Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

A Living Tradition

A Strategy to Enhance the Understanding, Minding and Handing on of Our Built Vernacular Heritage

Prepared by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

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The built vernacular heritage occupies a central place in the affection and pride of all peoples. It has been accepted as a characteristic and attractive product of society…It is utilitarian and at the same time possesses interest and beauty. It is a focus of contemporary life and at the same time a record of the history of society…It would be unworthy of the heritage of [humanity] if care were not taken to conserve these traditional harmonies.[1]

Longhouse at Lettaford, Devon, England

Roped thatched houses at Cregneash, Isle of Man

Farmhouse at Mougau Bihan, Finisterre, Brittany

Farmhouse at Auchindrain, Argyll and Bute, Scotland

Vernacular buildings on the 'Atlantic Façade' of Europe (Barry O'Reilly)

[1] International Commission on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), 'Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage' (1999).

Forewords

Our cultural heritage is immensely important to Irish society and my Department recognizes this through legislation, funding and initiatives that increase our awareness and appreciation.

‘A Living Tradition’ focuses on a significant and often underappreciated part of our cultural heritage. Our built vernacular heritage comes from our most deeply-rooted building traditions. These traditions, by their very nature, are sustainable and can teach us how to reduce our carbon footprint. They can inspire us to construct new buildings using the ideas and approaches of vernacular builders. Derelict vernacular buildings can be gently rehabilitated too, and upgraded for contemporary living, while maintaining their traditional character.

I wish to thank all those who contributed to the development of this Strategy and, along with my colleague, Minister Noonan, I look forward to its implementation.

Mr Darragh O’Brien TD
Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Ireland’s built vernacular heritage is a living tradition. It is deeply rooted within Irish culture, yet many of its aspects are universal, as well as showing tremendous continuity with the distant past.

It is something that most of us take for granted – it has always been there and is simply ‘part of what we are’. Our built vernacular heritage responds directly to its local environment and has clear regional characteristics. Thus, its lessons can present sustainable approaches to building, design and materials.

Traditional building crafts, like thatching and blacksmithing, have an enduring appeal and we lose these and other skills at our peril.

The tourism importance of our vernacular buildings and landscapes is long recognized and offers an option for reuse, but recent years have seen growing interest in these buildings for their other values, such as their role in local and regional distinctiveness, as well as social and cultural wellbeing.

Our built vernacular heritage can be fragile. Many buildings are carefully maintained and in everyday use. Others, loved or unloved, are abandoned and we need to carefully consider how we rescue and refurbish them for living and other uses. A solid understanding, and appropriate infrastructure for looking after our vernacular, are vital.

This Strategy aims to address the challenge of reconnecting with our built vernacular heritage. It seeks to encourage owners and communities to maintain this heritage and ensuring that it continues to be a living tradition – not simply a legacy of the past, but part of our future traditions.

I wish to thank all those who took the time to contribute to the strategy and those who will be tackling the various challenges presented, and look forward to seeing it coming together.

Mr Malcom Noonan TD
Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform

1 Executive Summary

Our built vernacular heritage[2] comprises the buildings, traditional fittings, settings and features of what might be termed the 'informal' or vernacular landscape. These things are, or were, conceived and built by 'ordinary' people, their families and their neighbours. Vernacular builders worked within traditional societies, using ideas and techniques passed down within the family and local community. Thus, the built vernacular heritage is a significant part of our intangible cultural heritage. It also represents a tangible link with the living and working places of our forebears, and displays their unselfconscious creativity and utility. The built vernacular heritage is also part of a longstanding, shared global tradition.

The need for a strategy for our built vernacular heritage comes from the tendency, common to many other countries, for vernacular building traditions to be forgotten, to lose their usefulness, or to be cast aside.

The built vernacular heritage has a strong relationship with place, climate and environment, giving it a distinctive local and regional character that contributes enormously to our sense of place. Construction materials were and are found in the immediate locality and applied using vernacular crafts such as thatching, mud-walling and wattlework, as well as traditional masonry and carpentry. Vernacular furniture-making and blacksmithing contributed the larger part of the fittings in houses and other building types.

Some examples of especially intact built vernacular heritage and their settings should be considered for preservation for scientific, educational and touristic purposes. Others, being ruinous, should be retained and recorded. The vast majority, however, should be regarded as having potential for rehabilitation as comfortable homes and useful buildings.

Dispersed rural houses, outbuildings and farmyards make up the bulk of our vernacular, but we also have large numbers of rural settlements (mainly hamlets). Vernacular buildings are also to be seen in many villages and urban centres.

Popular understanding varies from associating the built vernacular heritage with difficult times — overcrowding, dampness and poor lighting — to more neutral sentimentality and nostalgia, and on to active enthusiasm and passion.

A key issue is the challenge presented by the large numbers of derelict vernacular houses and outbuildings in our landscapes, urban as well as rural.

[2] The term 'built vernacular heritage' is used throughout this document, to reflect the wording of the 'Charter on Built Vernacular Heritage' (ICOMOS, 1999) which sees this heritage as a cultural phenomenon that can evolve and be part of the future as well as the past and the present.

It is important to consider the future sustainability of vernacular buildings in all of these settings.[3]

What is certain is that the built vernacular heritage is a key part of our traditions and landscapes. How we treat it tells a lot about our perception of our own country and ourselves.

At this stage there is a lot of work to be done to record the built vernacular heritage, whether buildings and settings, or crafts and craftspeople, and to consider how best to steward it. The role of local authorities, the Heritage Council, other conservation bodies and groups, and of practitioners, is extremely important in the task of enhancing the prospects of our built vernacular heritage.

In common with other layers of our built environment, maintenance and adaptation of vernacular buildings can present a challenge for owners. Vernacular houses and other structures will have settled into a way of working structurally and environmentally that needs us to be flexible and to treat these buildings in a gentle, considerate way. Ideally, owners of vernacular buildings, and their families and neighbours, would be best placed to do repairs and other works needed, but for the present most of this is likely to be carried out by practitioners well versed in the built vernacular heritage. Upskilling of builders and others is critical in this regard, and appropriate financial and other assistance for conservation and maintenance works is also important.

There is an urgent need to reduce our carbon footprint, through sustainable approaches to building and by maximizing energy efficiency. However, any energy conservation retrofitting of vernacular buildings will need to be very carefully considered in order not to adversely affect the stability and environmental operation of these buildings. By their nature, vernacular buildings have considerable benefits for these agendas: they are already built (reducing the need for new buildings) and the materials used in their construction are regarded as largely sustainable. However, the material sources require nurturing, as do the skills for applying these materials.[4]

The built vernacular heritage is not only about the past. Continuing use in the present and into the future is important and culturally appropriate.

We should also consider how we might explore new approaches to building design and construction that make use of vernacular ideas, techniques and materials. Indeed, eco-building and ‘natural building’ already make use of the lessons provided by vernacular builders.

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[3] The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and the Sustainable Traditional Buildings Alliance (STBA) have done work on buildings and materials in Britain; similar work is needed in Ireland.

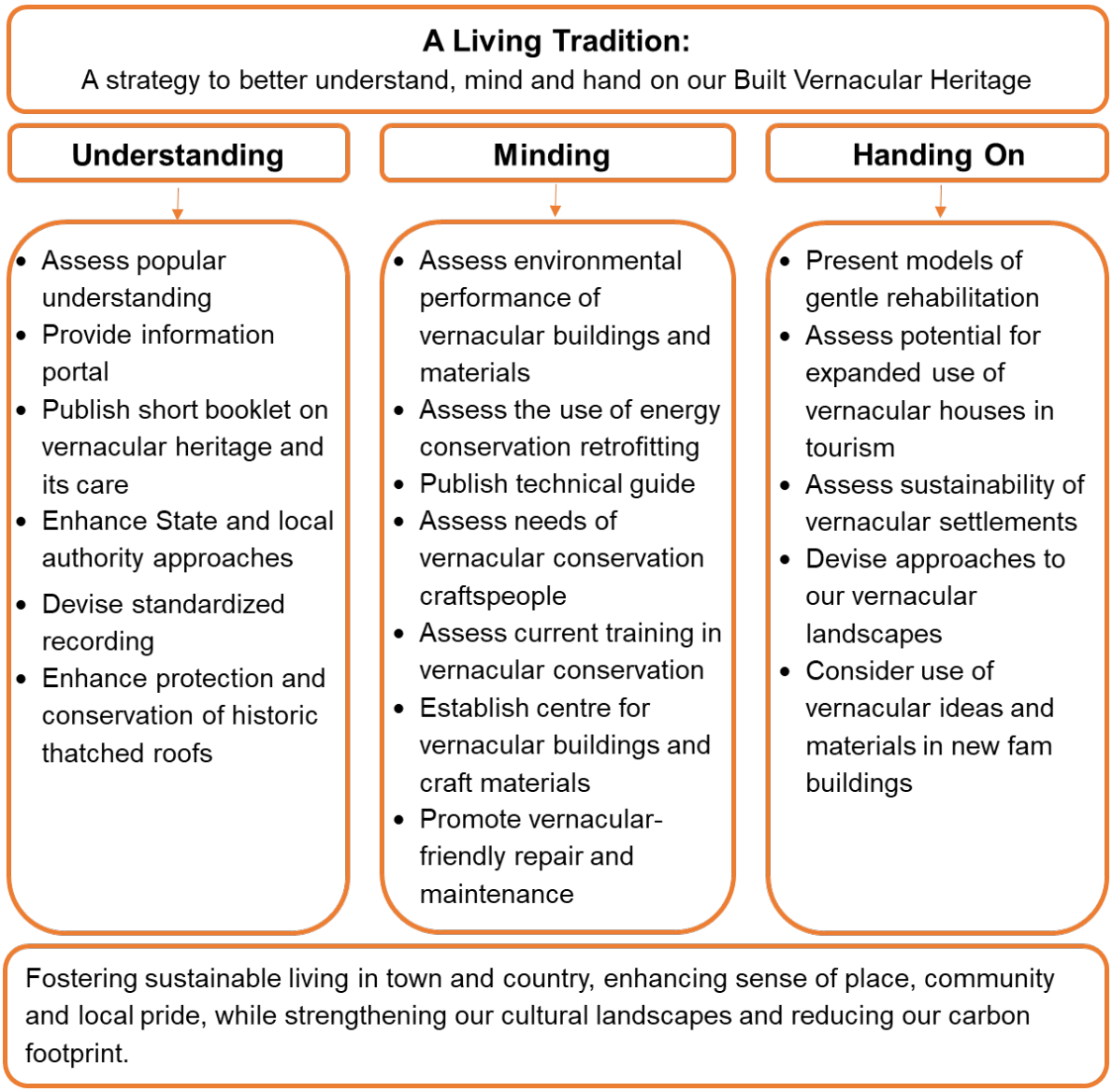
[4] ‘The Programme for Government’ (p.90) will ‘Encourage traditional building skills in devising an apprenticeship programme with the sustainable construction sector focusing on heritage disciplines and crafts.’ ‘Heritage Ireland 2030’ (forthcoming) will also have an action promoting traditional building skills.

Such learning allows us to embrace the vernacular way of building, to help make new places, new housing and new agricultural and other buildings that are rooted within our distinctive building traditions. We should start young: children are always open to exploring ideas through play and the vernacular offers endless scope for creativity with mud, straw, willow and other materials.

By safeguarding, celebrating and learning from our built vernacular heritage, we are also displaying confidence in our deep-rooted and distinctive culture and society.

2 Strategy 2021-2024 for Our Built Vernacular Heritage

The Strategy will be implemented over a three-year period, under three themes — understanding, minding and handing-on — with the aim of significantly improving the prospects for our built vernacular heritage. Each theme will be addressed by a number of actions, as set out in the graphic below.



The actions will address aspects of the built vernacular heritage that have not been adequately dealt with to date, with view to achieving a significant improvement. Progress will be reviewed yearly by an advisory group representative of the various interests.

Public engagement, including events for children, is essential for the success of the strategy, and the various actions presented will, wherever possible, allow for public participation. It is also important that the information and experience gained through the actions is made accessible to the general public as well as to those with a specialist interest.

Farmyard at Oola, Co. Limerick, displaying a range of vernacular buildings, features and materials (Barry O'Reilly)

Most actions will have a designated partner(s) and contributors, which will allow the strategy to benefit from the pooling of resources, skills and experience.

The strategy will involve the various building industry bodies, a wide range of agencies, organizations and individuals, craftspeople and community groups.

Social and other media will be used, where possible, to engage the public.

Local authorities will be important for the success of many actions, as they are often best positioned to assist with implementing enhanced policies and practices at regional and local levels.

The strategy can also benefit from work done internationally on a variety of issues.

Themes and Actions

Theme 1: Understanding Our Built Vernacular Heritage

Action 1	Assess popular understanding of our built vernacular heritage (Y1)
Action 2	Provide a reliable, national source of information on the built vernacular heritage (Y1)
Action 3	Publish short booklet for owners, potential owners and the general public (Y1)
Action 4	Enhance approaches to the built vernacular heritage on the part of State bodies/agencies and local authorities (Y1)
Action 5	Devise a standardized approach to recording the built vernacular heritage (Y1)
Action 6	Enhance the protection and conservation of historic thatched roofs (Y1-2)

Theme 1: Understanding Our Built Vernacular Heritage

A clear understanding of the nature of our built vernacular heritage is essential for developing coherent approaches to its protection, continued use and safe handing-on to future generations. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will act as coordinator and facilitator for actions to enhance understanding of this heritage, in partnership with relevant organizations and individuals, while recognizing the importance of North-South co-operation and the wider European dimension.

