



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 7 December 2023

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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CONTENTS

	Col.
INTERESTS	1
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	2
HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY	3

CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
34th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)

*Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Christina McKelvie (Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 7 December 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Interests

The Deputy Convener (Donald Cameron):

Good morning, and welcome to the 34th meeting in 2023 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We have received apologies from the convener, Clare Adamson, so I will chair today's meeting. We have also received apologies from Mark Ruskell.

Clare Adamson is substituted by Jim Fairlie. Welcome to the committee, Jim. As this is your first time attending the committee, I invite you to make a declaration of interests.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Good morning, convener. I have no interests to declare.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:30

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Are members content that we take item 3 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Historic Environment Strategy

09:31

The Deputy Convener: Item 2 is an evidence session on the historic environment strategy, “Our Past, Our Future: The Strategy for Scotland’s Historic Environment”. We are joined this morning by Christina McKelvie, the Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development. She is supported by Chris Raftery, who is the head of sponsorship and historic environment at the Scottish Government. A very warm welcome to you both. Minister, I invite you to make a short opening statement.

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Christina McKelvie): Thank you, convener, and please pass on my best wishes to both Mark and Clare.

Thank you for inviting me to give evidence to the committee. As the “Our Past, Our Future” strategy makes clear, our historic environment is a national asset that is intrinsically linked to our sense of self and national identity. It is of great importance to Scotland. I know from the many questions that I have had from members over the past few weeks that there is a warm place in everyone’s heart for the lovely attractions and assets that they have in their constituencies. The strategy acknowledges just how unique and diverse Scotland’s historic environment sector is. Our historic environment is of international significance, designated through our world heritage sites and iconic heritage attractions that are instantly recognisable and eternally memorable.

It is important to reflect back on Scotland’s first historic environment strategy, “Our Place in Time: The Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland”, which was published in 2014. “Our Place in Time” has had a positive impact on the awareness and perceptions of the priorities within and outside the historic environment sector. The strategy provides a framework around which Historic Environment Scotland and other stakeholders have aligned strategic planning and developed other strategies. However, we can all recognise that, since it was published, a lot has changed, with the sector facing fresh challenges and opportunities.

“Our Past, Our Future” focuses on priorities that have been identified through extensive consultation with the historic environment and cross-cutting sectors, as well as communities across Scotland. You will not be surprised to hear from me, as a former equalities minister, that participation is a key element of all that work. It is telling that those key priorities—sourced from active engagement with the sector—align with the Scottish Government’s national goals and targets,

which include delivering net zero, building a wellbeing economy and creating more resilient, inclusive and sustainable communities and places.

I turn now to the challenges. We all recognise the challenges around climate change, the shortage of traditional skills and the current economic climate. The need to address skills shortages in the historic environment sector has become even more important and pressing. We are all too aware of the high-level masonry issues that we have been facing as a result of worsening climate change, and we need traditional skills to maintain and retrofit our traditional buildings if we are to achieve our net zero targets and maintain our building stock for the future. A lot of good work is being undertaken in that area, including on the make your mark volunteering campaign and at the Ridge in Dunbar.

To ensure that Scotland’s built heritage is sustainable and promotes wellbeing, we will continue to engage with the sector to understand the ways in which we can support actions on our national targets.

The Scottish Government continues to recognise the important contribution that the heritage sector makes to our economy and our wellbeing. Therefore, against the challenges of the financial backdrop, we will continue to provide funding to the sector through our sponsorship of Historic Environment Scotland to support those key areas.

Collaboration—how we work together on the whole agenda—is a key part of the work that I want to do and the work that was done in the past. It is important that we work together to create opportunities to sustain and enhance the benefits that our nation’s heritage creates and ensure that the historic environment is at the centre of our national life. My recent work with the convener of the wellbeing board of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is an example of that collaboration.

We must communicate better the significance of our historic environment and the contribution that the sector makes to the economy and the wellbeing of Scotland’s people. The strategy was created by everyone for everyone and we all have our part to play in its delivery. The “Our Past, Our Future” strategy does not exist in isolation. It fits within the context of a number of other Scottish Government strategies, such as the programme for government, the national planning framework 4 and the culture strategy. However, we can do more to mainstream “Our Past, Our Future” across other areas of Government, and we will. I have taken that up as a personal action.

It is important that the challenges and opportunities around delivering “Our Past, Our

Future” are all considered. That is why I am pleased to be here for the open discussion and any questions.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you very much, minister, for that statement.

I have a question about the impact of closures and restricted access. HES updated the committee last week that around 20 sites remain closed. You gave answers to questions in the chamber yesterday about that. There are still sites with restrictions in place. That has an effect on tourism and the local economy. Has the Scottish Government done any analysis of the impact of closures and restrictions? Is any support available to communities that are affected by such closures or restrictions?

Christina McKelvie: I know that that issue is close to your heart, convener, and to the hearts of many members, not just of the committee but across the chamber.

I gave a bit of an update when I answered Roz McCall’s question yesterday. Seventy buildings were impacted by high-level masonry issues. At this stage, 53 have now opened or partially opened. Historic Environment Scotland confirmed to me that it expects all the inspections and work to be finished by March next year, which is ever closer as we move swiftly through this year.

