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Building at Risk Surveys and Monitoring

1 Introduction

The Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland has been in operation in Scotland since 1990 in response to a concern at the growing number of listed buildings and buildings in Conservation Areas that were vacant and had fallen into a state of disrepair. The Register is maintained by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) on behalf of Historic Scotland, and provides information on properties of architectural or historic merit throughout the country that are considered to be at risk. The Register is mainly concerned with those listed buildings, or unlisted buildings within a conservation area, that meets one or several of the following criteria:

- Vacant with no identified new use
- Suffering from neglect and/or poor maintenance
- Suffering from structural problems
- Fire damaged
- Unsecured and open to the elements
- Threatened with demolition

This list is not exhaustive and other criteria may sometimes be considered when assessing a building for inclusion in the Register. The Register does not include scheduled monuments. A scheduled monument is a monument of national importance that Scottish Ministers have given legal protection under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. Scheduled monuments are specifically excluded from the Buildings at Risk Register as a matter of policy, agreed with Historic Scotland, as the designation carries with it a presumption against development.

Register staff undertake external surveys on an area basis and every effort is made to ensure that information on the Register is as up-to-date as possible given the resources available. The Buildings at Risk Service reports to Historic Scotland and local planning authorities annually. Local authorities check the majority of new entries to the Register and review existing entries on an ongoing basis. However, due to the time gap between surveys and the reliance on other parties for data, some information may occasionally prove redundant, inaccurate or incomplete. Information on the Register is also subject to change and it is therefore important that users seek to verify information before acting upon it.

Furthermore, there is a limit to the amount and type of information that is held and might be shared via the Register. Local authority files and information systems can potentially hold considerably more concerning the recent planning history of a site, records of interaction with owners, etc. Councils and communities might also know of buildings at risk well in advance of

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those administering the Buildings at Risk Register. There is therefore a role for local authorities to ensure that they maintain good data to inform their decision making and to enable a prioritised, strategic approach to the buildings at risk challenge. This can also help maintain the quality of data in the national Register through regular input from those close to the ground.

Gathering information at a local level has other benefits too. While there is no duty on a council to undertake a survey of buildings at risk it is good practice for a local authority to have up to date knowledge of the historic fabric of its area. Where a council is aware of a building in its area that might be at risk but has never visited, monitored or surveyed it, then this could attract severe criticism, including claims of irresponsibility or even maladministration. Local surveys ensure that buildings at risk are not left 'out of sight and out of mind' and allow building condition, change and possible unauthorised works or malicious damage, and improvement, to be monitored. Information is locally owned rather than second hand or regarded as handed down from a central, distant source and systems can be set up to ensure it is shared and integrated with other facilities such as property databases, planning information and local asset management strategies. Programmed surveys and monitoring are crucial where there is a requirement for regular reporting to committees on buildings at risk matters and they should be the basis of a strategic approach to meeting the buildings at risk challenge.

There have been a number of different approaches to gathering information locally.

2 Local Buildings at Risk Surveys

Those local authorities covering a small area and with a comparatively low number of listed buildings should find it relatively easy to gain a baseline snapshot of the condition of their built heritage and to identify and subsequently monitor the condition of those items which might be at risk. The challenge is considerably greater for the cities and authorities covering large geographical areas.

As early as the late 1970s, the City of Glasgow District Council undertook external surveys of all listed buildings within the Glasgow East Area Renewal (GEAR) project area and in the Merchant City to identify issues and opportunities including what would now be termed 'buildings at risk'. Staff from the planning department conservation team undertook the work and the results were compiled into a single bound volume. Similar surveys were also carried out for redundant churches and 'surplus buildings' in the city and these were also compiled into reports. Glasgow City Council undertook to have all listed buildings within its area surveyed in 2004 and again in 2009. The surveys were mainly conducted by students, who used hand-held electronic recording devices to capture data. Although current resource levels do not allow a comprehensive up to date re-survey the output is still proving useful, with visits and efforts being concentrated on those buildings previously identified as priorities.

In the 1980s a Manpower Services Commission sponsored project in Edinburgh's Old Town involved a detailed fabric survey of all buildings undertaken by graduates under the direction of conservation architects. The 1990s saw West Lothian Council engage students from a planning degree course to undertake a survey of all listed buildings in one part of its area and this helped identify condition issues. Subsequently a postgraduate student pursuing a Masters in European Conservation at the University of Dundee compiled a comprehensive dossier of information on all buildings at risk and this became the council's baseline information that fed into the Buildings at Risk Register. Despite reservations regarding the quality of the output that might be

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achieved, the use of students has potential, particularly where the selection of experienced and mature survey workers backed by appropriate training, mentoring and quality control can be guaranteed.

