



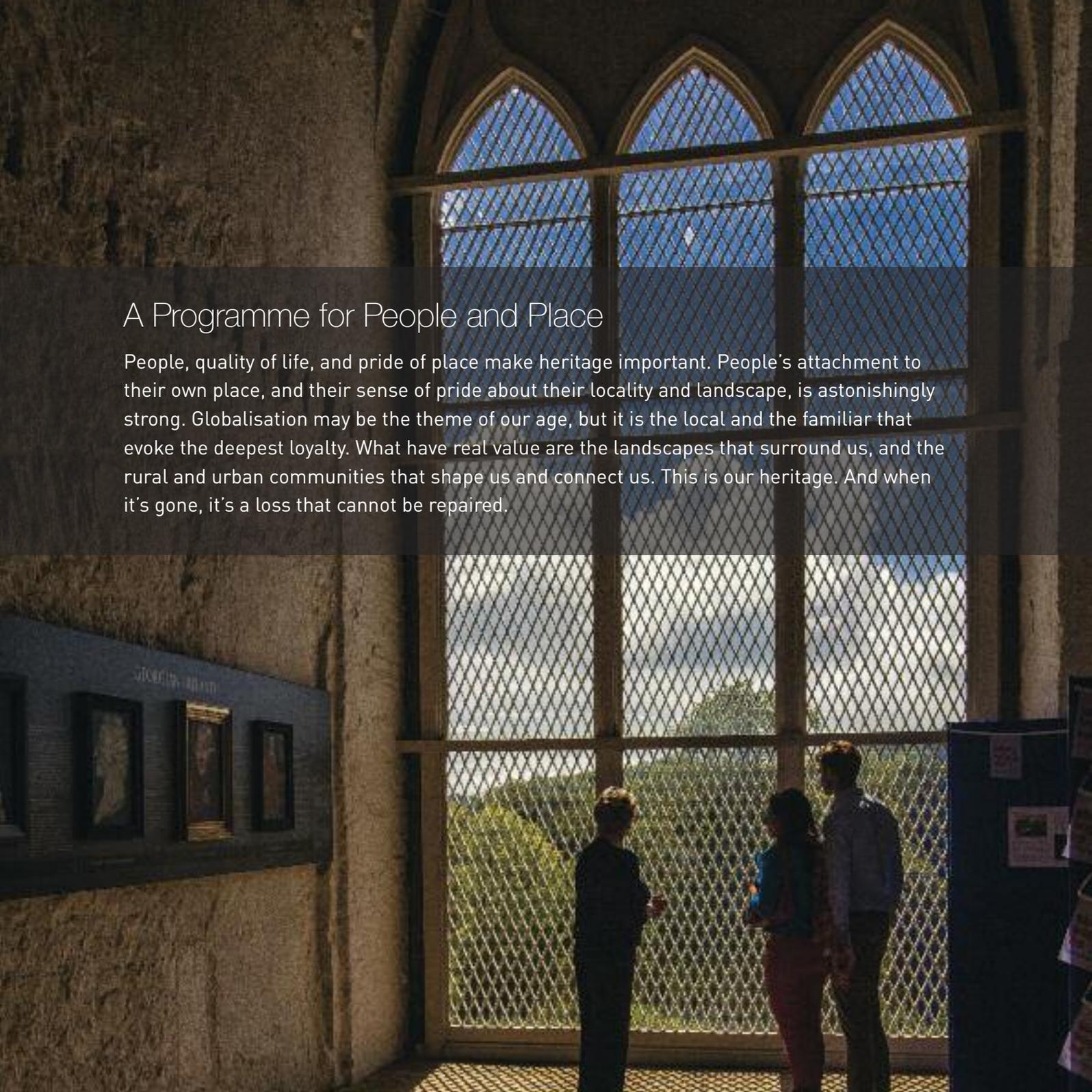
An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



Working for heritage | Working with communities

Heritage Council Priorities 2016 AND BEYOND



A photograph of a museum interior. On the left, a wall of rough-hewn stone features a dark blue display case with three small framed items. The top half of the image is dominated by a large, three-paned gothic window with a diamond-patterned leaded glass. The bottom half shows three people standing in silhouette, looking out the window at a lush green landscape under a blue sky. The floor is covered in a patterned tile.

A Programme for People and Place

People, quality of life, and pride of place make heritage important. People's attachment to their own place, and their sense of pride about their locality and landscape, is astonishingly strong. Globalisation may be the theme of our age, but it is the local and the familiar that evoke the deepest loyalty. What have real value are the landscapes that surround us, and the rural and urban communities that shape us and connect us. This is our heritage. And when it's gone, it's a loss that cannot be repaired.