You asked about analysis. HES constantly analyses and reviews the issue. It has considered different ways to speed up inspection processes and complete more detailed inspections—and, therefore, get more detailed work done. That includes using technology.

I visited Tantallon castle in the summer when it reopened to the public and was shown some of the damage that climate change is doing there. HES has used drones to identify issues that have come up, but getting a person up there has been much more fruitful because, sometimes, the drone does not tell you everything that you can find out by getting human eyes and hands on what it looks and feels like. HES has been doing a lot of that. All the different sites have different needs and issues. HES has been working closely with us and all the sites to identify those issues as quickly as possible, find the remedies to fix them as quickly as possible and get them opened to the public safely.

That work is continuing and HES updates its website constantly with the latest inspection data. I would be happy to give you and the committee that link in order to access that information as it is updated. It is updated quite swiftly, so keeping on top of it all through communications with me is one way, but the other way is the update to the public through its website.

The Deputy Convener: What can the Scottish Government do to support local communities that might have been affected by that situation?

Christina McKelvie: Much of the work that has been done at some of those sites has been done with local communities. It is about asking what people want to see from a historic site and what access they would like. It is about enabling them to understand why access is or is not safe, and asking them how they view the site.

When I was at Tantallon castle, there were many members of the public there. Some—like me—had climbed up to the parapet to get a view of the damage that can be seen coming in off the sea. Many of those people said that it was a great place to visit. It is interesting that I have found that tourists have known a bit more about local sites than local people have. There is educational work to do on what is on people’s doorsteps and how important it is.

During the pandemic, such sites became really important for people. Their daily walk was to those sites. It was about getting to know what is in their community. That is really important.

In my opening remarks, I spoke about participation, how we work with local communities to inform them about what is happening with inspections, how we are reopening sites and making them safe, and how people can use them in a safe way.

The Deputy Convener: I want to ask you about the phrase “managed decline”, which has been mentioned. In your opening statement, you referred to climate change and the transition to net zero. Is the managed decline of sites—basically, letting them decline or degrade naturally—part of the Scottish Government’s strategy as far as you are aware, or is that something that you would like to avoid?

Christina McKelvie: That is not a term that I have ever used or one that I have heard since I came into the job in March. I have heard it spoken about, but not by people who manage the sites.

There is a lot of positivity. There are challenges, but there are also many opportunities. It is about how we use those opportunities to give people a sense of their place in their own communities and to put Scotland on the international stage.

In my opening remarks, I mentioned how Scotland is viewed. Everybody knows Edinburgh castle, Stirling castle and the Wallace monument—the iconic places—but some people do not know what is on their own doorstep. Working with local people is important for that.

I do not hear that there should be managed decline. The attitude is very positive, and there are opportunities to raise awareness of what is

happening on all the sites and to use them as exemplars.

Tantallon castle is a tangible example of that. When I was there, we talked about repairs that had been done in the past and the methods that were used to make those repairs, which involved quite a rough-looking cement. The sandstone around the cement had degraded and worn away, and big chunks of cement were sticking out. That was being looked at. That did not seem to me to be managed decline; it seemed to be about securing the site for the future and using it to the best of our abilities.

The Deputy Convener: Good. I turn to questions from colleagues.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In your opening statement, you spoke about effective engagement, collaboration and partnership. All of those things are vital.

Last week, we had the opportunity to hear from Alex Paterson and Dr Adam Jackson about effective engagement and their belief that it is crucial for the strategy to succeed. However, one of the difficulties that has arisen is that there is sometimes not really effective engagement by local authorities. Some local authorities might well be supportive whereas others are not. There was talk about a local authority historic environment group, but that did not succeed in becoming a useful structure. That is seen as a potential barrier to engagement in local authorities.

How important should that role be for local government? If local authorities work in collaboration and partnership, things work well, but if they do not, there is a gap, and that gap creates complexities for the sector. The strategy will not succeed if co-operation and engagement do not take place.

Christina McKelvie: I agree that participation is incredibly important. You will know that the strategy was developed over the summer of 2022, and that participation was at the heart of it. It was developed by Historic Environment Scotland, but the Scottish Government, the Built Environment Forum Scotland and many other organisations and people with an interest were also involved.

There was a public consultation at that point, and HES published its “We Asked, You Said, We Did” report, which was a way of conveying to the people who engaged with the consultation process how important their ideas were. In that process, the point was raised about people not knowing what was on their doorstep and getting to know what was on their doorstep.

09:45

In my response to the deputy convener, I talked about my intention to work closely with local authorities. Many of the properties that HES looks after are also looked after by local authorities. For instance, Chatelherault country park in my constituency is incredibly well looked after by South Lanarkshire Council. That is one example, but members will all have examples from their constituencies of the partnership between local government and HES and therefore the Scottish Government, which is incredibly important.

One thing that I wanted to do when I came into my current role was to reinvigorate the culture conveners forum. We have done that, and the forum has now met. We decided immediately that we needed to have an event to look at how we work together and the value of culture in all of our lives. That will be called a culture value summit, which is a straightforward name for it, and it will happen in the new year. That is very important.

