing our funding and support into those areas is one of the ways that we can deliver our strategy. It is important for us to focus on those places. We will continue to have a strategy that tries to get additional resources into places that are in those top 30% deprived areas.

The programme that we are running with the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Heritage Development Trust programme, is trying to support organisations in those areas that are in the process of becoming social enterprise heritage asset developers. We have 12 that we are funding through a £5 million programme with the lottery at the moment. In places like Stoke, Hastings and Redruth, we are working alongside these organisations to develop buildings, to take on new projects and to build up their asset base. That is having some success. This funding is helping organisations to become more resilient, and we have ambitions to grow that beyond the current 12 that we are funding at the moment.

Geoff Parkin: We have a slightly different challenge. You have heard the words “project funding” several times so far this morning. We look after 400 historic buildings, landscapes and monuments right across the country, some in areas of high deprivation and others less so.

Our funding requirements fall into three buckets. The first is funding to ensure that the long-term health of the heritage assets we look after, the visitor infrastructure that supports them, and the technology platforms that the organisation relies on to do that are all in a sustainable condition. That is the first area. Think of that more as preventative maintenance funding.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The second area is more remedial conservation funding, where a curtain wall might have collapsed or a castle roof might be leaking, or we need to re-render the entirety of the exterior of a Norman keep. That is when the preventative maintenance work has not been successful and we need to step in with quite significant projects of scale.

The third area is the more innovative ventures that we have been hearing about, where we might be reinterpreting an entire site, which we did at Marble Hill with support from the lottery, or where we are using a heritage asset to drive economic and social regeneration in an area that needs it, which we are currently doing at Berwick Barracks, or introducing new concepts like the new learning centre at Stonehenge.

We have those three buckets. We have long-term support to ensure the organisation is in a sustainable condition, infrastructure support when things go wrong, and then the innovative projects.

Much of the investment that is available from the sector is in that third area, the project area, which is fantastic. We are grateful for having access to it and we do good work together in those situations. In the other two areas, it is more of a problem. We can access a couple of schemes for infrastructure support. One is the Museum Estates and Development Fund, which is enormously helpful for leaky roofs in museums. The problem is, where we have other similar assets in the portfolio that are not designated as museums, we cannot access that funding. As a quick example, Walmer Castle and Pendennis Castle are both Tudor forts, both with water ingress problems. One is a museum, so we can access funding. One is not, so we cannot. I am aware that this Government introduced a Heritage at Risk Fund, which was hugely oversubscribed, and that tells you how significant the demand is for this. Sadly, we were not able to access that for various reasons.

In answer to your question, how we access more of that infrastructure funding to support remedial needs is definitely one thing. Then, in the area that I started with, that long-term preventative maintenance investment, there is no funding for us for that at present, so we have to cover that from our own resources.

Q133 **Chair:** Why can you not access the Heritage at Risk Fund?

Geoff Parkin: It is largely to do with the tightness of the definition of the criteria: it is looking for specific project types in specific areas of deprivation, which makes complete sense. Our list of things that we ask for support for were not as closely targeted in those areas as many of the other people who submitted requests for funding.

Chair: You are not excluded as an organisation; it was just that you did not have any projects that met the criteria?

Geoff Parkin: We are not excluded, no. That is right, because they were quite tightly defined. The quantum of money was relatively small.



Q134 Jo Platt: Good morning. Can I declare my interest as having managed a grade II listed building during my sabbatical years, probably the hardest job that I ever did as a charity worker?

Geoff, as a funding recipient, what are the biggest limitations of the current funding models for heritage conservation?

Geoff Parkin: I will slightly repeat myself, if I may. The project funding for more innovative activity is well funded. We do have strong support in those situations. That aspect is fine. That is a relatively small part of what we do, but we should be more ambitious and do more of that over time.

It is the other two areas that are more difficult. For remedial infrastructure support, it is difficult to get access to funding for those projects. We are therefore reliant on our own resources or matched funding with things like the Museum and Estates Development Fund, which is problematic given the financial pressures on our organisation. We need funding for that long-term preventative maintenance piece I described, and there is no external support for that at all at the moment.

Q135 Jo Platt: Project funding is usually about short-term projects. It is usually the asset or the group that is trying to fit. Do you foresee any problems with that?

Geoff Parkin: When it is short term—the Heritage at Risk Fund, for example, was relatively short term—it can be difficult to design the project, secure the funding and get the work done within the timeframe. Most of our projects are larger scale than that, so we would be working over years with Eilish and her team to provide funding over an extended period. Berwick Barracks is a good example of that. We have raised something like £14 million for that project. It will take a number of years to put the money to work.

Q136 Jo Platt: Eilish and Matthew, what lessons have been learned from recent partnership approaches? You mentioned the heritage action zones and the heritage enterprise programme, and the collaborations between communities. What lessons have been learned and what could we do better?

Eilish McGuinness: We have distilled our 30 years into our current strategy and it is clear that partnerships are key. We have worked closely with the Architectural Heritage Fund and indeed with English Heritage, not just as a project funder but on those themes around running heritage projects and conservation and climate. We have learned a lot that partnerships are key. Some of the things that we talked about as being problems in the sector around skills also need a partnership approach. That is clear.

The other thing we learned speaks to what Geoff was saying about the long-term nature of projects. You will know from delivering a project that both the planning of it and the delivery are key. We have a 10-year framework and that allows people to plan with some degree of



confidence. I am sure I will be sitting down with Geoff at some point and talking about his portfolio of projects, because part of this, like all things, is good planning.

The other thing that we need to be super-aligned on—and we are—are the areas that Matthew looks at, the Heritage Development Trust, getting in at that small-scale, and then building on that with bigger grants, so that we are strategically aligned and supportive of the sector more widely.

Q137 Jo Platt: Do you believe the programmes have been successful?

Eilish McGuinness: Yes. I should say that we have two aspects to our funding. One is open programme, and it is important for our applicants to be able to apply all the time and to have it delegated to areas and nations. Then we have what we call strategic initiatives. One is heritage place and the other is about heritage and needs and places of worship. We fund urban and rural landscapes, nature, towns and cities, and those are all delivered in partnership.

The broader the partnership, the better. I know we sometimes talk about the heritage sector and sectors, but we like to look at heritage as broad and interwoven. Another thing we have learned is that it is more sustainable if we think of it in those terms.

Matthew Mckeague: We have joint funded projects and programmes like the high streets heritage action zones and the cultural programme. We had a sister programme called transforming places through heritage, which was about town centre heritage-led regeneration. You came to open a project for us in King Street in Great Yarmouth, which was about turning a building at risk into affordable housing, and a restaurant was provided at the ground floor level. For every £1 invested, our programme delivered £3.38 of return—a significant benefit that was delivered through the programme.

Organisations could do more on town centre regeneration through the reuse of historic buildings. The project I mentioned in Southend has brought a department store back into use, and it is now delivering 4,000 visitors to that part of the high street every month, which has helped to turn around the high street as well. Organisations could do much more, and the partnership that we had with the Heritage Fund and Historic England on that was absolutely key.

Revenue funding is absolutely a real challenge for the sector. We are project-focused because of the nature of the fact that we deliver projects around historic buildings. Evaluations and reports over the years have identified the lack of revenue funding, particularly long-term revenue funding, as a key gap.

Lots of organisations now have mixed income streams, whether it is cafes, renting space or holiday accommodation, and have done enormous



HOUSE OF COMMONS

amounts of work to develop that mixed model. However, when you are working in deprived areas, it is hard to have a completely 100% earned income model. That element needs longer-term revenue support.

We have looked at how we can provide some of that. The Heritage Development Trust programme is trying to do that in the 12 areas we are working with the lottery on. Because we are a social investor, we also work with other organisations outside the heritage sector. We have been working with organisations like the Social Investment Business on a programme called Thrive. This is getting working capital into an organisation. Lee Spinners Mill is one organisation that successfully applied for £150,000 of revenue funding to help with redeveloping part of the mill. That is one way that we are trying to leverage in funds from outside the sector. That partnership with social investors is key. Long-term revenue funding, is certainly one of the challenges for the sector that we have to work on.

Q138 Jo Platt: When funding models have historically gone to local authorities to distribute, what worked best? Is it working with the community or is it going via another level of bureaucracy, if you like, through the local authority? Is that a cheeky question that I can maybe get a one-word answer on?

Eilish McGuinness: All of the above. Community is important, and we think that sustains it in the long time. As Matthew said, communities need support and there will always be capacity building. In our heritage places, these areas that we will stick with for 10 years, we are building capacity in the local authority to support the communities, but equally allowing communities to determine what is important to them and their heritage. It is a bit of everything, I would say.

Jo Platt: That was diplomatic.

Matthew Mckeague: Strong partnership with local authorities is absolutely key. Local authority capacity has dropped off over the last 15 years; that is the reality. A strong partnership between an organisation that we are funding and the local authority tends to make projects stronger and more successful. Those partnerships are absolutely key, as well as those with organisations like ours.

Geoff Parkin: It is about having the people who have the skills to work with all the partners to bring a project together. To me, that is more important than how the money flows. That is a rare and specialist skill. We have a handful of people who are excellent at that. As part of a set of recommendations for improving the way this part of the sector works, investing in that skill set and providing support so that we can build more of those skills, whether it is in our organisation or it is in the combined authorities, if they have skills hubs, is critical. That co-ordination and collaboration piece needs to be worked hard by people who know what they are doing.



Q139 Damian Hinds: I want to pick up on what Geoff said earlier about the project funding being fine but there being limited preventative and maintenance funding. To what extent are you able, as English Heritage, to focus the money that you control on the former, on the preventative maintenance? To what extent do you do that?

Geoff Parkin: We have to. We generate about £150 million of income, mostly from our own resources—from membership, sales, visitor turnstile clicks, sales in the shops and cafes and so on. We generate £10 million to £12 million of external funding, so the vast majority comes from our own commercial activity. From that, we spend about £30 to £35 million in the preventative and remedial maintenance area I was talking about. We do convert quite a lot of our income into that style of investment, but the issue for us is that it is not enough to ensure the organisation as a whole is in a sustainable condition.

Chair: I feel like I have helped with that. I became a member of English Heritage at the weekend on a trip to Northumbria.

Geoff Parkin: Thank you. You are welcome.