Introduction

Public perception of heritage has changed in the last 20 years. No longer regarded as the preserve of experts, it is now focused on people and place. This approach emphasises the benefits of empowering communities to enhance the places where they live, work and socialise, in both rural and urban Ireland.

Speaking in June 2015 at an event to mark the 20th anniversary of the establishment of **The Heritage Council, Chairperson, Conor Newman**, stated:

“A very large measure of the work and the focus of the Heritage Council over the next twenty years will concentrate on the role that heritage plays in creating and repairing community cohesion, collective wellbeing, and belongingness. Communities the length and breadth of Ireland are turning to heritage to begin the process of self-healing, of bonding and regeneration, after more than a decade of financial and social flux, particularly in rural Ireland where heritage always ranks high on the list of assets and strengths”.

Ireland has a Heritage Council because heritage really matters to people. We work with communities, particularly in partnership with Local Authorities, to help achieve the potential offered by our heritage. We help raise awareness of its value to our quality of life, and its great contribution to social and economic wellbeing, including employment creation. We work to protect and enhance Ireland’s heritage for this, and future generations.

Our work complements that of other State bodies involved in the management of State-owned properties and designated sites.

Putting Heritage at the Core of National Policy

Maintaining and enhancing the quality of our natural and cultural heritage is crucial to some of our key economic drivers, including tourism and agriculture, and this fact is being increasingly reflected in key sectoral policies.

The policy document **Growing Tourism to 2025** states in its opening paragraphs:

“The focus of tourism policy must be to maximise the export contribution of tourism, while protecting the invaluable assets that are our natural, built and cultural heritage”.

The agri-food policies, **Food Harvest 2020** and **Food Wise 2025**, together with other environmentally enlightened agricultural policies, highlight the quality of our natural heritage as the core of quality agricultural produce. Whilst further work is needed in this area, it can deliver growth and added value for Irish produce, particularly in more marginalised areas. The Heritage Council’s promotion of **High Nature Value Farming** can be central to achieving these objectives, as can its recent partnership with Bord Bia on the implementation of the **National Pollinator Plan**.

The 2014 report by the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA), **Energising Ireland’s Rural Economy**, states:

“A stimulus programme should be centred in rural towns and their hinterlands based on approaches that are rooted in the local territory, value local resources and distinctiveness, are led by local stakeholders working in partnership with local authorities and State bodies... Local communities should be encouraged to support the improvement of physical architecture and the appearance of small towns by creating targeted incentives to facilitate town and village renewal and refurbishment”.

The **National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025** identifies wide-ranging actions that, if resourced, would have benefits for Ireland’s heritage, and the communities that depend on it.

The **Culture 2025 Discussion Document** promises a policy framework for our cultural and natural heritage.

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Heritage Requires Structural Reform and Increased Funding

These various policy extracts in relation to tourism, the food industry, rural development, historic properties, and landscape and culture, confirm the vital role of heritage to achieving their potential. However, this cannot be achieved without adequate financial, structural and personnel resources. Government now needs to provide these resources so that the benefits can be realised in every corner of Ireland. Local communities are clamouring for such an approach and want to see positive signs of the political will to do this.

The current fragmented nature of responsibility for heritage across various Government Departments and Local Authorities is a major challenge. Many of the problems facing our heritage transcend county borders and departments. Ensuring a sustainable future for our rural towns and villages, and for the country's upland areas, requires an approach that existing county-based structures, and funding mechanisms, are unable to meet.

As a national body the Heritage Council can play a unique role in resolving these issues. This can be done at modest cost by embracing the energy, commitment and knowledge of people in local communities. Through its outreach programmes, its established networks, and its integrated approach to natural and cultural heritage, the Heritage Council has a proven record of delivery.

Furthermore, the 1995 Heritage Act requires the Council to "*promote the co-ordination of all activities relating to the functions of the Council.*" This legal framework has facilitated the Heritage Council's flexible approach to working with a wide range of State bodies, Departments and Local Authorities to help meet the needs of heritage and communities. This means that, if provided with greater funding capacity, the Heritage Council is ideally placed to provide enhanced support, expertise and strategic leadership on heritage-based initiatives to communities right across Ireland.

Community-based Heritage Infrastructure

The Heritage Council has played a lead role in creating and supporting community-based heritage infrastructure in Ireland that has delivered returns way beyond the State's investment. From Loop Head to Bere Island; from the Wicklow Uplands to the Burren and beyond, rural community organisations, with very modest financial support from the Council, are undertaking sustainable economic initiatives that generate jobs, support conservation and improve people's quality of life.

Many of these people and projects have won international and European awards for their work, but they need financial investment if they are to continue to grow and develop. Working with these communities we have shown what is possible and the benefits this approach brings to communities in Ireland.