Action 1 Assess Popular Understanding of Our Built Vernacular Heritage

We need to have public dialogue to gauge the state of knowledge, understanding and perceptions (positive and negative), so that we can encourage greater appreciation of our built vernacular heritage and provide effective support for owners and potential owners (especially younger people).

Methods	Canvass building owners and others in order to understand what encourages or discourages occupation/reoccupation and use/reuse
Involve	Building owners, local authorities, schools, county heritage forums, craftspeople and practitioners, community groups, farm representative bodies
Outcome	A more solid understanding of current perceptions of the built vernacular heritage
Follow-up	Devise ways of addressing the obstacles and strengthening the incentives in relation to occupying and using vernacular buildings
Timescale	Year 1

Action 2 Provide a Reliable National Source of Information on the Built Vernacular Heritage

There has, to date, been a lack of coherent information on the built vernacular heritage. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will establish and maintain a constantly updated source of advice and information on grants, rehabilitation and upgrading of buildings, and other relevant material through the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage website.

Methods	Establish and maintain an information portal within the Buildings of Ireland website to host information relating to the built vernacular heritage, and with links to relevant bodies
Involve	Building owners, craftspeople and practitioners, local authorities
Follow-up	Ensure updating of guidance and maintenance of portal
Timescale	Year 1

Action 3 Publish Short Booklet for Owners, Potential Owners and the General Public

Providing user-friendly advice is essential for vernacular building owners, local authorities and the public at large.

Method	Produce non-technical guidance for owners and others
Partner	Department for Communities (N.I.)
Outcome	Availability of short, user-friendly presentation
Follow-up	Revise as required
Timescale	Year 1

Action 4 Enhance Approaches to the Built Vernacular Heritage on the Part of State Bodies and Agencies, and Local Authorities

Our built vernacular heritage has been dealt with inconsistently, and this discourages a coherent approach across the country. There is a need to ensure the effectiveness of policies, approaches and grant aid systems.

Method	Promote consistency in State and local authority development plans and among grant-awarding bodies, in the vetting of works proposed for vernacular buildings, and to examine the costs of repair and maintenance
Involve	State bodies and agencies, local authorities, grant-awarding bodies, craftspeople, practitioner representative bodies
Outcome	Consistent policies and approaches to treating the built vernacular heritage
Follow-up	Review and revise policies and approaches as required
Timescale	Year 1

Action 5 Devise a Standardized Approach to Recording the Built Vernacular Heritage

Guidelines are needed to ensure a consistent approach to the recording of built vernacular heritage. Resulting surveys will be hosted on the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage website. The information should help inform policies for the recognition and protection of buildings and sites of interest and identify the potential for buildings to be reused or reinhabited.

Methods	Develop a recording system for vernacular buildings, settings, structures, features and interiors (including furniture and fittings)
Partner	Ulster Architectural Heritage, National Museum of Ireland
Involve	Field clubs, heritage and history groups, third-level institutions, architectural recorders, vernacular furniture specialists
Outcome	Availability of guidelines for recording
Follow-up	Initiate wider recording of the built vernacular heritage; update guidelines as necessary; promote completion and publication of existing studies
Timescale	Year 1

Action 6 Enhance the Protection and Conservation of Historic Thatched Roofs

One of the most persistent issues for built vernacular heritage is ensuring the survival of historic thatched roofs. The many factors involved make this a complex matter. However, the importance of such roofs, in terms of archaeology and architectural history, vernacular crafts and materials, botany and diversity, as well as their landscape values, is such that everything must be done to address the various impediments to their survival. Insurance, in particular, has proved to be a constant problem for many owners and occupants. There is also a need for consistent, authoritative advice for owners and occupants, fire services, insurers and others.

Methods	Investigate and work to resolve the urgent issue of affordability of insurance for thatched buildings; examine other relevant issues, including thatching standards, fire prevention guidance and availability of appropriate thatching materials; accelerate recording and protection; establish centralized database.
Partner	Heritage Council (in relation to insurance matters).
Involve	Building owners, insurance industry, local authorities (including fire officers), craftspeople and practitioners, grants bodies
Outcome	A resolution of the ongoing problems of insurance for buildings with historic thatched roofs, guidelines for preventing and dealing with conflagrations, and generally enhanced protection for such buildings
Follow-up	Monitoring of the various factors involved in protecting and conserving historic thatched roofs
Timescale	Year 1-2

Theme 2: Minding Our Built Vernacular Heritage

Action 7	Assess the environmental performance of vernacular buildings and materials (Y2)
Action 8	Assess the use of energy conservation retrofitting and climate change mitigation on our built vernacular heritage (Y2)
Action 9	Provide a technical guidance document for practitioners and owners (Y2)
Action 10	Assess the current and future needs of vernacular building craftspeople (Y2)
Action 11	Assess current training in vernacular building conservation and facilitate enhanced approaches (Y2)
Action 12	Establish a centre for vernacular building skills, materials and research (Y3)
Action 13	Promote vernacular-friendly repair and maintenance (Y1-3)

Theme 2: Minding Our Built Vernacular Heritage

Consistent, well-informed approaches to the conservation of our built vernacular heritage on the part of policy-makers, craftspeople and practitioners, and building owners are needed to ensure that this heritage remains relevant to Irish society. This involves devising approaches that are rooted in a solid understanding of the built vernacular heritage and in practical examples of how to achieve good solutions.

Action 7 Assess the Environmental Performance of Vernacular Buildings and Materials

It is thought that vernacular buildings and materials are environmentally sustainable and healthy. This needs to be tested practically and conclusions drawn.

Methods	Draw together existing knowledge on vernacular materials and techniques; initiate research where needed; publish results
Partner	Heritage Council
Involve	Building owners, craftspeople and practitioners, State bodies and agencies, local authorities, Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Sustainable Traditional Buildings Alliance
Outcome	An authoritative understanding of the environmental performance of vernacular materials
Follow-up	Devise approaches to vernacular materials in the light of the research
Timescale	Year 2-3

Action 8 Assess the Use of Energy Conservation Retrofitting and Climate Change Mitigation on Our Built Vernacular Heritage

Energy conservation is crucial, but retrofitting is likely to have an impact on vernacular character, features and materials, and even on the long-term survival of buildings. The matter needs to be assessed, using sample vernacular buildings. Favouring the retention of existing buildings and thus avoiding the need for construction of new ones is an obvious way of helping to reduce our carbon footprint.

Methods	Assess the effects of energy efficiency measures on vernacular buildings; publish the results
Partner	Third-level institution
Involve	Building owners, craftspeople and practitioners, local authority staff, Heritage Council, sister bodies elsewhere, Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Sustainable Traditional Buildings Alliance, Department of Environment, Climate and Communications
Outcome	An authoritative understanding of the impact of energy conservation retrofitting on vernacular buildings
Follow-up	Devise approaches to vernacular buildings in the light of the research
Timescale	Year 2-3

Action 9 Publish a Technical Guidance Document for Practitioners and Owners

Providing authoritative technical information for the conservation of vernacular buildings is important for practitioners and building owners.

Methods	Commission a detailed guidance manual for dealing with repair, maintenance and upgrading of vernacular buildings
Partner	Contracted practitioner or craftsperson
Involve	Building owners, craftspeople and practitioners, heritage trusts and groups, Department for Communities (N.I.)
Outcome	Availability of substantial, authoritative manual for craftspeople and practitioners, building owners and others
Follow-up	Revise as required
Timescale	Year 2

Action 10 Assess the Current and Future Needs of Vernacular Building Craftspeople

A significant obstacle to maintenance and conservation is the scarcity of craftspeople to carry out necessary works. Often thatching is delayed due to the difficulty in sourcing a thatcher or appropriate thatching materials. There are few people who can build in mud/earth. Increasing the supply of skilled practitioners is essential for protecting, maintaining and conserving our built vernacular heritage.

Methods	Assess the current complement of vernacular building craftspeople; identify gaps; make proposals for making up shortfalls
Partner	Heritage Council
Involve	Vernacular building craftspeople, building owners, State bodies and local authorities, materials suppliers
Outcome	Clear idea of current complement of vernacular building craftspeople, and enhanced dissemination of information
Follow-up	Proposals for addressing the issues and enhancing the future prospects of vernacular building crafts
Timescale	Year 2

Action 11 Assess Current Training in Vernacular Building Conservation and Repair and Facilitate Enhanced Training

We need to examine the profile of vernacular buildings and crafts in the training of craftspeople and practitioners. This can be enhanced through continuing professional development and training days. The current state of play for vernacular building crafts also needs to be assessed, problems identified and remedies proposed. Until recently, building owners carried out some repairs themselves and this also needs to be considered under this action.

Methods	Assess how our built vernacular heritage is dealt with in the training of builders, architects, engineers, planners and surveyors, local authority staff and others; make proposals for enhancement
Partner	Heritage Council
Involve	Builders, architects, engineers, planners, surveyors, local authority staff, relevant representative bodies, ICOMOS Ireland, third-level institutions, building owners, SPAB Ireland, EBUKI and other conservation bodies and groups
Outcome	Enhanced knowledge and confidence among builders and others in tackling vernacular building projects
Follow-up	Review practices and maintain CPD approach
Timescale	Year 2

Action 12 Establish a Centre for Vernacular Building Skills, Materials and Research

A dedicated centre would provide an effective way of communicating and supporting vernacular skills and materials for practitioners, craftspeople and the community in general.

Methods	Appraise the experience of relevant centres in Ireland and abroad; examine feasibility of establishing a centre for training in vernacular skills and research into vernacular materials
Partner	Heritage Council
Involve	Craftspeople and practitioners, general public, schools and colleges, local authorities, museums and heritage parks, heritage trusts and groups, National Museum of Ireland, educationalists
Outcome	Establishment of a centre for vernacular building skills, materials and research
Follow-up	Review operation of centre; explore options for outreach (or regional satellite centres); initiate community-based building projects, whether the repair of existing vernacular buildings or the construction of new buildings inspired by vernacular ideas, methods or materials
Timescale	Year 3

Action 13 Promote Vernacular-Friendly Repair and Maintenance

There is considerable scope for the practical demonstration of vernacular building conservation, involving craftspeople and practitioners, local authority staff and building owners, with the emphasis on everyday problems.

Methods	Organize open days to demonstrate good practice, using actual vernacular buildings and through other means; ensure continuity of this approach during and beyond the lifetime of the strategy
Partner	Selected craftspeople and practitioners
Involve	Building owners, craftspeople and practitioners, local authority staff, heritage trusts and groups, third-level institutions, museums and heritage parks, broadcasters, print media and social media
Outcome	Evidence of growing awareness of vernacular-friendly repair
Follow-up	Ensure continuity of the open days approach during and beyond the lifetime of the strategy
Timescale	Year 1-3

Theme 3: Handing on Our Built Vernacular Heritage

Action 14	Present models for the gentle rehabilitation of vernacular houses for contemporary uses (Y2-3)
Action 15	Assess the potential for the greatly expanded use of vernacular houses as tourist accommodation (Y3)
Action 16	Assess the social, cultural and economic sustainability of vernacular settlements (Y3)
Action 17	Devise approaches to identifying and managing our vernacular landscapes (Y3)
Action 18	Explore the use of vernacular ideas and materials in the design of new buildings (Y3)

Theme 3: Handing on Our Built Vernacular Heritage

Our built vernacular heritage must be part of our future as well as being a legacy from the past and alive in the present. It will be relevant to future generations if vernacular ideas, methods and materials can feed into building construction in general, as part of sustainable lifestyles.

Action 14 Present Models for the Gentle Rehabilitation of Vernacular Houses for Contemporary Uses

Large numbers of vernacular houses, lying idle in both urban and rural areas, should be capable of being brought into productive use as comfortable homes. It is important to encourage prospective owners to take on such buildings through assisting and/or highlighting specific projects with a conservation-focused approach, while being mindful of the necessity for maximizing energy efficiency.

Methods	Propose typical and affordable buildings for rehabilitation and co-fund projects to rehabilitate them; present these projects in the field, on the internet and in the media; organize an awards scheme to recognize good, vernacular-friendly projects
Partner	Selected craftspeople and practitioners
Involve	Building owners and potential owners, craftspeople and practitioners, local authority staff, heritage trusts and groups, third-level institutions, museums and heritage parks
Outcomes	Examples and demonstrations of how to achieve the gentle rehabilitation of vernacular houses
Follow-up	Review projects on an ongoing basis; keep up to date with changing knowledge in Ireland and abroad
Timescale	Year 2-3

Action 15 Assess the Potential for the Greatly Expanded Use of Vernacular Houses as Tourist Accommodation

Vernacular houses can offer a culturally distinctive form of accommodation that could appeal to visitors, whether domestic and foreign. At the same time, such an initiative, if operated on a wide scale, has the potential to address the issue of dereliction of vernacular houses. As the demand for tourist accommodation tends to be for the more clement periods of the year, it should be possible to rehabilitate them with less intervention than would be required for houses that are occupied full-time.