Q140 Mr Bayo Alaba: Good morning, all. I will start with a thank you, Matthew, for some of the work that you have done with the Haven on Hamlet Court Road. That has done a significant job of pulling the community together. When you look at it, it is almost like an anchor tenant, and building has been replaced so that it is no longer a retail premises, but physically it is very much reanimating the community.

That brings me back to my point. Given the current reliance on short-term project-based capital grants—and this question is to all of you—how can funding models be restructured to better support long-term sustainability and ongoing maintenance?

Eilish, you mentioned skills and governance, and I wrote down trust and assurance. We have an old Victorian warehouse called the Freight House in my constituency in Rochford. It has been mothballed for about five years. There is significant community engagement to try to take the building up. The reason I noted trust and assurance is that we have a local authority, effectively, that wants to work in collaboration with the community, but there is an issue of funding streams and how it can be supported long-term. They do not want the keys to be given back to them at a certain point.

How do you see that reliance on short-term funding, and how do you see yourself supporting organisations such as that?

Eilish McGuinness: That is a good point, because communities are keen to take on assets, but that comes with enormous risk and responsibility. Our task is to make sure that people understand what is required. Geoff talked about some of the skills and knowledge. We can independently fund a delegated programme, which is getting grants of up to £250,000 to communities to get them to start to plan before they take on anything. We could look at business plans. We can support them on governance



HOUSE OF COMMONS

models. When they are ready—it is a bit like the Heritage Development Trust—they come in to us for a bigger amount of funding. One investment principle I refer to as organisational sustainability, and so we will assess and support that.

I should say that our grants are in two stages. People get development funding so that they can explore some of these things, and then we support them in the long-term delivery. We are not a revenue funder but, as I say, we have a longer timeframe now, sometimes up to 10 years.

We can work with people and be flexible about how the buildings are used. We talk about the heritage sector, but a lot of our projects in our communities are one-off projects. We have a fantastic project in Bristol, Kingsley Hall. It is an amazing heritage building, but it is actually a youth homelessness charity. It is about using the building for whatever purpose makes it both the centre of the community but available for access.

Matthew Mckeague: The sector has changed quite a lot, particularly over the last 20 years. I guess, if you look back at our annual reviews in the 1990s and whatnot, you will see a lot of heritage centres getting funded; some of those were inherently unsustainable when funding changed.

Now, a lot of organisations have this mixed model of funding—organisations like Cromford Mill in Derbyshire, which has business space and a café. It is a visitor attraction. It has a real mixed model. Age Concern in Southend, similarly, has lots of different tenants delivering different services and different activities going on any day of the week. Our much more varied model has reduced reliance on grant funding, as mentioned, and they are developing a much more earned income model.

The maturity of the sector, on what works from a business planning point of view, has got a lot better. We measure how organisations are doing 10 years after we first awarded funding, and 88% of the organisations that we funded, 10 years after we first funded them, the buildings remain in their ownership. That gives you an indication of the fact that most of these organisations retain ownership of the buildings in the long term.

We need to do more work to help organisations to strengthen business plans, absolutely. We also need to help places and organisations that are not yet ready to take on a building. We do a lot of work in the predevelopment stage, when organisations have identified a building and they have a general idea of what they want to do with it. We need to help places and communities that may be further back in that process to develop the capacity to be able to take on a building maybe in five years' time.

There is a bit of a gap in the support that can be provided. Potentially, good work can be done in partnership with the community wealth fund that the National Lottery Community Fund will be running to help areas that are suffering from a double disadvantage when they have ambitions



to take on a historic building, and to provide that deeper support to those places.

Q141 **Mr Bayo Alaba:** On that point, before I come to you, Geoff, often some of these projects take some time to come through, and in that time you have inflationary pressures. Is any work being done to try to speed up the pace, so that initiatives are not hampered by inflationary pressures?

Matthew Mckeague: You could do it in two ways. First, a phased approach can be a good idea, so you get a sense of bringing that floor back into use, work out how that is working out in practice, and then do the next floor and then the next floor. A phased approach can reduce risk because it enables projects to learn what is working. That inevitably will lead to projects having to raise capital in phases, but that may work for different organisations.

How we make these projects go faster, we definitely acknowledge, can be a real risk from a cost inflation point of view. We are making sure that we can get skills, experience and professional teams into areas where there may be capacity and skills gaps. In some parts of the country, as Eilish mentioned, like Cornwall, it can be difficult to get surveyors, architects into those areas, which means that some projects can be slower. Pace can sometimes be good if work is phased, but trying to speed up the process so that costs do not increase in a way that become problematic for a project is definitely, we acknowledge, an issue.

Eilish McGuinness: If I could add, we have definitely speeded up the ability to apply for development funding and be supported by our engagement teams on the ground. That bit of planning that we refer to that can be quite speedy.

Delivering a capital project has wider issues about tendering and planning and listed building consent that it is sometimes hard to control, and we need to be realistic about the timescales.

Geoff Parkin: How do we restructure the funding flow from short-term projects to assuring long-term sustainability? It is two things. The first is changing the policy for deployment of those funds. The terms of reference for the National Lottery Heritage Fund are such that it is project funding-based. That could change. Many of the foundations have a similar mindset. That could change. It is on us to make the argument for why those changes should be considered. We look after 400 historic assets on behalf of the nation. They are all owned by the state or are in the guardianship of the state, and they do amazing work in 400 communities all around the country. That is worth funding and ensuring that we are on a sustainable footing. It is on us to make that case more clearly.

Secondly, it is increasingly clear to me the Government need to play a role. These are national assets. Philanthropists have said to us, "We would be more supportive if we thought the Government were taking a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

lead.” We think the Government could play a role alongside a whole range of other funding providers. We are not assuming that is the only source. I am sure Ministers are prioritising and making trade-offs at the moment. It is clearly a matter for them, but heritage has a strong case to secure a reasonable share of the £2.9 billion of capital funding that the Department has announced for culture.

Q142 Mr Bayo Alaba: Geoff, I know you have partially answered this, but how can funding bodies help heritage organisations to plan ahead and stay supported both during and after projects? You have touched on the Government input. Any other areas?

Geoff Parkin: Yes, planning ahead. We look after buildings that are literally hundreds of years old and we have hundreds of them. We ought to be in a long-term dialogue with all the key funding partners about that long-term pipeline of work that we know is coming up. Perhaps we have been too short-term in our thinking, which is largely to do with the financial pressure the organisation has been under, but we ought to be able to have a 10-year conversation about the projects that are likely to come up.

On the second one, assuring sustainability of projects, there is scope for additional support when projects have been up and running for some time and may have reached maturity, and another intervention might be required to reinforce the things that are working and help to solve some of the problems where they are not, especially in some of the environments you were describing where they cannot necessarily survive on their own through their own commercial income generation. A post-project, medium-term check-in as to how things are going, and further support to put more momentum back into the program if things are going slightly soft, would be enormously supportive.

Eilish McGuinness: It is less our terms of reference and more our legislative framework around project funding. Becoming a revenue funder for the whole of the heritage sector would reduce the ability to fund a lot of the things across heritage that we are keen to deliver.

Q143 Chair: Geoff, is there sufficient flexibility within the way that your organisation is structured to be able to take advantage of a hybrid model of lots of different funding opportunities?

I will give you an example. In my constituency, we have Fort Brockhurst, which is one of your sites. It is a complicated site and in quite a state of disrepair in areas, potentially in some parts getting to the point where it could fall down forever. Local organisations have wanted to get involved and bring in their own expertise and funding to help sustain that site in parts. I went along to one of these meetings and I detected a reluctance amongst your organisation to embrace that kind of project.

Geoff Parkin: It is not reluctance. I was talking with Ali Naylor last week about this. It is more about capacity. What is happening at Berwick Barracks at the moment, with that multiparty, multimillion-pound



HOUSE OF COMMONS

regeneration project, is exactly the thing we should be doing other places, including Fort Brockhurst. The issue is the organisational capacity to do many of those at the same time. The funding is there. The will is there. The opportunity definitely is there. The community engagement is there. That one is more about organisational capacity. If you sense reluctance, it is people being concerned and not wanting to be stretched too thinly, as opposed to thinking it is not a good idea, because it patently is.

Q144 Chair: Yes. It is a race against time. In some cases, these buildings are getting to the point of no return.

Geoff Parkin: That is right. Part of our issue is we have 400 of them to look after. A good number are in need of some short-term support, whether it is that remedial infrastructure work or an opportunity to redevelop them before the maintenance challenge gets out of control.

Q145 Chair: What do you need to be able to build the capacity that you spoke of and to take advantage of some of the help that is around in the local area? It is almost as if you are turning your back on it.

Geoff Parkin: It is mostly about personnel and people who have the skills to run complex projects that involve multiparty engagement. We do have a handful of people like that, but they are in short supply and they have multiple claims on their time. If we had a magic wand, we would have a handful of people like that who could run projects like Fort Brockhurst and—

Chair: Is it an issue of funding for personnel?

Geoff Parkin: It is funding for people and capacity of those people. It is not a project funding problem.

Q146 Dr Rupa Huq: Hi, everyone. Thanks for coming in. My questions are following up from the stuff on Government support. On the deeply unsexy but fascinating subject of VAT and the inconsistency on the different exemptions, I wondered how the current VAT regime impacts your ability to support the repair and reuse of historic buildings.

Geoff Parkin: Shall I start that one? We are able to reclaim VAT on pay-to-enter sites; that is about a quarter of the estate. We cannot for the work that is performed on all the free-to-enter sites. Having equal treatment across all investment and across all site types would be beneficial without a shadow of a doubt. It would not replace the need for the structural funding I was talking about earlier or the remedial infrastructure funding, but it would definitely help the budgets to go further and would be welcome.

Matthew Mckeague: Yes, VAT has long been a big issue for the sector. The inconsistency in how VAT is applied to new build versus repair and conversion of historic buildings leads to some inequitable situations. Whether the Treasury will be willing to listen to our case on VAT has long



been a challenge. We have provided various tranches of evidence for the impact that this would have on improving how well we look after our heritage buildings. If we cannot look at a situation where that VAT relief is applied to the repair and maintenance of listed buildings, should it be applied to new builds, which would help prioritise in developers' eyes, potentially, the reuse of buildings versus new builds? With inconsistency, if relief is not possible on repair and maintenance, we want at least an equalisation of where VAT is applied.

