Conservation planning good practice guidance

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Conservation planning is a process that will help you understand your heritage and its importance and ensure it is valued, cared for and sustained for everyone, now and in the future.

By reading this guidance you will learn why conservation planning is important and the benefits it provides, as well as what is involved in creating a conservation management plan, how to structure it and tips for carrying out the planning process successfully.

About conservation planning

If you are anticipating making changes to your heritage you should start the conservation planning process as early as possible, as it will help you make important decisions about the aims and scope of your project. It is also important that the conservation planning process covers the whole heritage site and not just the part that forms the focus of your potential project. All types of heritage – from buildings and estates, to projects involving collections, biological species and intangible heritage (such as people's memories and experiences or cultural traditions) – can benefit from taking a conservation planning approach. However, this guidance focuses on physical heritage.

Often the trigger to start the conservation planning process is the realisation that there might be a need for change. In this case, following the process can help to ensure that the right information is gathered at the right time and that appropriate decisions are made as the project progresses. Well planned and thorough investigation carried out at an early stage can help to ensure that the extent of archaeological deposits or the presence of protected species on a site is fully understood well before construction works begin. If you are aware of these issues in the early stages then the project can be designed to accommodate them, potentially avoiding additional costs and delays.

However, it could be argued that conservation planning is better undertaken without a particular project in mind. This will ensure that decisions are made objectively and without bias towards any one outcome.

Conservation planning is a valuable tool as it will help you better understand your heritage and its potential. Researching the history of your site might uncover new aspects of its story and new layers of meaning. New insights into its history and past use might suggest new ways of interpreting its story for the people that visit the site. Understanding what is important and to whom will help you find meaningful opportunities for engaging with your visitors.

The conservation planning process will also help you gain a better understanding of any potential threats that might harm your heritage, and any potential opportunities to make improvements to its condition or long-term sustainability.

The understanding gained through the conservation planning process will therefore help you to decide on the best approach in finding an appropriate balance between repair, conservation, restoration and making changes. It will also be easier to manage your site effectively so that you are better able to care for your heritage now and in the future.

Why it's important and how it helps

Conservation planning provides a useful framework to help you bring together all the relevant existing information that you hold about your heritage alongside your management policies and procedures, to create an actionable conservation management plan.

At its most basic a conservation management plan describes:

- your heritage
- why it matters and who cares about it
- current threats to the heritage as well as opportunities for improvement; and factors that influence how you care for and manage your heritage

The information in a conservation management plan should help you to:

- plan maintenance, conservation and repair works
- improve public access and understanding
- implement measures to reduce negative environmental impact and adapt to the climate crisis
- adapt the site to meet new or changing uses
- write a brief for any new design work that is needed
- plan activities to help people engage with your heritage

Your conservation management plan should include information about all of the different kinds of heritage on your site and why they are important. Many places encompass more than one kind of heritage – such as archaeology, landscape, structures or buildings. Each of these aspects might be valuable in its own right – for example a scheduled ancient monument, a site of special scientific interest or a listed building. Having one single integrated conservation management plan will help you to reach a holistic understanding of the many layers of value that are ascribed to your heritage and ensures that the issues are considered collectively. It can also help you to anticipate and avoid potential conflicts in looking after these different kinds of heritage.

It’s important that the document that you produce can be used on a day-to-day basis to help you manage your site and make decisions. This could be in a spreadsheet or in an editable format rather than a PDF. You might want to use graphics and annotated plans rather than blocks of text. Use simple and jargon-free language. Effective conservation management plans are designed to be working documents, changing over time as circumstances change. A good conservation management plan will help you to care for your site in the long term as well as supporting the delivery of your current project.

Using consultants

If you are planning a heritage project, you might find it difficult to carry out a conservation planning process at the same time as carrying out your day-to-day activities. Many people therefore find it useful to commission a consultant to help them through the process. Consultants can undertake some of the detailed research and analysis as well as writing up the findings. However, it is essential that you remain closely involved and retain ownership of the process and the outcome. This might mean that you occasionally need to challenge some of the things that your consultants suggest, particularly with the policies that you will have to implement in the future.

Writing a good brief is essential to securing the best professional support. You should set out your requirements clearly and concisely. Explain how you intend to use the information in your conservation plan in the future and how you would like the information to be presented. You should make sure your consultants have sufficient resources (time and

budget).