Methods	Organize a pilot project in a selected county, working with the local authority, tourism and farming interests to explore the potential for offering distinctive, attractive and culturally interesting accommodation for the tourism sector; publish the results
Partners	Selected local authority, tourism and other bodies
Involve	Building owners, local authorities, tourism bodies, farming representative bodies, third-level institutions
Outcomes	Models for how to make unoccupied vernacular houses available on a wide scale for tourism purposes
Follow-up	Review effectiveness of pilot scheme; encourage expansion
Timescale	Year 3

Action 16 Assess the Social and Cultural Sustainability of Vernacular Settlements

Our vernacular settlements, mainly farm hamlets, tend to be underappreciated as distinctive communities. Central to this action is a North-South study of selected hamlets, focusing on accommodating change while retaining character.

Methods	Identify sample hamlets and carry out a study of their social, cultural and economic sustainability; publish the results
Partners	Department for Communities (NI), third-level institution(s), selected local authorities
Involve	Inhabitants of selected settlements, local craftspeople and practitioners, Department for Communities (NI)
Outcome	An understanding of the factors that lead to viability or decay in vernacular settlements
Follow-up	Initiate an enhancement project involving these communities and the local authorities; initiate an island-wide study of hamlets with view to enhancing their sustainability
Timescale	Year 3

Action 17 Devise Approaches to Identifying and Managing Our Vernacular Landscapes

Ireland has various landscapes with a distinctive vernacular character, including concentrations of hamlets, historic farming practices and field systems, or concentrations of structures or features associated with folk traditions. Identifying these, and devising ways that their communities can be supported in managing them, should bring social, cultural and economic benefits. This action should feed into the National Landscape Strategy. Both GLAS Traditional Farm Buildings Grant Scheme and High Nature Value Farming contribute to the conservation of our vernacular landscapes.

Methods	Define and identify vernacular landscapes; initiate a study of a sample landscape and explore how it can be managed by the community for its social, cultural and economic benefits
Partners	Local authority, third-level institution or consultancy
Involve	Heritage Council, farm representative bodies, local authority, government bodies and agencies
Outcome	Enhanced understanding of vernacular landscapes, with a detailed assessment of a selected landscape
Follow-up	Devise ways that vernacular landscapes can be sensitively managed and protected by and for the benefit of their inhabitants; seek to implement this approach on the ground
Timescale	Year 3

Action 18 Consider How to Use Vernacular Ideas and Materials in the Design of New Building

The design of new buildings can learn from the built vernacular heritage. This action will deal specifically with farm buildings, with view to encourage a move away from current models of industrial-scale, utilitarian-style farm structures through developing models for new farm buildings that heed the lessons of the vernacular.

Methods	Establish a pilot project for the design of new farm buildings; present models; publish guidance
Partner	Teagasc
Involve	Farmers, farming representative bodies, farm-building designers and erectors, craftspeople and practitioners, local authorities, third-level institution(s), agricultural colleges
Outcomes	A variety of design ideas for the construction of contemporary farm buildings that integrate vernacular ideas and materials
Follow-up	Initiate further projects with the construction sector and others to explore designs for new housing that heeds the lessons of the vernacular
Timescale	Year 3

Implementing the Strategy

The principal aims of the strategy are to show the general public, craftspeople and practitioners, such as thatchers, mud-wall builders, general small builders, architects, engineers, surveyors and planners, as well as local authorities and government departments and other State bodies, that our built vernacular heritage is fundamental to a sense of place and that learning from it should form part of a more sustainable approach to living and to building construction.

The best way to demonstrate the benefits is by presenting the value of the built vernacular heritage through the web, publication and, perhaps most importantly, though practical demonstration of sensitive adaptations and conservation of vernacular buildings at local and regional levels. Open days, where projects, skills and information can be presented, will be an important part of the programme.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will take the lead in implementing this strategy and in co-ordinating national policy on built vernacular heritage matters. Conveniently, the three divisions of the department represent the key facets of the current endeavour. An all-of-government approach will be taken to ensure effective and consistent implementation. The establishment of an information and survey portal will form part of the enhancement of the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage website.

Most actions will be accompanied by relevant partners and other contributors. Public engagement is envisaged, wherever possible, to ensure the wide-ranging dissemination of information and experience. Some actions may be based on co-funding arrangements with other bodies, and on reciprocation of staff time.

In addition to internal management and budgetary oversight within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, to ensure the effective implementation of the eighteen actions, it is proposed to establish an advisory group, representing key stakeholders, including State bodies, local authorities, craftspeople and practitioners, owners, farming bodies, community organizations, third-level institutions and the Department for Communities (Northern Ireland). The group may also be able to assist with identifying solutions to problems that might arise.

It is proposed to issue an annual report on activity and achievements, with a review of the strategy at the end of the three years.

The current Covid-19 pandemic may, through necessary restrictions on public gatherings, lead to the curtailment or cancellation of some proposed activities.

Consultation Undertaken for the Strategy

The compilation of this strategy has been informed by discussions with, and submissions from, a wide range of bodies and individuals, over a hundred in total, with an interest in our built vernacular heritage, including relevant bodies in Northern Ireland, particularly the Department for Communities, whose remit includes the built vernacular heritage.

Presentations were given at meetings of local authority heritage officers (September 2019), local authority architectural conservation officers (December 2019), ICOMOS Ireland (February 2020), National Museum of Ireland (March 2020) and the Historic Environment Division of the Department for Communities (Northern Ireland) (March 2020). A number of meetings were held with the heritage personnel of several local authorities, as well as with a number of building owners.[5]

The bodies and individuals who made submissions are listed in Appendix 1.

[5] A number of other planned meetings were cancelled due to restrictions associated with Covid-19. Further detailed discussions were had by telephone with a range of individuals.

3 Ireland's Built Vernacular Heritage

The word 'vernacular', as applied to architecture, is used to describe buildings and structures that are, or were, conceived and built by 'ordinary' people, as distinct from rulers and others exercising authority.[6] Such buildings are part of an informal approach to architecture and the landscape, largely operating outside formal architecture, being deeply rooted in traditional ideology and characterized by ideas and techniques passed down within communities and families. The earliest vernacular buildings in Ireland were constructed by our Mesolithic ancestors in the eighth millennium BCE. Our oldest standing vernacular buildings date to probably no earlier than about the year 1600.

Farmstead, near Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan (NIAH)

Vernacular buildings and other features are strongly related to specific regions and districts of Ireland. Particular house forms, layouts, walling and roofing techniques may be found in one region and not another. This contrasts with other design traditions that are less connected with place, tradition, climate and environment. Vernacular buildings were often built by the occupants themselves, with assistance from their family and neighbours.

[6] The term has largely replaced 'native', 'indigenous' and 'folk'.

Thus, it is community building, and vernacular architecture is community architecture. Individuality, but operating within a community tradition, is a striking aspect of the built vernacular heritage.

Our built vernacular heritage should also be seen as culturally characteristic of all of Ireland; historically, the lived experience of people in Kerry would have been similar to that of their counterparts in Antrim. Our built vernacular heritage, while apparently distinctively Irish, shares some elements with other parts of Atlantic Europe, notably Scotland, but also parts of Iberia and Scandinavia.

Experimental vernacular construction, National Museum of Ireland (Country Life), Turlough, Co. Mayo (Barry O'Reilly). Such materials and techniques can be traced back to the buildings of our earliest ancestors.

The construction materials used were found in the immediate locality and applied using vernacular crafts, including thatching, mud-walling, wattlework, stone masonry, carpentry, furniture-making, quarrying, limewashing and plastering, blacksmithing, and others.

Locally-made brick is found in some districts, later displaced by brick made in industrial quantities elsewhere, but tended to be used only in chimneystacks and perhaps door and window surrounds. Some other industrially-produced materials, such as tar and felt, have been absorbed into the built vernacular heritage.

House of vernacular plan form and appearance, but with walls and roof clad in corrugated iron, near Camp, Co. Kerry (Barry O'Reilly)

Corrugated iron is ubiquitous in the Irish landscape in the form of roof coverings on large numbers of farm buildings, often displacing (or covering over) a former thatched roof. Ironically, in the case of these latter, the material has served to preserve the thatched roofs that they cover. However, it is its appearance as the round-profile covering of thousands of hay barns that it is perhaps most evident and is, increasingly, cherished as an icon of rural Ireland. The majority of these barns are not vernacular per se, but their presence in most vernacular farmyards makes them an essential part of these ensembles.

It must also be remembered that the lives of 'ordinary people' in previous centuries are much less recorded than those of higher status in society. The built vernacular heritage, both in the form of standing structures and below-ground traces, represents the physical presence of our unrecorded ancestors. Archaeological approaches are important in bringing much of this to light.

Kitchen interior, Mayglass, Co. Wexford (Photographic Archive, National Monuments Service)

While present in the landscape as buildings and other features, the built vernacular heritage is also, importantly, a significant part of our intangible cultural heritage, as recognized by UNESCO in its 'Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage' (Paris, 2003):

> This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

Rag bush, St Brigid's Well, Tully East, Kildare, Co. Kildare (Barry O'Reilly)

Our built vernacular heritage represents a tangible link with the living and working places of our forebears, and displays their unselfconscious creativity and utility. The built vernacular heritage is a key cultural layer in our rural landscapes and in some of our more urban ones. It is no less valuable or important to our cultural heritage than our archaeological monuments or our formal architecture. Its loss in any particular place or district is detrimental to that locality's sense of place. Our built vernacular heritage also connects us with traditional societies throughout the world and is, therefore, part of a shared global tradition, which can enhance our human understanding and compassion.

Popular attitudes, knowledge and understanding of the built vernacular heritage, on the part of the general public, craftspeople and practitioners and regulatory authorities are difficult to gauge, but there is likely to be a wide range of opinion, knowledge and understanding, from hostility and identification of the built vernacular heritage with historically difficult times — overcrowding, dampness and poor lighting — to more neutral sentimentality and nostalgia and on to active enthusiasm and passion. It has been observed that foreign visitors, perhaps more forgiving of past hardships, can have a more enthusiastic view of vernacular houses than Irish visitors to the same place, the latter often perplexed about how someone could live in an old and ‘primitive’ building.

House near Ballymacarbry, Co. Waterford (NIAH)

Nevertheless, it must be said that older buildings can present challenges to owners. These buildings will have settled into a way of working, structurally and environmentally, that requires owners to be flexible and work with the building, rather than unnecessarily imposing on it. Owners also need to be prepared to commit time, labour and commitment to maintain these buildings. Waking up every day in a place of special character may bring on positive feelings; finding dampness where it had not been seen before, even if the winter has been long and wet, is another matter.

The built vernacular heritage responds to its immediate environment, particularly in terms of siting, orientation and materials, and is intimately related to the lives of the occupants and users. Our vernacular buildings, farmyards, boundaries and even whole cultural landscapes, are the result of this integration with place, tradition and environment.

Materials used in constructing vernacular buildings — clay, cereal straw, reed, willow and hazel rods, scraws from the bog, stone from the field or small quarries, timber from local woodland, hedges, disused boats and driftwood, or retrieved from bogs — are distinctly local. Vernacular building crafts, such as thatching, blacksmithing, clay-wall building and basketry are also rooted in local tradition and landscape. The materials are substantially green, environment-friendly and sustainable.

Many vernacular materials are claimed to have excellent qualities in terms of climate adaptation and resilience. Thick clay walls, for example, are often said to provide a cooler interior in high temperatures and a warmer interior in low temperatures, the low window-to-wall ratio keeping the interior insulated from extreme changes in temperature; thatch is also generally regarded as an excellent insulator. In the Irish context, there is a need to critically assess these qualities of vernacular buildings.

House with Roshine Slate roof and bed outshot, near Dunfanaghy, Co. Donegal
(Joe Gallagher/Greg Stevenson)

Historic thatched roofs are also significant for botanical and agricultural history reasons, because they may preserve materials that are little (or not) used today, such as old varieties of cereal straw.

Our built vernacular heritage must be part of the solution to the challenges of the current housing shortage, environmental sustainability and climate adaptation. Standing vernacular buildings, as is the case with all existing buildings, contain 'embodied energy'. A definition of embodied energy is 'the total energy required for the extraction, processing, manufacturing, and delivery of buildings'.[7] The very local sourcing of many vernacular building materials and skills and the organic nature of key materials means that the embodied energy of vernacular buildings is much lower than that for many other building modes. Also, until perhaps the mid-twentieth century, many owners could provide materials and some could provide the skills, thus further minimizing the energy inputs. Repairs and maintenance, likewise, were relatively low in energy. However, imposing new demands and materials on historic buildings, without very careful consideration, could lead to significant problems. It is important that existing buildings be treated carefully, with respectful understanding of the nature of their form, structure, building techniques and materials.

[7] https://ec.europa.eu/energy/eu-buildings-factsheets-topics-tree/embodied-energy_en

Recognizing Our Built Vernacular Heritage[8]

This Strategy takes a broad view of the built vernacular heritage, from the micro level of household fittings to the macro level of whole landscapes. Unsurprisingly, it has a strong emphasis on buildings, especially houses and outbuildings, which make up the bulk of our built vernacular heritage, and are certainly the most visible manifestations. Some elements of the built vernacular heritage are availed of at specific times, as in the case of holy wells; others are reminders of a lost way of life, such as summer pasture (transhumance/booleying), represented by the remains of huts on hillsides; and others are reminders of how things were formerly done or made, such as lime or kelp kilns.

None of these structures can be taken in isolation, as they exist in association with other structures and features, whether urban or rural.