Eilish McGuinness: I support that. One of our investment principles is about protecting the environment. The reuse of buildings is something that we encourage rather than new builds. We support that. It brings more funding into the sector.

Q147 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Yes. *Architects' Journal* is doing a big campaign on how retrofitting should be the way forward rather than demolition with all its huge carbon emissions.

How much overlap do the three of your organisations—National Heritage Lottery, English Heritage and Architectural Heritage Fund—have with the National Churches Trust? It has been lobbying me for quite a few years with similar arguments to what you are making. They are slightly better off than you because they have the listed buildings places of worship scheme, although, for them, the figures have dropped and it is uncertain whether it is continuing after 2026. The convincing arguments they always make are that, in recent years, vaccination centres and warm spaces have saved the NHS money. Things like playgroups and food banks all happen in their buildings and they should be exempt for their repairs, although, like you said, all your buildings are hundreds of years old and are crumbling. I wondered if there is any potential for working with them because it is a lot of the same arguments.

Eilish McGuinness: Yes, we work closely with the National Churches Trust. One of our strategic initiatives is around places of worship because they are the biggest number of listed buildings and they have amazing community use. We have funded the National Churches Trust to look at supporting capacity building in places of worship. Often they are small volunteer groups and we have supported this throughout. They have a lobbying sense around the listed places of worship scheme. It is a similar issue. If there is any reduction, the requests to the fund would be higher. We do work with them in general about supporting places of worship.

We have been encouraging applications to us through our project funding. We have funded £150 million of open programme funding for churches and places of worship already. We work closely with the National Churches Trust.

Matthew Mckeague: The listed places of worship scheme is important to churches. I used to be the Director of Regeneration for the Churches Conservation Trust and developed new uses for some of the churches in their care. The listed places of worship scheme was incredibly important



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in being able to use some of that money for more maintenance of some challenging historic buildings. I know how important it is to the church sector to have the LPWS.

If we were to look at other listed buildings, maybe there is a way of presenting it to the Treasury that we pilot a similar type of scheme in town centres, maybe in particularly deprived areas. We could have a similar relief scheme that would then enable more heritage-led regeneration to take place if VAT was not applied to repair and maintenance so that we could test whether that can deliver more regeneration benefits for places. Are there different ways of working that with some pilots similar to LPWS in some pilot areas? That may be one thing that we could try.

Geoff Parkin: We do not have much crossover with their work, but the idea of sharing ideas for innovation and community usage and science is a good one.

Dr Rupa Huq: It need not be just churches but also synagogues and mosques, which also do those functions.

Q148 **Chair:** Matthew, have you submitted that idea as part of your evidence?

Matthew Mckeague: It was one of the things in Historic England's evidence about how we maybe try different ideas. It was building on the high streets heritage action zones. It was an idea around town centre regeneration.

Q149 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Would other reforms to general taxation make life easier and conservation financially more viable for you?

Geoff Parkin: Nothing that is a priority.

Q150 **Dr Rupa Huq:** Your written evidence, Geoff's in particular, recommended a reclaim scheme on publicly accessible built sites. How does that fit with the net zero goals as well?

Geoff Parkin: That is a good question. The implementation of net zero goals in buildings that are 500 years old is a real challenge. We need to put more work and more thought into how we can respond to the regulations as they unfold, and we need to find ways of responding that are affordable and justifiable.

It is a big challenge. An air source heat pump in a 200-year-old building does not make any economic sense. The cost per tonne of carbon saved is not economically rational. We need to find alternatives that are in situations where opportunities arise. The new learning centre at Stonehenge will be a low-carbon building. We have retrofitted some solar panels on the roof of the visitor centre at Whitby. However, we need a clearer idea of how we can interpret the regulations in a way that is economically viable.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Matthew Mckeague: Regulations and policy are one area. Funding for energy efficiency improvements is another gap in the funding. It is hard to come by funding for projects that maybe do not need to do a big capital project but need to put solar panels on their building or put an air source heat pump into their property.

We have been in partnership again with the Social Investment Business on the energy resilience fund, which is a £50 million fund. It is a blended loan grant programme for organisations to apply for that particular need. If you need solar panels on your building, you can apply to this for up to £250,000, and it is a 75% loan grant.

However, £50 million is a drop in the ocean of the financial need that organisations have. In the public sector, Salix has put £3.3 billion into energy efficiency projects for local authorities. We do not have anything like that in the heritage sector, but we still have a similar need. The capital available for energy efficiency improvements and that type of work is a particular gap.

Eilish McGuinness: More broadly, the whole area of retrofitting and climate and environment is an area where a partnership for research and sharing knowledge would be good because everybody is grappling with the same issues.

Q151 **Damian Hinds:** Thank you very much. Can I follow up first on a question that Rupa asked about the historic churches? I have three in my constituency, two small ones and one grand one, but they are all subject to a restrictive rule that they can be used only six times a year for religious services. At the same time, all manner of different types of premises are being licensed to conduct weddings.

Is there a bit of a strange mismatch there with these beautiful historic buildings where people would love to get married but they cannot? Should we change it?

Matthew Mckeague: It is a question for the Church of England.

Damian Hinds: Is it a question for the Church of England or is it a question for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport?

Matthew Mckeague: It is a question for the Church. Yes, when a church is made redundant, it can be used six times a year. That is one of the rules. That means that weddings, which is often one of the main sources of income to keep the church going, are limited to six or fewer. It is a big challenge, and the rule around the number of services is something to definitely take up with the Church.

Q152 **Damian Hinds:** I want to talk about skills. It has come up a few times, including from Eilish earlier, and you mentioned both modern transferable skills like governance and digital skills but, crucially, I want to talk about traditional craft skills and heritage skills. On the red list of endangered crafts, 72 skills are listed as being critically endangered. That number has



HOUSE OF COMMONS

been going up. Also, this sector has an ageing workforce and, to be fair, construction in general has that complaint about the ageing of the workforce.

There is now a new architecture around skills in this country. Apprenticeships can now be shorter. Typically, a German apprenticeship is about two years. Now you will be able to have an apprenticeship in eight months in Britain. There is Skills England, which some of the sector is calling for. There are V-levels and the growth and skills levy. Are the problems now solved?

Matthew Mckeague: We do not fund skills per se. We work with organisations that do a lot of training onsite. Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust, has its own subsidiary called Norfolk Conservation. It raises funds and delivers programmes that train often young people who are not in education or training, and provide them with the skills to repair the medieval town wall or to get involved in the capital projects that they are delivering at any one time. They have delivered something like 30,000 training hours in the last 10 years. We are often funding these types of organisations that then will raise funds from the Heritage Fund or similar organisations to deliver skills and training.

These organisations are often in satellite places. The funding for the work that they are doing around skills can go up and down. They have skills and they have project managers that are there, but then they have to let them go because the capital project has completed. The nature of funding into skills can be quite lumpy. Trying to provide a consistent level of funding for organisations that can continue to build their capacity to deliver training and whatnot does need to be looked at.

More funding is going in. How local organisations can access that funding and how local organisations can build consistent capacity to deliver skills training, particularly around traditional historic buildings, is the element that needs further looking into.

Geoff Parkin: I agree with that entirely. We have our own programme in a specific area of skills called the heritage botanic garden trainee scheme, which has been running for the last 20 years. Last year we had 17 graduates, who have now all found work in the sector, some with us, others elsewhere. The reason that is working is twofold. First, it is funded so we are not taking any risk. Secondly, the individuals are paid salaries. It is appealing to get on to the scheme and the people who are co-ordinating the scheme are not taking any risk.

We outsource much of our conservation, maintenance and estates management work to specialist contractors. Because of the ebb and flow of the work, related to the funding and because of the geographical spread across the country where the work takes place, it is complex for the supply side to manage and it also comes with a degree of uncertainty. You can see why they would be nervous about investing in skills development on the one hand because they might not feel confident



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that they have the workflow but, on the other, if they do not invest in skills development, they might not win work in future.

Q153 Damian Hinds: It is currently changing. All the main institutions are changing. Has that solved or will it solve any of your problems?

Geoff Parkin: I am not sure. The private sector, in our case anyway, needs to have the confidence to lead the development of skills at scale nationally and they probably would argue they want more certainty in order to do that. If we had more certain funding, as we were talking about, we could probably provide a more predictable workflow, which is part of the problem. We could also offer multiyear contracting so that they would have much greater certainty at that point, but they would still need to take the risk of taking people on and funding that, which goes back to my original example. Maybe there needs to be funding for salaries to remove that risk and maybe there could be more flexibility in how the apprentice levy is used to support that.

Q154 Damian Hinds: There will be more flexibility in how the apprentice levy will be used. It is changing to the growth and skills levy, although that question about covering salaries is a different one. How long would a typical apprenticeship in a craft skill be?

Geoff Parkin: It varies enormously. The garden scheme is 12 months. I can imagine stonemasonry would be much longer. Flint knapping might be longer. I do not know.

Q155 Damian Hinds: Do you have a formal road into Skills England—or did you go to IfATE before—for setting the occupational standards in these craft skills? Matthew?

Matthew Mckeague: One of our trustees at AHF is a director at Skills England. The length of apprenticeships varies enormously. I was in York at the Centre of Excellence for the Minster the other day. You will never run out of work on York Minster. They can provide the consistency that is sometimes a challenge for the types of organisations that we fund. There might be a bit of work here for three months or there might be a bit of work there for six months. It is harder to provide a long-term apprenticeship when you have those short-term opportunities. With collaboration across a geographic area, you could have three months on a building in Great Yarmouth but then a nine-month placement in Lowestoft.

Q156 Damian Hinds: That is of course already possible, to be clear. You can do an apprenticeship across more than one employer.

Matthew Mckeague: Yes, but that co-ordination is one challenge that we maybe have not quite solved. The additional funding for some of these organisations will absolutely help.

Eilish McGuinness: We had a useful meeting with Baroness Twycross about skills because it goes right across the piece. You have mentioned



the endangered crafts. That is almost intangible cultural heritage, which is at real risk of loss. We are also funding projects. York was one of ours. These long-term projects have a demand for heritage skills, but it needs a more co-ordinated view right across the piece. I am sure there will be improvements, but I was listening to the National Trust. They even found it difficult to access the apprenticeship levy. We could all work together to address that.

