

Manifesto

2026



BEFS MANIFESTO FOR THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

EASY READ VERSION

Building Foundations: A Manifesto for Scotland's Future

This document is a Manifesto from the Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS).

It was created for the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections.

On behalf of the many organisations and people who care for Scotland's buildings, public spaces, and infrastructure, the BEFS Manifesto calls on the next Scottish Government to:

- Create a well-funded, active, and effective sector.
- See this investment as preventative spend (spending money now to avoid much higher costs later).

Table of Contents

Building Foundations: A Manifesto for Scotland's Future.....	1
Delivering Value Across Scotland	3
What BEFS Does (Built Environment Forum Scotland)	7
About the 2026 BEFS Manifesto	8
The Five Core Themes of the BEFS Manifesto	9
Investing in Heritage: A Missed Opportunity	10
More Support for Scotland's Heritage	11
The Funding Crisis for Culture and Heritage	13
Better Information for Better Heritage.....	14
The Crisis Facing Scotland's Churches.....	16
Need for Investment and Expertise	16
Looking Beyond Buildings: All Our Heritage.....	17
A Need for Better Policy	18
The Climate Threat to Our Buildings.....	18
Energy and Buildings: Getting to Net Zero	19
Using What We Have: The Circular Economy	21
The Heat in Buildings Bill: Upgrading Our Homes	22
The Condition of Scotland's Buildings	23
Fixing Scotland's Tenements	25
Urgent Action: Upgrading Older Homes	26
Tax Rules Harm Historic Buildings	27

Saving Our Historic Buildings	28
Materials, Waste, and Jobs	30
Skills Shortage Threatens Our Heritage.....	31
The Skills Gap Threatening Our Buildings	32
The Stories Behind Our Buildings	33
More People, More Diversity: Building Our Future	35
Planning Our Built Environment	36
Making Better Places	37
Special Challenges for Rural Scotland	39
Building Wealth with Heritage	40
People and Groups that Provided Input	41

Delivering Value Across Scotland

By taking a broad approach, investing in our built environment delivers strong value across many government priorities, including:

- Environmental sustainability and the fight against climate change.
- Skills and economic development.
- Housing, poverty, and health.

Scotland faces urgent challenges.

The investments BEFS call for will help build a better Scotland by reversing decline, improving the quality of life everywhere, and greatly enhancing the buildings and places we live in.

This Manifesto outlines 15 policy recommendations that the Scottish Government can implement in the next five years to lay a strong foundation for the decades ahead.

This Manifesto recommends the Scottish Government to take the following 15 actions across five key themes.

Theme One: Culture and Heritage

1. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should increase the amount of money it spends each year on projects to repair and protect buildings and historic places, making sure this investment helps different government goals at the same time.
2. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should continue to use HES as its primary agency to make sure Scotland's historic environment provides value for people and places. By increasing the yearly grants HES distributes, good work in this area can be expanded and improved.
3. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government and the organisations it manages should start using the Fair Funding principles created by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.
4. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should boost funding for data and research on our historic buildings.

Theme Two: Climate Emergency and Net Zero

5. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should look at how other countries use Material Passport schemes - which track

building materials - and consider starting a similar system in Scotland.

6. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should make sure that current and new laws dealing with the climate emergency take a complete view and fit in with all other government policies. This work will take many years, so it requires agreement and support from all political parties over multiple elections.

Theme Three: Repair, Maintenance and Retrofit

7. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should put into action all three suggestions from the Tenement Maintenance Group: mandatory building inspections every five years, creating compulsory owners' associations, and setting up building reserve funds.
8. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should create a high-level group led by Ministers to create a national plan for upgrading older buildings.
9. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should increase the number of trained experts available to give planning authorities advice on making historic buildings more sustainable.

Theme Four: Training and Skills

10. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should spend money on a nationwide programme to train people in traditional building skills and other construction trades.

11. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should invest money to boost the number of skilled experts in everything from construction, craft, and building upgrades (retrofit) to planning and conservation. This will stop essential skills from disappearing and help Scotland meet its national goals for Net Zero, as well as better places, and heritage protection.
12. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should invest in providing built environment skills training, and help change views in society so that they are seen as desirable career paths by more people.

Theme Five: Planning and Place-making

13. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should convert the fourth National Planning Framework into a digital tool that is interactive and kept current, instead of being a fixed document.
14. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should commit to spending more money and creating new systems that will bring many of the empty buildings and abandoned pieces of land in Scotland back into use.
15. BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should make sure that all local plans for Community Wealth Building include goals for improving our buildings and heritage.

What BEFS Does (Built Environment Forum Scotland)

BEFS acts as a strategic connector for everyone involved with Scotland's buildings and historic places. We bring together a Membership-led forum full of extensive knowledge about our past and present environment.

Our Vision

We want a strong sector that is well-informed, can discuss issues constructively, clearly shows the positive difference it makes, and champions good results for our places.

Our Role: Working Together

Our job is to help professionals tackle the big challenges facing Scotland's built environment by focusing on four key areas:

INFORMING: We keep everyone up-to-date on the latest changes in policies and practices, raising awareness of new strategies.