The built vernacular heritage includes churn stands, farm and field gates, wells, old potato ridges, booley (transhumance) sites, field boundaries and gates, forges, mills and kilns, penal chapels, mass rocks and holy wells, children's burial grounds, trees, bushes and stones with traditional associations, currach pens, piers and kelp stacks, sweathouses, clapper bridges, Travellers' wagons and tents, ball alleys and fair greens, vernacular settlements (mainly farming hamlets, sometimes called 'clachans'), fords, mass paths and old (often disused) routeways, but also many, many more items.

Barrel-topped wagon, near Fethard, Co. Tipperary (Barry O'Reilly)

[8] Interestingly, it was Germans and Scandinavians who, in the 1930s, carried out the first scientific studies of our built vernacular heritage: Muhlhausen, Ludwig, 'Contributions to the study of the tangible material culture of the Gaoltacht', Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, vol. 38 (1933), pp.67-71 and vol. 39 (1934), pp.41-51; Campbell, Åke, 'Irish fields and house', Béaloideas, vol. 1 (1935), pp.57-74.

Sweathouse, near Drumshanbo, Co. Leitrim (NIAH)

Some vernacular houses, outbuildings and industrial or other structures are recognized as being of special interest and are protected structures under the Planning and Development Acts, by being included in the record of protected structures drawn up by each local authority. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH), established in 1999, increasingly includes the built vernacular heritage in its surveys and ministerial recommendations to local authorities. Currently, more than 2,000 vernacular structures feature in the Inventory, but their inclusion in local authority development plans has been variable. Holy wells, sweathouses and a few other items are recorded as archaeological heritage under the National Monuments Acts.

However, a vastly greater number of structures and features are neither recorded nor protected. As every year more vernacular buildings are lost or unsympathetically altered, it is increasingly urgent that we identify and protect those that survive. To protect their special interest and to ensure that alterations to them are carefully managed, and to allow owners access to conservation advice and grant aid, significant numbers of vernacular buildings would benefit from being added to the relevant record of protected structures.

Concern for the built vernacular heritage of Ireland was first expressed in the 1940s, with a call for a national survey, leading to a series of interesting studies carried out by UCD architecture students, in cooperation with the Irish Folklore Commission and the National Museum of Ireland. Since the 1980s there have been various student theses and local studies that examined the built vernacular heritage of particular districts[9].

However, no large-scale countrywide recording has ever taken place. Vernacular buildings of very modest or plain appearance can contain construction features and materials, and interiors of considerable significance. Sometimes, this only comes to light when a building is collapsing or being demolished. Wicker or wattlework partitions or hearth canopies, often daubed in mud, are an example. The importance and urgency of recording both our rural and urban vernacular can be seen all over Ireland, where buildings are left to decay or are replaced with new structures, almost always without any assessment of their cultural value. Thus, significant information relating to historic, vernacular building materials, methods and many other aspects, is being lost relentlessly and largely without a record being made. It is imperative that this lack be addressed. Much of this work might best be carried out by local people trained up in recording our built vernacular heritage. Indeed, much work in recording tradition-bearers has already been done in this way.

House near Valleymount, Co. Wicklow and its hearth canopy of wattlework (Christiaan Corlett)

[9] An example is the Dublin Public Libraries/FÁS Vernacular Buildings Survey of Fingal (1992-5).

The intention of recording, in the first instance, would be to recover valuable information about the nature of our built vernacular heritage. Buildings of special interest that merit inclusion in the relevant record of protected structures could also be identified.

Likewise, vernacular furniture and objects need to be urgently recorded and, preferably, retained and cared for in their vernacular settings. The abandonment or demolition of buildings and removal of their fittings has been relentless, and there needs to be a fundamental change of approach.[10] There is also the loss of irreplaceable traditional knowledge when owners and craftspeople decline or die. A more thorough understanding of the causes of abandonment of vernacular buildings will help us to create a sustainable policy for their continued use.

[10] It must be acknowledged that many local authorities aspire to retain vernacular buildings, but buildings nevertheless continue to be lost or severely altered.

Change and Loss[11]

From about the mid-nineteenth century, improvements in transport infrastructure led to the universal availability of industrially produced materials, often brought long distances or imported from abroad. This led to the increasing marginalization of the older materials and methods, and some age-old construction techniques, such as mud-walling, largely became extinct.

Farm building with mud walls, near Geashill, Co. Offaly (Barry O'Reilly)

Accompanying these changes were the spread of more modern ideas of comfort and taste, and the professionalization of the building process. In Ireland, as in many 'developed' countries and regions, vernacular approaches to building have been largely supplanted by architects, engineers and other professionals, and carried out by building contractors.

The mid- to late twentieth century, however, saw a significant change in the general perception of our vernacular. A striving for modernity, and enduring memories (mainly unspoken) of poverty, the Great Famine, emigration and internal migration to towns and cities, created an emotional conflict in which the built vernacular heritage frequently lost out. As a result, large numbers of vernacular houses and farmyards were left empty, or modernized and altered beyond the constraints of the tradition that had created them.

[11] Caroline Maguire's 'The Changing Vernacular Landscape', quantifies the losses, particularly the replacement of vernacular houses as part of official policy in Northern Ireland, but is relevant also for the Republic.

Despite the convenience and modernity of the new houses, including the well-built local authority labourers' cottages, with forms and some detailing not dissimilar to the older houses, many occupants came to miss the character and homeliness of their former dwellings.

In some cases, abandonment of older buildings did not signal the end of their owners' emotional attachment to them, as the re-use of former dwellings as outbuildings, or the retention of ruins, indicates. There has been a relentless loss of houses and other structures, with new houses regarded as superior, easier to maintain and, with a front lawn instead of a setting on or close to the road edge (as so many vernacular houses may be), generally more desirable.

However, good houses and outbuildings with potential for continued or renewed use have often been side-lined in favour of new-build. A major consideration is the level of conservation awareness of potential owners and their builders and advisors. The tendency has too often been to demolish or severely alter buildings. However, it is extremely important for the implementation of the strategy proposed here that we understand and tackle the obstacles and disincentives that exist to the continued use or reuse of our vernacular.

It must also be remembered that vernacular buildings are an enduring part of our built environment and have proved to be adaptable to changing circumstances over the generations. Modernization was almost universally accepted (if reluctantly, initially) by owners of vernacular buildings in the form of electrification — lighting, first and foremost and, in the case of houses, various domestic appliances. Later, indoor plumbing and bathroom extensions and 'kitchenettes' were added. Many older vernacular houses had already been extended lengthwise, thus indicating that the owners of vernacular houses were already open to change.

In more recent times, a desire for greater space, more light and improved head heights has often been seen as making the continued use or reuse of vernacular buildings unfeasible. It is true to say that vernacular buildings generally have relatively small, but intimate, internal spaces and a lower window-to-wall ratio, in contrast to the airier, lighter, 'cleaner' nature of newer local authority cottages and other new-build housing. On the other hand, vernacular buildings have thicker walls, which act as a sort of 'storage heater', absorbing heat during the day and releasing it slowly at night.

It is important that existing buildings be treated carefully, with respectful understanding of the nature of their layout, structure, building techniques and materials. Imposing new demands and materials on historic buildings, without very careful consideration, can lead to significant problems. At the same time, climate change is likely to have a significant impact on vernacular materials, their longevity and durability, and their future availability, and this needs to be assessed.

Limekiln, near Tonyduff, Co. Cavan (NIAH)

Vernacular houses are indeed different, but they can be made more comfortable — doing this in a way that doesn't compromise the building is the key to success.

In parallel with the fate of many vernacular houses, changes in agricultural practices, involving the use of larger machinery and vehicles, and often driven by new regulations for the management of livestock, dairying practices and grain storage has resulted in otherwise good and useful farm buildings being demolished or left to decay, and old gateways removed and entrances widened for the passage of modern machinery. Often, farm buildings and other structures have been demolished and replaced with often quite large, new buildings. These latter can be of a scale or massing that can overwhelm old farmyards and their settings. However, there is scope for creatively designing new farm buildings that respect the spirit, scale and setting of the existing buildings. Two booklets on the conservation of farm buildings have been published: 'Traditional Buildings on Irish Farms' (Heritage Council/Teagasc, 2006) and 'Reusing Farm Buildings: A Kildare Perspective' (Kildare County Council, 2007).

It is also the case that many vernacular building skills have declined to the extent that few people are familiar with, for example, mud walling or seashell-based renders, whether building in such materials, or repairing walls made from them.

Loss of such skills, and the difficulties of acquiring appropriate materials, can hinder the repair and conservation of vernacular buildings. It should be possible, for example, to re-establish some old limekilns as sources of lime for building purposes, especially for conservation, and perhaps for agricultural purposes. In the case of mud walling, a North-South project exploring regional building cultures in different parts of the island would add considerably to knowledge and create enthusiasm for this often-maligned material.

The 'Programme for Government 2020' commits the State to 'emphasising and building capacity for green apprenticeships through a Green Further Education and Skills Development Plan, as tackling the climate crisis will require a broad range of skills across the construction, energy and natural heritage sectors' and to 'Encourage traditional building skills in devising an apprenticeship programme with the sustainable construction sector focusing on heritage disciplines and crafts.'[12]

Rediscovery of the wisdom of vernacular builders offers an exciting challenge and opportunity in an era when it has never been more vital to reduce our carbon footprint and to reconnect with ways of building that reflect local and regional environments and building cultures.

Repairing mud walling, Mayglass, Co. Wexford (UCD)

[12] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/ (p.116).

The Importance of the Local: The Vernacular Landscape

One of the many attractive aspects of our built vernacular heritage is the fact that it is strongly local and responds so directly to local climate, topography and environment. Vernacular builders have used locally sourced materials and traditional, local building crafts. Our vernacular buildings, settlements and landscapes are an essential part of the scene – cultural, social, visual and historical. Field boundaries, whether hedgerows, earthen banks, walls or timber fences, may be distinctive of particular regions or districts. A thatched house, a gate made by the local blacksmith, a dugout for a boat at the side of a river, abandoned lazy-beds on a hillside, an old field path, a roadside well, stone walls and old hedgerows, and a great many other structures and features, a forge, a row or urban vernacular houses, all contribute historic quality to their locality and help maintain communal memory. In fact, the vernacular component is frequently the most important contributor to the local scene.

Culm crusher in operation, near Muine Bheag (Bagenalstown), Co. Carlow (Michael Conry)

Abandoned tillage, Rindoon, Co. Roscommon (Barry O'Reilly)

Rediscovering the intrinsic importance of the built vernacular heritage to a given locality is important for community identity, pride and wellbeing. Maintaining the built vernacular heritage will sustain the viability of traditional craft skills and local employment. A landscape, rural or urban, whose vernacular has been understood and cherished is a landscape that is attractive and culturally significant for local and visitor alike. It also contributes to sustainable local economies and social cohesion.

The relationship of buildings to one another and to their local landscape is highly significant. While some buildings stand isolated, more are set within a farmyard, a farm hamlet, a village or a town, and may be part of several of these at the same time. Non-built elements are also important, such as old trees, cottage gardens and tillage plots; trees (and indeed buildings) are also important for providing valuable shelter from wind and rain. All of these things contribute strongly to a sense of place and recognizing their interaction and significance can be helpful in 'place-making'.

Regionalism is also to be seen in, for example, field enclosures. Lowland districts tend to have hedges and ditches, and upland and western districts are known for their stone walls. The openwork limestone walls of the Aran Islands contrast with the post and panel form found in West Wicklow. Within a district there may be a range of forms and techniques used to build walls and earthen banks, or indeed combinations of stone and earth.

Footbridge, formed by a single slab, across a small stream, near Convoy, Co. Donegal
(Barry O'Reilly)

Field boundary, formed from granite uprights and panels of infill, Ballyknockan, Co. Wicklow
(Barry O'Reilly)

Wrought-iron gates made by local blacksmiths often have details that identify these craftsmen and tie the gates very directly into their immediate locality. Such gates are an important and often overlooked part of our vernacular and craft heritage and should be retained in situ. At this stage, even some factory-made gates, made in the likeness of older examples, have become rare and are worthy of consideration. Both types of gate have been superseded by mass-produced tubular steel gates having little or no variation, to facilitate modern farm machinery. Stiles, into fields or located to one side of a gateway are also distinctive local features, mainly in stone, but sometimes in timber. It is important that planning requirements for refurbishment, adaptation or extension of vernacular houses do not result in the loss of important site features, such as mature trees, boundaries and gates.

Field gate, near Tang, Co. Longford (NIAH)

Accelerated recording of the vernacular landscape has never been more urgent. To date, this has been piecemeal and ineffective. It is an aim of this strategy that a coherent approach be developed, involving guidelines for recording and the operation of pilot projects, with a view to implementing a national survey. There are landscapes that exhibit an evident regional vernacular personality — to take just two examples, the bend of the Suir, Co. Kilkenny and Corca Dhuibhne (Dingle Peninsula), Co. Kerry.

The transition from the Irish language to English on a wide scale was culturally destructive throughout Ireland, leading to a situation where the origins and meanings of the names of many places are now obscure. Various local groups, facilitated by local authority heritage officers, have carried out recording of their local place names, including (importantly) field names, whether in Irish, English or anglicized versions.[13]

Such work is a significant contribution to study of the vernacular landscape.

