



Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee
Tuesday 22 September 2026
5th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Historic Environment Scotland – Governance

1. The Committee will take evidence from representatives of Historic Environment Scotland (HES) following a period of difficulties in relation to the governance of the organisation.
2. This paper sets out:
 - HES' roles and responsibilities
 - Commentary from previous scrutiny and main findings of reports on HES' governance

Roles and responsibilities

3. HES was formed in October 2015 following passage of the [Historic Environment Scotland Act 2014](#). It was created through a merger of Historic Scotland with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. HES is a non-departmental public body with charitable status, and it was established as the lead public body to investigate, care for, and promote Scotland's historic environment. HES is also a membership organisation.
4. The organisation has statutory responsibilities in relation to listed buildings, planning and development support, and World Heritage Sites. It has a wide range of roles:
 - looks after over 300 sites of national importance, over 43,000 collections objects, and over five million physical and digital archival holdings
 - regulates Scotland's historic environment
 - provides grants to support heritage activity across Scotland
 - provides advice to ministers, local authorities and owners and managers of properties
 - undertakes research
 - educates and supports skills development in the sector
 - advocates on behalf of the sector.

5. HES makes decisions on which properties are scheduled and listed, as well as whether consent is granted to conduct works on these sites. It is involved in the planning process, providing advice and support to owners and occupiers of listed properties.
6. The [most recent annual report covers 2024-25](#). In 2024-25, HES had 188,000 members. It also had around 4.7 million visits to staffed sites and made £72.5 million in earned income. It distributed £12.4 million in grants and spent £65.9 million on properties in its care.

Strategy

7. HES led on the development of a strategy for the sector, [Our Past, Our Future](#). It also has a separate corporate plan, [Heritage for All](#).
8. In April 2023, HES published a strategy for the historic environment. [Our Past, Our Future](#) covers 2023-2028 and identifies three priorities as the focus for delivery over the next five years—
 - Delivering the transition to net zero;
 - Empowering resilient and inclusive communities and places; and
 - Building a wellbeing economy.
9. The strategy is described as ‘mission-orientated,’ and it identifies the actions that need to be taken to make progress on each of the three aims.
10. Under the transition to net zero priority, the strategy lists three outcomes: to reduce emissions from the historic environment, to make the sector more climate resilient and to improve the pathways needed to build up the skills needed to meet these aims.
11. The outcomes for empowering resilient and inclusive communities focus on upskilling the organisations involved in caring for the historic environment, providing more opportunities for communities to be involved in decision-making, and encouraging diversity and inclusivity across the sector.
12. Aims within the final priority to build a wellbeing economy include the historic environment making a responsible contribution to Scotland’s economy, providing fair work, and increasing engagement with the historic environment with a focus on activities that enhance wellbeing.
13. Outcomes are [reported annually](#). The latest annual report was published in September 2025 and covered 2024-25. This said that activities in that year focused on “finalising the delivery and evaluation framework for the strategy, alongside targeting support for development needs areas and transitioning legacy work from the previous strategy”.
14. HES’ corporate plan, [Heritage for All](#), covers the period 2025-28 and focuses on the work of HES as an organisation, rather than the sector as a whole. Heritage

for All is intended to “support national and sector priorities to drive delivery of Our Past, Our Future”. The corporate plan outlines five priorities:

- Scotland’s heritage
- Skills and learning
- People and places
- Climate action
- HES’ organisation

15. Under each of these priorities are identified outcomes and performance indicators. The final priority includes the outcome, “we will have provided a safe, secure, and inclusive environment in which our colleagues can thrive” and this outcome would be measured by colleague engagement survey scores.

16. Speaking to the predecessor Committee [on 11 September 2025](#), Alison Turnbull from HES said—

“Our commitment to deliver our corporate plan and sector strategy is unchanged. We have reviewed our deliverables for Q1 and we are on track. However, it has been a difficult time and I am very proud of the staff team.”
(Col 13)

Funding

17. HES is funded with a mix of grant in aid from the Scottish Government and earned income from memberships and visitor fees.