Q157 Damian Hinds: On a different tack, there has been a shift away from people wanting to own stuff to having experiences, particularly since covid. It is a big trend of the leisure area. Heritage skills, particularly some of these rarer skills, in theory offer quite a big opportunity.

I wonder how or if you see the opportunity of upping the scale of transferring these skills, not only for work purposes for the workforce but also in itself as a product or service for people to experience heritage. It is an interesting question and two thoughts come to mind.

First, it is an opportunity to work with volunteers to be more involved in the day-to-day activity, and some of them will have the skills or could teach other volunteers to learn those skills.

Secondly—this is a small example but is an interesting idea for perhaps more widespread deployment—when we undertook the work at Belsay Hall, we had a “become a Belsay builder” experience for visitors. People could learn about the craft skills that were required to do the work and had a behind-the-scenes tour of the reroofing work. It is one small example, but it is in line with the thought you had. We could do more of that, for sure, across the board. It is interesting. You can imagine that being a core part of community engagement work across a number of sites.

Matthew Mckeague: Portland Works in Sheffield is the original site of cutlery manufacturing in the country. It is now a workspace for all different types of creative businesses and manufacturing businesses. The volunteers have done a lot of the window repairs themselves. They have the experience to take out the windows, repair them and put them back in. That is saving Portland Works an enormous amount of money on maintenance. That is quite a high end of the spectrum, but volunteers can definitely help with the day-to-day maintenance that will help manage these buildings, particularly things like churches, in the long term. With the risks around people having their jobs taken by AI, traditional built skills is something that is quite difficult for robots or AI to get their heads around. There are definitely opportunities.

Eilish McGuinness: That is very much within our projects. Having visited so many projects, people are interested in the details and seeing how crafts are developed.

Q158 Jo Platt: Can I quickly ask about the procurement policies where a heritage facility has public funding and yet they are allowed to use only a small pool of contractors, usually national contractors, not local? Again,



what you are saying is absolutely great and we could all pull together on that, but the reality is you can use this small pool of contractors who are usually not from the area, and not skilling the local workforce up. Is that a problem? Do you see that?

Matthew Mckeague: We would never say you can only use this contractor or that contractor. We expect to see a certain number of skills, experience and quotes. We encourage organisations to seek quotes from local companies. Absolutely, we encourage organisations to do that so that they can help develop the supply chain locally. As I mentioned, cold spots of particular professionals or contractors are a challenge, and so a pragmatic approach sometimes needs to be taken to make sure that we can get a sufficient number of quotes to meet our public funding commitments around procurement. It can be challenging, but we definitely encourage organisations to look at local suppliers wherever possible.

Eilish McGuinness: Looking at skills as a theme and thinking about the construction industry is a big part of this because, in a way, you cannot never have procurement but, if they are embedded in a team delivering locally, it is positive.

Q159 **Jo Platt:** Again, declaring an interest, we were a recipient of community ownership fund support, which did give us a real kickstart into developing the mill project that you mentioned before. With the closure of COF, how are you ensuring that community ownership is encouraged in heritage projects?

Eilish McGuinness: I can go first. I talked a little bit about how our funding is very much around communities and people having access to our funding. The first thing is making our application process simpler and also proportionate. It is also about our engagement teams on the ground, working with local authorities and community groups, telling them what is available, because that is important. We find it useful when grantees themselves talk, the people who have delivered and are able to advise people.

The other thing that is important is development funding and making sure that people are aware of the issues and risks and supporting them in that. We talked about even big organisations and Geoff was talking about capacity. We can build capacity into project planning as well. We will work with other funding where it is available but, equally, we can support communities themselves in taking on that. It does need to be realistic about the future sustainability, which is why organisational sustainability and sustainability generally is so important to us.

Matthew Mckeague: The end of the community ownership fund did cut off a significant source of funding for organisations that were wanting to take on heritage assets. A quarter of the projects that were funded through COF had AHF early-stage funding. About a quarter of the organisations that went on to be successful with COF had had our funding



and probably involved a heritage asset. That is a significant number of the projects that were being funded. That will have reduced the availability of funds for acquiring historic buildings.

Our heritage revival fund that DCMS is funding at the moment is providing some funding for early-stage development grants and capital grants. That is a £5 million programme, but at the moment it is only one year. That will potentially end in March 2026. We are discussing with DCMS a future programme around the heritage revival fund, which will hopefully help fill some of that gap that has been left by the community ownership fund.

Generally, the lack of matched funding out there is also a problem, not just COF, but the fact that there are no European funds any more or the UK shared prosperity fund. These all provided important match funding for projects. The amount of match funding out there in the sector in circulation is much reduced from what it was. The end of things like COF and what have you is potentially a problem for projects moving forward.

Eilish McGuinness: We have observed that because people are asking for higher percentages of grants at that smaller end. We can fund up to 100% and there is not as much partner funding out there.

Geoff Parkin: Our assets are all either owned by the state or in the guardianship of the state. Community ownership is not an issue for us.

Q160 **Jo Platt:** Eilish, you mentioned sustainability being part of how you can better support community initiatives. Matthew, how do you think projects will be able to be supported, especially in deprived areas?

Matthew Mckeague: As mentioned, that early-stage support needs to be looked at. How do we help organisations that might not be ready to take on an asset yet?

Jo Platt: Is the community right to buy part of that solution as well?

Matthew Mckeague: It will be, but at the moment there is no funding to support the community right to buy because of the demise of COF. As I mentioned, things like the heritage revival fund could support that. In places like Scotland, where there is meatier legislation around community rights to buy, the Scottish land fund helped organisations with that kind of purchase. The community right to buy will be important, but we need to make sure that the funding mechanisms are there, particularly in deprived areas, where skills funding capacity is one of the barriers to taking on assets.

Q161 **Jo Platt:** I have a question to Geoff. How do you engage local communities in the stewardship of the sites you manage? You mentioned volunteers before. Having run a facility, run by volunteers as well, they do not always have the time. Damian mentioned as well that volunteers are dropping off, especially since covid. What would your advice be on stewardship of managing community heritage assets?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Geoff Parkin: We do a lot of work to build community engagement. We can definitely do more and, in a world of more certain funding, we definitely would.

The programme is pretty extensive already. We have 5,000 volunteers helping with everything from interpreting the site and telling stories through to some of the elementary maintenance work. We run 800 community events per annum, be they major events like the solstices and equinoxes at Stonehenge—four of those a year—or more local things.

Walmer is a popular site with members, but we have been experimenting with how to extend usage by local communities, making space available to them free of charge. We have had dementia groups, yoga groups, parents groups and social prescribers coming to the site, which is fantastic and we should certainly do more of that. We also welcome 200,000 schoolchildren every year to visit their local heritage site free of charge.

We work with friends groups on programming. For example, I do not know whether you have been to the Heiress exhibition at Kenwood. That was put together in partnership with the Friends of Kenwood.

We also have local management agreements, not quite community ownership but the next nearest thing, where local groups would take on the responsibility for the operation of the site, which, as Elish was saying, is not without risk for them or us but can be done, and in certain situations that works well. In heritage asset-led regeneration areas, we work actively with all the local community interest groups and other funders to make sure the projects are a success from a capital standpoint and also continue to be a success thereafter.

Could we do more of that? Absolutely, yes. We have a network of 400 links into local communities across the country. That is a fantastic opportunity to drive community engagement with all the benefits associated with that. and we need to do more of that going forward.

Q162 **Jo Platt:** What would the challenges be or what do you foresee these challenges are?

Geoff Parkin: It is down to money. The people who run our sites are passionate about their local operation. They know what works in their local environment and they see their local community every day. They know how to build a bigger programme that would encourage different groups to come to the site and make the most of the facilities. We need to give them space to think about that and money to make it happen. That is in short supply at the moment.

Matthew Mckeague: On the number of volunteers, the Age Concern project in Southend has about 180 volunteers that they manage day-to-day. It comes back to that revenue funding question. You have to manage volunteers. You have to provide activities. You cannot do that for



free. When I worked with the Churches Conservation Trust, hundreds of volunteers contributed there, but having the funding to manage those volunteers, make sure that they are safely looked after, are engaged in activities, are enjoying it and are useful for the organisation takes time and money and professional staff. There is a great opportunity, but the funding model is one question for how that is resourced.

Eilish McGuinness: That is core to what could be applied to for us. There is a real opportunity there as well, even for perhaps your local volunteer groups, in making it accessible.

Q163 **Chair:** Great, thank you. Can I ask you one more question before we before we let you escape our evil clutches? We are coming together as a Committee to write our report at some stage on built heritage and how we steward it as a nation. What is one recommendation that you would like our Committee to push the Government on, Geoff?

Geoff Parkin: It is long-term structural funding to support that preventative maintenance activity on the heritage sites, on the visitor infrastructure, which is often forgotten, and on the core capabilities of the organisation that runs the network, long-term funding to ensure we are in a sustainable condition.

Matthew Mckeague: I second what Geoff said, which hopefully gives me another chance to say something else.

What heritage regeneration can do in town centres is under-recognised by the Government. The high streets heritage action zones delivered a huge amount. Our own transforming places through heritage programme did as well. How we reuse historic buildings can provide the revitalisation of town centres. In Caernarvon, half the town centre was vacant in the 1990s and now is a thriving town centre, which has partly been led by a heritage development trust called Gallery. You see there an alternative way of regenerating town centres through heritage-led regeneration. Further investment into places is a real opportunity that I hope comes through the report.

Eilish McGuinness: I second that. It is about that cross-partnership working across Government and across DCMS. Some of the themes that we discussed would be good things for us all to work together around skills, partnerships and future sustainability, and also to register the importance of National Lottery funding in this and to thank the National Lottery players.

Chair: Absolutely. In that case, that concludes our questions for the first panel. We will now briefly suspend the meeting so that our second panel can come forward. Can I thank you all for coming to see us? Thank you.

Examination of witnesses



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Witnesses: Sarah Buckingham, Jennifer Cooke and Councillor Julie Jones-Evans.

Q164 **Chair:** Welcome to our second panel on protecting built heritage this morning. We will turn to the local planning system and its role in protecting our built heritage.

