Area-based projects and area action plan good practice guidance

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If your project has multiple aspects or sites across a defined territory, or spans a large geographic area, and aims to connect people with the heritage of their local place, it might be what we call ‘area-based’.

By reading this guidance, you'll learn what an area-based project is – what they look like and how areas can be defined – and how they can have a big impact on heritage. It also shows you how to structure an area action plan, which you’ll need to submit with your grant application (this replaces the need to submit conservation plans for each type of asset included in the project).

What is an area-based project?

It takes a holistic approach to improving an area of built, natural or historic landscape. It will cover a defined area and include a partnership approach, with the aim of reviving, conserving, repairing and enhancing the distinct character and heritage of a geographic area.

Area-based projects will be made up of a portfolio of integrated projects that work together to reinvigorate cultural and natural heritage across an area in need of investment.

Conserving historic areas or supporting nature recovery across whole landscapes is a long-term process. While we can help support a period of more intense activity, our funding should be part of a wider vision that stimulates further activity and has a legacy.

Defining your project area

An area-based project will focus on a distinct and identifiable area that will provide a clear narrative as to why the place’s heritage is important. The area will have a clear geographic boundary that may be administrative or defined by natural geography but which includes built and natural heritage with a distinct character that is recognised either formally by designation or informally. For example:

- historic townscapes
- conservation areas where there is a mixture of buildings of different uses including community, residential, retail and business as well as public spaces
- an area of landscape with land uses, habitats and cultural heritage that give it a unique character and sense of place
- a set of similar habitats across a larger geographic area such as a project focused on restoring commons, orchards or sand dune systems
- places with an administrative boundary such as a local authority area, town, city borough or parish

If your area does not have a formal designation such as Conservation Area or designation such as being a National Landscape, you will need to provide an assessment of the area's special character. You will find further guidance on area appraisals in the area action plan section later in this guidance.

In your application, you will need to show how your scheme will support the environmental, social and economic enhancement of the area in line with wider strategies for regeneration or nature recovery.

The benefits of taking an area-based approach

It can be an effective way of using heritage to help transform your local area socially, environmentally and economically by creating attractive, vibrant and interesting places for the benefit of people and communities. It can also contribute to improvement in the well-being of local people and an increase in jobs, business activity, tourism and the visitor offer.

Projects that provide opportunities for the needs and voices of a wider section of society to be considered can increase the local pride in a community because people have contributed to their own place's future.

By looking beyond individual projects and taking an integrated, holistic and strategic approach to improving all aspects of an area's heritage, the overall benefits should outweigh the combined benefits of individual projects. It can help halt and reverse the decline of historic townscapes and address the impacts of the climate emergency at a landscape scale consistent with the European Landscape Convention: guidelines for managing landscapes to which the UK remains a signatory.

It encourages a broader understanding of the relationship between natural heritage, the built environment, people and communities, local institutions and local businesses, leading to a deeper understanding of the negative issues affecting a place and how these can be overcome.

By achieving a partnership consensus that heritage can help unlock the social and economic potential of an area, it is an opportunity to draw in investment from a wide range of sources including private individuals and commercial organisations.

What does a successful area-based project look like?

- Heritage will have contributed to a wider transformation of a local area. For example, this could be through community led regeneration of a rescued building as part of a wider plan to regenerate a high street.
- An entire landscape has been put into recovery where habitats and species are thriving, landowners and managers are actively managing the land for both economic and conservation benefits, access is improved for everyone and the beauty of the landscape has been recognised and conserved.
- Your project will have documented the cultural, social and economic needs of people who live, work and visit an area and addressed them in some way.
- Your project may have included stakeholder groups with differing needs within a place or area and allowed them to codesign and support delivery of the project.
- As a direct result of your project, local people will see the improvements and feel the benefits, have gained opportunities to explore and enjoy heritage and feel more pride in the area and a stronger sense of community. People of different ages and backgrounds will be inspired to volunteer and look after their heritage, increasing its resilience.