18. The 2026-27 budget allocated HES £57.2m resource in grant in aid. This is a fall of £2.1m from 2025-26 and was expected as part of an agreement between HES and the Scottish Government whereby HES would have greater flexibility to effectively carry reserves across financial years but with reduced support. The estimated expected income of HES in 2026-27 is £74.9m which is an increase of £2.8m compared to the estimate for 2025-26. The expected increase in income would offset the reduction of the GIA. There is also a capital budget for HES of £10.0m in 2026-27 which is the same as 2025-26.

Areas the Committee may wish to explore

- Whether the governance issues have affected the focus on delivering expected outcomes.

Governance issues in recent years

19. Governance issues with HES came to light in 2025. There were press reports about a director’s use of a private dining space in Edinburgh Castle, behaviour of a senior official at a function, and alleged comments made by a director about

visitors to Edinburgh Castle. There were also incidents of personal data breaches.

20. In May 2025, the then Chief Executive, began a lengthy period of sick leave. There was a significant period of activity across the summer of 2025. This included Hugh Hall resigning as Chair and Sir Mark Jones being appointed as Chair in September 2025.
21. Alison Turnbull, Director of External Relations and Partnerships, appearance on [11 September 2025](#) at the predecessor Committee. She said that in the absence of the Chief Executive, “the executive leadership team ... has ensured continuity of leadership and operational stability” and worked closely with the HES Board and sponsorship team at the Scottish Government.
22. The [predecessor Committee took evidence](#) from Sir Mark Jones and Andrew Davis, another board member on 30 October 2025. At that meeting, Sir Mark said that “one of the main challenges is that we have a lack of leadership” and said that he had proposed the appointment of an interim chief operating officer to support the organisation ([Stephen Uphill was appointed to this role commencing 15 December 2025](#)). Sir Mark also acknowledged the organisation had issues with its culture. At this stage the Auditor General for Scotland had said that he would undertake an audit of HES under section 22 of the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000 (“section 22 report”. Sir Mark told the predecessor Committee that he welcomed this process. He also noted that investigations into “grievances of various kinds” was underway.
23. [The following week, the Session 6 Committee took evidence from the then Cabinet Secretary, Angus Robertson](#). Mr Robertson noted that there were serious concerns about the leadership of the organisation and, “with new leadership on the board, we are now in a position where those issues can be addressed.” Mr Robertson expressed confidence in Sir Mark Jones and said that “he will have any resource at his disposal to be able to do what needs to be done to get Historic Environment Scotland back working in the way that we expect any non-departmental body to do.” The Committee explored the issue of HES operating without a Chief Operating Officer for some time and the relationship and oversight between the Government and HES.
24. [In December 2025, Audit Scotland published a Section 22 report](#) on HES. It found “unacceptable weaknesses in the leadership, governance and use of resources within [HES]”. It highlighted “allegations of a toxic workplace” and “a culture of non-compliance”. The report recommended that “lessons must be learned” from the Archive House project, where significant costs continued after the project was cancelled. Audit Scotland also said:

“Historic Environment Scotland operated without an Accountable Officer for almost six months. The Scottish Government should have appointed a substitute Accountable Officer to provide the necessary leadership and accountability for financial regularity and propriety, and the economic, efficient, and effective use of resources.”