DISCUSSING: We create opportunities for experts to meet, share ideas, and develop solutions that affect their daily work.

EVALUATING: We help groups show the benefits of their work by building their skills in measuring performance and outcomes.

ADVOCATING: We work directly with the Scottish Parliament, helping the sector collaboratively shape new laws and policies.

To learn more about BEFS activities and how to get involved, please visit our website:

<https://www.befs.org.uk/>

About the 2026 BEFS Manifesto

The main goals of this Manifesto are simple:

- To clearly explain what the members and partners of BEFS want the next Scottish Government to do differently regarding policy for our buildings and historic places.
- To share these ideas with all the major political parties running in the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections.
- To use this document as a tool to influence government policy throughout the 2026-2031 Parliament period and beyond.

The Manifesto was created through a consultation process that ran from March to September 2025. This involved talking to BEFS Member organisations, several working groups, and other key people interested in the built environment. A list of these contributors is at the end of the document.

This feedback process resulted in 15 specific policy recommendations organised under five connected themes. These are the actions that BEFS Members want to see the Scottish Government take.

The Manifesto itself was put together by BEFS Director, Head of Policy and Strategy, and Communications and Policy Officer. You can find their contact information by clicking this link:

<https://www.befs.org.uk/about-befs/team/>

The Five Core Themes of the BEFS Manifesto

The BEFS 2026 Manifesto is built around five key themes that are most important to our Members.

Scotland's built and historic environment, in cities, towns and rural areas, is essential to the quality and character of our country. The built environment has been shaped by people over many years: it includes our buildings, parks, historic monuments, gardens, and industrial heritage.

The diverse field of the built environment influences, and is influenced by, many Scottish Government policy areas, including climate change, tourism, housing and health.

Working Together for the Future

The five themes in this Manifesto are closely connected. They overlap with each other and with the many policies the built environment supports.

With government budgets tight, it is more important than ever to use "preventative spend" - investing now to avoid more complicated and expensive problems later on.

Our policy recommendations are practical and designed for the next term of the Scottish Parliament (2026-2031). However, they are intended to be foundational work for a longer-term impact, including the plan for Scotland to become a Net Zero economy (which adds no extra climate-warming gases to the atmosphere) by 2045.

BEFS urges all political parties to support these recommendations across all five themes.

We believe that preventative spending in these areas will bring lasting, positive benefits to Scotland's people and places.

THEME ONE: CULTURE AND HERITAGE

Investing in Heritage: A Missed Opportunity

History and heritage (like old buildings and traditions) are often ignored or undervalued by government decision-makers. They don't fully appreciate how much investing in our past can help with major challenges today.

Our heritage can deliver huge benefits across many areas, including:

- Fighting climate change and achieving Net Zero goals.
- Creating better housing and regenerating local towns.
- Improving health and wellbeing.
- Helping with local economies and tourism.
- Teaching the traditional skills that are needed to repair our homes and other buildings.

Our historic buildings already contribute positively to society, providing many homes and creating long-term, skilled employment.

The numbers prove that investing in heritage pays off. Historic Environment Scotland (HES) found that for every £1 they invest, another £5.24 is created for Scotland's economy. Separately, experts

estimate that every £1 spent on archaeology generates £15 for the local economy.

A new tourist tax could be a vital way to raise more money for local heritage, especially in areas that attract tourists. This money should be set aside to better care for our historic sites.

We also see a problem where cultural funding mostly goes to creative arts, often leaving the heritage sector underfunded. Plus, demand for heritage grants is far higher than the available supply, with successful applications dropping below 20% in some funding programmes.

The Scottish Government needs to provide a more balanced approach and more funding. Closing this gap between demand and supply would benefit the heritage sector, the building industry, and society as a whole.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should increase the amount of money it spends each year on projects to repair and protect buildings and historic places, making sure this investment helps different government goals at the same time.

More Support for Scotland's Heritage

The main organisation in charge of Scotland's historical places is Historic Environment Scotland (HES). This body, which has charity status, works with the Scottish Government and the built environment sector to manage, conserve, and promote our history and heritage.

We are calling on the Scottish Government to provide increased support so HES can do its job more effectively. HES is a major

employer, with nearly 1,700 staff providing expert services like conservation, research, and advice. It is also central to the national strategy for heritage, [Our Past, Our Future](#).

The Funding Problem

A core function of HES is giving out grants to external groups, which currently totals around £12-13 million per year. This money pays for the repair of old buildings and monuments, archaeological digs, and local regeneration projects.

However, HES funding has barely increased in three decades. Back in 1994, the grants were worth £11.3 million. If that money had kept up with rising costs (inflation), it should be £23.4 million today. This means the HES grants programme has lost about £10 million in buying power.

This investment shortage restricts what the heritage sector can achieve. In 2024/25, the demand for grants was two-thirds higher than the money HES could actually award.

The Solution

A major increase in the HES grant budget for 2026/27 and beyond is needed to catch up with inflation and meet rising demand. Boosting this fund will allow the sector to deliver high-impact projects that support shared goals, benefiting Scotland's people and places.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should continue to use HES as its primary agency to make sure Scotland's historic environment provides value for people and places. By increasing the

yearly grants HES distributes, good work in this area can be expanded and improved.