[13] See, for example, https://kilkennyheritage.ie/2017/08/kilkenny-field-name-recording-project-2/

Ball alley, near Charlestown, Co. Mayo (NIAH)

Vernacular Settlements and Hamlets

The majority of rural vernacular settlements are farming hamlets, comprising closely grouped farmyards in a wide variety of configurations. They are found in every county, but some districts, such as mid-Galway, south Kilkenny, the Dingle Peninsula, Co. Kerry, and the district around the River Foyle in counties Donegal and Tyrone, have retained very large numbers. However, hamlets are very prone to loss of character, with many now unrecognizable as historic settlements.

Plan forms and layouts of hamlets vary considerably across the island. The Atlantic fringe frequently has parallel lines of buildings arranged parallel to, or at right angles to the public road; elsewhere courtyard arrangements of many different types are to be found; there are also many examples of more apparently random forms.

The significance of some hamlets is recognized by a few local authorities and a number of such settlements have been proposed as Architectural Conservation Areas.[14] 'The Kilkenny County Development Plan (2014-2020)' has by far the most comprehensive section on hamlets.[15]

While most hamlets are associated with agriculture, others had fishing (e.g., the famed Claddagh village at Galway) or industrial activity (e.g., the stonecutter settlement at Ballyknockan, Co. Wicklow) as the basis of their economies. Many farm hamlets, especially in eastern counties (but also, for example, in parts of the Dingle Peninsula) are likely to be at least late medieval in date, especially where they are associated with medieval castles, churches or other features. Others, especially, in western and upland counties are likely to have been founded in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These latter settlements were associated with 'Rundale', a form of peasant land management involving a tilled infield, pasture outfield and, often, an element of transhumance (summer pasture) and, in coastal areas, access to seaweed and other resources.

There is a need for a considerably enhanced understanding of our rural hamlets. The very term 'hamlet' appears to meet with resistance, but it very simply and precisely states what these places are. It is important to recognize them as a key part of the rural scene and of our contemporary and historic cultural and working landscapes.

[14] See, for example, Louth, Kilkenny and Kerry county development plans.

[15] Based on work by Burtchaell, Jack (1988).

Farm hamlet, comprising parallel lines of houses and outbuildings, near Ceann Trá (Ventry), Co. Kerry (Barry O'Reilly)

Part of the fishing settlement at Clogherhead, Co. Louth (Barry O'Reilly)

Water pump, Ballygorey, Co. Kilkenny. Though produced in foundries, such pumps became an essential part of the local scene (Barry O'Reilly)

Vernacular houses were also formerly a strong feature of Irish urban areas. The large-scale Ordnance Survey maps of 1847 for Dublin City indicate long rows of mud cabins along some of the roads on the northern outskirts, now long since vanished. However, most smaller towns and villages still have examples at the edges of what had been their cores in the nineteenth century. Most of these survivors are significantly altered and often do not look particularly vernacular. Derelict examples are usually better preserved and can retain features of considerable interest, such as thatched roofs under corrugated iron. The north County Dublin towns of Skerries, Rush and Lusk, and some of the villages, are notable for having cores that are still substantially vernacular.

While most surviving urban vernacular buildings may date to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries there are probably some that are much older. A clearer understanding of the origins and nature of our urban vernacular is needed. There is much confusion about what is and what is not urban vernacular in Ireland. This is clear from many local authority development plans, in which it is erroneously claimed that the generality of town or village buildings are vernacular. Typical urban buildings are usually not vernacular, nor is most labourers housing.

Urban vernacular housing, Strand Street, Skerries, Co. Dublin (Barry O'Reilly)

Urban vernacular house, Percival Street, Kanturk, Co. Cork (NIAH)

The Domestic Interior

The interior of the vernacular house is especially important for understanding the lives and culture of its occupants and their community. The old kitchen and its hearth are, practically and emotionally, the heart of the traditional home.

Stone-arched hearth, Menlo, Galway City (Barry O'Reilly)

Layouts of vernacular houses vary from region to region, but two principal forms are known: lobby-entry and direct-entry. The first is found mainly in the south-eastern half of the island and the second in the north-western half and in upland areas throughout. In lobby-entry houses, the main entrance is set in line with the kitchen hearth, with a short wall projecting form the hearth at a right angle to protect the fire from draughts. This 'jamb wall' usually has a small window that admits some light into the hearth area and allows someone working or seated at the hearth to be able to see out the front door. Direct-entry houses have their entrance doorways and their hearths at opposite ends of the kitchen and, thus, the chimney is spaced well apart from the entrance. There are hybrid plan forms in various regions, and there are also some examples of rarer plan forms.

Hearth with jamb wall, Portally, Co. Waterford (Barry O'Reilly)

Vernacular houses were and, in some places, continue to be the setting for many folk customs and traditions, particularly the celebration of the significant days of the traditional calendar. An example is the making of St Brigid's Crosses: on the saint's feast day the old cross was placed in the underside of the thatch and the new one placed over the inside of the front door. In some districts, mumming (a play based on death and rebirth) is performed in local houses at Christmas.

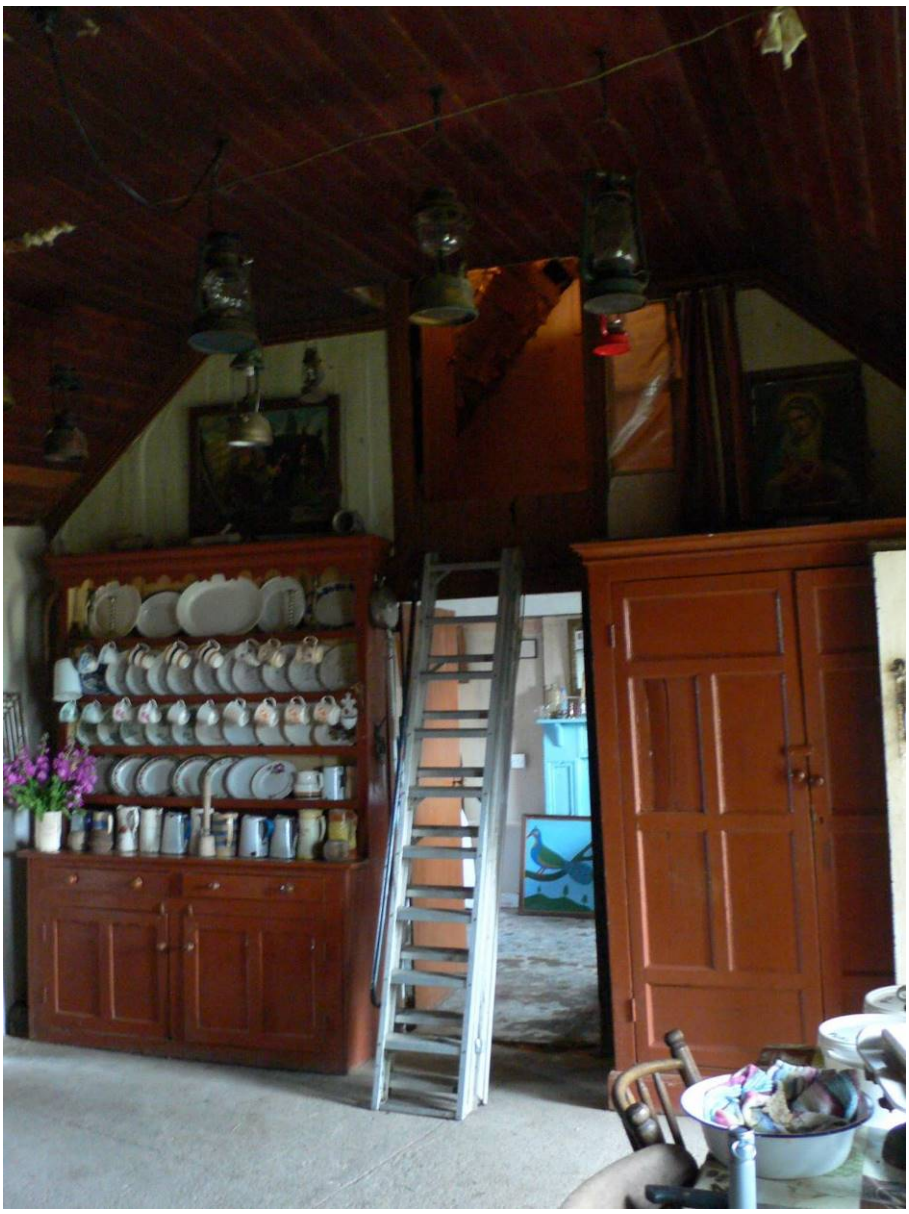
The house and family were traditionally believed to be protected through religious observance and through acknowledging the other, supernatural, world. In turn, the practices and concerns expressed in this supernatural world are rooted in deep farming ways.

A notably intact vernacular kitchen, near Kilcormac, Co. Offaly (Barry O'Reilly)

In short, the vernacular house cannot be understood or appreciated by looking simply at its form or construction. It is always vital, in addition to the utilitarian uses of houses and other buildings, that we acknowledge the importance of folk traditions.

Furniture and fittings, often of local craftsmanship and perhaps made specifically for the house, are personal to the family. Ireland is fortunate in retaining a significant amount of vernacular furniture and fittings, such as iron hearth equipment in situ or close by, although an untold quantity was and still is, regrettably, shipped out of the country, or destroyed. Typical items of furniture are the dresser, settle bed, a variety of chair types, table, meal bin and food press, clevvy, 'holy shelf'; in bedrooms, various types of bed, wash stand, corner cupboards, statue stands/'altars'. Other fittings include hearth equipment, crockery and the like, framed prints, whether of a religious, political or family nature, objects of religious piety, and objects with supernatural aspects, such as horseshoes, horse skulls and the 'house leek' (sempervivum tectorum), and myriad other items.

It is very important that we do not lose this key part of our vernacular and folk culture; rather we should retain such items in their original settings and, as with the buildings, look after them carefully so that they can continue to serve their function into the future.



Dresser and food press, near Kilcormac, Co. Offaly (Barry O'Reilly)

Historic Thatched Roofs

Historic thatched roofs have come under particular pressure, due to the short lifespan of thatch, with its vulnerability to decay, and its associated labour and materials costs. The unpredictable availability of these latter is also problematic, as is the frequently very high cost of insurance. Being emblematic, even iconic of Ireland, as well as for their inherent interest, every effort should be made to ensure that historic thatched roofs are properly understood and survive as part of our living cultural landscapes. Thankfully, in several thousand instances, thatched roofs have been renewed over time and continue to be viable. A large number of further examples survive under a later covering, usually corrugated iron. Countless numbers of other historic thatched roofs have been lost entirely.

It should be noted that there are also examples of recently built non-vernacular buildings that have been given a covering of thatch. A viable thatching sector that serves more recent, non-vernacular buildings is important for the survival of all thatch, as it can help ensure a livelihood for thatchers.

The emphasis of the strategy for built vernacular heritage, in relation to thatch, must be on appropriately skilled thatching work for historic thatched roofs and the buildings they cover. It is important that all those involved in decision-making for thatched roofs, especially in the awarding of grants and inspection of buildings for this purpose, are appropriately trained. Grants for the repair of thatched roofs have been available since 1990, but at present only apply to buildings that are primary residences; other grant schemes can fund a wider range of thatched structures.

Historic thatched purlin roof structure, near Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo (Barry O'Reilly)

It is particularly important to retain the diversity of thatching techniques, as they reflect the regional and local nature of thatching as a craft. The range of materials in historic roofs is a reminder of farming from earlier generations, which used cereal varieties that have now been displaced. These roofs may contain several (sometimes many) layers and examining them can be akin to archaeological excavation. Roof structures in historic thatched roofs may contain forms and elements that are important for the history and development of roofs and carpentry. It should be noted that many of the most intact historic thatched roofs survive under corrugated iron or other coverings. For these reasons, historic roofs in particular, whether on houses or outbuildings, deserve to be recorded and protected.[16]

Audits of thatched houses have been produced since the 1990s, mainly by Michael Higginbotham of the Office of Public Works and, later, by local authorities.[17] A few of the latter have recently updated their surveys and the statements of losses make for grim reading, with a rate of loss of up to 40% in less than two decades.[18] Some roofs have been destroyed by fire, including arson, and others have been replaced with slate, tile or other coverings. It is essential to tackle the reasons for the loss of historic thatched roofs, and to examine the effectiveness of current grant schemes and protections.

The all-island 'Report on the Present and Future Protection of Thatched Structures in Ireland' (2005) included an action plan that has been partly implemented. As already noted, the State has published a volume on thatch in its conservation advice series.

There is a need to enhance our knowledge of historic thatched roofs and to ensure that all such roofs are recorded and monitored to ensure their survival. Maintenance of a database of thatchers and suppliers of thatching materials, as well as of conservators with specialist knowledge of vernacular buildings in general, and of thatch, in particular, is essential.

The availability and cost of insurance present a major problem in Ireland, sometimes compounded by inappropriate changes to buildings requested by insurers. An examination is needed of the criteria used when determining whether to offer or refuse insurance cover, as well as the basis for pricing insurance premiums. Comparison with the experience in other European countries should form part of such an examination.

[16] The publication, 'Thatch: A Guide to the Repair of Thatched Roofs' (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2015) is an introduction to historic thatched roofs and the various issues relating to their conservation.

[17] For example, Fidelma Mullane has produced a number of reports for local authorities in western counties.

[18] For example, Built Heritage Collective, 'Survey of Thatch Buildings County Offaly' 2018.