- As a direct result of your project, local stakeholder groups will be better able to care for heritage and continue providing opportunities for local engagement with it.
- Visitors may tell you an area has improved and is better known as a regional or national tourist destination.

Time for development

Developing partnerships for area-based projects will often require a phase to allow time for consultation. This can be funded through a development grant offered for all applications over £250,000. Alternatively, you could apply for a grant to fund consultation and partnership development separately.

Area action plans

If your development round application for an area-based project is successful you will be required to produce an Area Action Plan.

Your area action plan should help you integrate all the different aspects of your scheme into a coherent and integrated whole. It should:

- be your manifesto for your area, its people and communities
- embody the shared aspirations and intentions of the project partners
- demonstrate a clear vision during and beyond your project

Every project is unique, not only in terms of the physical characteristics of the area, but also the social context, the nature of the local economy, the composition of the partnership and the role of the partner organisations. Your plan should reflect the needs of your area and of your partnership.

Your area action plan should:

- explain the physical characteristics of the area including the organisations with an interest in the area and the way groups and individuals relate to it
- summarise what it is about the area that matters and to whom and why
- present your partnership's agreed vision for the area
- identify and provide details of projects that will help meet our Heritage Fund investment principles
- explain how your project will be delivered, including staffing, timetables and costs
- outline the intended long-term legacy of your project and how this will be secured

In preparing your area action plan, you should consider how and what resources you will need to evaluate your area-based project.

In addition to meeting your delivery round application requirements, a well-produced plan will:

- demonstrate to everyone, including partners and other funders, that your project is well thought through, will achieve important outcomes, aligns with wider strategies and will be delivered to the highest professional standards
- be the focus of communication, both within the partnership and beyond
- provide you with an essential project management tool

How to structure and present an area action plan

We suggest you use the following template to structure your plan:

- The project area
- Area appraisal
- The vision and strategy
- The partnership and partnership agreement
- The project plan
- Project team
- Management planning
- Appendix: area appraisals for designated landscapes and conservation areas

For presentation, we suggest you:

- include an executive summary no longer than a single A4 page
- include a contents page
- consider including maps, photos, diagrams and tables
- Present your plan as an electronic document such as a PDF. Think about the design including the choice of font size and the way you use colour. Your plan may need to be printed out or photocopied either in full or in part, so you should think about how it looks when it is reproduced in print. The RNIB publish useful ‘clear print’ guidelines.

The project area

Your area-based project should demonstrate an integrated approach that considers the needs of the built and natural environment, management practices, the range of cultural practices associated with the area and the communities that live there.

This section of your area action plan should include:

- Your rationale for your chosen scheme boundary. This could be because of an area’s physical heritage distinctiveness, identity or an intangible heritage narrative.
- A summary that explains the distinctiveness of your area and how this has evolved over time. This could include, for example, landscape, habitats and species, structures, buildings and other features that make positive contributions to the area's overall distinctiveness. Or it could include community descriptions whose histories and intangible heritage together contribute to an area’s distinctiveness.
- Information on how the area is currently managed and protected including assessment of current strategies and policies against appropriate sector benchmarks and availability and need of heritage skills.
- Analysis of the area's demographic, social and economic conditions and an assessment of the different interests and concerns of stakeholders such as owners of heritage, local communities, business community and visitors.
- Threats to the area and opportunities to address these such as climate change, the decline of nature, broader political environment and policy issues, social and economic changes and local attitudes and understanding of the heritage. Plus, a summary of the type and category of work which could be carried out to preserve and enhance the character of landscape, habitats and species, structures, buildings, features and the overall area.
- An assessment of policies and statutory powers that need to be put in place to protect the area's character and sustain the benefits of your project in the long-term for the benefit of the heritage and local communities.

- Information that will help you design activities that you will run as part of your scheme to raise awareness and understanding of, and engage local people with, the area's heritage.

Consider how you will justify your rationale for your chosen boundary and if it covers a large area include how you will ensure the benefits of our funding are not too thinly spread.