The Funding Crisis for Culture and Heritage

Changes in how we fund culture and heritage projects are creating serious problems. It's getting much harder to keep services and initiatives going, especially for smaller charities, community groups, and heritage trusts.

These groups struggle to plan ahead because they are unsure about future support and grant funding. This uncertainty affects their ability to keep staff, volunteers, and even their basic operations running.

The Challenge of Short-Term Funding

Most funding is given for only one year or a very short period. This lack of stable, long-term support leads to instability, service decline, and low resilience across the sector. It is increasingly difficult to secure money to both start new projects and maintain existing ones.

This situation is made worse by rising costs due to inflation, making repairs, maintenance, and insurance much more expensive.

New Ideas, Little Guidance

While demand for existing grants is high, relying on other options like crowdfunding or private donations is also difficult.

The Scottish Government has suggested some new ways to raise funds, such as a "percentage for the arts" scheme (where a small portion of development costs go toward culture) or using corporate sponsorship.

However, they haven't yet provided enough guidance or support for these new funding models to actually be implemented.

Groups like the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations are calling for a change. They want funders to offer longer-term support (three years or more) and flexible funding to cover core running costs. These changes would help heritage groups become more stable, sustain their projects, and deliver better results for the public.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government and the organisations it manages should start using the Fair Funding principles created by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Better Information for Better Heritage

A top priority for managing our historic places is improving the quality and amount of information we have about old buildings and landscapes, not just famous ones but also those that are less well-known and not officially protected. Right now, many records are missing or poor quality, and we lack key research.

Gathering Data Smarter

We can fix this by piloting new technology and techniques. Crowdsourcing - asking the public, volunteers, and experts to contribute - is a cost-effective way to collect data. Government agencies can help by making their own data available and easy for the public to use.

By mapping all of Scotland's built heritage, including less-recorded areas like industrial sites and unlisted buildings, we can build a

complete picture of our social and economic past. We also need to systematically track how former empty or abandoned sites are being reused.

Addressing the Gaps

While new tools like AI (artificial intelligence) and crowdsourcing initiatives (like '[Glorious Gardens](#)') can be helpful, they aren't the complete answer. We need clear quality checks to manage these public contributions.

A 2024 audit found huge gaps in our knowledge, including missing information on:

- The social and health benefits of heritage.
- How diverse the sector is.
- The number of active volunteers in the sector.
- Emissions from historic buildings.
- Assets not on official lists.

Better data alone won't protect heritage, but it is essential. Local knowledge and Council records must be used more often in planning decisions. We need to coordinate investments to improve both the information we have and the ongoing research used to keep it updated.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should boost funding for data and research on our historic buildings.

The Crisis Facing Scotland's Churches

Scotland's churches and other places of worship face a national emergency. Religious groups are selling off many of their properties, which has major negative effects on our communities, both physically and socially.

These buildings are often the heart of our cities, towns, and villages. They are vital to our shared cultural heritage, contributing to local pride and connecting different generations. The issue is now a matter of national civic concern, not just a religious one. It affects all people and all places.

Need for Investment and Expertise

As many places of worship are no longer used for services, we must invest money in adapting and reusing them. This aligns with government goals related to heritage, wellbeing, and achieving Net Zero (cutting carbon emissions).

We need more funding for grants that support:

- Routine maintenance and repair.
- Communities buying and renovating the buildings.

Without this support, these valuable buildings will continue to deteriorate. A big risk is that churches are bought for reuse but quickly become empty again because the new owners lack the necessary specialised expertise (like structural engineers or architects familiar with church buildings) and funding.

The urgency of this crisis must be reflected in government spending. We need simple, clear policies and a funding package that everyone, from community groups to local Councils, can easily access.

We should also look at successful international examples, like Romania's ['Ambulance for Monuments'](#), which focuses on cooperative maintenance and skills training.

Looking Beyond Buildings: All Our Heritage

When we talk about the built environment, we often think only of houses. But this sector includes much more: parks, gardens, ancient sites, monuments, battlefields, and even countryside landscapes with architectural elements like paths, walls and bridges. All these areas have their own challenges and are often undervalued.

Hidden Economic Value

Investing in this wider heritage sector brings significant economic returns. For instance, for every £1 spent by local Councils on archaeological services, £15 is returned to the wider economy through tourism and construction. Furthermore, outdoor landscapes provide billions to the UK economy.

Scotland has over 8,000 war memorials and more than 8,000 officially protected historic monuments, showing the massive scale of our assets.

A Need for Better Policy

The contributions of this heritage are often ignored in key areas of national policy, such as agriculture. Our fields, forests and waterways have been shaped and managed by people over centuries, telling a story of human influence. This historic aspect must be better recognised.

When policy-makers look at issues like farming or planning for new building developments, they must take a complete view of the historic and natural environments. We need to ensure that heritage is not lost when considering development, biodiversity, and land use.

