

PE2105/G: Safeguard Scottish Listed Buildings at risk of unnecessary demolition

Built Environment Forum Scotland written submission, 2 June 2025

Summary

Historic buildings are typically constructed very differently from modern structures. Specialist knowledge is required to assess whether they might pose a danger to the public and whether they can be saved.

There already exists a mechanism for specialist advice in the recently launched Scottish Building Standards Expert Hub; consideration might be given to expanding its remit to support local authorities in such instances.

Introduction

The Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS) is a charity and umbrella body for organisations working in the built environment in Scotland. BEFS is a member-led forum that informs, debates and advocates on the strategic issues, opportunities and challenges facing Scotland's historic and contemporary built environment. Our members represent the entire sector, from surveying to architecture, archaeology to landscape, and individual buildings to city centre townscapes. BEFS welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the Petitions Committee with regard to Petition PE2105, which calls on the Scottish Government to take specific actions to safeguard listed buildings from unnecessary demolition.

The Issues

The historic environment, whether rural or urban, contributes to its quality and character. It has been shaped by human and natural processes over thousands of years. This is most obvious in our built heritage: ancient monuments; archaeological sites and landscapes; historic buildings; townscapes; parks; gardens and designed landscapes; and our marine heritage, for example in the form of historic shipwrecks or underwater landscapes which were once dry land.

Listed buildings are a fundamental part of this resource. They have an impact on the communities who live, work, and spend their leisure time within and around them. They are of national importance and need to be managed appropriately. Inevitably, however, buildings can become at risk of demolition through redundancy, deteriorating condition, and other factors. How we deal with that, including their potential demolition, is a complex issue with dynamics spanning the need to safeguard public safety whilst preserving the valuable and unique heritage of Scotland's places.

BEFS actively campaigns for increased recognition of the importance of regular repair and maintenance works - as well as the skills capacity to deliver these effectively - and for the productive reuse of vacant buildings. All of these are necessary to create sustainable places and avoid the circumstances the petitioners are highlighting.

To highlight the scale of the challenge, there are 47,639 listed buildings in Scotland. There are 2,214 buildings on the Buildings at Risk Register (BARR). Historically, 22% of buildings that have been listed on BARR have been demolished ([link](#)), which statistically suggests that around 500 buildings are at risk of demolition in Scotland today.

This is not, however, just a Scottish issue. There are few major differences in policy regarding the dangerous buildings notices and demolition of listed buildings between Scotland and England/Wales. Despite this consistent approach across UK jurisdictions however, the results are often unsatisfactory. Ensuring our public sector has access to the appropriate expertise will lead to satisfactory decision-making processes and outcomes around potential demolition.

The central challenge, expressed by BEFS Members, is that specialist knowledge must feed into these decisions; a lack of – or lack of access to – conservation accredited engineers and specialists has led to generalist practitioners becoming more involved in decision-making around demolition, than has perhaps been the case in the past.

BEFS is concerned that anyone without specialist knowledge of listed and traditionally constructed buildings will understandably be more risk-averse and more likely to recommend demolition, without the specialist skills and experience to fully understand the safety issues at play, and the potential for restoration. Specialists, including conservation engineers and building control surveyors that specialise in historic buildings, have a deeper understanding of the safety complexities and – crucially - the practical opportunities for refurbishment.

Illustrating a wider shortage in the engineering sector, in their 2025 skills analysis survey, Scottish Engineering ([link](#)) reported that by the end of 2027, the industry needs 58% new engineers across 31 specialisms. They described the growing skills gap situation as “facing an economic disaster” ([link](#)).

Local governments that do not have the in-house specialisms should be able to access specialist knowledge externally in a timely manner.

Recommendations

What BEFS Members want to see, above all, are wider incentives and mechanisms for investment in the built environment sector, so that our most important buildings do not reach point of becoming dangerous and at risk of demolition. They are of the view that we as a nation are not doing enough to maintain our buildings - as the latest Scottish Housing Conditions Survey, 2023, makes clear. The survey reported

that 45% of dwellings have disrepair to critical elements, such as roof coverings or the structure of external walls, which mean they are not weather-proof, compromising structural stability, and failing to prevent deterioration of the property ([link](#)).

Modest investment in specialist training and skills is needed now, to avoid even bigger costs in future to the public purse in relation to our heritage and climate. There are similar issues here as with other building-related challenges, including cladding and RAAC. As we move towards retrofit – including that of our existing building stock – this skills gap will become more and more apparent. Training and accreditation as part of this, to achieve net zero targets, will be essential.

We appreciate, however, that this is not the matter before the Petitions Committee today. Turning therefore to the processes around demolition, we would support the suggestion that appropriately qualified conservation professionals require to be consulted when decisions are being made around dangerous buildings and the potential need for demolition works. In most urgent cases that will mean a conservation accredited structural engineer.

However, BEFS recognises the need not to place undue burdens on already stretched planning authorities. Public finances and local authorities are under increasing pressure to deliver statutory services in a period of fiscal constraint. We do not, therefore, envisage a situation where each local authority is required or able to have such specialists in-house. Rather, we suggest a shared resource is the way forward. One route might be for the recently launched Scottish National Building Standards Hub to provide this expertise as needed, at regional level, or perhaps for larger local authorities to lend their expertise out when needs arise in those areas that are less well resourced.

The need has become clear for a greater number of trained individuals with appropriate qualifications. Core accreditation in conservation engineering is one route to this, but it is not the only one. There are parallels with other areas of the built environment, including traditional building skills, heritage management and retrofit coordinators, where BEFS Members report major issues in skills and training gaps, and limited access to skilled contractors in many parts of the country.

To reiterate our main point, listed buildings should be saved and re-used wherever possible, given the **value accrued in doing so to many public policy areas, from culture, heritage and economic development to health, climate change, and place-making**. Ensuring experts rather than generalist practitioners inform the decisions will help us save more of our invaluable listed buildings for the benefit of our current population and future generations.