Local authorities are often at the frontline of heritage protection but can face significant challenges, whether that is financial pressures, skills shortages, or navigating quite complex planning frameworks. The session will explore how the planning system is working in practice, how organisations can adapt to things like climate change, and what changes might be needed to better support heritage conservation.

To do this, we will be hearing from Sarah Buckingham, director of historic properties and environment at Jersey Heritage, from Jennifer Cooke, director of heritage and townscape at Smith Jenkins Planning & Heritage, and Councillor Julie Jones Evans, chair of the Local Government Association's culture and tourism and sport board. Welcome to all of you.

I will kick off with a question for all of you to think about. What are the main reasons for delays in listed building consent and planning applications? Sarah, can I start with you?

Sarah Buckingham: Yes, certainly. I suppose I would put it down to a couple of reasons, probably starting with the volume of cases and the complexity of dealing with listed buildings. Although I am here from Jersey, I have worked in local authorities as a conservation officer for about 20 years on and off in my career and as a planning inspector, so I have seen this at first hand. Yes, listed building cases are by definition more complex than ordinary planning cases, although I refer you to the Government's own statistics quoted by Historic England in the last *Heritage Counts*, which is that none the less 92% of listed building cases are approved. The issue is that they take a bit longer. About 70% are meeting the targets, as opposed to 86% in the planning area. They are more complex in that something might be not quite right, plan or detail. Generally, the urge is to negotiate or ask for an improvement, but then to be able to approve the case rather than simply saying, "No, this is not right. I will refuse it," which does not help anybody and will send the applicant straight back to the beginning, which is not helpful. That is certainly one thing.

I have worked most recently in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in this country, which you would consider to be a well-resourced planning department. None the less, given the volume of cases, most people are stretched to absolute capacity. If there are any slips in what is produced, there is not much scope for working faster, shall we say. In moments when perhaps they are slightly down on numbers because of a recruitment issue, people will be stretched. People have caseloads of 80 or 100 cases to be dealt with within eight weeks, which is clearly punishing. Conservation cases are fewer, but still equally challenging. We were lucky in that the applications were generally of good quality but, as



I mentioned, those small issues that you need to rectify before you can approve them still arose, which cannot be avoided.

The issue has been raised throughout the representations to this panel. The numbers of conservation officers are not as high as they could be. There has been a steady decline for as long as people have been counting, which is several decades now, in people working in a conservation service in a local authority. Lots of local authorities do not have a conservation officer or they share one or they have a part-time conservation officer. Clearly, there is a capacity issue. Areas like that will have delays. I understand maybe planning officers might be also issuing conservation advice, which is not so straightforward.

Finally, more than one of the responses has also referred to a lack of experience in the conservation services, which may mean delays or hesitation due to not having the confidence to say yes. I have observed that myself first hand. If you are not quite sure, it is so easy to say no or to ask for more information, but somebody with the right experience can say, "That will be fine," and approve something.

I put it down to those three issues: numbers, volume of cases, and skills and confidence.

Q165 **Chair:** Excellent. You have given us a comprehensive answer. I have volume of cases, complexity of cases, and the fact that sometimes cases are sent back to the beginning rather than negotiated—

Sarah Buckingham: Or revised.

Chair: —the capacity of the local planning teams and the low number and lack of experience among conservation officers. Jennifer, anything else to add to that list?

Jennifer Cooke: Taking your point earlier about not repeating what somebody else has said, I do agree a lot with what Sarah said there.

It is probably fair to say I feel some responsibility representing the private sector to some extent. We are a private consultancy. We work with individual homeowners who have responsibility in the stewardship of thousands of listed buildings and thousands of heritage assets, not only individuals but also private companies, which have a huge opportunity to help fund these buildings, make sure they have a viable use, and make sure that they are ongoing, and it does not all fall on the public sector. I feel a huge responsibility at this table to talk about that. Thank you for having me.

To echo but to build on what Sarah said, heritage is part of the wider planning process and so any challenges that the planning process is having, heritage is, too. It is not standalone. Therefore, the frustrations and the constraints on planning officers also apply to heritage officers and conservation officers. When we are applying and making applications as part of a wider planning application—it could be for a big masterplan



for a new residential development or it could be for a large listed building—we are coming against time delays because of a lack of conservation officer support.

I can see the planning officers doing the best they can, but they do not have the experience necessarily. It is a tricky, complex area of policy and legislation that filters its way down into local policy. It is the nuance of the semantics in the terminology. It is a subjective assessment. It is not like a BNG assessment where you can look at credits and you can work out the numbers. It is a subjective assessment. There is that lack of confidence sometimes internally when they are missing that resource.

A stat came out from the Victorian Society this week on its Instagram page that said Birmingham has one conservation officer but 2,000 listed buildings and 30 conservation areas. One person cannot possibly care for all that. I would certainly say that.

Then a big thing that perhaps Sarah has not mentioned for us on the receiving end of that ongoing process to get a listed building consent through is the subjectivity and advice that you get from different officers. This is exacerbated by time delays. You might take something for a pre-application in good faith and you get one opinion and then time moves on and of course all those issues around costs are compounded and time is compounded, but then you come across another officer three or four months down the line and they have a different opinion and you feel like you are back to square one again. Some element of a unified local authority position would be helpful.

To finish that before I hand over to Julie, I would say that there is an acknowledgement that listed building consent applications are free of charge, unlike a planning application. They do have that eight-week determination period and the clock starts ticking at validation. Understandably, stretched local authorities try to work their timeframes and their pipelines as best they can. Sometimes you get sent through pre-app. I would like to think that is a real opportunity to have a dialogue with an officer, with an authority, to try to get the best position and the best project. Invariably, you pay for pre-app and it delays the process and there is no timeframe around pre-app. That is important to say. Something can go from what would have been an eight-week determination to a year or so of one pre-app, one opinion, a second pre-app, another opinion, back around the loop again, with an application to an officer that perhaps is brand new or has moved on.

I see real opportunity and I do not want to present problems, but we submit over 100 applications every year as a business on behalf of our clients, and sometimes these themes are coming out as we go through.

Q166 Chair: That is helpful. I will come back to you all and ask for your recommendations to how we fix this. Before we do, Julie, do you have any other issues to add to the pot before we look for the solution?



Councillor Jones-Evans: Thank you, Chair. Jennifer and Sarah have done well to talk about the severe capacity and skill shortages that LPAs are experiencing. To put it into context, nine out of 10 councils are reporting recruitment difficulties and over two thirds are experiencing retention problems. It is a severe issue.

On top of that, councils are constrained by the complexity of the regulatory framework. We have new housing targets put on us. We have to do biodiversity net gain. We also have to do energy efficiency standards. There are local nature recovery strategies, for instance. We are doing our local plans again and people who are going through LGR and devolution, of course, have another set of work to be done.

Officers have a lot of pressure to deliver all these other strategy frameworks, which is important, and also making sure they all align up as well. That compounds the issue of not having a conservation officer to do the work. You have to pivot from looking at a Tudor house one minute to a Norman church to a brutalist building. The skills needed to assess those buildings are different. If someone is coming to you wanting to put some heating into this building, a different skill set is needed from whatever era that was from. Yes, investing in our skills is absolutely pivotal. I have probably captured most of that between the three of us now.

Q167 **Chair:** Does anyone have any views—we have already heard some from Jennifer—about the most urgent reforms needed to improve the efficiency and the consistency? You spoke about the inconsistency of heritage planning application decisions. What do we need? Does anyone have any thoughts on that?

Councillor Jones-Evans: From a local government perspective, having that long-term funding is important so that we can plan our workforce and we can grow our own. The pathways to planning programme is quite new, but it will be interesting to see how that grows and how that needs further support. We need that multiyear flexible funding to be able to recruit and retain the heritage and design specialists that we need.

It is not only within our own departments. The previous panel touched on those in procurement. Jo spoke about that. On the Isle of Wight, where I am from, we have only one architect firm that our heritage action zones could use. Of course, the backlog was with that one firm as well. It is the support industry around it.

I was interested to hear one of your previous sessions in June or July that they were talking about how to engage more with the graduate programmes as well, with history students and so on. We do well at the LGA with our graduate programmes. Maybe we could look at getting more young people coming up so that we have that follow-through.

Jennifer Cooke: If I could pick up on that as well, I agree with Julie that it would be great if there were more conservation officers, and that training and that impetus coming through, but we can try to diversify a



HOUSE OF COMMONS

bit and think about what other opportunities are there. There is a model that works well as an outsource model, effectively, which is not always very popular and it might change when it comes back in again.

On what is working at the moment, there is an organisation called Place Services, which works quite a lot in Essex; I do not know if you have come across them. It is a private organisation that provides conservation officer consultancy advice to a number of LPAs. I am not familiar with its funding model and how that works and how it charges, but it is a combined resource. Where conservation officers are low in numbers across those different LPAs and there is not a headcount for one in each authority, they can pool resources at the Place Services level and it covers a number of different authorities. For us as an applicant, when I know that it is Place Services, I know that I will get a consistent approach. I know where I stand. I do not always agree with them, but it is nice that we build a rapport and we can build that dialogue. That is one option.

Q168 Chair: Basically you are talking about councils outsourcing their heritage officer roles.

Jennifer Cooke: Yes, part of that role. I would more than happy to provide more information; I only know that as a recipient of that process as opposed to being within it as an organisation. I also sometimes wear a conservation officer hat when I work on schemes in Kingston. The Royal Borough of Kingston is low on its conservation officer resource so I get funded through the planning performance agreement. That is the agreement, as you are probably already aware, where an applicant, usually a big developer, will agree a PPA with the local authority and there is some funding that goes backwards and forwards there. It sets things like an expectation on the number of meetings, the resource that gets assigned, pre-app stages, timings. It only works for certain things, but what that means is that the authority dedicates resource, usually internally, but at this point, I am being funded through the PPA. I am an outside consultant, but instead of consulting to the applicant, I am consulting to the authority.

There are challenges. I effectively sit in a bit of a vacuum. I am not a local authority employee and I have to be very aware of which hat I am wearing. But it does, I feel, help to fund the process and is good for big projects. You can parachute in and provide that expert advice and it gets outsourced. The challenge, of course, is how you work with the other officers and it is something we have worked on over time. In some of the big landmark projects in Kingston I have been involved in, it has been great and I have built up my knowledge of that borough as well. Those will be the two additions to the additional conservation officers as well.