Surveying and information gathering by **volunteers** also has potential, particularly in the current financial climate. For several years Edinburgh World Heritage Trust has benefited from the services of an intern undertaking survey work.

Example: Edinburgh World Heritage Trust

Using an experienced intern the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust undertakes an annual survey of all streets in the world heritage site and identifies buildings that give rise to concern. The organisation also writes a 'soft letter' to the owners of between 10 and 20 such buildings in its priority areas advising that the property appears to be in need of attention and indicating that funding may be available for a properly specified scheme. This normally results in a modest number of responses.

Although there would appear to be differences in the working definitions of 'at risk' used by the Trust, the council and the Buildings at Risk Register, the intern surveys do capture valuable information that helps the Trust focus its own activities. Any differences in interpretation could be easily resolved through closer co-operative working and information sharing between the bodies.

The importance of evidence : Photographs

During building inspections or surveys, in investigating possible breaches of listed building consent or unauthorised works and in preparations for an Urgent Works or Repairs Notice it is important to take a comprehensive set of internal and external, dated photographs. These should focus on areas of concern including failure, damage and rot as well as existing architectural features. Photographs will provide essential evidence of the building's prior condition if an owner contests a suggestion that a building is at risk or that costs of works being reclaimed following service of a notice are inappropriate or unnecessary. With a Repairs Notice they can form a key part of the evidence at the Sheriff Court or public inquiry if objections are made to a subsequent Compulsory Purchase Order. They will also provide essential evidence if damage or inappropriate works are pursued through enforcement or prosecution. In such cases it is important that all witness evidence is corroborated.

Over 25 years ago, Ipswich Borough Council, Suffolk, established a comprehensive survey and monitoring programme for all of its listed buildings. The work was assisted by community service volunteers, taken from the unemployment register and trained as photographers. The output permitted a comprehensive record of all heritage assets to be compiled for the first time. This formed a baseline against which later assessments of external condition and deterioration could be measured. More recently, a local project using volunteers was successfully undertaken in Peterborough with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund:

Example: Peterborough Buildings in Need Project¹

This project, designed to raise awareness of the city centre of Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, was funded through a Your Heritage grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project ran from September 2011 to June 28th 2012. Although the area had only one building with the potential for inclusion on the national at risk register it was recognised that the conservation area was suffering through a more subtle pervasive lack of basic repairs and maintenance, combined with vacancy. The project had several strands including awareness raising, training and a building-by-building survey of the city centre. Over ten months the project provided visits to historic sites, 21 lectures and 17 workshops that engaged over 1100 members of the community. Over 240 buildings were surveyed by 40 volunteers from the local Civic Society, University Centre Peterborough and Peterborough Regional College through the equivalent of 44 days work. A Buildings in Need Toolkit, including survey advice and criteria, survey forms and letters for volunteers was published on the project's web site along with project reports and material associated with the training and awareness raising activities. Positive interventions followed on several properties and there are plans for the Civic Society to celebrate good custodianship of those with lesser issues.

In most situations it would not be realistic to expect volunteers to undertake complex survey work and therefore the level of detail involved should be tailored to meet their expertise and available time. Volunteers may also have difficulties accessing many buildings, such as those that are dangerous, in isolated rural locations or tight urban sites. Also, the buildings will all need to be surveyed again to see if they have been repaired or fallen down and this will require to be resourced. The expertise and knowledge of those briefing, guiding and monitoring the surveyors is another crucial consideration.

Building preservation trusts can also be providers of surveys and monitoring. In the 1980s the Lothian Building Preservation Trust took a leading role in raising awareness of important listed buildings at risk by collating and maintaining information provided by the four local planning authorities, encouraging council intervention and bringing forward potential solutions. Ideally, local authorities should be sharing buildings at risk information and co-operating with trusts that operate in their areas and taking advantage of the opportunities the trust's expertise and experience. Similarly, trusts should consider aligning their functions and activities to local needs. In most situations trust would a fee for building at risk survey services but this may be highly cost-effective and a good option where there is no in-house capacity.