25. The Auditor General gave evidence to the [Session 6 Public Audit Committee on 14 January 2026](#) and the [Session 6 Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee on 22 January 2026](#). The Auditor General for Scotland described governance at HES as "unacceptable" and highlighted problems such as weaknesses in procurement, personal data breaches, and poor controls around complimentary tickets and hospitality. AGS noted that HES effectively operated for almost six months during 2025 without a chief executive or accountable officer. He argued that the Scottish Government should have appointed an interim accountable officer.
26. The AGS also noted issues with the culture within the organisation and that HES had initiated an external review. [The review was led by an independent consultant and was published on 2 June 2026](#). The review was intended as a system-wide assessment of HES's culture, leadership, governance and operating practices against best-value principles, in light of the concerns about leadership, governance and organisational culture. The review provided a useful description of the issues HES faces as an organisation and made 30 recommendations.
27. The review found that HES remains an organisation with highly committed and capable staff, but that feedback from staff and stakeholders suggested its effectiveness has been undermined by a fragmented organisational culture, weak and inconsistent leadership behaviours, poor communication, low trust in internal processes, dysfunctional people systems and strained relationships between the Board and Executive Leadership Team (ELT). In summary, it said:
- “Recommendations have been made on aligning operating plans more closely with strategy, improved target setting and simpler procedures, particularly around people and workforce issues. There is significant scope to manage resources more effectively, moving emphasis from a predominantly short-term focus to more strategic medium term resource planning and delivery. In the same way, HES should play a more effective national leadership role and drive more productive partnerships. The most important recommendations arising from the review, however, are those relating to improving governance, oversight and accountability, together with the steps necessary to transform executive leadership. These will have the greatest impact on future organisational health, wellbeing and performance.
- “The review closely examined concerns that the organisation exhibited a ‘toxic culture’. The evidence submitted by consultees in general demonstrated that HES is an organisation of 1600 FTE committed public servants working hard to protect and promote Scotland’s historic environment. However, there is no doubt that in recent years organisational performance and strategic focus have not been well served by a combination of unproductive relationships between the HES Board and senior executives, a lack of joint visible leadership and limited collective accountability. Considering the review recommendations as a package should help address these challenges.”
28. Both the Culture and Organisational review and HES’ submission to the Committee refer to a recent Equality Audit. HES has [published details on its work on equality, diversity and inclusion](#). In response to reports of the use of racist language being used by senior staff, [HES issued a news release in November](#)

[2025](#) reiterating its stance against racism and support for inclusion. Neither of these publications seem to be an Equality Audit and SPICe was unable to locate such a report in the publications or news sections of HES' website.

29. Since the publication of the review, [the Chair Sir Mark Jones resigned](#) and was replaced on an interim basis by Ronnie Hinds. [The CEO, Katerina Brown has resigned](#) and Stephen Uphill is the current Interim Chief Executive Officer.
30. This Committee discussed some of these matters with the [Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic and her officials last week](#). The Committee was told that the Government had recently "gone through a process of refreshing the board structure". The Government expects to announce the appointment of five board members plus a new chair shortly.

Role of the board

31. HES is a non-departmental body. The HES [Board](#) are appointed by Scottish Ministers. Chair and Board member appointments are regulated by the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland. The HES Chief Executive reports to the Board and is the designated Accountable Officer to the Scottish Government.
32. The Scottish Government has [published guidance, On Board, for all those appointed under statute to be members of the boards of public bodies in Scotland](#).
33. Among other things, the guidance notes that:
- The four main functions of the Board of a public body are: to ensure that the body delivers its functions in accordance with Ministers' policies and priorities; to provide strategic leadership; to ensure financial stewardship; and to hold the Chief Executive and senior management team to account.
 - The Chair has additional responsibilities to Board members, particularly leadership, directing a diverse team and harnessing the benefits of this, and the conduct of Board business.
 - The Board focuses on strategy, performance and behaviour – the Chief Executive advises the Board on all matters and is solely responsible for operational issues. Board members have no authority to instruct the Chief Executive or any member of staff on operational matters.

Areas the Committee may wish to explore

- How the organisation is responding to the Section 22 report and the Organisational and Cultural Review. How the continuing instability of leadership is affecting this.
- The role of the Scottish Government to support and challenge HES to improve its governance and culture.

EEAC/S7/26/5/2

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