Area appraisal

You will need to provide an outline description of the character of your area with your development round application.

If your scheme is in a designated landscape such as a National Landscape, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or a Conservation Area, you must follow formal guidance from the statutory or other recognised authority on the historic and natural environment in your nation when writing this section of your area action plan. Links to this guidance can be found in the appendix.

In essence, the area appraisal describes:

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

The appraisal provides a basis for making decisions about the future of your area and is an opportunity to record, understand and evaluate its special interest.

If your area is designated, such as a National Landscape, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or a Conservation Area, it is an opportunity to re-assess the existing designation.

Your area appraisal should be based on surveys and investigations as well as historical sources, maps and plans. You should illustrate it with photographs and, where possible, historical images and master plans. Refer to more detailed supporting information such as heritage audits, inventories and any other relevant piece of research.

You will need to involve the community in preparing your area appraisal and consider their views and aspirations for the area.

Your area appraisal should be used to support relevant supplementary planning documents, such as local plans and neighbourhood plans, and inform planning policy and planning decisions affecting the area.

The vision and strategy

Set out your aims or strategic objectives for the heritage of the area and how you will address the needs and aspirations of local people, local businesses and visitors to the area. (Provide any wider strategies for the area at the end of your area action plan.)

Your scheme partnership should have collective responsibility for the vision and strategy for the scheme and these should be clearly articulated in your partnership agreement.

It is important to show a clear link between the vision and strategy for your area-based project and:

- local, regional or national strategies (for example, regeneration, nature recovery, tourism, local development) and local social and economic needs
- the reasons why people value their heritage
- potential threats faced by the heritage in your area and the opportunities to address these
- our investment principles

We recognise that heritage should respond to the current needs of people, communities and the environment. Your vision will need to strike the right balance between conserving heritage and ensuring heritage is a useful and sustainable resource that adds value to your area.

The partnership and partnership agreement

A partnership approach is central to developing and delivering a successful project. This section of your area action plan should provide:

- a description of each partner and their contribution to the scheme
- the structure and operation of the partnership board including frequency of meetings and any terms of reference
- a signed partnership agreement that includes the adoption of the management plan included in the area action plan
- the role and composition of any stakeholder advisory group that will support the partnership board

We expect the scheme partnership to be made up of organisations that all have a shared purpose to deliver the project for the benefit of the area and local people.

The strongest partnerships can demonstrate a membership that is representative of the interest, communities and the full breadth of heritage of the area.

You will need to nominate a lead applicant who should provide a signed partnership agreement or a partnership constitution showing the involvement of each partner and how the project will be collectively managed.

A partnership board should be formed of individuals or representatives from partner organisations who have the expertise or authority to advise on and support decisions on all aspects of the scheme. We expect to see a broad range of interests represented.

A confirmed partnership agreement that has been signed by all partners must be submitted with your delivery round application.

Examples of partnerships:

- a number of separate organisations or individuals linked together as partners through a written agreement, with a lead partner identified
- an existing partnership whose role is to conserve an area of landscape, for example the conservation board for a National Landscape
- an existing partnership whose role is to improve an area such as a Local Area Partnership or Community Development Trust
- a new organisation representing a number of partners set up specifically to deliver the area-based project

If private owners or for-profit organisations are involved in the project, we expect public benefit to be demonstrably greater than private gain.

The project plan

This is the plan for the group of capital projects and other activities that you intend to deliver as part of your area-based project, based on your area appraisal and stakeholder consultation.

The following example relates to a project that includes capital improvement and people engagement.

Capital improvement and people engagement

Capital improvement plans part 1

Provide a description of each individual project under the following headings:

- a description of the heritage including any designations, its location, its condition and why it has been included in your project
- the nature and scope of the work proposed
- results of surveys, investigations and development work
- how the project will be delivered and managed and by whom
- the main risks associated with the project
- when the project will start and finish
- the resources required to deliver the project, eg: costs and staff time
- how the amount of community grant will be calculated, if applicable
- how future management and maintenance will be delivered and who will be responsible for this

You must provide full details of all the projects you intend to deliver in the first two years of your area-based project. Full details of future projects should be provided as part of regular reporting on the progress of your project.