A number of local authorities in England and Wales have employed **external consultants** and there would appear to be a number of private businesses now offering comprehensive buildings at risk services. To date there is little evidence of such companies operating or being established in Scotland.

One such consultancy specialises in the assessment of large stocks of buildings and other structures. They suggest that all projects should be survey-led and have a policy of using only qualified engineers and surveyors to carry out all fieldwork inspections. They also claim to have developed a survey methodology and analysis system employing a widely used software system that can form the core of a local authority listed building management systems. The system is said to include analysis tools for rapid and varied interrogation of the data, monitoring trends and setting best value targets.

¹ <http://peterboroughbuildingsinneed.wordpress.com>

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In Wales, Cadw has funded local authorities to survey their stock of listed buildings and to prepare local buildings at risk registers. A grant covering eighty percent of the cost by an outside provider was offered, provided that the survey recorded a minimum level of information according to a given template. By 2010 most local authorities had commissioned or undertaken the required work. Most surveys were undertaken by a single consultancy and the information was brought together in a summary report.

No matter how local buildings at risk surveys are organised there are a number of administrative considerations that have to be taken into account. Protocols should be developed and agreed for matters of health and safety, interaction with owners and for access in and around private property. Local planning authorities have rights of access to private property for inspection where they suspect that a building is not being properly maintained or has been subject to unauthorised works or malicious damage but these powers might not be appropriate for volunteer based projects. Invoking such rights requires that due process is followed but it is possible and appropriate that professional consultants work on the local authority behalf in such circumstances.

The developing public interest and concern with buildings at risk has seen the emergence of private initiatives aimed at sharing information on such structures using online publication and social media.

The Derelict Glasgow² initiative supports a personal, web-based photographic record of the derelict architecture of Glasgow. The website is non-profit and independent and as such has no connection with property owners, agents, public or private bodies. The site offers professional-quality images combined with responsibly sourced information and has the potential to focus attention on important sites while complementing the information from more 'official' sources. The publisher aims to ensure that new pages are added regularly and existing pages are often updated as new information is found or the condition or circumstances of individual buildings change. There is also a presence via <http://www.facebook.com/derelictglasgow> and other facilities.

Other web-based initiatives include sites where photographs and records are posted by individuals who explore and photograph derelict buildings and abandoned buildings and places.³ Some art photographs draw inspiration from the prominent work of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre⁴ or the Dutch artist Daanoe⁵. However, these are almost always undertaken without the owners' consent and in accordance with full health and safety considerations. Despite giving rise to such grave concerns, these web sites could provide useful evidence on condition and suspected unauthorised works in buildings at risk cases and conservation officers and estates managers might find it useful to monitor their content for intelligence on buildings in their areas or care.

² <http://www.derelictglasgow.co.uk/index2.html>

³ For example <http://www.urbexforums.com> and <http://www.28dayslater.co.uk/forums>

⁴ <http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit>

⁵ <http://www.daanoe.nl>

3 Grading Condition

All comprehensive surveys normally include a system for rating the relative condition found. Some authorities, such as Scottish Borders Council, employ the method developed by the Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland:

Example : Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland condition categories

Buildings are classified according to relative condition based on the system employed by the Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland complemented by the knowledge of the local authority. The condition of a building is usually assessed during site visits undertaken by the Buildings at Risk Service. Usually based upon a visual inspection of the external fabric, it does not constitute a structural appraisal and further independent expert advice is recommended. The following categories are used to describe the condition of a building, though other criteria often come into play:

Ruinous: The building is a roofless shell. Little of the original fabric remains other than the external walls.

Very Poor: The building is either extensively fire damaged, partially collapsed, or is suffering from major structural problems. It may be totally or partially roofless but retains a little more fabric than just the external walls. Very little of the interior remains.

Poor: The building does not appear to be maintained. Most of the external fabric remains but there are obvious signs of deterioration such as slipped slates, vegetation growth, broken windows, vandalism or blocked rainwater goods.

Fair: Although previously well managed, it now requires minor repairs. There are some signs of neglect.

Good: The building fabric is generally sound and its overall condition alone does not necessarily place it at risk.