If you have a complicated site with lots of different types of heritage you may need to commission more than one professional to ensure that you have access to specialist knowledge on specific topics. You might want to approach a number of consultants so that you can compare their responses to your brief. It is important that you ask the potential consultants to give you a method statement setting out how they will go about the work as well as giving clear information about costs. You should also ask to see examples of other conservation management plans that they have written. You may want to interview potential consultants to experience how well they listen and communicate so that you can decide whether you can work closely and productively together.

Gathering information

Making use of existing resources

If you already have a conservation management plan, land management plan, green space management plan or another similar document that sets out why your heritage is important and how you will look after it, then you may not need to prepare a new plan for your current project. However, if your existing plan was prepared some time ago, you might find it helpful to review and update the document as it is likely that there will be new risks and opportunities to consider. If you already have surveys, drawings and reports that contain useful information about the history and condition of your heritage then you should share this information with your consultants at the start of the conservation planning process.

New research

As part of the conservation planning process you or your consultant are likely to need to carry out additional research, especially if you are planning a project that includes capital works. The following surveys or investigations might be required:

- measured drawings of the landscape or buildings or some form of digital survey
- archaeological surveys or analysis of the building or landscape
- a detailed condition survey of the building, landscape or monument
- historical research
- habitat or species surveys and monitoring eg: bats, birds and newts
- materials analysis such as architectural paint research, tree-ring dating (dendrochronology), mortar or stone analysis
- geophysical investigation
- an assessment of the building’s environmental performance

Engaging with the people who use or visit your site

As part of your research it’s vital to engage with the people who use or visit your site. Include activities that allow you to capture their knowledge and insights such as workshops, focus groups, surveys and interviews. You should also try to talk to a wide range of people including your staff, volunteers, stakeholders and visitors as well as experts in your heritage field. You could think about how to engage your local community in your research and consider collecting people’s memories of the heritage.

The conservation planning process, step by step

Although every heritage site is different, this section outlines the essential steps that every conservation planning process should include. These steps correlate with the ‘chapters’ that will form the conservation management plan document.

Step 1: Understanding your heritage

Gather together all the available information including surveys and investigations, as well as historical sources, maps and plans. When you write your conservation management plan you can illustrate this section with your photographs and copies of historical drawings, etc. Any detailed supporting information, such as a site gazetteer, area character appraisal, inventory of a collection or other survey, or audit reports, should be contained in appendices.

You should include the following information:

Describe the heritage

Describe each of the different kinds of heritage on your site including buildings, archaeology, landscapes and industrial heritage. If there is existing oral history material or other intangible heritage, such as traditions or customs and dialects related to your site, you should also describe these.

Local context

Explain where your heritage is and what is nearby. For example, if your heritage is a building, describe the surrounding environment. If it is a wildlife site, describe the surrounding area and landscape.

History

Explain how the object, site, building or landscape has developed through time. Use historical sources, maps and archaeological evidence to illustrate the chronological development of your heritage. Make sure that you describe all of the history of the site from the very earliest times to the present day.

Relate your heritage to the wider heritage context

Describe the wider context of your heritage. This means explaining how it relates to other sites of a similar type or date. For example, if it is a building, how does it compare to similar buildings? Or for a wildlife site, are there other comparable sites?

Describe how the heritage is looked after

Explain how the site is managed today. Explain what polices you have in place for managing the heritage, what management standards you need to meet as a result of the site’s protection or designation. Are there tenants or other people involved in the site? If so, who are they and what is their role?

Explore more about understanding your heritage.

Step 2: Summarising the heritage value of the object or place

This is where you set out **what is important about the heritage, why and to whom it is important**. You should cover the heritage as a whole, but also identify the specific values of individual parts in more detail, preferably in a gazetteer. It can be useful to distinguish things that are crucial and cannot be lost or compromised, and those of lesser value. If there are things that appear to have little value or detract from the value of the heritage you should explain why they are not valued – it is easy to dismiss as unimportant something that later proves to be worth keeping.