I am interested in the local authority historic environment group that Alexander Stewart mentioned. I have not heard of that and it has not been mentioned by any of the culture conveners—I think that I met them all in that meeting just a few weeks ago. However, I will pick up the point and see where that group got to.

In big cities such as Edinburgh or Glasgow, the historic environment is everywhere. In fact, most of the authorities in those places work in buildings that are part of the historic environment, because the city chambers are important buildings. However, that comes with challenges when there are issues with the buildings and local authorities are involved in their clean-up and restoration.

That partnership is important to me. I want to strengthen and grow it, but I want to work together much more dynamically to tackle the challenges that are coming down the road and we can do that only in partnership. There is no way that being separate from local government on the issue would deal with those challenges.

I will take away the issue about the local historic environment group and speak to Councillor Maureen Chalmers, with whom I work closely, as she is the chair of the community wellbeing board.

Alexander Stewart: To make everything work, we need to have the resources, manpower and finances. We have touched on short and medium-term financial planning for the organisation and how it will progress. If it does not have financial stability, it will not be able to achieve some of the goals that it is trying to achieve. You have indicated that the Government is supportive of where the organisation wants to go, but there still seems to be a gap between the aspirations for the organisation and where we want to go with the

strategy, and the financial situation. The aims of the strategy can be achieved only if it is backed up by funding from local government, national government, sponsorship, entrepreneurs or individuals who give legacies.

Without that, the strategy will not succeed, and the areas that have more engagement and financial support will manage much better than those on the periphery. You talked about the centre of the country—Edinburgh and Glasgow—having more of these places. However, in rural areas, we have many local attractions and institutions that are trying to support them. In the past, we have talked about sponsorship and how that is managed, and about people volunteering and giving their time and talents to ensure that something is restored or kept within a community. However, without financial back-up, that becomes a mountain for those organisations to climb. It would be useful to hear your views on some of that.

Christina McKelvie: You will not be surprised to hear me say that the current budget round is incredibly tough. However, putting that aside for a second, in 2023-24, the operational budget for HES has risen by 18 per cent to £114.5 million, which shows a level of commitment. The budget for high-level masonry issues has risen dramatically, too. Again, there is a recognition that we need to invest for all of our futures.

We are coming into a new budget round. The draft budget will be published on 19 December, and I am sure that the committee, among many others, will take the opportunity to have its say on that, and I encourage you to do so.

You made a point about sponsorship. There is a bit of work to be done on that. I know that the committee has asked questions about the issue over the past few weeks and has been thinking about how we can maximise income. Interestingly, HES has suggested that it has made a very strong recovery from Covid, which is good to hear, because it has been hard for many people to recover from Covid. The amount of revenue that it is raising is coming up to previous levels again.

There is one challenge that comes from the way in which HES was set up, because if its revenue goes above a certain amount, that has an impact on the money that it gets from the Government. HES is working on a new plan and a new model for how it does its business. We are looking at ways in which we can build in some flexibility so that it can do more with revenue raising and sponsorship. Various issues can arise from that, but HES has very positive relationships around the world. The “Scottish Connections Framework” is a perfect example of how we can use the number of people who believe that they have Scottish roots—it is 40 million, 50 million or 60 million, depending

on who you speak to—and therefore have a connection with Scotland. There are many ways in which we can use that network, but some of that depends on the new business model. We are working with HES on how we can build in flexibility to allow those things to take place.

You mentioned volunteering, which ties into the point that I made to the deputy convener about local communities. Sometimes, local communities are the best custodians of what is on their doorstep, although some communities might not be too sure about what is on their doorstep. When local communities are involved in looking after their local heritage assets, they become the best custodians. We want to encourage and further develop that by working with HES and others to create such opportunities, not just for folk who have a bit of time on their hands but for young people and older people, so that the places are made accessible for all groups, including disability groups.

The number of events that take place in Chatelherault country park, in my constituency, is absolutely unbelievable. Believe it or not, there was a serious issue with badger baiting, but, after we engaged all the primary schools on badger watch, the badger baiting stopped. When communities engage in looking after not just buildings but the land and landscape around them, they become the best guardians of it. We want to encourage much more of that.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, minister. In your opening comments, you said that the shortage of skills has become an even more important issue in the past few years. You talked about the financial situation and the need to understand the key issues that the sector faces. Investment in skills is one of those key areas.

Bryan Dickson, head of buildings conservation at the National Trust for Scotland, expressed the view that, although the review of the skills investment plan should create some positive action, there needs to be more investment in that area. He also argued that the concerns of the historic environment sector need to be more mainstreamed to ensure that there is enough support in areas such as skills training.

I will follow on from Alexander Stewart’s question. I noted that you said that the budgets for Historic Environment Scotland and for stonemasonry have increased. Do you agree with the evidence that we have received that there needs to be more investment in skills?