A better, more coordinated approach, which addresses gaps in funding, data, and skills across all heritage specialties, will lead to major benefits for Scotland's economy, climate, and quality of life.

THEME 2: CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND NET ZERO

The Climate Threat to Our Buildings

Our existing buildings are not ready for climate change. As severe weather, like flooding, strong storms, heavy rain, and hotter summers, happens more often, our homes, historic sites, and local economies are at risk of serious long-term damage.

We must take urgent action to climate-proof our buildings. If we don't, it will harm residents' well-being, threaten our heritage, and lead to expensive maintenance and repair bills down the road.

Building Resilience

While the Scottish Government and organisations like Historic Environment Scotland have plans that recognise the problem, we need much more investment to deliver change more quickly.

The first step is ensuring all buildings are wind and watertight. This means promoting a culture of regular maintenance and repair to make sure they last. After doing this, we must:

- Invest in upgrading (retrofitting) older homes.
- Put prevention measures in place, especially against flooding.
- Support fast, effective repairs that protect important historic features.

Climate change is an emergency. Despite tight budgets and competing governmental priorities, this threat to our built environment must be treated with greater urgency and higher investment. The building sector needs support, both to cope with the changing climate and to offer solutions to help Scotland achieve its Net Zero and climate goals.

Energy and Buildings: Getting to Net Zero

When we upgrade buildings, we must fully value the energy already used to build them (known as embodied energy). By considering the total carbon footprint of a building over its entire lifespan, we

encourage repair, reuse, and keeping existing structures, which is better for the planet than constantly constructing new buildings.

Confidence and Clarity

To achieve Net Zero, people need confidence. Homeowners and businesses must be sure that the energy-saving advice they receive is accurate and unbiased, and that any changes will be right for their specific building. They also need access to skilled installers.

More changes to policy and practice are needed if Scotland is to reach its climate goals and create a fair transition and a circular economy (where waste is minimised).

Knowing the Next Steps

Achieving Net Zero relies on everyone - homeowners, businesses, and community groups - having a clear understanding of exactly what they need to do and when.

Big questions remain unanswered:

- What kind of new heating systems will be recommended (e.g. heat pumps)?
- What training is needed to create a skilled workforce?
- What financial programmes will be available to help people afford the costs of installing new systems?

For historic areas, we also need to ensure that local materials are used, and appropriate skills training programmes and supply chains are in place.

Using What We Have: The Circular Economy

Moving toward a circular economy, where we keep resources in use for as long as possible, needs a complete strategy across the Scottish Government. We need a two-part approach for our buildings:

1. Better upkeep, reuse, and retention of existing structures.
2. Promoting the recycling and reuse of building materials.

The Value of Old Buildings

Our historic buildings contain a huge amount of embodied carbon (the energy already spent creating them). Reusing these buildings and their materials is essential.

Because over half of all Scottish homes were built before 1946 (much higher than in the rest of the UK and Europe), expanding maintenance and appropriate upgrades here offers massive potential for climate and economic benefits.

We also need local hubs to help recycle construction waste and make sure we use suitable local materials whenever possible.

Opportunities for Change

The construction industry creates half of all waste in Scotland. Our existing buildings offer a massive opportunity to find climate solutions and cut carbon emissions.

We must promote the use of local, sustainable, and low-carbon materials. To drive change, we should introduce:

- Incentives (like tax reductions) for reuse.
- New systems for tracking materials.

- A culture change that prioritises using existing materials.

Local Councils must be supported to meet any targets set for a circular economy, and we can learn from new building standards that require developers to plan for the end-of-life of materials.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should look at how other countries use Material Passport schemes - which track building materials - and consider starting a similar system in Scotland.

The Heat in Buildings Bill: Upgrading Our Homes

Scotland cannot reach its Net Zero goals without changing how we heat our homes and buildings. Since Scotland has so many historic and traditionally built properties, the heritage sector is vital to this process.

The 'Fabric First' Rule

The key to success is focusing on regular maintenance and repair. This is known as the 'fabric first' approach. We must ensure buildings are windproof and watertight before installing new heating systems.

If we skip this step, expensive upgrades won't save the energy expected, may damage the building, and could even harm the health of the people living there. This would also fail to meet goals for reducing fuel poverty (lowering heating bills).

Clear Rules and Skills

New laws (including plans for a [Heat in Buildings Bill for Scotland](#)) and related regulations need to be clear about who is responsible for what.

To succeed, we need a new mindset and approach, supported by effective tools like updated Energy Performance Certificates.

Most importantly, all policies must be consistent and work together. We need to invest in training skilled workers capable of maintaining all types of homes, from very old to modern constructions, in all of Scotland's regions.

We must also be flexible. A single strict and simple rule for energy standards could damage certain buildings, especially historic ones that have special requirements. Focusing on repair first will pay off and help us transition fairly to clean heat.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should make sure that current and new laws dealing with the climate emergency take a complete view and fit in with all other government policies. This work will take many years, so it requires agreement and support from various political parties over multiple elections.