Chair: Sarah, do you have anything to add?

Sarah Buckingham: Yes, I am aware of Place Services. It has been a pooled model in Essex for quite a long time, outsourced possibly more



recently. That pooling of resources has occurred anyway, de facto, as local authorities have coalesced and new structures have emerged. It may be something to look to do consciously rather than by accident, and to be supported. There has been a similar model in dealing with archaeology for many years. Not many local authorities have their own archaeologists, but counties have had an archaeologist. That is one thing to look forward to.

Going back to the pre-application issue, having worked in a local authority where we did a lot of pre-app, we had very strict targets and time objectives attached to those. I had no concept that they were open-ended. In the Royal Borough we had a six-week target not an eight-week target to get back on pre-app advice, because it is paid for. I wonder if a bit more structure might be attached to them to help with that delay factor

Q169 Jeff Smith: You have identified the issues and some of the challenges that we are facing and started to talk about some of the solutions. It is a partnership between Government and local authorities and a lot of the responsibility goes to local authorities. How can Government support local authorities better to do this work?

Councillor Jones-Evans: Partnership between local authority and Government is critical, and also our arm's-length body. We have a very good relationship with our arm's-length body. We recently had our big culture, tourism and sport conference in Bradford, which was very, very well attended, and we had all of our ALB partners there in the room. Unfortunately, what was lacking was having DCMS there. We have gone through the first cycle at the LGA on the culture, tourism and sport board, as was, without having any ministerial or Secretary of State engagement whatsoever.

It is really important because we are doing this together. The local authorities are the biggest public investor into the sector. It is DCMS's remit and we are the biggest public sector investors there. If we can truly co-create and co-produce, we have to be talking to each other in the same room. We do have glimpses of it. For instance, we had a good roundtable with Minister Peacock. We talked about the £400 million investment in grassroots sports. That was brilliant, with all the arm's-length bodies around the table and we are getting to a place that is where we need to be. In the past it has very much been about thematic types of investment, where we need to be talking about place-based stuff all the time. We have to be talking about place. I think that the DCMS's own figures tells you how much value is put on to visiting our museums, galleries, and so on. It has £8 billion of wider societal benefits, with £0.77 billion of savings to the NHS. Historic England has shown the well-being created by the data encounters with local heritage, now worth £29 billion annually worldwide. This is all about our well-being, it is all about our communities. Not that I want to take away anything from MHCLG, but



HOUSE OF COMMONS

maybe communities will fit better with the DCMS. I do not know. That is controversial, maybe, but you see what I am getting at.

We have talked well in the sports arena and leisure centre sector about creating active wellbeing hubs now. It is a mindset that you are flipping to that it is the greater benefit, not just someone going to a swimming pool. To have a swimming pool fund is great, but what if it is your civic hall that needs fixing for that community to bring them together? If we can look at place-based regeneration and place-based funding, that would be so helpful, but talk to us because we will be delivering your programmes. You will be sending out the guidance and if we have not had a hand in moulding them, sometimes it does not always work.

Q170 Jeff Smith: If we are devolving power to local regions, as we have in Manchester, would devolving some planning policy and funding help or would that be another layer of bureaucracy?

Councillor Jones-Evans: I am going through devolution, as some of our colleagues around the table are, all on that table at the minute. Culture, and heritage being a subset of culture, is not a competency. You have to put it into all these other areas and it is very, very difficult because none of this is statutory. If you leave the statutory thing apart from planning to one side, that would be our libraries, and even that is a very, very small layer of statutory provision there, which we are already down to bone to where I am from. It is a big ask from the LGA, can culture be a competency within the devolution framework. I have answered your question, Jeff, but any help with capacity, building capacity within our within planning, will be fantastic.

There is another solution that we can offer you, and we do work very well with Arts Council England and with Sports England. We have leadership essentials that we deliver not only to hundreds of councillors each year, but also to officers as well, and that enables knowledge and skill to be passed down. From an officer point of view, you might get people who could develop their careers and go into conservation heritage planning, but on the political side you now have hundreds of advocates who are able to talk the same language to officers and talk to their communities more. That is something that we could quite easily deliver with Historic England, with the National Trust and the Heritage Lottery Fund. We are very up for doing that.

Jeff Smith: Jennifer and Sarah, do you have anything specifically on planning and listed buildings and what the Government could do?

Jennifer Cooke: It is more of a question for Julie and Sarah, but I would mention the role of public-private partnerships and joint ventures. A couple of examples: Barclay Homes and National Grid did the redevelopment of former gasworks into high-quality, high-density housing. I do not know if anyone is a cricket fan, but there is one going on at Lord's at the moment. Located is a government initiative combining school construction with residential development as well, ensuring that



financial viability as well as protection of historic resources. I am working on some with Network Rail in the context of stations, listed stations especially, but also all the viaducts and the arches as well and how they can be repurposed. There is a role there in that joint approach to something that benefits both.

Sarah Buckingham: I agree with what Julie said on the need for a change of perspective that heritage is part of wider economic factors, it contributes to social welfare, it contributes to environmental improvement, so to see it in that wider context rather than something that may be a bit niche and on the side and part of a core competency for local authorities. I do not know if it would help to have somebody to identify a minimum standard for what a conservation service should look like to meet the needs and what it should be doing through the planning system. That might be helpful.

Q171 **Jeff Smith:** Can I talk about consistency? Jennifer, you referred earlier to inconsistent advice from officers and how it would be helpful to have unified local authority positions on things. Is there anything that the Government can do with better heritage policies and priorities across government? Is there any inconsistency in the policies that is hampering local governments' work?

Jennifer Cooke: It is a good question. The national planning policy framework provides for the decision maker to have the discretion in heritage around what change is balanced against harm. The way that it is structured at the moment is it does not say that you cannot make any change, you cannot make any development. It says that if you will cause harm to the significance of a listed building, or heritage asset listed building in this case, what are the benefits that you weigh against that, and what are called public benefits. That is quite a wide net, what is a public benefit. Heritage benefits, ie saving that building, is also a public benefit. You put it all on the scales and you weigh it against impact. The NPPF provides for that decision-making weighing exercise, and that ideally gets translated into local policy as well. Often there is nuance in terminology and it gets lost and that is why a lot of things go to appeal. But the clarity around the freedom to make a decision where you weigh benefit against harm—just because something is harmful does not mean it cannot get consent. There is that balancing thing.

There is also, as I touched on earlier, the unified approach. Pre-app advice is not binding, and I understand that because we want the freedom of dialogue. But almost is there a way that we can say that where an opinion is given, due regard will be given to that opinion, and that will be the base that you take into consideration in your decision-making process. You do not disregard it and say, "Well, my colleague is retired now, and I have a different view," unless there is a change in policy that provides for that. That would help people know where they stand a bit more, I think.

Q172 **Chair:** A number of heritage sites have been regenerated in my own



constituency. I have heard feedback from those who are doing the work that when it comes to communicating with the planning team—you said before that they are time limited in how they are supposed to process things. They will get to the 11th hour and suddenly they will ask a minuscule question of clarification, which suddenly resets the clock, which extends the time. Is that a common experience or is that unique to an area like mine?

Jennifer Cooke: It is interesting. I would like to think that people do not use it as a tool to buy themselves a bit more time, and everybody is trying to work towards the right thing. I have seen it happen, but I would like to think that it is for a genuine reason because they have only just got to it. They have such a pipeline that, yes, if they could have asked that question in week one, they would have done, but there was something that took a little bit more priority and they have only just got to it. It is very frustrating to be on the receiving end of that, but I would like to give the benefit of the doubt.

Any opportunity to engage with an officer through determination, bite their hand off. You submit, you validate, and the clock starts ticking, and then that is for determination. Any opportunity in that determination period to provide more information, to go back and forth, to allay any concerns, I see as a positive opportunity, because otherwise what happens is that you do not hear anything for eight weeks or 12 weeks and then you get your refusal and it could have been solved by an email or a conversation. But there is a lack of time, resource, too big a pipeline, in that condensed period, so often you get the last-minute request.

Q173 **Chair:** Is there something that the Government that could do, based on Jeff's question, to incentivise those decisions to be made in a timely and a decisive way without them saying, "No, rejected," and you have to start again? Is there something that the Government could do to bring that to a much more satisfactory conclusion for everybody?

Jennifer Cooke: I would defer to Sarah and Julie, but what I would not want to see is an automatic lengthening of the time, because we all fill the time we have, don't we, so I think that it would automatically fill that time. Something that might not be very popular with my clients is that there is an opportunity to charge for an LBC application. Would that involve, therefore, some funding for additional resource? The quid pro quo would be that you are paying for it, albeit a nominal amount, but we will stick to these time frames or we will ask questions by week three, we will not wait until week nine or whatever it is. But I will defer to Julie and Sarah.

Councillor Jones-Evans: What we do not need is more constraints on already well-stretched planning authorities. It is also indicative of having had a hollowing-out over the last 15 years. We cannot deny that it has happened. If you are losing skills and you are losing also the revenue to have those skills there, it is very, very difficult to rebuild them. If the skills are not out there, with recruitment and the retention issues that we



are facing, how do you solve that? That is a tricky question, isn't it, with more and more pressure put on local authorities. Our funding gap is horrendous, which we have given you, £8.4 billion by 2028. That a real issue that we are facing, so it will come back to investment in capacity. I do not think that more sticks will make any quicker decisions. But dialogue is really important, absolutely, because we are all working to the same end, aren't we? We are all making better places.

Q174 Chair: It is a chicken and egg situation, though. Let's say that there is a listed building that needs to be brought back into use so that it could generate growth for the local economy; it also generates business rates for that local authority, so there is a quid pro quo in making sure that application goes through swiftly and efficiently, and not delaying it at every single process in the long run. I take your point about obstacles along the way being the lack of capacity. Sarah, did you want to add anything?

Sarah Buckingham: Yes, with that particular example it might take a long time for that rated income to get through to the planning department, unfortunately. I agree with Julie and Jennifer. There is a lot there about communication and I do not think that people would deliberately try to obstruct or delay by coming up with last-minute objections. It will be about capacity. Jennifer clearly has a healthy relationship with local authorities, which is great, and that is the ideal and how it should work, that there should be communication and issues can be brought forward as soon as possible.