Christina McKelvie: A combination of things are going on. We have skills challenges in this area generally. One issue that has arisen is the need to create opportunities for young people and

other people to develop such skills. Just yesterday, Graeme Dey and I met the Historic Environment Scotland team, because, over the past few months, his officials and my officials have been working to address all the concerns that have been raised. Following the Withers review and the other work that Graeme Dey spoke about in his recent statement on developing skills and the skills landscape, we have been working to find ways in which we can tackle some of those challenges.

When it comes to apprenticeships for those areas, particularly stonemasonry, we are talking about a maximum of 30 apprentices a year, and there are 27 right now. We are working closely with Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council and the Construction Industry Training Board to develop the framework. A bit of work is being done right now on the qualification framework and whether it reflects professionalism and the way in which we want to hold those skills in our training formats. With the Scottish Qualifications Authority, we have agreed to look at how we develop that professional framework. When the qualifications are of those standards, it makes the whole apprenticeship programme much more attractive for people who seek those skills. That piece of work is being undertaken right now and I had a meeting on that with Graeme Dey just yesterday.

I do not deny that there are challenges, including around how we deliver some of that work in a rural setting. You will know that Historic Environment Scotland is working with CITB and other bodies in Elgin and in Stirling at the Engine Shed, and we have been having a conversation about developing a centre of excellence. Nothing is agreed on that yet, but we are exploring all the ideas that will create the circumstances in which people will be encouraged to come into the roles and the framework for them to have qualifications when they come out on the other side. Over the next few weeks, we will continue those conversations with Mr Dey, his team and HES. I am meeting HES next week to follow up on all that. The issue is live right now. Nothing has been agreed yet, but lots of ideas have been coming in. If you have some of your own, please share them.

Neil Bibby: It is clear that we need greater investment in skills, and the evidence that we have received backs that up. I welcome the meetings that you are having with Mr Dey—that is positive. However, people in the sector and more widely are probably looking for more details, targets and specifics on how we will address the problems. I appreciate that you are saying that nothing has been agreed yet. Clearly, we have skills investment shortages in stonemasonry, but we are also short of traditional joiners, line plasterers, historic gardeners, surveyors and archaeologists.

We hear that we need more investment in skills, but we also need more clarity from the Government about where we are going in relation to that. Earlier, you talked about the number of apprenticeships in stonemasonry. If we accept that there is a skills shortage, what analysis has the Government done of that shortage and what targets will it set to address it?

Christina McKelvie: We are working on that information as we speak. On 13 November, Historic Environment Scotland engaged a new programme management team, which includes a data analyst, whose job is to look at all those issues and at how the skills gaps emerge for Historic Environment Scotland.

The other piece of work that you are looking for is within the skills sector. Rather than trying to pull out of the back of my head what Mr Dey is doing about that, I will endeavour to get that information and send it on to the committee.

For our purposes and the purpose of the strategy, we recognise that traditional skills gaps exist and that we need those traditional skills to be built into what we do. There are 2 million stone-built structures in Scotland, which means that, in the next few years, particularly with the acceleration of climate change, we will need more people with those skills areas to protect, repair and improve our structures. There is currently no training provision in Scotland for repair and maintenance skills in those key areas, which is one of the issues that Mr Dey and I discussed yesterday. We discussed how we create the circumstances in which we can create training for those skills. That will involve a shared apprenticeship model and continuous professional development for people who are already qualified in those areas. We are looking closely at all that.

The new data analyst for HES started his work on 13 November. We will give him until the new year, and then we will start to ask him about what analysis he is pulling out and what that is telling him. That data will then inform our next steps. We are well aware that there is an issue there, which HES is starting to address with the new engagement that I mentioned.

10:00

Neil Bibby: I welcome that. We need to understand more about the shortfalls that exist as regards skills and the investment that is required, so I look forward to receiving details on that.

The Deputy Convener: Two weeks ago, we received highly compelling evidence from Bryan Dixon of the National Trust for Scotland, who said:

“Even if the NTS had the finances to deliver large-scale capital works across Scotland, I do not think that we would have the skills available in Scotland to do so.”—[Official

Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, 23 November 2023; c 6.]

That is very significant. Do you have any observations to make on the urgency of addressing that gap in the market?

Christina McKelvie: We recognise that there is a challenge there and that we must do something about it. I hope that the committee recognises the work that has been done over the past few months, which I have spoken about. The fact that I had a meeting on the subject just yesterday and will have a follow-up meeting with HES next week demonstrates how urgent I think the issue is and our desire to create the circumstances in which we can address it.

It is amazing how, when you come into a new portfolio, you start to see things that are relevant to issues in that portfolio. On a recent trip to Paris, I saw the work that is being done to restore Notre Dame and the apprenticeship programme that has been included in that project. An apprentice who starts their apprenticeship on that project will end it on that project. What a great thing it must be to have on your CV that you have been involved in restoring Notre Dame.

I asked our officials in the Paris office to look at that scheme to find out whether there is any learning that we can take from it on the way in which those apprentices have been engaged. I think that people would like to be able to put on their CV that they had experience of working on Edinburgh castle or the Wallace monument. We need to make that offer much more exciting for people who might not think about such careers when they embark on their further or higher education learning, or when they look for jobs and apprenticeships. By making that offer more exciting, we can encourage people to think about such a career, the opportunities that it provides and the prestige that it brings with it.