THEME 3: REPAIR, MAINTENANCE AND RETROFIT

The Condition of Scotland's Buildings

Over half of all Scottish homes were built before 1946. This is one of the highest proportions in the world. It means the condition of our old

buildings demands special attention, but Scottish Government policy and funding often fails to recognise this.

Disrepair and Climate Goals

Poor repair is widespread. In 2023, 45% of all homes had critical defects, and 28% of pre-1919 homes needed urgent repair.

Furthermore, 71% of all pre-1919 buildings have a poor energy rating (Energy Performance Certificate D or worse).

There is a direct link between a building's physical condition and its energy performance. Regular maintenance and repair, especially for older, traditional buildings, must go hand-in-hand with new heating solutions. Without fixing the building fabric (walls, roof, windows) first, energy upgrades will fail.

A Better Approach

We currently lack a policy that requires improving building condition through regular maintenance. Investment in a 'fabric-first' approach, along with better energy rating systems, offers a major chance to use our existing buildings to meet Net Zero goals.

Traditional buildings cannot be assessed like modern ones. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach is damaging. Successful models, like the [Traditional Buildings Health Check Scheme](#), show that regular inspections and high-quality repairs can work. Investing in this model, plus the necessary skills and data, is crucial.

Local Councils lack the funds to properly maintain our historic places. The Scottish Government must provide them with support and oversight to help ensure our buildings are preserved and perform well.

Fixing Scotland's Tenements

Scotland faces a housing emergency, with nearly half of all properties showing signs of critical disrepair. This problem is especially severe in tenements - the 895,000 flatted homes that make up one-third of our housing stock - which are among the least energy-efficient in Europe.

The Three-Part Solution

To tackle this, the cross-party Tenement Maintenance Working Group (formed in 2018) has spent years developing and promoting three key solutions to help owners maintain their buildings:

1. **Compulsory Owners Associations:** These would require all owners in a tenement block to legally form a group. This group could then manage maintenance budgets, hire contractors, and deal with building issues collectively.
2. **Mandatory Five-Year Building Inspections:** Common areas of tenements would need to be inspected every five years. The reports would clearly list required repairs and be made available to future buyers and tenants.
3. **Building Reserve Funds:** Owners would be required to make a regular payment (currently suggested at around £50 per month) into a fund. This acts like a pension for the building, providing the money needed for future large repair bills.

The Scottish Government is already acting on these ideas, with work underway to draft a Bill on Compulsory Owners Associations. Moving forward with all three recommendations will significantly improve housing conditions, reduce disrepair, and help with the complicated

energy-saving upgrades needed to tackle the housing and climate emergencies.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should put into action all three suggestions from the Tenement Maintenance Group: mandatory building inspections every five years, creating compulsory owners' associations, and setting up building reserve funds.

Urgent Action: Upgrading Older Homes

We aren't upgrading older properties fast enough, and the quality and scale of work are falling short. This essential work would make homes more comfortable, cut carbon emissions, save energy, and lower heating bills.

To tackle this, the Retrofit Roundtable, a group of building industry and heritage experts, is investigating solutions. [Their 2024 report](#) highlighted the urgent need to speed up home upgrades to meet Net Zero goals and address building maintenance issues.

The key problem? Policy departments aren't working together well enough.

The Roundtable is calling on the Scottish Government to create a Ministerial Oversight Group on Retrofit. This high-level group would have the power to coordinate all relevant Scottish Government departments and develop the resources needed for both short- and long-term action.

They also want this Oversight Group to create a Retrofit Delivery Plan. This Plan would clarify funding, set specific goals, and ensure high-quality work. Poor-quality upgrades are a real risk, leading to severe issues like damp and mould years after installation.

Organisations like the Existing Homes Alliance are also urging the Scottish Government to help create regional support services called [Retrofit Agencies](#) to help homeowners in different parts of Scotland.

Upgrading older buildings is a crucial investment. It not only addresses climate change, fuel poverty, and health but also protects historic properties and creates skilled jobs across Scotland.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should create a high-level group led by Ministers to create a national plan for upgrading older buildings.

Tax Rules Harm Historic Buildings

To create a sustainable future, we must encourage repairing and reusing buildings instead of demolishing them and rebuilding. This goal should be built into all our planning rules.

The Problem: Unequal Tax

Currently, our tax system creates a major barrier. New construction projects pay 0% VAT (sales tax), but if you repair, refurbish, or conserve an old (historic) building, you must pay the full 20% VAT.

This tax difference often persuades landowners to choose demolition and new-build simply because it is cheaper. This goes against our goals

for heritage, climate change, and community development, hindering the preservation of our diverse historic environment.

The Solution: Changing VAT

Since VAT is controlled by the UK Government, the Scottish Government cannot adjust it, but they can lobby for change. Removing or significantly reducing VAT on repair work would bring major benefits for the economy, well-being, and heritage.

Experts estimate that reducing the VAT rate on heritage repairs to 5% could:

- Add £15 billion to the wider UK economy.
- Create almost 100,000 new jobs.
- Reduce carbon emissions by a quarter of a million tonnes.

Tax decisions heavily influence investment. A change in VAT would only be a first step. It must be delivered alongside wider investment and a cultural shift to encourage the continued care and shared use of our existing buildings.