Straw-thatched vernacular house, near Rathkenny, Co. Meath (NIAH)

There is a need for more effective co-ordination between State bodies, local authorities, the thatching trade/craft and building owners to ensure that thatchers, materials and grant assistance are available when they are needed. Review of the effectiveness of the various grant schemes is important. The supply of thatching materials has often been problematic and ways to address these effectively are needed.

It is essential that work on historic thatched roofs is carried out by practitioners with appropriate understanding, skills and materials. The ongoing training of thatchers and the operation of apprenticeships and courses have been rather sporadic over the years and need to be regularly reviewed to ensure the best outcomes for our historic thatched roofs.[19]

[19] Under the Programme for Government 2020 (p.116), the State is committed to 'emphasising and building capacity for green apprenticeships through a Green Further Education and Skills Development Plan, as tackling the climate crisis will require a broad range of skills across the construction, energy and natural heritage sectors'.
https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/

Thatchers at work, Swords, Co. Dublin (Barry O’Reilly)

4 Policy and Practice

The Irish Context

A number of reports over the years have highlighted the vulnerability of our built vernacular heritage. ‘A Pathetic Situation’ (George McClafferty, for the Office of Public Works, 1989), ‘Vernacular Architecture and its Conservation in the Republic’ (Barry O’Reilly, for the Heritage Council, 1995) and ‘A Sense of Loss’ (Donal Boyle, Environment and Heritage Service, 1998) give a picture of the scale of the challenge for our built vernacular heritage, with proposals for actions. It would be satisfying to report that the situation for our built vernacular heritage has changed radically for the better in the twenty years since the last of these reports was written. Certainly, there have been some positive signs, but there continues to be a relentless loss of vernacular buildings, features, details and interiors and the erosion of their settings, as well as losses in settlements and landscapes.

Derelict vernacular building, near Mountmellick, Co. Laois (Barry O’Reilly)

The ‘Architectural Heritage Protection Guidelines for Planning Authorities’ (2004, 2011), published by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, while dealing with historic buildings generally, contain some detail specific or relevant to the built vernacular heritage, such as mud and sod walling, thatch and corrugated iron. The Advice Series on architectural conservation includes the volume, ‘Thatch’ (2015), and other volumes in the series touch on aspects of the vernacular buildings. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is currently developing detailed technical guidance on the energy retrofitting of ‘traditional buildings’ (historic buildings in general) as part of Action 50 of the ‘Climate Action Plan 2019 to Tackle Climate Breakdown’.[20]

[20] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ccb2e0-the-climate-action-plan-2019/

The State has produced two documents that examine and propose remedies for vacancy in the housing stock, especially in urban areas. The ‘National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy’ (2018) seeks to identify vacant housing, gain a better understanding of the barriers to its reuse and to encourage the bringing back into use of such buildings. ‘Bringing Back Homes’ (2018) also encourages the reuse of existing housing stock for reasons of housing supply and sustainability. The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, operated by the Department of Rural and Community Development could have a role in funding or grant-aiding similar activity in rural areas.

‘The National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015–2025’, with its origins in the European Landscape Convention (2000), was published in 2015. It provides a framework for recognizing and protecting landscapes, stating that ‘as a reflection of European identity and diversity, the landscape is our living natural and cultural heritage, be it ordinary or outstanding, urban or rural, on land or in water’ (p.8). The actions in the strategy are aimed at helping to support ‘a living landscape, and strengthen community identity’ (p.9) and at ‘integrating landscape into our approach to sustainable development’ (p.10). While cultural landscapes are not mentioned explicitly in the document, the aspirations of the National Landscape Strategy are relevant to the identification and promotion of vernacular landscapes. The Environmental Protection Agency’s draft ‘Guidelines on the Information to be Contained in Environmental Impact Assessments’ (2017) require landscapes to be considered as an important element in assessing the impact of development.

As part of the mitigation policy associated with housing developments and road schemes, archaeological work has led to the discovery of the remains of long-gone vernacular buildings and even whole settlements, from the Neolithic period to the nineteenth century. Such mitigation acknowledges the significance of the built vernacular heritage and can help to improve our understanding of, for example, the origins of house plans.

‘The Government Policy on Architecture 2009–2015’ (2009) notes that ‘the practical advantages and aesthetic appeal of vernacular rural design and built heritage can contribute to high quality contemporary design, tailored to today’s living and energy needs. Our ability to transmit this heritage will help shape the values of the future’ (p.33).

Archaeological excavation of two-roomed house, Tipperary Town (Barry O'Reilly)

Also, that 'Assessment and analysis of the potential for sensitive adaptation and re-use of existing buildings and landscapes including historical/vernacular settlement patterns, and the re-use of building materials needs to be mainstreamed in the development process' (p.45). It should be noted that incorporating ideas, construction methods and materials from the vernacular into new buildings, while encouraged by this strategy, does not mean that the results are vernacular buildings. The proposed successor, 'Places for People', emphasizes the urgent need to respond to the challenges posed by climate change, a theme that accords well with various objectives of this strategy for our built vernacular heritage.

The remit of the State, as set out in the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht's 'Statement of Strategy 2018-2020' (2018) includes 'pursuing opportunities with partners in Northern Ireland to enhance co-operation across other areas, including arts, culture, heritage' (p.21). Our built vernacular heritage is an inheritance that is shared by people throughout the island of Ireland and thus the North-South dimension is important to consider, with mutual engagement leading to more efficient and innovative approaches to similar issues.

Farmhouse adding visual interest and sense of place to its locality, near Togher, Co. Louth (NIAH)

Heritage Ireland 2030 includes an action to ‘Promote our vernacular built heritage and support associated traditional skills.’

The State enacted a thatching grant scheme in 1990 as a house repair measure, rather than as a conservation mechanism per se. The availability of this grant has assisted the retention of many hundreds of thatched houses throughout the country. However, the current value of the grant would benefit from a review.

Stone, slate, mass concrete and corrugated iron: farm building, near Tramore, Co. Waterford (NIAH)

House at Newtownshandrum, Co. Cork (NIAH)

Grant aid programmes for architectural conservation accompanied the coming into effect of the Planning and Development Act (2000). The Built Heritage Investment Scheme (2014), administered by the local authorities, and the Historic Structures Fund (2015), administered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, with both funded by the Department, have benefited many vernacular buildings, but generally only those that are protected structures. A recently added sub-programme of the latter scheme was established specifically to assist owners of vernacular buildings that are not protected structures.

Donegal and Fingal county councils have operated schemes of small grants for thatch repairs (in particular), informally termed ‘A Stitch in Time’, that might be usefully implemented by other local authorities.

Tax incentives, such as waiving VAT on building crafts and materials, could be beneficial for historic buildings in general and vernacular buildings in particular.

Farm building under repair, near Moyvore, Co. Longford (NIAH)

The Town and Village Renewal Scheme (2016) and the ‘Action Plan for Rural Development’ (2017), operated by the Department of Community and Rural Affairs and the Islands, also provide frameworks within which work that can benefit the built vernacular heritage can take place.

Environmental Sustainability and Climate Adaptation

A widely accepted definition of 'sustainable' is being able to '[meet] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.[21] The United Nations sustainable development goals include Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and Goal 13 (Climate Action), all three of which infuse the current strategy document.[22]

Reduction in carbon emissions will apply to all buildings, but the potentially negative impacts on historic buildings are recognized, and proposals for retrofitting will need careful scrutiny and advice, as acknowledged in the recently revised Building Regulations (2019), Part L: Conservation of Fuel and Energy (dwellings).

Old house (left, now demolished) and its replacement, near Kilsallaghan, Co. Dublin (Barry O'Reilly)

The global response to climate change incentivizes the retention of vernacular structures and landscapes. There is a strong argument to be made against the unnecessary construction of new buildings, with their depletion of resources and generation of waste, when there are so many abandoned buildings in our urban and rural landscapes that should be capable of sensitive rehabilitation, adaptation and reuse. Minimizing the creation of waste is one of the key ways to tackle climate change and unsustainable development, and makes good sense in its own right.

[21] https://www.iisd.org/about-iisd/sustainable-development, accessed 7th January 2021.

[22] https://www.iisd.org/about-iisd/sustainable-development

As part of our response to climate change, and the need to act responsibly to protect our environment, we need to learn what our vernacular can teach us about building wisely, so that we can integrate its many good ideas into contemporary building practice.[23] In time, new vernacular building traditions may emerge.

Two-storey farmhouse, near Kilann, Co. Wexford (NIAH)

Under the 'Programme for Government 2020' the State is committed to an average 7% annual reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030…and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050.[24] There will commence 'an ambitious retrofitting programme to make our buildings warmer and more energy efficient, reduce our emissions and deliver a crucial economic stimulus.'[25]

The target is for 500,000 homes to be retrofitted to Building Energy Rating (BER) (B2 or cost optimal) by 2030; most remaining homes built before about 2006 are to be retrofitted by 2050.

For traditionally-built homes the objective will also be to achieve the B2 target (or as close to it as is possible), without causing damage to the building.

DHLGH is currently (2021) steering the development of a guidance document on upgrading the energy efficiency of 'traditional buildings' (historic buildings in general).

[23] The attractive local authority cottages that can be seen throughout the country borrowed elements of the built vernacular heritage in their various designs.

[24] 'Programme for Government 2020', p.30. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7e05d-programme-for-government-our-shared-future/

[25] 'Programme for Government 2020', p.37.

It is important that energy retrofitting standards and approaches are suitable for vernacular buildings and do not cause damage, foreseen or unforeseen.
It would be ironic if works to improve energy efficiency were to undermine the essential environmental workings of a vernacular building and lead to structural or other failures. Approaches to energy conservation can, if carefully considered and presented, deepen a community's understanding and respect for both the need for energy conservation and for the built vernacular heritage. This approach has been endorsed since 2010 in 'Technical Guidance Document L (Fuel and Energy) for Dwellings', which states:

> The application of this Part and of the European Union (Energy Performance of Buildings) Regulations may pose particular difficulties for habitable buildings which, although not protected structures or proposed protected structures, may be of architectural or historical interest including buildings of traditional construction with permeable fabric that both absorbs and readily allows the evaporation of moisture. The aim should be to improve the energy efficiency as far as is reasonably practicable. The work should not prejudice the character of the building or increase the risk of long term deterioration of the building fabric.[26]

The document also states that relaxation of the energy performance values proposed may be acceptable 'if it can be shown to be necessary in order to preserve the architectural and historical integrity of the particular building.[27]

Eco-building has existed in a generally low-key way for decades, as a less carbon-intensive way of building. 'Natural building' is a more recent approach that emphasizes the use of natural, non-toxic building materials, many shared with the built vernacular heritage and with eco-building. These branches of architecture and construction are rooted in sustainable living, harmony with the Earth, waste reduction and community-building in the many senses of the word.

Experimentation and openness to innovation are strong features of this approach. The EcoVillage at Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary exemplifies this, with many self-build houses and other buildings that have been constructed using ecologically friendly and vernacular materials, such as mud and straw. While eco-building, per se, is not necessarily vernacular, it involves some key ideas and approaches that are familiar within the vernacular way of building. In time, eco-building and natural building could become vernacular.[28]

[26] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d82ea-technical-guidance-document-l-conservation-of-fuel-and-energy-dwellings/

[27] See also the Advice Series of publications.

[28] A book that extols the virtues of vernacular approaches to building is Edward Goldsmith's, 'The Way: an ecological worldview' (various editions from 1992 to 2014)

Mud-walled house, built 2010-13, Eco-Village, Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary (Barry O'Reilly)

Tourism

The role of our built vernacular heritage for the benefit of tourism, whether domestic or international, is known, especially through picture postcards and through the facsimile ‘rent-an-Irish cottage’ schemes. The role of tourism for the benefit of our vernacular, is much less in evidence, but could be greatly enhanced.

It is conceivable that domestic holidays may become more attractive for many, helping to support the rural economy and rural life. Some vernacular houses are in use as holiday lets, and this can be an option for property owners who are not otherwise in a position to occupy or let out these dwellings on a long-term basis. In general, vernacular houses that might be too small for everyday living may well be appropriate and attractive for holiday and short-term letting, especially if the environs are pleasant and characterful. Living, albeit for a short time, in a vernacular setting in an everyday landscape makes for a memorable experience. Seasonal occupation could also relieve the burden of heating in winter and mean that the significant interventions and costs required to make such houses habitable year-round could be avoided.

It is the authenticity, distinctiveness and perhaps even the ‘quirkiness’ of vernacular buildings that makes them attractive for tourism. A business case should be developed for the establishment of a new form of Irish tourism based on an experience of living in genuine examples of our built vernacular heritage.

A network of vernacular houses for holiday and short-term letting could also reduce development pressure for new holiday house construction. Such an approach could be piloted in selected regions or local areas and could create a sustainable market for repairs and conservation, supporting labour-intensive craft skills and local economies.

Holiday rental, near Dundrum, Co. Tipperary (Barry O’Reilly)

There could be opportunities to link with local food producers and other local services and attractions. All of this would provide an opportunity for domestic and foreign visitors to experience something authentic, distinctive, or even unique.

Houses that are part of relatively intact vernacular settlements should be particularly attractive for tourism. Hanna's Close, Kilkeel, Co. Down is an example of a hamlet whose houses have been carefully conserved for use as holiday houses.