It is not simply a case of filling the gaps in a perfunctory way; we need to make the offer much more attractive to encourage people to come into the sector. We are all picking up on the need for us to work on that.

Jim Fairlie: There is a wee issue that I am curious about. We have just finished building our house, and the biggest problem that we had was getting people to do the stonemasonry. Will the United Kingdom Government's new immigration system allow people with the skill set to do stonemasonry to come into the country? Obviously, there are big gaps. You said that there are 2 million stone-built buildings in this country, and we definitely do not have enough stonemasons. Are we able to bring in people with the requisite skills from European countries to help to fill the gaps?

Christina McKelvie: I would always welcome and agree to such an opportunity, but the announcements that we have heard in the past few days on the new immigration measures that the UK Government wants to take will make that process much more difficult. The earnings threshold is a barrier on its own, but the UK Government has just said that it will scrap its list of areas in which there are skills gaps. Therefore, encouraging people from other parts of the world to come to Scotland to work on our amazing assets has just become much harder.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Good morning, minister. Given that HES has been making more money, I was pleased to hear you say that you are looking at the idea of HES being able to keep any additional money that it makes, because that would be a real incentive for it to do more work. It is not for me to speak on behalf of the committee, but I think that, in speaking to HES and others in recent weeks, the committee was concerned that they did not exactly jump on the idea of exploiting their facilities to a greater extent as a huge opportunity. Given what you have said, and what we all know about the budget situation, surely HES should show greater vigour and urgency in seizing opportunities to maximise income from other sources. Can you give the committee any reassurance that that will be supported, encouraged and facilitated by ministers as a matter of urgency?

Christina McKelvie: That is an excellent question, which leads on from my response to the earlier questions about the new model that HES is developing.

Officials from the Scottish Government, as the sponsorship body, are working with HES on that and supporting it to do that. They are in the throes of redeveloping that business model as we speak, and they want to ensure that it delivers a high-quality, sustainable and equitable service for the people of Scotland. Sustainability now becomes even more important, particularly in this financial environment, where everyone is feeling it tough when it comes to budget.

The Built Environment Forum Scotland has created a sustainable investment toolkit, which any of our heritage organisations can use. That was created as a result of the predecessor strategy, "Our Place in Time". That toolkit has been designed to assess societal and economic opportunities and the environmental potential of our built heritage.

As I explained earlier, the way in which HES is set up creates some challenges. If it raises additional revenue, that has an impact on the grant that it gets from Government. That is the legal framework, which is a result of how it was set up.

As I said, we are working closely with and supporting HES in this work. It is looking at income forecasts and how income can be increased, without the impact on its grant aid from the Scottish Government, which can be a disincentive. Therefore, I am not surprised that HES was not that forthcoming, because the current business model does not allow it to take full advantage of those opportunities. We are working with HES and finance and exchequer colleagues to look at ways to create flexibilities. In a very tough financial environment, opportunities for revenue raising become very important, particularly for sustainability but also for investment in those assets and the ability for HES to hold reserves. Those things are all in play in that work.

HES is also leading the way on public sector and public services reform, particularly as a public body in that landscape. Therefore, we are looking at ways in which it can become an exemplar for other public bodies. We are looking at new, innovative and flexible ways in which it can raise more revenue and raise its profile and the understanding of some of the amazing heritage that we have and how it can invest that revenue back into the work that it is doing, particularly on preserving, sustaining and maintaining cultural assets for the future.

Keith Brown: Thanks for that, and that is encouraging but, first of all—this might not be the view of the whole committee—the idea of public bodies accumulating reserves for no apparent purpose is not something that I am very supportive of. There will be different views on that.

However, with regard to those assets, I am keen to see a change in mindset, which is required so that imaginative entrepreneurialism takes place. I am sure that the committee will look at that in the future. Everyone talks about Badbea in the Highlands, for example—as I did last week—and the places that are important to people in North America as a result of the clearances. Parts of Scotland have Hanseatic league links, and along the road, for example, we have Picardy Place, which is a link between Edinburgh and that French region. I am also thinking about China and the presence of Scots in the banking institutions in Hong Kong and so on.

If HES did a complete audit of the important sites that it has, and some places that it does not currently have, and if it properly exploited those, that could transform the money that HES has to develop, maintain and improve access to its sites. That could also be done through fundraising—think of some of the corporate entities around the world that might be willing to contribute. It would be useful to know whether the Government would be willing to encourage HES to have a complete, fresh audit of what opportunities there might be in

relation to every site. I know that it has an awful lot of sites, but it could start with a priority list, if that kind of approach was possible.

Christina McKelvie: Any positive approach is possible. I suspect that HES's imagination has been tempered by the current legal set-up for its operating model. From 2024-25, it will have some flexibility in that, which might open the Pandora's box of imagination about how we can use all the assets.