Saving Our Historic Buildings

Our historic buildings are incredibly important nationally. They boost tourism and give communities a sense of identity. Yet, many of these places are at risk of demolition due to decay and being left empty.

The Scale of the Problem

Of Scotland's nearly 48,000 listed buildings, 2,214 are on the Buildings at Risk Register. Historically, 22% of buildings on this register have

been torn down, suggesting around 500 buildings are at risk of being lost today.

We need better incentives to prevent our most important buildings from reaching a state so dangerous that we think about knocking them down. National data shows a major lack of maintenance: 45% of all homes have critical disrepair to parts like roofs or external walls, making them vulnerable to the weather and structural damage.

The Skills Emergency

To fix this, we need significant investment in specialist training and skills now. Without enough trained experts in areas like conservation and engineering, the future cost to the public purse and to our climate goals will be much larger. This skills gap will become even more noticeable as we ramp up energy-saving upgrades (retrofit) to existing homes.

We must create the conditions to ensure the right skills are available when and where they are needed. Local Councils need access to qualified conservation experts to make informed decisions.

Historic buildings should be saved and reused whenever possible because they bring value across many areas, from local economies to housing and from health to climate change. Having the right expertise involved prevents unnecessary demolition and saves invaluable heritage for future generations.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should increase the number of trained experts available to give planning authorities advice on making historic buildings more sustainable.

Materials, Waste, and Jobs

The construction industry is responsible for half of all the waste produced in Scotland. We urgently need a culture change that prioritises maintaining, reusing, and fixing our existing buildings instead of letting them decay and then demolishing them.

Challenges and Solutions

We face major hurdles in bringing empty and abandoned sites back to life, including:

- A shortage of traditional skilled trades (like stonemasons).
- Slow planning processes
- Inadequate supply chains for local materials.

We should reward the reuse of existing materials and implement a Material Passport system to track components, supporting a circular economy.

Economic and Climate Benefits

Investing in repairing and improving existing buildings supports 40% more jobs than building new ones. A maintenance-first approach is vital for achieving Net Zero, but this is impossible without robust skills and supply chains.

The Scottish Government's commitment to using and reusing durable materials must be fully put into practice to help meet our climate goals.

We must invest in local materials and suppliers across Scotland. For example, funding local quarries for slate and stone would create jobs

and revive traditional skills, especially benefiting rural and island communities that often own this land.

Instead of waiting for these supply chain problems to fix themselves, a dedicated national programme with appropriate funding is needed now to create and support local, circular economies.

THEME FOUR: TRAINING AND SKILLS

Skills Shortage Threatens Our Heritage

We have a widely recognised problem finding workers with the traditional building skills needed to maintain Scotland's historic properties across cities, towns, villages, rural areas, and islands.

The Challenges on the Ground

Specialist contractors (like stonemasons or thatchers) are often booked up months in advance and unable to travel to remote areas. This makes it almost impossible for building owners to get the simple quotes or repairs they need, sometimes causing entire projects to fail.

As these skilled experts become harder to find, our buildings will continue to crumble. This isn't just about preserving old stone; when buildings are at risk, the benefits they bring to communities, like supporting local economies, improving well-being, and helping meet climate goals, are also lost.

Making Skills a Priority

Traditional construction training is not a luxury. It is an essential service needed for the health of all buildings and for preventative maintenance. We must take action to support Colleges and training centres to deliver these vital courses.

In a fast-changing world driven by Net Zero goals and new technology, current skilled workers need ongoing opportunities to learn and to share their knowledge with the next generation. We need to invest in training courses to support new workers and ensure that traditional skills are treated as a central, mainstream priority, not a niche one.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should spend money on a nationwide programme to train people in traditional building skills and other construction trades.

The Skills Gap Threatening Our Buildings

The sector responsible for maintaining our buildings and heritage faces a major skills crisis. We don't have enough people trained in essential areas like conservation, construction, and modern energy upgrades (retrofit).

Fewer Experts, Bigger Problems

This problem extends into local government. Planning departments are overworked, and key in-house expert roles like archaeologists and ecologists are under-resourced or have been cut. Since 2005, the number of local authority archaeological staff has dropped by 38%.

Funding cuts are widespread: [spending on planning has fallen by nearly 29% since 2010](#). Engineering is also suffering, with the industry needing 58% new engineers by 2027 just to meet demand, [a situation described as an "economic disaster"](#).

Missing Traditional and Green Skills

Traditional trades are also struggling. [A 2023 survey](#) found Scotland only has about 360 skilled stonemasons, and there are widespread concerns about supporting the trade and meeting future demand.

[This skills gap is particularly severe in green skills](#) (required for climate adaptation). A 2024 plan highlighted that 65% of employers are worried about the lack of specialist skills needed for older buildings, which is already causing economic losses.

If we don't invest in training a future generation of skilled workers immediately, we won't be able to maintain our cultural heritage or achieve Scotland's Net Zero goals.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should invest money to boost the number of skilled experts in everything from construction, craft, and building upgrades (retrofit) to planning and conservation. This will stop essential skills from disappearing and help Scotland meet its national goals for Net Zero, as well as better places, and heritage protection.