Capital improvement plans, part 2

Provide a table summary of all the capital projects in your area-based project (see the example below). If you plan to carry out work on a collection of adjoining land or buildings, you should provide information for each heritage asset.

Prioritisation

To help you prioritise you could group the capital projects in your project plan into the following categories:

1. high-priority projects – essential to the delivery of your scheme, making a fundamental difference to the overall area
2. medium-priority projects – clearly contributing to the enhancement of your area
3. reserve projects – worthwhile pursuing should funding become available

Table summary of capital projects in an area-based project:

Project	Project description	Priority	Public/private ownership	Estimate of costs
11 Bridge St	Repairs to upper storey, including roof repairs, reinstatement of cornice details	M	Private	£45,000
76 Storm Road	Coppicing	H	Private	£25,000
Total projects	-	-	-	**Total costs**

Engaging people and communities

You will need to develop a plan for engaging local people as an integral part of your scheme. Activities should respond to the needs of your area and align with the vision, aims and objectives of your overall project.

Think about:

- how and why local people currently interact with the heritage of their local area and how this can be improved
- opportunities to embed good practice and provide new skills that maintain the benefits you've achieved
- how improving civic pride and a shared sense of ownership in the wider community should be an important aspiration for your scheme and the activities that could help you achieve this

Consult with all stakeholders in the community so that the outcome of these conversations will help shape your final plans.

Explain:

- how local people, communities and businesses perceive the area and its heritage
- how they engage with it and any barriers to engagement, identifying communities that feel disconnected
- how the action or perceptions of local people and visitors are affecting the condition of the heritage
- how you have involved local people, communities and businesses in developing all aspects of your project
- work or research that has helped you better understand how local people engage with the area and its heritage
- Activities you will deliver, the groups that will benefit and how this aligns with the vision, aims and objectives of your scheme overall. Consider how your activities link with wider local strategies, for example, education, training, young people and mental health.
- the resources you require and any partnerships you have put in place or are intending to develop to help you deliver your activities
- how you will publicise all aspects of your project
- how you will evaluate the success of your activities and information
- how your activities could be maintained after you have completed your project
- the Heritage Fund investment principles you'll contribute to

Include:

- a detailed description of activity
- audience
- benefits for people

- outcome
- resources
- costs in project budget
- timetable
- targets and measures for success
- method(s) of evaluation

Ideas for activities:

- training for owners and custodians of heritage in management and maintenance practices
- Working with local communities to identify and record places and features that are important to them and making this information widely available. This could include documenting languages or dialects, recording oral histories, surveying species or habitats, cataloguing and digitising archives, recording customs and traditions or making a record of a building or archaeological site.
- structured training leading to formal qualifications that help ensure the heritage is properly understood and maintained
- Formal and informal learning opportunities for adults and young people that could help them better understand the special character of their landscape or townscape so they can value it more. Activities could be tailored to the needs and interests of participants and align with local priorities such as engaging NEET (not in education, employment and training) groups and incorporating STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects.
- Activities that use local heritage, culture and customs to improve how the area is perceived by people who live, work and visit it. For example, you could consider activities that help build a greater sense of civic pride in groups that feel marginalised.
- opportunities for people to give their time as volunteers

You can find more ideas for engaging people in our activity plan good practice guidance.

Please note: if any of your activities relate to projects identified in your project plan you should cross reference. For example, a nature restoration project that will train and use volunteers to deliver work on land should identify volunteers as a resource in the project plan.

With your development round application, outline information on the nature and scope of activity that you are intending to deliver.