I hear you on the diaspora and the Hanseatic league and the links that we have with other nations. You also mentioned China. Our new Scottish connections framework is a great vehicle for using some of the examples that you just spoke about, raising the market profile and using all the iconic backdrops that HES has for revenue raising, sponsorship and fundraising. That might involve clans coming back and taking some responsibility for funding and supporting cultural heritage to which they are connected.

There is a rich seam in that suggestion that can certainly be mined. I intend to do that. We need to settle the issue of the operating model to allow us to be as adventurous and imaginative as possible. I am keen to do that as well. An action for me from this meeting will be to sit down with the Scottish connections team and consider how we can use the work that it is doing on the diaspora to do that with some of the iconic and perhaps not-so-iconic places.

You asked about a complete audit, Mr Brown. I will have to go back and check on that. I think that HES audits all the time. I think that it keeps track of sites all the time, but perhaps the audit that you are thinking about—you can correct me if I am wrong—is about looking at opportunities for fresh ways to use them. You are nodding, so I will take that away as an action.

It has nothing to do with last week's committee meeting, but Alex Paterson has decided to move on and there is an opportunity for a new chief executive officer to come in. Fresh leadership and a fresh pair of eyes, might, together with the new operating model, provide an opportunity to use some of the ideas that are around to realise "Our Past, Our Future" in all the wonderful assets that we have.

I put on record my thanks to Alex Paterson for the work that he has done, because, through very difficult circumstances over the past few years, he has managed to keep the organisation moving. However, change always presents opportunities and those opportunities should be positive.

The Deputy Convener: I was not aware that Alex Paterson had moved on. I hope that the grilling from the committee last week did not play a role in that.

Christina McKelvie: I am sure that it did not.

The Deputy Convener: I am sure that it did not. We are grateful for the evidence that he gave.

I endorse what Keith Brown said about the need to turbocharge the possibilities that we all know exist for trying to generate revenue from abroad or the private sector, for instance. That is an important and significant aspect of what we have done so far.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I have a question about the strategy's laudable aims. The strategy picks up on aims that all Scotland should pull together to try to deliver, such as transitioning to net zero, creating resilient communities and building a wellbeing economy.

10:15

I put it to Alex Paterson that, although you would expect one of HES's most obvious aims to be the preservation of historic buildings, that is not one of its aims. He said that that is in Historic Environment Scotland's DNA, which makes sense. Do you sense any legitimate tension in that Historic Environment Scotland trying to meet those aims might have an impact, even financially, on its ability to expand its portfolio? For example, if Historic Environment Scotland had to use its resources to, rightly, reduce emissions and make current properties more energy efficient, that would inevitably absorb income. Rather than spreading itself too thinly, Historic Environment Scotland could invest more in its current portfolio. Is that right, or is it flawed?

Christina McKelvie: It is not flawed. There are current challenges, and challenges on the horizon, in relation to the impact of climate on all our buildings. I explained the situation with Tantallon castle, including the wear on the building and the sea wall and the previous bad repairs, and I take account of that.

I agree with Alex Paterson that preservation is in the DNA of everything that we are doing. It is all about how we maintain, sustain and preserve our cultural heritage for future generations in a sustainable way. That will be different for the different materials that buildings are made from.

I will pick up Neil Bibby's point about how important skills are for preserving our cultural heritage and taking forward those challenges to resolution. In the past 50 years or so, we have used many different materials in building. We built our cultural heritage from the ground; people built using the things that were around them in their communities. We can go back to ideas around how those buildings and landscapes were created, and we can use traditional ways to preserve them.

We also use innovation. I mentioned the fact that drone footage is used to get to places where it has been difficult to get to, but that is not the be-all and end-all. In some ways, it is not the best way to get a pair of eyes and a pair of hands on crumbling rock or whatever. Preservation is also an issue there.

Keeping buildings wind and watertight is one thing, but creating opportunities in which they can be drivers of change for future generations is another. One example of that is the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, which is in a new building and an old building. The older building was much more solid than the newer building, and challenges came with that. A new hybrid building was created, which the collection is now in. Most of the glass is energy-conserving glass. Not only were the curators excited to show me all the exhibitions—I have been to the Burrell quite a few times; it is one of my favourite places—but it was great to hear from them about how they did that work. They took me up on the roof to see the big array of photovoltaic panels, which, along with the energy-conserving glass, have drastically reduced the museum's energy bills.

It is not just about making sure that the fabric of the building is wind and watertight and that the building is sustainable for the future; it is about taking opportunities to reduce costs and, therefore, the carbon impact on the environment, and using new technologies to do that. The Burrell won an award for that work, and it has become a bit of an exemplar for other cultural heritage buildings. It can share that experience, and is doing so as we speak.

You cannot just put things in isolation in that sense; they are all connected in different ways. Not only does the Burrell Collection now have a building that will be sustained for many years in the future, but it has also dramatically reduced its energy bills, when energy is probably the biggest cost impact for any of our cultural heritage buildings.

Kate Forbes: You have one of the best jobs in the Government, because you are able to visit those incredible assets.

Christina McKelvie: There is not enough time.