Bristol City Council uses a smaller range of categories:

Example: Bristol City Council Buildings at Risk Register

The condition of a building and its occupancy are both based on an external visual inspection of the fabric. In some cases the Local Authority will have further information about the property and will have made an internal inspection, which can make the assessment more accurate:

Very bad means a building where there has been structural failure or where there are clear signs of structural instability; (where applicable) there has been loss of significant areas of the roof covering, leading to major deterioration of the interior; or where there has been a major fire or other disaster affecting most of the building.

Poor means a building or structure with deteriorating masonry and/or a leaking roof and/or defective rainwater goods, usually accompanied by rot outbreaks within and general deterioration of most elements of the building fabric, including external joinery; or where there has been a fire or other disaster which has affected part of the building.

Fair means a building which is structurally sound, but in need of minor repair or showing signs of a lack of general maintenance.

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Ipswich Borough Council, Suffolk, developed a 'highly satisfactory' heritage asset survey and grading system that was 'developed, refined and road tested for over 20 years'. The survey recorded each of the following:

- Name of asset
- Address
- Unique Property Reference Number
- Occupancy (full, partial or vacant)
- Use
- Owner/occupier status if known or obvious
- Photographic references
- Site Plan if available/practicable
- Description based on listing information
- Notes

The 'critical elements' of roof coverings, roof structure, flashing, rainwater goods, drainage, chimneys, external walls, features, fenestration, site condition, site security and risk of arson were each scored on a six-point scale ranging from 'unsound' (5) to 'very good' (0). These were then totalled to reach a Critical Element Factor score (CEF) for the property. Buildings were also given a Heritage Asset Grade (HAS) from a seven-point scale based on a combination of its condition, use, treatment required and other known factors as illustrated below. The building was also given a Buildings at Risk Grade (BAR) from a six -point scale ranging from 'extreme risk' to 'no risk' as illustrated in the Toolkit text 5 *Strategic Approaches to Buildings at Risk*.⁶

⁶ From information kindly supplied by Bob Kindred MBE BA IHBC MRTPI, former Head of Conservation, Urban Design and Planning Policy at Ipswich Borough Council, Suffolk, and now of Bob Kindred Heritage Consultants.

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Example: Heritage Asset Grading as employed by Ipswich Borough Council, Suffolk

A

The Building is in good condition and well used for its current purpose.

Building maintained to good practice standard to prevent deterioration to the fabric and sustain economic use.

B

The Building is in average/poor condition but well used for its current purpose.

A backlog of maintenance may need to be addressed within 3- 5 years.

C

The Building is in poor condition and under-used for its current purpose.

A backlog of maintenance may need to be addressed within 3- 5 years.

An options appraisal should be carried out to determine if there is an opportunity for increased economic use of the building.

D

The Building is in poor condition and has no present use.

Works have been carried out to mothball the empty building.

An options appraisal should be carried out to determine if there is an opportunity to bring the asset into economic use.

E

Where the Building is in poor condition, has no economic present use and appears to present no legal barrier to disposal.

Present occupiers (if any) to be assisted to relocate.

Immediate work required to safely mothball and maintain the building until disposal.

Building needs to be properly marketed provided sustainable sympathetic redevelopment is required.

F

Where the Building is in poor condition, has no economic present use but appears to have a legal barrier to disposal.

Action is needed to resolve the legal position preventing disposal.

Present occupiers (if any) to be assisted to relocate.

Immediate work required to secure long term mothballing of the building.

Secure shell maintained for duration.

Periodic review/inspection required to facilitate bringing building back into economic use.

G

Where the Building is unused and is in a dangerous condition.

Immediate work required to secure public safety.

Remains should be secured in stable condition pending review.

Review in consultation with English Heritage as necessary to determine sustainable conservation/sympathetic redevelopment of what remains.

In the event that the damage & decay is determined to be such to an extent that the building has clearly lost its character, then a decision will need to be made about its future value/importance/designated status.

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Scored surveys of this type are an integral part of local buildings at risk strategies, the data being a major factor in prioritisation. They are also appropriate for those managing privately owned estates containing heritage assets. One survey of heritage assets on a private estate using an innovative Site Assessment Framework was undertaken at Bolton Abbey Estate, North Yorkshire with the results published by English Heritage.⁷

Example: Bolton Abbey Estate, North Yorkshire

This project involved a survey of field barns and other isolated farm buildings conducted on the Bolton Abbey estate in North Yorkshire. The survey and report was intended to contribute to the debate concerning the future of the traditional farm buildings that make a strong contribution to the landscape character of the Yorkshire Dales and other upland areas of northern England. The Bolton Abbey Estate is part of the Devonshire Group, and estate affairs are managed under a Chief Executive. The estate holds heritage status for the conservation of the landscape and in excess of over 200 buildings, consisting of farm steadings, isolated barns and a broad range of dwellings, and prepares a budget for the maintenance of its buildings once a year, divided between:

- 1 Reactive works, on a 'needs must' basis; and
- 2 Proactive works, which are specified and sent to tender every four years.