Project team

This section of your area action plan should explain:

- How you will manage your overall project. You will need to provide a narrative and a diagram that shows who will be responsible for the different aspects of your scheme, what expertise they will have and how decisions will be made. Explain how you will ensure communication is effective internally and with us.
- The main risks that could affect the delivery of your scheme and how these will be managed. Refer to any surveys or risk assessment. Assign each risk to an individual with appropriate expertise and authority. We expect the level of risk associated with your project to inform the amount of contingency identified in your project budget.

- How you will approach appointing people to new posts and procuring specialist work. You will need to meet our requirements for procuring staff, goods and services. You must provide job descriptions for new posts and briefs for any specialist work.
- If you require any statutory approval for work you are proposing to landscape, historic buildings or other historic assets. You should tell us how you intend to achieve the necessary approvals and the outcome of any preliminary discussions.
- How you will ensure that you meet the required standards for data quality and accessibility if your scheme involves biological recording. Any species observation must meet standards set by the National Biodiversity Network. If your scheme contributes to UK, regional or local biodiversity action plan targets you must report outputs through the Biological Action Reporting System. See our Landscapes, seas and nature good practice guidance for more information.
- How you will ensure your scheme meets our requirements for digital outputs. See our digital good practice guidance for more information.
- A timetable that shows all the work and activities in your project. We expect this to be fully detailed for the first two years. Future years may have less detail if you are intending, during this period, to work on heritage that is owned by individuals or organisations that are not part of the project partnership.
- A detailed breakdown of the cost of delivering your project as an Excel spreadsheet. Present individual cost entries in the same format as the project cost section of the application form using the same categories.
- How you will ensure there is sufficient cash to deliver your project. We expect you to provide a cashflow. You will need to tell us, in detail, how you intend to raise any unsecured partnership funding.
- How you have calculated any costs under full cost recovery, if applicable to your scheme. You can find more information about full cost recovery in our National Lottery Heritage Grants from £250,000 to £10million guidance.

Management planning

In this section include information on how you plan to manage the heritage of your area following your project.

The benefits of your project will quickly disappear if the area does not benefit from management that respects its heritage and conservation value in the long term.

Therefore, within your area action plan you will need to develop a succinct management plan for your area, which sets out the measures you have or will put in practice to make sure that the benefits of your project are maintained.

Your management plan should:

- consider whether any training and learning activities are necessary to sustain a conservation-led approach to managing the area over the long term and build upon the training initiatives
- set out good practice standards that owners of heritage will be expected to achieve in work to their land or buildings including the maintenance of heritage
- express how the long-term vision for your area will be achieved – the legacy of your project
- show that you have consulted widely on the plan while you have been developing it and explain how the community will be involved in managing the area in the long term
- provide fully costed proposals for managing and maintaining your project area, to show how you will sustain the benefits of our funding conditions

Your partnership should formally adopt the management plan part of your area action plan by the time we give you permission to start your project. This will be in the form of an adoption statement and/or minutes of meetings of relevant committees which should be included in your final document.

Putting the plan into practice for at least 10 years after your project has ended is a condition of our grant. If you fail to uphold its measures, we could decide to ask for repayment of our grant.

Appendix

Landscape character assessments for landscapes

Below you can find links to national guidance on how to undertake a landscape or seascape character assessment for an area of landscape. This guidance will help you to understand why a landscape is special and ensure that any future plans for change or conservation will protect and reinforce the existing special character of the place:

- Natural England guidance on landscape and seascape character assessments
- NatureScot guidance on landscapes
- Natural Resources Wales guidance on landscapes
- Landscape Institute guidance on landscape character
- Northern Ireland Executive guidance on landscape character

Conservation areas

If your scheme is in or includes a Conservation Area you should produce your area appraisal in accordance with formal guidance from either Historic England, Historic Environment Scotland, Cadw or the Northern Ireland Executive.

You can find this guidance using the following links:

- Historic England guidance on Conservation Area designation, appraisal and management
- Historic Environment Scotland guidance on Conservation Areas
- Cadw guidance on managing Conservation Areas in Wales
- Northern Ireland Executive Conservation Area guides