The Stories Behind Our Buildings

We believe we should do more to explore, record, and celebrate the strong connection between Scotland's buildings and the traditions,

stories, and histories linked to them. This is known as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

The value of ICH is huge: it strengthens our cultural identity, builds pride of place, helps communities gain more control over their future, promotes local tourism, and supports sustainable economies.

Protecting Skills and Stories

This heritage includes traditional building and craft skills, like thatching and specialised masonry, passed down through generations. Supporting local specialist training not only protects these vital skills but also ensures our historic buildings are properly maintained, boosting local economies.

To make the most of this, we need more funding and attention to collect local and regional knowledge and make it accessible, especially through digital tools.

Moving Forward

There are positive steps, such as the UK Government recently signing a United Nations agreement on ICH, and new online resources. But we need clearer guidance on how to turn these opportunities into practical changes on the ground.

The Scottish Government should give more thought to how to strengthen ICH policies and align them with broader national goals, such as improving wellbeing. Recognising the value of unseen stories and traditional skills is essential for fully realising the benefit of our historic environment.

More People, More Diversity: Building Our Future

The workforce that cares for our historic and existing buildings is too small and not diverse enough. Across traditional trades and the wider construction industry, we need more young people, women, and people from ethnic minority groups to join the sector and stay long-term.

We need to make sure people with “protected characteristics” - which are specific parts of a person’s identity that are supported by law, including disability, race and age - are encouraged to take up training and employment opportunities in the built environment.

The Recruitment Problem

There is a systematic failure to promote careers in building and heritage skills within our education system. Adding to this, it is getting harder to find and enroll in training courses or specialist apprenticeships, threatening the future supply of skilled workers.

Many young people are not exposed to possibilities, or encouraged to consider careers in traditional building crafts and construction. We need to offer more hands-on opportunities to try these trades out, which are vital as the current workforce gets older.

Why Diversity Matters

A diverse, healthy, and growing workforce is essential for tackling major national issues, including:

- Achieving Net Zero carbon goals.
- Providing the necessary homes, jobs, and infrastructure.
- Ensuring the wellbeing of Scottish people.

We need a clear strategy that includes an equality and human rights focus to improve diversity. This strategy must hold decision-makers accountable for change. Without a diverse and skilled workforce, meaningful progress on all these urgent priorities will be impossible.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should invest in providing built environment skills training, and help change views in society so that they are seen as desirable career paths by more people.

THEME FIVE: PLANNING AND PLACE- MAKING

Planning Our Built Environment

Scotland's spatial planning system (how decisions are made about land use) is crucial for protecting our diverse historic places and encouraging the reuse of empty buildings. It's good that the latest national plan (the Fourth National Planning Framework) clearly emphasises protecting our rich heritage and culture.

Major Challenges

However, the planning system faces two huge problems that slow down decisions and reduce quality:

1. **Lack of Staff:** Local planning departments are severely under-resourced. Spending on planning has dropped by nearly 29% since

2010. This means they don't have enough workers to handle the necessary workload, leading to a downward spiral of problems.

2. **Conflicting Goals:** The national plan tries to achieve too many things at once. There are contradictions between key goals, such as protecting historic sites, promoting biodiversity, and approving new developments. This makes rules confusing.

Improvements and Solutions

New investments in training and recruiting planners are welcome, but it will take years to see the results. In the meantime, we can make immediate improvements:

- **Make Rules Clear:** New guidance is needed to resolve conflicting policies and clear up confusion. The national plan should be turned into an interactive website to make it easier to use and keep up to date.
- **Prioritise Reuse:** The planning system should do more to favour reusing existing buildings over new construction.
- **Change Attitudes:** Planning should not be viewed as an obstacle to economic growth, but rather as a driver of sustainable development.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should convert the fourth National Planning Framework into a digital tool that is interactive and kept current instead of being a fixed document.

Making Better Places

Place-making means actively working to ensure a community's physical spaces and amenities like parks, streets, and buildings are maintained

and developed according to local needs and respectful of the area's unique character.

Effective place-making is collaborative and brings great results for health, economic growth, and resilience against climate change.

Bringing Back Empty Buildings and Spaces

A key action is bringing empty buildings and abandoned land back into productive use in our villages, towns and cities. The scale of this problem is huge: there are 11,000 hectares of vacant and derelict land in urban Scotland. This is almost twice the size of Dundee, Scotland's fourth largest city. Reducing this total would create massive value for our people, economies, and environment.

To address the housing emergency, we must commit to reusing vacant buildings instead of always building new ones. This helps tackle the climate emergency, cuts waste, improves biodiversity, and creates new homes.

We should do the same with empty land in our towns and cities, to create attractive public spaces and parks for people to use and enjoy.

Integrating Heritage

Taking better care of our local buildings and heritage sites is a vital part of making a great place. Improving town centres, increasing access to public spaces, and enhancing connectivity are also essential.