The high cost of maintaining the estate's traditional buildings requires long-term planning and prioritising of financial resources, in order that investment is relative and appropriate to the economic benefits that can be sustained from repair or adaptation for other uses, as well as the broader environmental benefits and the estate's overall objective of sustaining and creating employment in the community. In 2003 the Bolton Abbey Estate compiled a survey which recorded the condition and current management of over 70 buildings. Further detailed work has since informed studies of the economic viability of approaches to the sustainable reuse and appropriate management of field barns.

4 Individual Building at Risk Surveys

Both private consultants and the larger building preservation trusts will also provide more detailed surveys, options appraisals and feasibility studies for individual buildings at risk as key components of funding strategies and applications. There is an extensive body of guidance and good practice on undertaking such surveys and several consultancy firms specialise in their production. Most reports are built around the identification of need for works deemed urgent, necessary or desirable.

Such studies can be labour intensive, time consuming and relatively costly. In many situations the local authority will require to gain a more rapid and inexpensive independent professional assessment of the condition of a buildings at risk that is more detailed than the low-level building at risk survey but nowhere near as complex as a feasibility study or options appraisal. These reports can be used in deciding what immediate action the council should take to arrest deterioration or to remedy a defect that threatens the future of a structure. Similarly, they can assist in the early stages of considering serving a Repairs Notice or Urgent Works Notice. The

⁷ *Farm Buildings and Change on the Bolton Abbey Estate, North Yorkshire: A Character Based Pilot Study* (2009).

audience for such reports is generally internal, including heads of service, finance officers, council chief executive officers and key elected members who are involved in decision making and budgeting and might need to be convinced of the need for action. These people require surveys and reports that are clear, concise and accompanied by indicative costs for action. Local authorities would therefore benefit from being able to commission such reports from approved specialists who understand their intended purpose, perhaps using standard reporting templates based on the needs of notices, and can offer guaranteed fixed rates for the work. In the past, some authorities could rely on internal services to provide this service but access to such facilities in-house is becoming rarer. It is suggested here that there may be business openings in Scotland for service providers that are able to recognise and respond to this opportunity.⁸

5 Steps towards effective Local Buildings at Risk Surveys and Monitoring

Local buildings at risk surveys, monitoring programmes and information systems should take account of the following:

- A first comprehensive survey is important as this provides crucial base line information. The earlier this is undertaken the better.
- Consult with the Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland at the earliest opportunity to ensure a close match of survey criteria and data.
- Share all data with the Buildings at Risk Register.
- Develop standard survey templates and software based information systems for recording and analysing data.
- Take the opportunity to make comprehensive, dated photographic surveys. Digital video is now widely available through telephone technology also.
- Use appropriately qualified or trained survey staff to undertake surveys and to mentor others.
- Local authority conservation staff should engage Building Standards colleagues where possible in scoring condition.
- Involve locally operating building preservation trusts where possible and share any findings with them.
- Do not employ over complicated survey. Keep detail to the minimum necessary. Regular simple, fast and focussed surveys are more useful than single, highly detailed ones.
- Integrate the survey information with local property asset management.
- Integrate buildings at risk survey findings with council planning and heritage information systems and sites and monuments records.
- Make the results of surveys public where possible.
- Report the results to decision makers.
- Make provision for regularly updating and monitoring.

⁸ See Leeds City Council buildings at risk stages of action in Toolkit text *Strategic Approaches to Buildings at Risk* where, in Stage 9, the council recommends commissioning a Schedule of Repairs at a typical cost of around £1,000.

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The above guidance was prepared by The Architectural Heritage Fund for Historic Scotland and is published by the Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland as part of the Buildings at Risk Toolkit. <http://www.buildingsatrisk.org.uk/>

The text contains references to legislation and its interpretation that may contain inaccuracies or be out of date. Ensure you take appropriate professional advice before making decisions relating to property. Feedback, relevant case studies and suggested changes are welcomed.

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