Kate Forbes: My other question to Alex Paterson was about expanding the portfolio. I asked that first question to try to understand whether there is a trade-off. Obviously, there are a lot of old buildings in Scotland and it is not feasible for Historic Environment Scotland to own and run them all. Alex talked about the process of determining that. However, in recent years, the approach has been to not add anything to the portfolio and he also said that he would quite like to change that approach. How do you feel about

that? Would you like to see more ancient historic buildings coming into Historic Environment Scotland's portfolio, or do you think that there are other owners that can run them well?

Christina McKelvie: Yes—I think all of that. I have seen community asset transfer used very effectively right across the whole of Scotland, mainly for community assets, but local community groups with some expertise can look after the historic assets in their communities. A properties in care review is happening right now, so extensive work has been done on that aspect. I suppose that HES would say that, if it took more properties into its care, it would mean more responsibility, including financial responsibility; in tight circumstances, that is a difficult thing to do. Again, that is why the review of the operating model becomes more important, because if we can raise more revenue and therefore more investment, it becomes more straightforward to take more properties into care and look after them. Some properties in care are in a perilous state and that is why HES has come in. It is about maintaining and sustaining those properties.

However, there is much more that we can do about community engagement. We have talked about volunteering and how that becomes important. There are lots of places in which communities can be engaged in all this, through community development trusts and historical development trusts, for example. The issue that I raised at the very beginning of the session about participation is important in relation to that too.

One of the issues that we are grappling with right now is in relation to churches. Many churches in small towns, particularly in rural areas, are the cultural heritage of those towns. HES has now engaged a member of staff who is working closely with the Church of Scotland on the challenges that it has and the proposals to dispose some of its historical buildings. An example of that—again, I will take you back to my own constituency—is the Trinity church on Larkhall Main Street, which is an amazing building with an amazing historic stained glass window. The window was removed a few years ago because the stone around it started to degrade and they were worried. There is now a consultation with the community in that area about taking over ownership of that and maintaining it, both as a historic monument and as a community asset. Therefore, it may not be about more properties coming into the care of HES but about sharing the expertise so that communities can look after what is on their doorstep.

Kate Forbes: Thanks very much. I have just one more small question. I could not agree more with you on the suggestion that often visitors know more about our heritage than local communities know. Even from a Highlands perspective,

whenever tourists come, we always recommend that they go to certain areas or properties, but when you ask locals, they say that are not going to those places. How can we change that?

Christina McKelvie: That is about looking at how we can do more local community engagement. We will pick up that issue in the culture values summit. How do we engage communities more with what is on their doorstep? How do we get them involved and how do we get them fired up about what is there?

We hear from communities when they find out that an asset is to be closed. That has happened over the past couple of years. There was a bit of an earthquake in Larkhall when the Trinity church went on the list and people said, “We’re not having that”, so we know that we can really engage people, and not just in an emotional way, but in a really committed way. I want to develop work with HES and other cultural organisations to consider how we can do more of that. I think that you are absolutely right.

Schools have a huge role to play in how we educate young people about what is in their local communities. My lifelong interest in empire and slavery, for instance, is because of a primary school visit to the David Livingstone birthplace when I was about 10 years old. I have never lost that interest and now have the honour of taking it forward in the Government. Such things can spark something in a 10-year-old that becomes a lifelong passion; we need to create opportunities that ensure that that happens.

We have lots of wonderful young people and older people engaged in their local community. There are many ways in which we can do that. If you have ideas on how we could do it, particularly in rural settings, please share them. My mind, ears and heart are open to any opportunities that you think we are missing.

Kate Forbes: That is wonderful. Thank you.

The Deputy Convener: I do not know whether members have any other questions, but I have a couple of final questions on the back of certain things that have been asked. You mentioned mainstreaming in your opening statement: it is a recurring theme. The priorities of the strategy reflect how the historic environment sector is delivering against wider Government outcomes, such as transitioning to net zero. Alex Paterson told us the other week:

“If the strategy is not to be delivered by the sector only, the funding should not be constrained within the culture portfolio.”—[*Official Report, Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee*, 30 November 2023; c 13.]

What is your observation on that? I think that you support mainstreaming across portfolios, but do

you also support access to cross-portfolio funding?

Christina McKelvie: For fear of speaking for my other colleagues in Government and because of the rough budget situation that we are going through right now, I will not answer that question, because I do not think that I can answer for other portfolios.

When I came into the job, part of my role was to mainstream culture across the whole of Government. Mainstreaming was one of the roles that I had when I had the equalities and human rights portfolio, and now I see some of my own work coming back to me from other portfolios, which is always a good thing.

Mainstreaming across many parts of Government is not just desirable—it is necessary. From the point of view of net zero, for example, I found that we had to engage with the heat in buildings regulations, which could be a bit dry for most people, because that led straight back to the example that I used of the Burrell Collection and how it has managed to turn around its fortunes. That is one example.

I want opportunities to formalise cross-Government work and I want to include local government. That is why the work with the wellbeing board in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is incredibly important. Across the national performance framework, the wellbeing economy work is also of huge interest to me. I do not think that we can have a wellbeing economy without culture being one of its structural mainstays. Their having the opportunity be involved in and experience the imaginative input of something that we deem to be a cultural asset is incredibly important to people's wellbeing. We saw that during the pandemic, when people found interesting and innovative ways of doing their daily walks, for example. That links wellbeing straight into health and health outcomes.

