

Historic Environment Scotland needs two years to complete safety inspections

A programme of safety inspections at some of Scotland's best loved historic attractions, which began in 2021 due to fears of falling masonry, will take until at least 2025 to complete, it can be revealed.

Historic Environment Scotland (HES) earmarked more than 200 sites with high level masonry across Scotland for "tactile condition surveys" after concerns were first raised in 2021.

A total of 70 sites were either closed or partially closed to the public so that inspections could take place to ensure the safety of staff and visitors.

While many iconic sites including Linlithgow Palace and Holyrood Abbey have been able to reopen, HES said 18 sites in its High Level Masonry programme remain subject to "full access restrictions", while many others have only partial access.

Minutes of a HES board meeting reveal that "over 100 sites still require assessment, in a programme that will last until 2025". Now HES has warned of further possible restrictions as these are carried out.

A HES spokeswoman said: “Over 200 properties in our care have high-level masonry – masonry over 1.4 metres. The initial inspection programme consisted of 70 sites, where access restrictions were put in place on a precautionary basis following a robust risk analysis exercise until inspections could take place.

“To ensure the continued health and safety of our staff and visitors, the remaining sites will be inspected from spring 2024 until into 2025 as part of our standard care for these properties.

“Depending on the geography of the site, some short-term access restrictions may need to be put in place in some areas of the sites during the inspections to allow safe access for our inspection crews and their equipment.

“We do not anticipate that any long-term access restrictions will be put in place as part of this next stage of our inspection programme.”

HES, the public body responsible for caring for and promoting the nation’s historic environment, looks after 336 properties across Scotland.

Surveys conducted in spring 2021 identified potentially dangerous fabric at high level, leading to immediate access restrictions at 20 properties “as a precautionary measure” to ensure visitors and staff were not exposed to possible risks.

Sample surveys on these properties confirmed that the type of deterioration being seen could only be assessed properly by hands-on, tactile surveys. Other methods of inspecting at high level, such as visual inspection from the ground or by drone, while useful, were deemed not as accurate.

Access restrictions were put in place at a further 50 properties after assessments showed that issues found at the initial sites could potentially pose a risk to properties with

shared characteristics. All properties with masonry over 1.4m were earmarked for checks, however.

The tactile survey programme is designed to assess the impact of climate change, as well as the scale of deterioration caused by other factors including the materials used in the buildings' construction, their age and physical location.

HES has described its programme as "a proactive step towards transforming the way the nation's most precious places are protected, repaired and experienced in the face of accelerating decay from climate change". And Dr David Mitchell, then director of conservation at HES, warned: "Historic properties are inherently fragile by their nature, often ruinous and standing at exposed locations. We face a constant battle against time and the elements.

"... A range of solutions is needed, including repairs, investment and new and innovative interventions. In some cases reduced physical access and accepting the natural process of decay will need to be considered."

Minutes of the HES board meeting state: "Over 100 sites still require assessment, in a programme that will last until 2025. Consequently, focus is now being given to mainstreaming the HLM (high level masonry programme) into business-as-usual activity.

"Efforts to engage with local communities is ongoing, with an emphasis of open and honest dialogue around the issues and timescales."

A total of 33 HES properties currently have full access restrictions in places, including historic Culross Abbey, Kelso Abbey, Lochmaben Castle and Bothwell Castle. A further 44 sites offer restricted access.

The spokeswoman said: "Of the 33 sites with full access restrictions in place, 18 are part of our High Level Masonry

Programme, which is looking at the impact of climate changes on sites in combination with other other factors, 13 are restricted due to conservation works and two are restricted due to operational factors.”

The swathe of closures caused visitor revenue to plummet and dismayed communities and tourism operators dependent on visitor income generated by their local heritage sites.

However, HES said it was unable to calculate lost tourist revenue or provide costs for fencing used to barricade castles, abbeys and churches.

Scottish Conservatives’ deputy culture spokesperson, Alexander Stewart MSP, said: “Many Scots remain disappointed that many sites across the country, which are part of our heritage, still remain closed following the pandemic and during the global cost-of-living crisis.

“They will be deeply concerned by this lack of transparency from Historic Environment Scotland over how much these closures are ultimately costing them, and how it is affecting Scotland’s tourism sector.

“Measures must be put in place to ensure that the public have confidence that these losses are being monitored carefully, while SNP ministers must finally make the re-opening of these closed sites a priority and support Historic Environment to do so.”

Garry Clark, development manager, East Of Scotland Federation of Small Businesses, said: “It is so important that HES redoubles its efforts to reopen its remaining properties across Scotland as soon as it is safe to do so, in order to facilitate a wider boost to visitor spend, particularly in more fragile areas of the country.”



HES is hoping to reopen more sites as soon as possible Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com