Going back to the issue of consistency raised by Jeff, I worked for quite a long time at Historic England and every so often there was a call for, "Can you not write national advice that tells everybody how to interpret the NPPF in specific circumstances?" It is excruciatingly hard to do. I know that attempts have been made and not come to very much in that it sets the framework. You have your balancing exercise, but the details that go into that are the place where all the devils are lurking. It is hard. There could be something done to encourage more consistency.

Q175 Chair: What would you do? We are in the business of solutions here, not problems.

Sarah Buckingham: Something that I have done, which is possibly a reason why I am here and we would talk about in the context of retrofitting, is the idea of local authorities taking into their own hands a bit more agency about how they interpret and use planning legislation to make decisions through local listed building development orders, which I can come on to later in the context of retrofitting. National ones also exist and the Government could use those. These are pieces of legislation, formal legislation, that are on the books now. There is a worked-through example, which sits there awaiting parliamentary time and has for maybe 10 years. That could be a positive step in showing how you can start thinking about the changes that although they might cause some minor harm can be offset by the public benefits, and giving that example to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

encourage people to use these measures to make things quicker and easier.

Q176 **Chair:** Has that example been shared with the Committee?

Sarah Buckingham: No.

Chair: Would you share it with the Committee, please?

Sarah Buckingham: Yes, of course.

Chair: As part of this evidence it would be valuable.

Q177 **Mr Bayo Alaba:** Some evidence was submitted by the LGA, highlighting that funding for heritage planning is fragmented, competitive and of insufficient scale. What changes would you recommend for a more sustainable funding model for heritage conservation and planning services?

Councillor Jones-Evans: I touched on this earlier. It is having those multi-year settlements to enable you to plan your workforce and, as I said earlier, about aligning other strategies that you have to have, making sure they all have a read-across, making a coherent local plan, and then you have officers in place that have the confidence to make decisions in a timely manner and have that expertise to be able to work on multiple types of listed building planning applications. As I said earlier, you have to flip from medieval to brutalism in a heartbeat; it is a very, very skilled job. It is about the consistency of approach. You can invest in a service and you have to invest for years ahead. You cannot just work from one year to one year, one year.

Jennifer Cooke: I probably have less to add, coming from the private sector side of it. There are a lot of skills—something I picked up on quickly with the last panellist from English Heritage—that could be tapped into that could provide the resource on how best to allocate that funding, how best to project manage. It was something that came up before. He mentioned that there is a skills gap there with project managers to bring stakeholders together and that consultancy role that could be provided to help disperse that funding. But nothing beyond what Julie said on funding of projects specifically.

Q178 **Mr Bayo Alaba:** We mentioned outsourcing, and that is one way and I am not discounting its viability. That is something we could factor in. But is there an issue with inconsistencies across authorities if there is a heightened level of outsourcing?

Councillor Jones-Evans: There would be, because if you have a smaller authority, they may not have so many calls on them. Think about the Isle of Wight as England in miniature. I have Newport, which is our county town, and 300-plus listed buildings. You have Sandown with 12. If you think of that as local authorities, Sandown will not have its own conservation officer, probably, if they have other things to focus on. So in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

small authorities that ability to have a shared service. However, I am thinking about local government reorganisation, how that will play out. With the policy not being there, there seems to be lots of holes that we may be creating inadvertently.

Jennifer Cooke: To clarify, I was not advocating a national outsourcing model, because the very nature of heritage is that it is subjective to the area and it depends on the local history, and some areas are very different. Jersey is very different to central London. That is not to say that local authorities that are neighbouring cannot share resources and work in that way.

Sarah Buckingham: One minor additional point is that in the past, local authorities have taken advantage of short-term revenue funding to do particular pieces of work about heritage—for instance conservation area appraisals, which are a necessary thing and often have not been updated for a very long time. Some short-term resilience set-up funding to develop pooled resources or possibly partially outsourced with local heritage trusts, advice, something to set that arrangement up, could be helpful to get things going.

Q179 **Mr Bayo Alaba:** A completely new question, and I know we have touched on it. On central government, what would you say we should do? How can we address this issue?

Councillor Jones-Evans: Talk to local government, properly engage us as delivery partners, because we are obviously doing the job on the ground. Our doors are always open. We would love to be able to have a closer working relationship with DCMS, for sure. We are just down the road, in Smith Square.

Jennifer Cooke: From a central government point of view it would be the standardisation of time frames and process across local authorities that would be helpful. We touched on it earlier when you said that you are in the business of trying to find solutions. Sarah mentioned conflicting policies, and some clarity around that. For example, there is a lot of red tape involved in ticking boxes for validation when you submit an application. There was one example where we were in Warwick Avenue in North London wanting to put in some French doors in a listed building, but they were declined because they needed a sustainability note, a flood-risk assessment, all the stuff that was not relevant, but because the computer said no, they could not validate it and get moving. The same with changing windows, and it was a full fire risk assessment. Central government could have a unifying approach around that. We have already touched on the resourcing piece in every local authority.

Sarah Buckingham: I agree with what the others have said and the validation point is a good one. Sometimes the validation requirements do not help you to understand what you are looking at at all, the demand for very detailed plans of existing and proposed. They are supposed to be



identical. That does not get you to the information you need, which may be quite different from that.

Councillor Jones-Evans: If you start with the holistic view and drill down into specifics, that is quite helpful sometimes.

Q180 **Vicky Foxcroft:** My questions are on net zero. Sarah, in your work, how have you approached climate adaptation?

Sarah Buckingham: The first thing to say about historic buildings is that there is a lot that can be done to make them more resilient and more carbon efficient. There can often be a common view that it is impossible but there is a lot of unintrusive work that you can do with simple insulation in lofts, curtains. If people only wanted to use curtains, how much warmer their houses would be. There are all sorts of things. We have to remember that the right comparison is not between a historic building and a brand new building, it is between the unimproved historic building and the improved historic building, and substantive changes can be made.

When I was working at Kensington, what we did—which was quite innovative at the time, although using an existing legal measure called the local listed building consent order—was to try to encourage local residents by making certain works easier to do in listed buildings, and alongside that, sending out a really strong message that as a council we are very supportive of the retrofitting of historic buildings. These measures essentially allow you as a local authority to grant, in advance, certain consents for certain buildings with certain conditions. You still can be confident that you have protected the special interest, but you can be taking away a layer of consent, because once those are in place people do not have to make that application themselves. That consent is out there and they can make use of it.

We looked at solar panels. Before I left the borough I drafted one for windows to allow people to replace single-glazed windows with double glazed in places, modern additions to listed buildings, or windows that were known to be replacement windows, and to apply secondary glazing as well. The borough has been great in taking that forward, and it has added another consent order to that for certain conservation areas where the windows are of a certain nature, whether they are big, robust sash windows, where people will now be allowed to re-glaze them with double-glazed units or thermally efficient glass. Providing they keep the frames and the whole window, they can pop those new bits in to improve the thermal efficiency. That has shown a clear commitment to helping people to change, but also made it possible. Boroughs also added a local development order for non-listed buildings, allowing people to change to double-glazed windows in flats, which is not permitted in national permitted development rights. That is the kind of thing that can be done but it needs to be done more widely across the country.

Q181 **Vicky Foxcroft:** In my constituency we had a project called the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Hermitage and they went and replaced the windows with double glazing, but then they had to have gaps in them because of damp and mould that reduced the energy efficiency. They put solar panels on the roof and now all of the flats are solar panelled. It is fantastic, saving the residents money, the damp and mould has gone, let alone the climate change cost. On that in particular, and to everybody, what lessons could be shared with planning authorities that are facing similar problems?

Councillor Jones-Evans: Clearly there are solutions for retrofitting historic buildings, but there is no central repository of information or a training programme for conservation planning officers that gives them the confidence that we talked about earlier so they can make prompt decisions about the interventions that are applicable for that type of building. The LGA did produce a culture services sustainability route map. That brought together several sources of information and best practice. We would recommend that DCMS and our arm's-length bodies consider how to embed this in training provision for councillors and officers responsible for planning. We can look at our leadership essentials, our programme that we run for other areas potentially as a way forward.

Jennifer Cooke: There is a reticence, I think, with local authority decision makers. It is a big responsibility to say yes to solar panels on a listed building. They are very obvious and it will make the press, probably. If you are a college in Cambridge, it will make the press, which they did, and they took them on and off again. It is a bold decision to make, so any support that we can give to decision-makers to feel confident in that decision is a good one. City of London, for example, has a presumption against demolition. Maybe that is something that could be considered on a national policy framework approach. You have to justify the demo. We talk about reuse, retrofitting, and then draw in all the other arguments that says we are retaining, but look at the changes that we have to make to retain. That starts that argument. It is not retain as is. Someone mentioned what your baseline is and where are you starting from. We are not comparing this with a passive house. We are comparing this with where we have got to.

Vicky, your point is a good one. These listed buildings were often built at a time when the climate was very different. If it was warm, you opened the window, and if it was cold you closed it again and closed your curtains. That exchange of air and condensation—they are intended to breathe, these houses, intended to have a fire and ventilation, and they are drafty, and it is supposed to be that. Now we are in a different environment, and it is how we work the two together. Historic England is supportive of secondary glazing or double glazing. There are policies on solar panels. There is guidance, I think that we probably need to get it a little bit firmer and for decision-makers to be bold and say, "Yes, it's impactful, but I am going to weigh it against the public benefit." If sustainability and net zero carbon efficiency is deemed a public benefit, there is more to put on that side of the scale.



Councillor Jones-Evans: It is all about balance, isn't it? It is not about setting things in aspic. It is not about preservation, as such, it is about conservation and how those buildings can become more relevant now and useful.

Q182 **Vicky Foxcroft:** Building on that, historic buildings do present unique challenges in adapting to climate change and achieving net zero targets. How can the suggestions that you make ensure that heritage assets can still maintain their historic integrity?

Councillor Jones-Evans: It is highly technical as well, so I will give over to my colleagues because the training and knowledge will be shared with planning officers and local authorities so that we can deliver and guide applicants.