Step 3: Investigating the risks and opportunities

This step should help you to **consider and explain the ways in which the heritage might be vulnerable and any potential threats to its long-term survival**. Understanding these issues will help you to create policies you need to put in place to tackle them. Some of the issues may relate to your own organisation – for example you may lack the skills needed to manage your heritage. The following list gives some examples, but make sure you think about the issues that are specific to your situation and try to find information that allows you to measure the scale or nature of the risks:

- the climate crisis might lead to an increased risk of flooding, more extreme temperatures, more frequent severe weather events and to species migration
- construction or landscaping works might put wildlife or archaeology at risk
- enhanced security measures could make the heritage less accessible to the public
- buildings or monuments might be more vulnerable to erosion, heritage crime or vandalism as a result of increased access
- implementing measures to reduce energy use might put the fabric of a historic building at risk or have a negative impact on its character or appearance
- creating new buildings on the site might have a negative impact on its character or appearance
- the deterioration of the fabric might result in safety risks to visitors as well as the loss of heritage value
- competing priorities such as conservation and commercial pressures might generate tensions in terms of how the site is managed

This section of your plan should also include a **summary of the opportunities for protecting or better revealing the value of your heritage**, such as conserving historic buildings or landscapes, increasing access or providing better visitor facilities. Try to identify any opportunities for improving the condition of the site and how it is managed. Think about how to increase the benefits it provides for people and society.

Step 4: Writing your management policies

You might find that your organisation needs to change, develop new expertise, manage the heritage differently or work more closely with others to look after your object, building or site. In this section you should set out the **guiding principles that you will use to look after your heritage**. These principles should be informed by the previous sections of the conservation management plan. There should be a clear link between your summary of the heritage value, the risks and opportunities and your policies.

Your policies should be written as a series of aims and objectives and should be specific to your heritage. The policies also need to be consistent with any local, regional, national or international policies and regulations and should refer to any relevant conservation standards that you need to meet. Your policies will help to show that you are committed to caring for the heritage to the highest possible standards and should cover:

Conservation, maintenance and repair

How you will:

- ensure that the site is well managed and maintained
- set guidelines for the principles that should be applied to works of repair and conservation
- resolve any conflicts between different types of heritage
- meet conservation standards for each kind of heritage

Making changes – adaptation and new work

How you will make sure that any new design or building work:

- is based on a proper understanding of the value of your heritage
- does not damage your heritage unnecessarily
- follows an appropriate approach to restoration, reconstruction and the reinstatement of lost features
- is located in an appropriate place
- is of a suitable scale and does not impact on the setting of important features
- anticipates the potential impact of the works on the different kinds of heritage and includes actions to reduce the impact (eg: archaeological excavation)
- is designed by professionals with the necessary skills (eg: accreditation)
- is carried out by people with appropriate skills using suitable materials

Improving access

Your organisation should have an access policy which should help you to set out how you will:

- improve access without damaging the heritage, for example by providing wheelchair access to as many areas as possible and improving lighting or colour contrasts for people with reduced visual ability
- ensure that access improvements are appropriate to the site in terms of the choice of materials, scale and location
- provide alternative solutions, where physical access is not possible, such as using digital technology

Protecting the environment

You should set out how you will tackle any risks posed by the climate crisis, such as increases in heavy rainfall and the potential for flooding, identified in step three. Explain how you will reduce negative environmental impacts through the way you manage your heritage – for example how you will:

- reduce your energy use
- minimise waste and recycle more
- encourage visitors to use public transport

Managing information about your heritage

You should have clear policies that set out how you manage the information you hold about your site and how you use this information to inform the decisions that you make. Set out how you will:

- store your information, update it and make sure it is accessible in the future, for example depositing it with external archives such as the Historic Environment Record
- Ensure that volunteers, staff and contractors have access to relevant information about the heritage so that they can perform their tasks appropriately. This might include making sure that they have access to important information contained in other documents such as your health and safety plan.
- use the information to resolve conflicts between competing priorities and make decisions
- inform the public about your heritage and how you are looking after it

Writing your conservation management plan

Structure of the plan

Executive summary

This is a very brief summary of the main points in the plan. It should include a short statement setting out the value of the heritage and why people care about it, along with the key policies for its conservation. You should also set down the reasons for producing a conservation management plan at this time – was it motivated simply by an aspiration to understand and to manage the heritage better or because a need to make changes had already been identified? If you have already started a capital project you should record where you are in this project. It is also helpful to include a table that states the publication date and the date when it will be reviewed, as this helps to remind everyone that the plan is a working document.