Scottish Government policies like the [Place Principle](#), [Local Living and 20 Minute Neighbourhoods](#) are increasingly focused on local needs. To maximize their success, the interests of our historic and existing built

environment must be fully included in all place-based planning and practice.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should commit to spending more money and creating new systems that will bring many of the empty buildings and abandoned pieces of land in Scotland back into use.

Special Challenges for Rural Scotland

Rural Scotland, including our islands, faces unique and tough challenges when it comes to improving local areas (place-making).

Problems like few full-time jobs, a shortage of affordable housing, and people moving away makes it harder to invest in local buildings. If these problems continue, we will lose the benefits our historic rural places offer to local people and to the entire nation.

High Costs - But High Value

Because these areas are remote, efforts to improve infrastructure, services, energy efficiency, and building maintenance are generally more expensive, take longer, and are more difficult than in cities and large towns.

Despite these obstacles, rural and island areas are rich with heritage sites and are a major driver of Scotland's tourism industry.

Policymakers must take these additional challenges into account when planning for the future.

Landscape-Led Approach

Experts are calling for a "landscape-led" approach to development. This means that plans to build or change an area must work with the natural shapes of a landscape (such as the geology, soil, and habitats) and the needs of the humans and animals that live in it to create the best possible places.

This integrated approach helps to create beautiful places while also meeting bigger goals for:

- Adapting to climate change.
- Restoring nature.
- Boosting the economy and housing supply.
- Improving public health.

Building Wealth with Heritage

The care of our buildings is central to improving local areas, creating strong economies, and boosting quality of life. By linking heritage, tourism, and local economies more closely, we can make further gains.

Well-maintained, accessible heritage buildings strengthen a place's identity, attract visitors, and create local jobs in tourism, hospitality, and retail.

Community Ownership and Skills

There is a direct connection between local economic resilience and our heritage. By ensuring local contractors get maintenance jobs for historic buildings, we reduce costs, support local businesses, and improve their skills.

However, significant obstacles prevent communities from taking over empty or neglected historic buildings, especially the difficulty of getting funding for purchase and repair. Many community-led groups also lack the capacity and resources to manage the long-term running costs of these old structures.

A New Opportunity: Community Wealth Building

The new [Community Wealth Building Bill](#) will require Councils and some other public bodies to create action plans to help local communities.

Public sector leaders must work closely with local heritage groups and tourism partners to give these community-led projects the best chance of long-term success. For local councils to effectively lead and support these new action plans, they will need a better level of funding and resources across their many stretched departments.

BEFS recommends: The Scottish Government should make sure that all local plans for Community Wealth Building include goals for improving our buildings and heritage.

People and Groups that Provided Input

BEFS is grateful to all the members and groups who took the time to contribute their feedback to this Manifesto, whether through meetings, working groups, or email.

A special thank you goes to the representatives from the organisations listed on the following pages.

While BEFS used the consultation results to write this document, the groups listed here may not support every policy we recommend.

- Archaeology Scotland
- Architectural Heritage Fund
- Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland
- Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers Scotland
- Built Environment - Smarter Transformation
- Chartered Institute for Archaeologists
- Chartered Institute of Building
- Church of Scotland
- Community Ownership Support Service
- Conservation Officers Group
- Development Trusts Association Scotland
- EALA Impacts CIC
- Existing Homes Alliance
- Glasgow City Heritage Trust
- Heritage Network
- Historic Buildings Trust
- Historic Churches Scotland
- Historic Houses
- Landscape Institute Scotland
- Institute of Civil Engineers Scotland
- Institute of Conservation Scotland Group
- Institute of Historic Building Conservation
- National Churches Trust

- National Federation of Roofing Contractors
- National Lottery Heritage Fund
- National Trust for Scotland
- Places of Worship Forum Scotland
- Planning Aid Scotland
- Ptotal Consultancy
- Ridge Foundations
- Retrofit Roundtable
- Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland
- Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
- Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce Fellows Media, Creative Industries, Culture and Heritage Network
- Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland
- Scotland's Churches Trust
- Scotland's Gardens and Landscape Heritage
- Scotland's Towns Partnership
- Scottish Council of Jewish Communities
- Scottish Episcopal Church
- Scottish Civic Trust
- Society of Antiquaries of Scotland
- Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings
- Stirling City Heritage Trust
- SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum
- Under One Roof
- War Memorials Trust

End of 2026 BEFS Manifesto: Easy Read Version

Two other versions of the BEFS Manifesto are available on our website - a short Manifesto Statement and the Full Manifesto. You can find these at the link below:

<https://www.befs.org.uk/latest/news/befs-launches-manifesto-2026/>

Thank you for reading this Manifesto.

It was produced by Hazel Johnson, Director, Derek Rankine, Head of Policy and Strategy, and Jonna Meredith, Communications and Policy Officer, in December 2025. The front cover is designed by Malini Chakrabarty, Communications Lead.

For this easy read version, the authors utilised a large language model, Gemini (Flash 2.5 by Google), during the drafting process. This artificial intelligence tool was specifically used for condensing some source material into accessible summaries and rewriting technical jargon.

For further information on BEFS, please visit our website:

<https://www.befs.org.uk/>