Based on the experience of developing this infrastructure, the Heritage Council is now proposing a series of community initiatives that will help ensure that the social and economic benefits of protecting and enhancing our national heritage are realised by local communities throughout the country.

1. Develop a Rural Towns and Villages Network

One third of Irish people live in towns, but over many years towns have suffered from a policy vacuum, poor planning and external pressures. Extensive research highlights the financial and employment benefits that arise from the conservation and restoration of historic buildings and streetscapes that help define the character of our towns.

The development of a network would provide the targeted support so many towns in Ireland need. The Heritage Council proposes that this network is modelled on our Irish Walled Towns Network. The Network has produced and implemented Conservation Plans for many of the towns involved as well as bringing the story of our walled towns to the general public through events and festivals, resulting in aesthetic, economic and social improvements for the towns involved. Proof of the Network's ability was recognised in 2013 when the network was awarded a Europa Nostra Award for the innovative structure and collaborative approach adopted by the Network.





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The Living Cities tax initiative is welcome but needs to be reformulated if it is to be effective. It is recommended that a Living Towns Initiative should be devised and introduced that would provide allowances against income tax for owner-occupiers and investors. A much broader range of buildings should also be included.

2. Develop ten Irish Upland Partnerships

Modelled on the success of the Wicklow Uplands Council, these would tackle the ongoing crisis in the management of our rural areas and uplands. Recent research carried out by the Irish Uplands Forum identified the need for such partnerships in areas such as the Blackstairs mountains, the Comeraghs, the Bluestacks and many more. The complex network of users and beneficiaries of our uplands, including farmers, recreational users, wildlife conservationists, and those who live there is leading to an increasing number of issues that require a special community based management structure. The divided administrative boundaries result in a lack of joined-up approaches to resolving the competing interests of these various stakeholders. The proposed upland partnership model would provide a framework within which these could be resolved.

3. Enhanced Community Grants Programme

Since 1995 the Heritage Council has supported over 6,000 heritage projects across Ireland with small-scale financial support. Many of these have gone on to gain recognition at national and international level as models of sustainable development. This funding support has helped change the way communities understand their heritage, and the value placed on it. It has supported the enthusiasm and interest of community organisations, working with professionals whose skills and expertise ensure good management and long-term care of heritage at local level.

Ongoing support for community based heritage is essential. Because of the severe cuts to its budget during the recent recession, in 2013 the Heritage Council was unable to provide any support for its community grants scheme and in 2015 a budget of €547,042 supported 190 projects across Ireland. It is essential that this community grants scheme is restored to more realistic levels in the coming years.

4. Expanded Partnerships and Networks

The work of the Heritage Council reaches into the heart of communities across Ireland through its network of 28 County Heritage Officers, who are employed by the Local Authorities. County Heritage Officers provide a structured and co-ordinated approach to managing and promoting local heritage and have played an important role in Local Authorities since 1999. The Heritage Council wants to see this local network given the resources they need to meet the demands at local level.

5. Expanded Schools Programme

The Council's Heritage in Schools Scheme provides a panel of 175 heritage specialists who visit primary schools throughout the country. The specialist's areas of expertise range from bats to whales, from Vikings to the history of bread, from story-telling to traditional dance, and from charcoal making to military heritage. Over 80% of school visits take place outdoors.

The scheme supports the school curriculum and provides an additional educational tool and resource for teachers. The visit is part-funded by the school and the Heritage Council. In 2015, 864 schools participated in the scheme, reaching 97,000 children. The success of the Heritage in Schools Programme is hampered by a lack of resources and capacity.

6. Programme to Develop Local Museums

Currently there is no policy or legislative basis for museums other than the national institutions. Supporting access to significant historic collections through an expanded Museums Standards Programme, including digitising collections, would have a range of advantages. On-line access to manuscripts, library and archival documents allows more people the opportunity to engage with these collections, whether for learning, developing new businesses, or enjoyment. Our cultural heritage collections and sites have the potential to become a new source of funding for research projects, enabling Ireland to take part in the European research funding programme, Horizon 2020.



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Empowering Local Communities

It was also clear from the 2016 General Election campaign that local communities, up and down the country, feel neglected and powerless, and want to be given a clear opportunity to contribute to the task of improving their lot.

The centrality and significance of our natural and cultural heritage in the day to day lives, and the economic wellbeing, of all citizens is acknowledged in the policy documents cited above, and was also reflected in the policy manifestoes of all parties and groupings in General Election 2016.

Yet, despite all these factors, heritage and culture remain peripheral within Government and Departmental structures. It is now essential that the centrality and significance of our natural and cultural heritage is acknowledged by government, and is reflected in appropriate and reformed Government structures, and in increased funding.

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