Introduction

You should include:

- names of the people who commissioned the conservation management plan and all the authors and contributors
- an overview of who participated and who was consulted
- an outline of the scope of the plan and how and when will be reviewed
- a list of any other relevant documents and management tools such as activity plans, business plans, maintenance plans, access policies or the disaster planning manual
- a record of any gaps in the information, including any limitations

The main body of the plan

This is made up of the information captured in the steps above:

- Summary of the heritage (see step 1)
- Assessment of the value of the heritage (see step 2)
- Risks and opportunities (see step 3)
- Policies (see step 4)

Bibliography

List all the other materials you have consulted as you worked through the conservation planning process and where these documents can be found. Including this information will allow people to access more detail if they want to without making the plan itself overly long or unwieldy. The bibliography might include:

- wildlife or habitat surveys
- previous condition surveys
- any other existing site investigation such as archaeological excavations
- any scientific studies or experimental data relating to conservation techniques or materials
- any maps, plans or other drawings of the heritage
- any other historical research

Appendices

This should contain any information that is vital to the management of the object, building or site but that is too detailed to put in the main body of the conservation management plan. An example would be a gazetteer, which is a detailed list of all of the heritage items on the site containing information about each item and why it is important.

If you have carried out other new work as part of the conservation planning process – such as preparing a condition survey, commissioning further investigations or audits of your site, collection or building – include these reports in the appendices or a reference to where the material can be found.

Publication of your plan

Once the conservation management plan is complete you should think about publishing the document and sharing your findings with others. This is especially important for objects, buildings and sites of national, or even international, interest. As a minimum you should make copies of the plan for all of the people involved in your project. You should also keep at least one paper copy in a secure place on your site and deposit a copy in your local Historic Environment Record, and in your local studies library or record office. Ideally, you should publish your conservation management plan on your website too, though you may wish to remove any sensitive details or information that might pose a security risk.

Remember that you will also need to maintain an up-to-date working copy where you record any changes that you make between the publication of the plan and its next formal review (usually after four to five years).

Tips for successful conservation planning

Do it for the right reasons

Use the process positively to create a valuable management tool. If you just produce the conservation management plan because you think decision-makers or funders want you to, the process will be of limited benefit.

Get specialist help

You and your team are responsible for looking after your heritage, but you may need a specialist to help you work through the conservation planning process. Getting the right advice can save you time and money in the long term, but if you do ask consultants to help you then it is essential that they work closely with you. The role of the consultant is to help you understand your heritage and then to help you clarify and articulate your ideas about how you will manage your heritage, but you still need to retain control and ownership of the process. Make sure that you continue to engage with them and involve them in workshops and discussions as your project progresses – they may need to update sections of the plan as circumstances change.

Manage it well

Make sure that the conservation management plan you prepare or commission helps you care for the assets effectively by taking an active role in managing the conservation planning process. Manage the process from the first discussion of the idea through to the commissioning process in a way that makes sure that people use the conservation management plan once it is complete. Use the plan to mediate between different ideas about heritage. For example, biodiversity specialists and buildings specialists might have different ideas about how to look after your site. The information in your conservation management plan will help you to discuss and achieve consensus about where compromises have to be made.

Involve people

Most projects will involve a range of participants and partners. Use the conservation planning process to bring together the people who will be essential to the success of your project or management strategy. Make sure that their views are taken into account in your conservation management plan. The conservation planning process can also be a good tool to open up a dialogue with your stakeholders, such as local authority officers and amenity societies. Delays and extra costs can arise in the course of a capital project if the right people are not involved from an early stage.

Organise information

Use your conservation management plan to organise the key information you need to manage your site, ensuring that you have captured the right level of detail for your needs. A plan can easily be overwhelmed by the amount of information needed to care for a complicated heritage asset so it needs to be designed to be readable. It will be useless if it is poorly presented, difficult to read, badly organised or inaccurate. However, you should also set it out in a way that allows it to be expanded and developed as new information becomes available.

Adopt it and use it

There is no point in preparing a conservation management plan unless you are going to use it. Having undertaken a conservation planning process and compiled your plan, ideally you should share it with others via your website. The information will be of wider interest to experts and researchers, and other people who care for similar objects or sites might also learn from your approach.

More information and resources

- download a free PDF of James Semple Kerr's (2013 edition) The Conservation Plan
- explore Historic England's guide to the preparation of conservation plans
- the Building Conservation Directory has information on conservation and heritage statements

- explore the Church of England's guidance on conservation management plans