Many of the sites that I have visited have had lots of incidental things going on for their local communities. For example, one site that I visited recently has an older people's rambling group. I asked people what they get from that, and they said that it keeps them mobile, maintains good mental health, maintains social connection and reduces social isolation and loneliness. You can see right there how mainstreaming is incredibly important in everything that we do across the whole of Government.

Mainstreaming also makes implementation important. Jim Fairlie will be interested in this example of mainstreaming. When stakeholders raised concerns about rural and agricultural policy areas, we worked closely with them on the draft Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill.

Those conversations led to the inclusion of the historic environment in the bill; it would probably never have been included otherwise. Mr Fairlie will know from his background how important cultural heritage is and how farmers are growing or allowing grazing around sites. That engagement enabled us to work on the bill and to preserve historic and cultural assets through it. That is an example of how mainstreaming is important in the day-to-day work of creating new legislation and regulation.

That is one aspect. For me, another aspect is health and wellbeing. We cannot work without having mental health colleagues, wellbeing colleagues from Mr Gray's team and colleagues from the health team working with us, because that can be transformational for people's lives.

10:30

Alexander Stewart: I have a question about accountability and delivery. Last week, Mr Paterson told us that ways to measure the success of the strategy are "built in". However, when I asked about what data is being used, our witnesses were not convinced that all the data that they need is being provided by all the groups in the sector. Therefore, how will the Scottish Government monitor HES's performance in delivering the strategy? We are not clear about what the process will look like.

Christina McKelvie: The engagement of a data analyst on 13 November is the answer to your question. There was recognition that there is lots of data, but there are issues about how it ties together and can be used to focus resources, time and energy, or to show that there is a gap that needs to be filled. HES will monitor that and report to the Government and to the committee: you have the role of being a monitoring body, and you do it very well.

Another issue is who is included and how we create inclusive environments. One aspect of that is about making physical assets accessible. You will have noticed that all the websites and all the plans and updates that we have published are available in easy read, Gaelic and other formats in order to increase inclusion. That is perhaps where some of the data gaps exist, in as much as it is easy to see a physical barrier, but it is not easy to see the non-physical barriers and to know how to tackle them.

I put a lot of stock in the new person who is doing the data analysis. When I was equalities minister, I would have been unable to move forward with many actions that I took without underpinning data and knowing what it told us about where the gaps were and how to resolve them. I look forward to hearing the first update

from that person, but we should let him get his feet under the table, as he has only been there a few weeks.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you.

The Deputy Convener: Finally, I want to ask about community asset transfer, which has been mentioned. You will be aware of the statistic in “Our Past, Our Future” that around a third of all community asset transfers since 2015 have involved a heritage asset. I was quite surprised that the figure is so high, although I am pleased that it is. However, such transfers bring challenges for the communities that manage the assets. There are the initial challenges of acquiring an asset in whatever way, but there is also a longer-term challenge in managing and maintaining it, and so on.

We heard evidence from the National Lottery Heritage Fund that we should consider providing a longer-term safety net to ensure that such transfers are successful. Last week, Alex Paterson said that HES has aligned its grant making to allow greater flexibility to support community ownership. Can the Scottish Government do anything more to help communities that are managing assets for the longer term?

Christina McKelvie: The genesis of the community asset transfer process was about assets such as community centres, libraries and so on. It is now moving into a new sphere, part of which is heritage buildings in communities. The Trinity church in Larkhall is a perfect example of that and of a community getting together, holding consultations and deciding what it wants to do with an asset. A few weeks ago, I met Caroline Clark from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. We discussed many such issues and how her organisation aligns its funding and grant-making opportunities for communities.

In some ways, when a property is not in the care of a Government body, it can attract more support. If a property is transferred to a charitable trust or another constituted organisation such as a residents organisation, avenues open up for additional grant funding that does not come through Government bodies. Caroline Clark and Alex Paterson talked about how aligning some of that funding will support people. It is not just about money, however; it is also about the expertise that people need in order to maintain the buildings.

It is one thing to take on a straightforward community centre, but it is another thing to take on, for example, Trinity church in Larkhall, given the stonemasonry and stained-glass window issues there. That takes real expertise. We have been talking about how we use the expertise that is currently in all our bodies to support communities to do such work. Caroline Clark has

talked about grant funding being attached to securing expertise—it would not be conditional, but would be about giving people opportunities to access experts in such fields.

On that point, when I met Historic Churches Scotland a few weeks ago, it talked specifically about the expertise in its organisation and how it can engage community groups and charitable trusts in its work so that they can take on buildings and maintain and sustain them using those heritage skills.

The Deputy Convener: As colleagues have no further questions, that concludes our evidence session. I express the committee’s thanks to you and to Mr Raftery for attending. We are very grateful for your evidence.

We will now move into private session for our final agenda item.

10:36

Meeting continued in private until 10:52.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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