Learning about Irish history and life through the medium of our buildings and landscapes can be exciting and stimulating. The 'idea of Ireland' – a place where tradition is strong and whose landscape is relatively 'unspoilt' – is enduring, but not inaccurate. Museums, heritage centres and, perhaps especially, folk parks, are not only tourism attractions but, critically, have an educational purpose – the important task of portraying Irish life, history and heritage in an accurate and authentic way. Such centres could also be places where vernacular building skills and vernacular ideas could be actively communicated and taught.

Farm buildings near Magheracloone, Co. Monaghan (NIAH)

Local Authorities

Much valuable work has and is being done by various local authorities, to highlight and protect our vernacular. Local authorities provide advice on conservation, implement various grant aid schemes and, through their heritage plans, have run programmes that assist the conservation and celebration of the built vernacular heritage. In some cases, this has included audits of thatched buildings, seminars and traditional building skills workshops.

Some fine studies of the built vernacular heritage have been produced under the auspices of local authorities and a number have been published. Some of these could serve as models for how to engage with, record and present the built vernacular heritage. An excellent example is Kerry County Council's publication, 'The Home Place: An Inventory of Rural Traditional Architecture' (2016).

However, attention to and understanding of the built vernacular heritage is unevenly spread across the country, with an overemphasis on thatch. Furthermore, many councils do not employ an architectural conservation officer, a situation that tends to put owners of historic buildings at a disadvantage. In some local authorities, the heritage officer has a particular interest in, or knowledge of, built vernacular heritage. The ideal is for conservation officers, heritage officers, planners, building control officers and fire officers to work together, and to engage intensively with building owners to strive for the best outcomes for historic properties.

In general, there has been significant positive change over the last two decades, with vernacular buildings increasingly featuring in local authority Records of Protected Structures, operated under the Planning Acts. At the same time, there has been an improvement in the inclusion of built vernacular heritage in about one-third of written statements in local authority development plans.

Hay barn of informal construction, near Barringtonsbridge, Co. Limerick (Barry O'Reilly)

These plans have well-thought-out and integrated policies. However, there is considerable scope for improvement in the others, many of which have seen no improvement and, in some instances, a backward slide, over the last 25 years.

Local authorities are obliged to protect all structures of special interest in their functional areas. However, the vast majority of vernacular buildings, structures and features have no formal recognition or statutory protection as either protected structures or as part of architectural conservation areas. This is a major issue, as vernacular buildings are disadvantaged in the planning process and are thus very vulnerable to loss. In Northern Ireland and in Britain, this part of the cultural heritage is known as ‘unlisted heritage assets’ with various measures to address the deficit. In the Republic, a number of local authorities have likewise acknowledged this shortcoming and state in their development plans that it is their policy to resist demolition of such structures. Formerly, it had been a requirement that an existing house be demolished if a new one was proposed, involving the loss of countless vernacular and other buildings.

Too often, decisions in relation to vernacular buildings have been made without an adequate knowledge or understanding of these buildings and clauses concerning habitability are too often interpreted as a licence to intervene heavily or even demolish the building in question. Any report requested by the local authority to set out why a building ‘cannot be retained’ needs to be carefully scrutinized and not simply accepted at face value.

Several local authorities have comprehensive, well-integrated and well-worded statements and policies for their built vernacular heritage. The ‘Fingal County Development Plan 2017-23’ provides a good example, under ‘Historic Building Stock & Vernacular Heritage’:

> The retention and reuse of the historic building stock that contributes to the distinctive character of the rural or urban areas of Fingal is supported and encouraged by the Council. These buildings tend to have been constructed using traditional methodologies and materials such as lime, stone, mud, thatch, slate and timber. These materials allowed for moisture to be absorbed and released easily, for the building to ‘breathe’ and so the ventilation of internal spaces performs an important function. Interventions that may be appropriate for modern construction practices, such as impermeable building products or air-tight spaces, could have unintended harmful consequences for the historic building stock.
>
> Where development is being proposed for a site that contains historic buildings and/or structures that contribute to the distinctive character of the rural or urban areas of Fingal [the local authority will] have regard to the following:
>
> An assessment of the existing buildings on the site should be carried out through an analysis of historic maps and an appraisal of the historic fabric and features. Development proposals should seek to retain and incorporate existing buildings of merit and any elements that contribute to its distinctive character.

> Appropriate materials and methods are to be used to carry out repairs to the historic fabric.
>
> Any proposed changes need to be sympathetic to the special features and character of the existing building by respecting the existing setting, form, scale and materials.
>
> Proposals for extensions to historic or vernacular buildings should not erode the setting and design qualities of the original structure which make it attractive and should be in proportion or subservient to the existing building.
>
> Direction for the design should be taken from the historic building stock of the area but can be expressed in a contemporary architectural language.
>
> Original building features or materials should be retained including windows, doors, roof coverings, boundary treatments and site features (such as stone walls, hedges, railing, gates, gate piers, cobbles and courtyards).
>
> Where a proposal seeks to redevelop a derelict property or one that has been unoccupied for a long period of time…in addition to the above…A written report from a suitably qualified professional should accompany any application outlining that the proposal will not structurally compromise the building and outline the measures to be taken to protect the building from collapse prior to and during construction works.
> (Objective DMS160)

A number of development plans state, laudably, that it is an objective to discourage development that proposes the demolition of vernacular buildings. The question of 'a suitably qualified professional' is one that merits consideration – while a person may be qualified in their profession, this does not mean that they will necessarily have the understanding or upskilling needed to judge the merits of an historic building or, more particularly, a vernacular building.

Where planning authorities require a report, especially where demolition or substantial alteration is proposed for a vernacular building, such a report should present various approaches, including that of 'Gentle Rehabilitation' and not simply be a justification of their client's wish to redevelop the site. Local authority staff also need to be able to appropriately and critically assess such reports.

A number of local authorities have produced design guidelines for new housing in the countryside. Galway County Council's booklet, 'Galway Design Guidelines for the Single Rural House' (2005) is an example of a well-presented approach that takes our built vernacular heritage into account.

Conservation Bodies and Other Institutions and Bodies

Since the late 1990s, the Mourne Heritage Trust has carried out practical on-site conservation projects to inspire the general public, as well as employing and encouraging craftspeople and practitioners. This work is presented in their book, 'Traditional Buildings in Ireland: Home Owners Handbook' (2004). The Irish Landmark Trust operates in both jurisdictions and has repaired and renovated some vernacular buildings for use as holiday lets.

Ulster Architectural Heritage has also done a great deal to highlight our built vernacular heritage, especially through their 'Buildings at Risk' publications and their casework.

Volunteers repairing field wall, Mourne Mountains, Co. Down (Mourne Heritage Trust)

One of the most important examples to date of a vernacular building conservation project is the Kirwan house at Mayglass, Co. Wexford, carried out in 1998–2001.[29] Led and funded by the Heritage Council, the work was managed by a conservation architect and a conservation engineer and was carried out by a local building firm, with specialist input from the National Museum of Ireland, the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, the Department of Irish Folklore (UCD), the Department of Architecture (UCD), the Weald and Downland Museum, an archaeologist, a traditional furniture historian, a textile conservator, a paper conservator and a thatcher. Some of the rediscovered skills used, such as mud-wall repairs, were rather novel at the time. It was also possibly the first time that a vernacular building was conserved in situ because it was vernacular, rather than for an association with a notable public figure.

[29] See Reeners, R., 'A Wexford Farmstead. The conservation of an 18th-Century Farmstead in County Wexford' (Heritage Council, 2003).

A temporary protective shed was erected over the building to facilitate conservation works (Heritage Council)

Mud bricks, formed in wooden moulds, were used to repair decayed parts of the mud walling (Heritage Council)

The Irish Folklife Division of the National Museum of Ireland, based at Turlough Park, near Castlebar, Co. Mayo, manages the national collection of objects reflective of Irish traditional life. It collects and stores objects and also exhibits a large collection of traditional artefacts and building craft tools.

At University College Dublin, the Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection has one of the world's largest and most important collections of material, both oral and photographic, relating to Irish tradition, including vernacular architecture, furniture and fittings, folk culture and the traditional landscape. The collection has recently been inscribed in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 'Memory of the World'.

One way in which vernacular traditions are proudly displayed is at open-air folk museums, which are now to be found in most European countries. These places have often served as a basis for research and scholarship and have encouraged the conservation of folklife objects. In Ireland there are two State-operated open-air museums, both in the North.

The largest is the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, near Bangor, Co. Down, which has an extensive collection of vernacular buildings reassembled there, from the Northern Ireland counties as well as County Donegal, and extensive holdings of furniture, artefacts and documentary archives.

The Ulster American Folk Park at Omagh, Co. Tyrone, presents the region's historic links with the United States and exhibits a collection of buildings and objects from the two countries.

In the Republic, Bunratty Folk Park, Co. Clare, has an important collection of buildings, furniture, fittings and other material, but is currently run as a commercial regional tourism enterprise, rather than as a museum; it nevertheless has considerable educational potential.

The Irish Agricultural Museum at Johnstown Castle, Co. Wexford and Muckross Farm, Killarney, Co. Kerry also have important collections.

Forge at Bunratty Folk Park, Co. Clare (Barry O'Reilly)

The Irish National Heritage Park, near Wexford Town, which has reconstructions of prehistoric and medieval buildings and sites, essentially displays structures, crafts and materials of direct relevance to the built vernacular heritage; it has also hosted relevant craft workshops and conservation events.

There are many smaller museums and other centres, mainly created and operated by individuals, which display local buildings and artefacts; all have potential for enhancing the profile of our vernacular building traditions, folklife artefacts and traditional ways of life.

The National Library of Ireland and the Ulster Museum also hold relevant archival material, in the form of historic photographs, and the latter and the National Gallery of Ireland have holdings of paintings and drawings of landscapes and interiors.

Kitchen, showing hearth and bed outshot, Hennigan's Heritage, Killasser, Co. Mayo (NIAH)

Apart from public bodies, there are community networks, Public Participation Networks and Local Community Development Committees and individuals, who have engaged with aspects of the built vernacular heritage.[30]

The emergence of local and national groups keen to record or work on vernacular matters is a positive development and should be encouraged.[31] There are some useful web-based forums that gather together individuals with an interest in vernacular topics and folk traditions.[32]

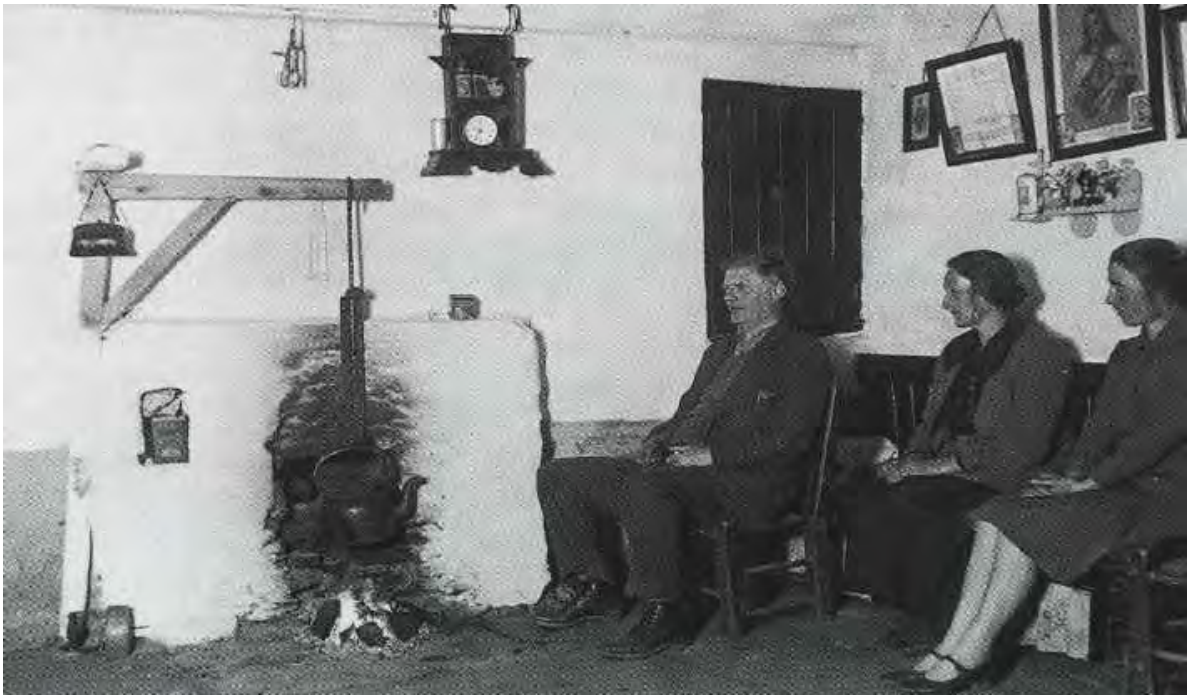
A relatively small number of individuals have ploughed often lone furrows over many years to keep our vernacular on local and national agendas.

[30] A notable example is Michael Conry, with his books, 'The Carlow Fence' (2000), 'Dancing the Culm' (2001) and 'Corn Stacks on Stilts' (2004).

[31] Examples are the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (Ireland) (SPAB Ireland) and Earthen Buildings UK and Ireland (EBUKI) and the Lough Erne Landscape Partnership.

[32] For example, 'Irish Vernacular Architecture' at https://www.facebook.com/groups/897391157067634/ and http://www.folklore.ie/Home.html.

