

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT FUND

Comments by
Northern Ireland Environment Link

6th June 2016

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 70+ Full Members represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

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Northern Ireland Environment Link welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Department for Communities in its consultation on a Historic Environment Fund. NIEL has a developing membership and expertise in the historic environment, and has been active in the delivery of several conferences relating to the management and promotion of the historic environment in Northern Ireland over recent years, in partnership with NIEA, HLF, and Belfast Buildings Trust. These conferences have included a [Ministerial Built Heritage Summit](#), [‘The Heritage Opportunity’](#), and [‘Engaging Heritage with Community Planning’](#). NIEL staff have significant expertise in cultural and built heritage, and heritage science, including physical impacts of climate change on the fabric of our heritage materials. NIEL also provides the secretariat for the Northern Ireland Archaeology Forum, seeking to bring together key stakeholders within the Historic Environment sector in Northern Ireland to provide a unified voice and forum for partnership.

The NIEL response to specific questions are below. We have not responded to every question, but much of what is written under the high-level questions is relevant to the questions dealing with finer detail.

Q1: Do you agree with the overall approach to the Historic Environment Fund as outlined in section 1?

- We welcome the proposal for a Historic Environment Fund, and the ambition articulated in the consultation document, especially following recent detrimental cuts to the sector.
- NIEL is supportive of a fund that supports collaborative and partnership working across government (central and local), communities, industry, and universities. Linking and providing coordination between these traditionally quite disparate sectors is crucial to optimising the use of whatever resource is available through the fund. We suggest that staff resource from the Historic Environment Division be dedicated to coordinating across these sectors (not only in relation to the best use of the fund, but for good historic environment outcomes more generally).
- NIEL broadly agrees with the scope of support under the 4 identified themes. However, with no proposed budget it is difficult to assess the potential impact of the fund, and to suggest how spend may be allocated proportionately across the themes. While we recognise that the intent is to address key areas for development within the heritage sector currently, we express concern around the level of funding that would be required to realise the vision set out in the document.
- NIEL agrees that there is an over-reliance on public-funding in NI, and that the Historic Environment Fund should be seen as a catalyst to address the issue of

conservation deficits and unlock the economic benefits of built heritage assets in particular. We also encourage the Department to engage with the sector on other kinds of non-monetary support that may help communities and other heritage groups to begin to address over-reliance on public funding.

- We encourage the Historic Environment Division to consider strategically how their work may align with, and deliver for, other related areas of government (for example, tourism, regeneration in a variety of contexts). We believe that this kind of thinking will be important in causing other government Departments, and indeed the NI Executive, to reconsider the importance of the Historic Environment as a vehicle for social and economic change. Key documents referred to like 'The Economic Value of Northern Ireland's Historic Environment (2013)', while still providing an insight into the growth potential of the sector, require updating within the current context of a renewed focus on social value and communities at a Local and Central Government level.
- NIEL welcomes the fact that the Historic Environment Division will be working under Community Cohesion in the Department for Communities, and we would encourage close interaction with the Voluntary and Community Unit to optimise opportunities for engagement with grassroots groups through this fund.
- If the historic environment asset in Northern Ireland is to be truly sustainable, it is vital that we understand the physical challenges facing our heritage, including complex environment/material interactions, and have strong conservation guidelines based on science. Therefore, it is encouraging to see the proposed engagement with university research. We would also highlight that sustaining a vibrant heritage sector also requires the support and utilisation of the skills of the sector to enable community support and development.

Q2: Do you agree or disagree with the proposed four key strands and their associated aims?

- NIEL broadly agrees with these strategic areas for funding, which cover crucial areas of concern for the heritage sector (increasing understanding and best practice, increasing local communities' understanding and sector capacity, ensuring sustainability and maintenance, and enhancing social value and well-being).
- As stated above, without knowledge on the total amount of funding available, it is difficult to comment on the effectiveness of the spread of funds across these theme areas. The obvious danger is that if funds are limited, then committing to spread the

allocation across the different themes dilutes the overall impact of the Historic Environment Fund, and constrains costly repair and restoration work.

- Coordination between the different strands of the fund will be important – there is clearly significant synergy between the repair, regeneration, and revival strands.
- The research strand will enable the Department to establish a relationship with existing heritage expertise within Northern Ireland. Beyond the more straightforward support for excavation, NIEL is aware of the potential of government and industry-guided research which could result in the Historic Environment Division producing conservation guidelines tailored for Northern Ireland’s heritage materials and climate. We are happy to engage further with the Department on this issue. Such guidelines could also extend beyond physical conservation principles, to best practice around community involvement and promotion of heritage assets.

Q3: Do you agree or disagree with the proposals to include a framework for the Principles for the sustainable management of the historic environment to include the six identified Principles?

- NIEL agrees that an outcomes-based model established from a defined (but flexible) framework is often best approach.
- We suggest that a Historic Environment Strategy for Northern Ireland is needed, within which the framework can be guided, with the flexibility to address need as it arises.
- We strongly suggest that one principle of sustainable management should relate to evidence-based physical conservation (management and intervention). Ultimately, sustainable management will not be achieved if we do not understand the often complex behaviour and decay of our heritage materials, and manage them accordingly.
- Another principle of sustainable management that merits mention is the capacity and enabling of the existing heritage sector. A healthy, vibrant and high capacity heritage sector will enable other key measures to be achieved.
- NIEL agrees with the general underlying aims of the 6 principles and importance of their alignment with best practice conservation management, focusing on engagement, value, management and sustainability.
- We agree with the universal conservation principles in determining weight in funding decisions to ensure conservation-led best practice care and management. We would note, however, that the concept of best-practice is constantly evolving, and that in our changing climate we need to be open to new approaches to material conservation (tested through targeted and rigorous research).

Other Comments

- NIEL would encourage the Historic Environment Division to engage with our HLF Catalyst programme 'Investing in Northern Ireland's Heritage', which aims at increasing the fundraising capacity-building of the sector. Given the likely limitations on funding it is essential that our sector continues to find ways to diversify income and become more resilient.
- NIEL would encourage a strategic approach to funding which would provide mechanisms for the sector to link together more effectively, increase linkages to other sectors, and would create a more cohesive historic environment in NI.
- Given the likelihood of budgetary constraint, NIEL agrees that funding should exclude Government and public bodies, Housing Associations funded by public monies and large commercial organisations, including but not exclusively limited to, financial institutions and multi-national companies. We do recognise the important role of Councils in the heritage sector, either as owners responsible for built heritage, or as enablers for community involvement in heritage regeneration. It will be important to establish the role of Councils to ensure that funding is directed to areas or projects of greatest need. For example, we would like to see support for heritage regeneration featuring in Councils' Community Plans, through which other potential sources of funding may be unlocked (allowing the HEF to be directed to communities).
- In the development of traditional heritage skills and heritage science in Northern Ireland, we also encourage the Historic Environment Division to engage with universities on the delivery of tertiary level courses. The challenge of environmental and climatic change can be a driver of innovation in Northern Ireland, and such courses can draw on innovative and best practice already existing in construction and the voluntary sector (including heritage conservation, repair and regeneration).

If you would like to engage with NIEL on any aspect of this response, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.