Jennifer Cooke: That perhaps was something I should have mentioned before, that the policy at the moment is structured around it being incumbent upon the applicant to provide all the necessary assessment work and that technical justification. That very much sits with me as a consultant for applicants to pull that body of evidence together, and it is fundamentally rooted in what is the significance of that asset. That is sometimes the bricks and mortar, but it could be other things as well. It could be who has lived there, what they have used it for, it could be communal value, whatever it is. We talk about it being a subjective exercise, but we follow GPA3 methodology, which is an Historic England recognised methodology in case law, where you assess what the significance of a building is or an asset is. That helps you identify what bits are important and what bits are not, in colloquial terms. Not all old buildings are important, unfortunately, and we would not have the breadth to be able to look after all of them. What bits are important, what bits are not, which have tolerance for change and what bits do not?

To answer your question on how you make sure they retain their integrity, first you have to understand where that integrity, that significance comes from and say, "This is a late bit, we do not need to worry about this bit so much. Perhaps we put our air source heat pump at this side rather than somewhere over here". That is a pretty obvious example, but you see what I mean. You have to break it down, establish a baseline, and then what you will do to it. The policy at the moment does provide for that assessment work. There are five steps, and it asks what is there, what will you do, how will it impact and what is your balance. It is that decision at the end. You need a strong planning officer to be able to say, "Thank you, conservation officer, for your advice. Yes, it's harmful, but I am going to say yes". It is a difficult decision to say that at the coalface, effectively. Any support we could give to an officer to make that difficult decision, where it is clear in policy, would be welcomed.

Councillor Jones-Evans: On the planning committee I always turn to the last page where it says, "on balance". I always go to the last page first.



Jennifer Cooke: There are so many wider things to consider.

Sarah Buckingham: Jennifer is right. An important aspect that Jennifer has mentioned is identifying the tolerance for change. In creating those orders, that is what we have done, identify the places in a building where changes could be made without creating harm.

Q183 **Vicky Foxcroft:** The final question for me is for Julie and for Sarah. What national support or resources could help councils balance conservation with climate goals more effectively? What changes would you like to see?

Councillor Jones-Evans: It goes back to that sharing of knowledge and being able to invest in our workforce. We all understand, we are doing all our strategies, our local strategy, net zero strategies, we are doing our biodiversity net gain stuff, we are doing our local nature recovery strategies, all that sits together, but we do know the impact that climate change is having on our buildings. For instance, just the extra rainfall, our buildings cannot cope with it. If you do not mind, I would like to give you a written response to that because that goes a little bit deeper, I think. I would like to do that if possible. It is definitely about us having the capacity to invest in our workforce and to share that knowledge that is out there, with our colleagues who are working on the technical side of things.

Sarah Buckingham: Yes, it is a difficult question because very much I feel that local authorities and the heritage sector generally are thrown on their own resources. Historic England has done a lot in producing advice and guidance on things like retrofitting. I would like to see more local authorities being braver and using local development orders, or making decisions like King's College where you can demonstrate, for the benefit of others, that the retrofitting does not have to be, on balance, so harmful that it should not go ahead.

As to what Government can do, support behind that, support in perhaps—and it has been suggested in the past changes to the national planning policy framework to emphasise that, although they are quite supportive at the moment of that change. Julie has mentioned training. I was fortunate to be able to send two of my team on an intensive training course on retrofitting. That was transformative for our ability to deal with that as an issue, to write guidance for local residents, to make bold decisions, to understand the technicalities. Historic England provides training, but if that in-depth training was more available, it would make that decision-making much easier.

Councillor Jones-Evans: One thing that I might add is the public sector decarbonation fund was really good, and that has come to an end and there is a gap there. If we could look at some replacement funding like that aimed at match-funding projects that would not otherwise be affordable to retrofit. It could be possibly aligned to the warm home plan



that is coming through as well. Looking at that in the whole would be helpful.

Q184 Dr Rupa Huq: It's great to have an all-female panel. I want to ask about workforce development issues. I know that we touched on the conservation officer phenomenon. In my own borough, Ealing, we have 29 conservation areas, mostly Victorian and Edwardian, although there is a bit of Georgian as well. That post was vacant from 2018; it was controversially axed. The current council leader, who is a trained planner, Peter Mason, who has given evidence to this Committee, brought it back, but conservation officers do seem to be going out of fashion. We have been given a whole list of places where there is no one left. There is a bit of a heritage skills crisis. What local or national initiatives do you believe are needed to ensure that the sector has the skills it needs for the future?

Councillor Jones-Evans: A pathway to planning that we are already working on is quite new, so I would like to see how that embeds. We need to carefully monitor that and see when it needs bolstering or needs changing. I know that many local authorities and on the island are doing our own apprenticeship schemes and grow your own, because there is nothing like knowing your own environment and knowing your local vernacular and the buildings you have on your doorstep, understanding your heritage through that. Also looking at people returning to work, or maybe people who are working for Historic England who might want to come and work for the local authority and flip their careers.

If I can talk very quickly about the HAZ schemes. They are absolutely fantastic and thank you so much to Historic England for doing those HAZs. They are brilliant, the high streets heritage action zones. We worked very, very closely with local authorities and with local communities, and the skills sharing that came from that was absolutely brilliant. It was very, very grassroots led, but had long-term significance and legacy. Every time I walked down my high street, I get a buzz when I see all those shop fronts that have been transformed. We have our SPD, our policy document, which is a design guide to help you. Anyone, if they have an historic building, can pick up a design guide and know what colours they should use. If they have a Georgian house, know what frontages to use, what tiles, all of that. It is very, very grassroots. It is the macro and the micro always, isn't it? Sometimes having revenue to do training alongside any particular funding programmes that are going on is important because you build capacity and you build people's curiosity to get into the game as well.

Q185 Dr Rupa Huq: Is the pipeline there with degree courses on estate management and planning and things, are they covering these modules enough?

Jennifer Cooke: From my personal experience, I started off by saying heritage is part of the wider planning piece in the same way a lot of other disciplines are, so you have to look at the two together. Yes, on degree courses, we have people who work for us who have come from the town



HOUSE OF COMMONS

planning background and then had a particular passion for heritage. I have come from a legal background and had a particular passion for old buildings, and flipped then. There are a lot of master's programmes. We talked about technical assessment before, and there is that level of master's knowledge that is required to apply it. We talked about skills earlier and there are skills that we understand, stonemasons, and I am from York so I know what that wonderful—you can walk past it and you can see all the stonemasons doing their work.

There are artisanal skills but there are also the professional skills of how you apply policy and legislation to a real-life example and how you interpret that as part of a project and an English Heritage structure on it again on the PM skills. That level of tertiary education is there. There have been some cuts to the history department, the archaeology department especially. It went at Sheffield not long ago and perhaps funding is instead going by universities into more what you would call maybe maths, English, that sector instead, or perhaps business, whatever. The skills that you get from doing first a degree and then a master's level to build your understanding, there is not as big a take up perhaps as there was, but I would hope that the net is cast wider and that there is not a block on coming through. I had a relatively unconventional path to heritage and most of my former colleagues do not even know what Heritage England is. A lot of people come through town planning and that is a real resource to come through town planning, because you need to see it as a part of the whole plan as a wider approach.

Sarah Buckingham: Jennifer is right that people come to working in conservation from quite a variety of backgrounds, and it is normally through doing a master's course. There has been a slow decline in institutions offering that training, and sometimes it has morphed into things like sustainable heritage, which is equally important but perhaps does not give people that grounding in planning. I wonder if there is a role there for the professional institutes that deal with the various professions that might be relevant—architecture and planning. The RIBA has a level of accreditation for conservation architects. That is very high level and very technical, but can the professional institutes also encourage that training structure—a structure whereby people can demonstrate their competence and move into that area as part of their professional development? That might be something.

An upshot of covid is that there is an awful lot of training out there and quite a lot of it is free and online. It is important that people have things that are easy to access and not expensive, because their employer will no longer pay a lot of money for them to be off work for a couple of days attending a course. That is important and I cannot believe that it is not out there. There is an identification of a training path with various modules for somebody to get to the point where they can act within the planning system and deal with conservation. It must be something, but



HOUSE OF COMMONS

maybe more is needed or it needs to be better known or better structured.

Dr Rupa Huq: And for people to update, I suppose—not just the training and it is done.

Sarah Buckingham: Yes, and it is also experience as well, you are right.

Q186 **Dr Rupa Huq:** The other thing that occurred to me is that we had the new council leader put in a conservation officer, but I am still being emailed about things about to be demolished, “Object by 13 November.” So what effect do these positions have, even if you do have them?

Jennifer Cooke: In that example it sounds like an application has been put in to demolish and they have to go out to consult and ask for comments. I wonder if that is part of a public consultation, perhaps, although “object” is an interesting turn of phrase and that sounds like perhaps it is more of a social media post. What the local authority will say is, “This is a window in which to comment on this application, all comments must be in by X date.” Then they factor those into their decision. I would say that from an applicant point of view often it is geared around objection. That is a word that is used a lot. You have a window to object and people do not often put in comments in support. Ideally, it would say that you have a window to comment. Ideally that is what that should say. But I could not speak for a local authority on the terminology they use.

Q187 **Dr Rupa Huq:** In the build, build, build climate, will it be more likely that these old things do disappear because you can put a much higher structure up on the same space?

Jennifer Cooke: I was at a conference with Historic England, and it said of the 1.5 million homes target, 800,000 could be provided through existing buildings. What is preventing that reuse? It is probably a lot of flood and fire risk assessments that you do not need to get, and the confidence to make a decision that says what is more important and what is our priority. Sustainability might be one of them, net zero might be one, providing homes might be part of it. But there are a lot of empty buildings out there. Aside from the passion we have about historic buildings and getting rid of them, the embodied carbon has to be a huge element of that demo and rebuild.

Councillor Jones-Evans: The question about homes in historic buildings is a whole other discussion maybe. I have got a lot to say, maybe another day, on our high streets as well and how we can put housing into our high streets and upper floors, but that is probably not for today.

Chair: Very good. Thank you all so much for coming and seeing us today and for the benefits of all your expertise and experience. If you do have anything further to add, please do drop us a line, because we will be crunching the numbers on our report and we want to get some strong recommendations for the Government and others about how we can



HOUSE OF COMMONS

make a difference in built heritage, how we can maximise the potential of it for the future, regenerate communities and preserve our nation's history. Thank you very much.