Our built vernacular heritage, and the traditions associated with it, are taught through the folklore programmes at University College Dublin, and the conservation of vernacular buildings is among the aspects taught in the diploma course in Applied Building Repair and Conservation at Trinity College Dublin.[33]



Kitchen interior, An Blascaod Mór, Co. Kerry, c.1930, with Robin Flower seated at the fireside (Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore and the National Folklore Collection, UCD)

The Irish Georgian Society is an advocate for the conservation of built heritage and, through its open days, seminars and workshops, presents and encourages a wide range of traditional building skills; they also maintain a register of practitioners. An Taisce and various other conservation and advocacy groups have also helped raise the profile of historic building conservation.

ICOMOS has national representative associations. The Irish committee, founded in 1984, has specialist subcommittees on Vernacular Heritage, Cultural Landscapes, Energy and Sustainability, Intangible Cultural Heritage and Education and Training that have a bearing on the built vernacular heritage.

[33] At the time of writing of this strategy document, the Masters in Urban and Building Conservation (MUBC) at UCD was not accepting students.

Well-sited farm buildings, near Rathfeigh, Co. Meath (NIAH)

European Union Programmes and Broader International Policy

European Union programmes have long contributed to the protection of the rural environment. The Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS) (established 1992) and its successor, GLAS (Green Low-Carbon Agri-Environmental Scheme), have incentivized landowners to carefully manage the historic landscape, such stewardship being thus embedded in agricultural practice in many parts of the country; this practice should be encouraged with all available means. GLAS has provisions relating to the planting of hedgerows and the maintenance of stone walls and is administered by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The Traditional Farm Buildings scheme, administered by the Heritage Council in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, is open to farmers who are eligible under GLAS, and buildings do not have to be protected structures to qualify for inclusion. The scheme has helped convince builders, building owners and the public in general of the practical potential to bringing traditional buildings back into regular, non-habitational use with minimal investment. The basic conservation involved is seen as making economic sense, helping to demystify the repair of old farm buildings that might otherwise be regarded as a lost cause or be subjected to unnecessarily heavy interventions or conversions.

The Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale (LEADER) programme (established 1991) also has a role in the economic development of rural areas, but any projects or schemes proposed for our built vernacular heritage will necessitate the appropriate upskilling of LEADER advisors and the staff in the various LEADER companies.

Understanding, valuing and minding the built vernacular heritage is explicitly encouraged by various international bodies, principally UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the Council of Europe and ICOMOS. While the principles and recommendations of these organizations have no statutory effect, they do set out standards to be aspired to, and these are reflected in irish policy, particularly in the statutory guidance on heritage protection.[34]

ICOMOS produced its 'Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage' (1999), which sees the built vernacular heritage as 'the fundamental expression of the culture of a community, of its relationship with its territory and, at the same time, the expression of the world's cultural diversity'. It regards it as 'the traditional and natural way by which communities house themselves', but also considers that the built vernacular heritage adapts continuously to social and environmental constraints, not least 'the involvement and support of the community, continuing use and maintenance'.

[34] https://whc.unesco.org, https://www.coe.int, https://www.icomos.org

Thus, the built vernacular heritage is to be seen as a living tradition and not something frozen in time.[35]

The Charter sets out five principles, the fourth and fifth of which are particularly characteristic of the built vernacular heritage:

> The built vernacular heritage is an integral part of the cultural landscape and this relationship must be taken into consideration in the development of conservation approaches. The vernacular embraces not only the physical form and fabric of buildings, structures and spaces, but the ways in which they are used and understood, and the traditions and the intangible associations which attach to them.

Likewise, UNESCO's 'Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage' (2003) refers to many of the characteristics that are central to our built vernacular heritage. The convention defines intangible cultural heritage as:

> the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.
>
> This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

St Brigid's Holy Well, Liscannor, Co. Clare (Michael Houlihan)

[35] Spain has already produced a strategy for its built vernacular heritage – 'Plan Nacional de Arquitectura Tradicional' (2015).

UNESCO operates the ‘Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage’ (1972) and has conferred World Heritage Site status on a growing number of landscapes that are notable for their vernacular cultural content. The organization has increasingly tended towards including multifaceted sites, rather than grand monuments in isolation, seeing the interplay of humans and nature as being of special importance.[36]

The Council of Europe’s ‘Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe’ (Granada Convention) (1985) defines architectural heritage in terms of ‘monuments (buildings and structures…including their fixtures and fittings), groups of buildings (homogeneous groups of urban or rural buildings) and sites (combined works of man and nature…partially built upon and sufficiently distinctive and homogeneous to be topographically definable)…of conspicuous historical, archaeological, artistic, scientific, social or technical interest.’

Cuts for boats in bank of River Suir, Ballygorey, Mooncoin, Co. Kilkenny (Barry O’Reilly)

The Council of Europe has also formulated the ‘Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society’ (2005, not yet ratified by Ireland), which sets out to promote

> a wider understanding of heritage and its relationship to communities and society. The Convention encourages us to recognize that objects and places are not, in themselves, what is important about cultural heritage. They are important because of the meanings and uses that people attach to them and the values they represent.

[36] Examples are the ‘Ancient Villages in south Anhui – Xidi and Hongcun’ (China) and the ‘Agricultural Landscape of Southern Öland’ (Sweden).

The ICOMOS ‘Declaration on the Revitalization of Small Settlements’ (1995), can also be relevant for urban vernacular ensembles and farm hamlets.

The same organization’s ‘Burra Charter’ (2013) emphasizes cultural authenticity, in contrast to that of material authenticity, the latter being the subject of the ICOMOS ‘International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites’ (Venice Charter) (1964).

The International Association for the Study of the Traditional Environments (IASTE) and the International Seminar on Vernacular Settlements (ISVS) regularly discuss and publish work on all aspects of vernacular environments.

5 A Future for our Built Vernacular Heritage

Perceptions are changing positively, if slowly, towards our built vernacular heritage, with a growing appreciation of its significance in cultural and landscape terms. Its conservation is a growing priority for local authorities, who see it as an asset that can provide housing and other useful buildings, particularly in rural areas. Many local authorities now declare a presumption in favour of retaining and rehabilitating these buildings. Such an approach should also help to reduce the need for new buildings. However, it is vital that such declarations are accompanied by the necessary upskilling of staff and appropriate follow-through to make these aspirations a reality.

We must arrive at a stage where vernacular houses are seen as desirable dwellings of character, preferably as fulltime homes, but otherwise as tourist accommodation and summer homes. Some houses, especially the smaller ones, could be suitable for people who wish to downsize. Farm buildings and some other structures may be capable of being reused for a wide range of activities. We must also strive to retain the distinctive character of vernacular settings.

There is no need to view the built vernacular heritage as something that is only part of the past. Vernacular ways of dealing with our stock of vernacular buildings could and should lead to the unselfconscious creation of future vernacular. However, planners and other practitioners will have to be amenable to this approach, and building regulations and their application will need to be flexible enough to accommodate vernacular knowhow. The non-professional and the community in general must also have a meaningful place at the table.

Gentle Rehabilitation: The Way to Treat a Vernacular Building

The ideal for vernacular buildings is a gentle approach that involves the bare minimum of intervention. Below are two examples from County Donegal, brought back to life in the last ten years.[37] The first, slate-roofed house was empty for more than forty years, but had not fallen into ruin. The second, a thatched house, had become ruinous after only a decade of disuse, emphasizing how vital it is to keep thatch maintained and to ensure that such buildings are occupied and used. This latter house benefited from grant assistance from the Irish Georgian Society Conservation Grants Scheme, the Heritage Council Heritage Management Scheme and the State's thatching grant scheme.

To date, a majority of rehabilitation and conservation projects have been undertaken by heritage trusts or by individuals living (or formerly living) outside Ireland, perhaps based on relative wealth and sentiment for their place of origin. However, vernacular houses can be less expensive for prospective purchasers, and matching people with buildings that appeal to them for their vernacular qualities may be an effective approach.

[37] We are thankful to Duncan MacLaren, conservation architect, for these examples.

Lenankeel, Co. Donegal: before (2015) and after (2018) (Duncan MacLaren)

An aspect of building conservation projects that can be off-putting is the cost of appropriate professional conservation advice and works. Enhancing the base for local vernacular building and craft skills is essential for ensuring a continuous supply of well-trained workers, and to reduce costs for building owners.

Upskilling in conservation philosophy and methods is essential for building contractors, especially the small builders who undertake the majority of these projects, and coordination of activity at State and local levels is needed to help bring about successful outcomes for vernacular building projects.

Isle of Doagh, Co. Donegal: before (2010) and after (2013) (Duncan MacLaren)

Much work is being done at present on natural building materials, such as compressed raw earth blocks, earth-based plasters, hemp-lime and hemp-clay products and straw panels.

This approach can be attractive to those concerned about climate action as much as those with an interest in the built vernacular heritage. It would also make some of the transfer of skills easier: a bricklayer might not be comfortable building with wet mud, but might be happy to work with mud block.

It would be important not to over-commodify this work, or its basis as a craft could be forsaken — a parallel being a baker working with all the ingredients in contrast with someone adding water to a packet of ready-mix bread. A key component of working in the vernacular realm is knowing how to use and adapt non-standard materials, but pragmatic flexibility will still be required of all involved.

The preparation of easily available non-technical advice for owners and prospective owners of vernacular buildings is an urgent requirement, as is the provision of authoritative technical advice for building practitioners and craftspeople. Access to such information and advice about vernacular buildings, construction and materials will facilitate good practice that protects and enhances the vernacular qualities of buildings and settings.

A pragmatic approach on the part of local authorities, the State, practitioners and craftspeople and owners or prospective owners would be helpful. All of this requires the particular ways of thinking, resourcefulness and ingenuity that are to be found in vernacular approaches to building.

It is often difficult for builders to cost conservation-friendly repair or rehabilitation works. Likewise, it is not easy for building owners to judge if it is in their interest to proceed with a project. The lack of data creates uncertainty that has too often led builders and others to advise the construction of a new building and the demolition of an existing one. It may also be difficult to find practitioners and craftspeople, whether they be builders, architects, engineers, surveyors or other advisers with appropriate experience of vernacular buildings. An assessment of the content of conservation courses, and accreditation, is needed to establish if these courses adequately cater for the needs of vernacular building conservation.

Ideally, building owners would be able to carry out at least small or recurring repairs with training programmes established to this end. Larger-scale work, such as full recoating of a thatched roof, is likely to remain the preserve of skilled thatchers. Repairs to mud walls, for example, could be carried out by an owner, and this would be the vernacular way.

It should be a given that repairs and rehabilitation of vernacular buildings and settings should consider the needs of wildlife, such as birds and bats, and retain mature trees and other natural features.

As climate change mitigation accelerates, economies of scale, perhaps encouraged by fiscal measures, should favour ecological approaches to building, whether in the form of community-led projects, self-build or low-cost housing.

It is important to provide and disseminate information about well-informed rehabilitation projects that allow meaningful demonstration of the craft resources needed to repair and maintain vernacular buildings, while taking into account the requirement to maximize energy efficiency and allowing for sympathetically scaled and detailed additions or re-workings of existing buildings.

Watermill complex, near Horseleap, Co. Westmeath (NIAH)

Vernacular buildings must evolve, as they always have, with their owners and their changing circumstances. However, today there are two constraints that were generally absent heretofore – one, the need to embrace sustainability in all its facets and secondly, the need to conserve what is a unique legacy of homegrown architecture, all the while adapting it for our own era. It should be possible to devise and present a variety of ways of adapting or extending vernacular houses that do not undermine their traditional character by, among other approaches, drawing on the methods that people in earlier eras have used to alter or extend their houses.

The ideal, towards which we need to strive, is a situation where vernacular buildings are owned, occupied and used by sympathetic owners assisted, where necessary, by local authorities, advisors, builders and others, with all parties well-versed in, or at least open to, good vernacular conservation practice.

Furthermore, all of these should be supported by an appropriate level of grant assistance with flexibility of timescales for completion of works, and the ready availability of vernacular materials and traditional skills.

Pedestrian gate to house, Geashill, Co. Offaly (Barry O'Reilly)

Farm buildings near Kildorrery, Co. Cork (NIAH)

As stated at the beginning of this document, safeguarding and celebrating our vernacular is a sign of maturity, cultural awareness and confidence on the part of a people. The built vernacular heritage not only represents our past and be useful in the present, but can, and should, be part of our future.

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- Rosa Meehan, Assistant Keeper, National Museum of Ireland (Country Life)
- Robert Miles, Architectural Conservation Officer, Meath County Council
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- Michael Moore, Archaeologist, DHLGH
- Sioban Mulcahy, Conservation Architect, Clare
- Fidelma Mullane, Geographer/Vernacular Specialist, Galway
- Damian Murphy, Built Heritage Unit, DHLGH
- Colm Murray, Architecture Officer, Heritage Council
- Cáit Ní Cheallacháin, Conservation Architect, Limerick
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- Bairbre Ní Fhloinn, Delargy Centre for Irish Folklore, University College Dublin

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- Chris Southgate, Conservation Engineer, Southgate Associates
- Martin Timoney, Archaeologist, Sligo
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- Seán Ward, Vernacular Property Owner, Laois
- Brian Wilkinson, Activities Manager, Technical Outreach and Education, Historic Environment Scotland

Appendix 2: Reference Material

Policy and Guidance (Ireland)

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Local Government and Heritage