



HISTORIC HOUSES *of* IRELAND

Five Year Strategy 2026-2030

Introduction

Historic Houses of Ireland (HHI) is a charity established in 2008 at the behest of the Irish state to support and represent the custodians of Ireland's remaining historic houses in private ownership, whether they have been in the same hands for generations or more recently acquired. These remarkable properties and their stewards continue to face steep challenges in preserving their homes for the benefit of the Irish public.



Pressures include rising insurance costs, inflexible planning frameworks, outdated tax legislation and rural depopulation. These properties are not just private homes. They are cultural and economic anchors in their (mostly rural) communities. Historic houses are net contributors to the economy, to their local environment, and to Ireland's efforts to meet UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and EU sustainability directives. They generate employment, provide publicly-accessible green spaces, promote biodiversity and sustainable land management practices, and ensure an ongoing connection to Ireland's built heritage.

HHI envisions a future where Ireland's privately-held historic properties are recognised as vital cultural, environmental, and economic assets, where custodians are well-supported, and where these unique buildings and landscapes endure intact for generations to come. This strategy seeks to capture the critical work the organisation will do over the next five years in support of its members, and in service to the increasingly important (but evermore fragile) heritage sector in Ireland. I am grateful to the staff and volunteer Board of HHI whose efforts are central to this strategy and its successful implementation.

A black ink handwritten signature, appearing to read 'Justin Green', written in a cursive style.

Justin Green - Board Chair

Context

Building on proven success

Historic Houses of Ireland has demonstrated consistent growth and impact since its establishment, and particularly since 2022, when it first received grant support from the Heritage Council. From modest beginnings, the organisation has grown to over 200 members with year-on-year increases in membership, engagement, and influence.

Our successful implementation and delivery of the HHI Heritage Prize and the Airbnb Capacity Awards has proven HHI's capability as a credible funding intermediary. Our growing list of partners and collaborators has positioned member properties at the forefront of natural heritage management, sustainability and rural tourism. Our advocacy has brought member concerns directly to government departments and shaped policy conversations across a range of issues. Our public engagement efforts have resulted in 70+ open house events during Heritage Week each year.

This strategy builds on these foundations whilst significantly expanding our ambition. The decision to widen membership opens HHI to a broader range of historic properties, including smaller country houses, gate lodges, and thatched buildings - fundamentally broadening who we serve and the challenges we address. This expansion requires not just more of the same, but a step-change in our organisational capacity and strategic approach.

A critical moment for Ireland's historic houses

The next five years present both unprecedented challenges and unique opportunities for Ireland's privately-held historic properties:

The Challenges: Government supports (through tax relief, business supports, and grant funding) are being eroded by administrative complexity and ever-increasing compliance burdens. Insurance costs have become prohibitive for many properties. The shortage of skilled craftspeople threatens conservation work. Short-term letting regulations risk stifling rural heritage tourism before it fully develops. Climate change demands adaptation strategies that respect historic fabric.

The Opportunities: Government has demonstrated willingness to engage on heritage matters. Ireland's climate and biodiversity commitments create space to position historic estates as part of environmental solutions rather than obstacles. Post-pandemic appetite for domestic tourism and authentic experiences has never been stronger. International examples show that well-supported historic house sectors deliver significant economic and cultural value.

HHI must seize this moment. With expanded membership, stronger partnerships, a robust evidence base, and enhanced capacity, we can shape the policy environment rather than simply react to it. But the window of opportunity is now: properties are being lost, owners are struggling, and policy decisions made in the coming years will determine whether Ireland's privately-held heritage survives intact or becomes permanently diminished.

Financial sustainability at the core

As a membership organisation dependent on both earned income and grant funding, financial sustainability is critical. Whilst income has grown significantly over the last five years, so too have operational costs, and the scope of work expected of us by our members.

Over the next five years, we must achieve three financial goals simultaneously:

- grow absolute revenue to support expanded activities
- increase non-grant income to reduce dependency
- build reserves that provide security against fluctuating grant cycles

Planned membership growth from ~200 to 400 members provides the foundation for this transition. Combined with enhanced partnership revenue, event income, and new roles as funding intermediary, this growth should enable us to reach 80% non-grant funding on a sustainable, year-on-year basis. This financial resilience will, in turn, enable the organisation to take on more ambitious projects, employ additional permanent staff, and become the internationally recognised body our vision demands.

The membership is our strength

As we pursue this ambitious strategy, it will remain critical that all our efforts are in the service of our members, and the properties in their care. Peer support and member-led advocacy will remain core strengths of our organisation, and impact for our members, and their communities, will be the yardstick by which all our efforts will be measured.

Aim

We aim for a world in which owners of privately held historic properties in Ireland are well supported in their efforts to preserve, restore, and share their heritage for generations to come, and for the public good through:

- Effective advocacy
- Dissemination of knowledge and best practice
- Engaging member- and public-facing events
- Meaningful partnerships
- Enhanced financial supports for heritage projects

Objectives and Key Results

OBJECTIVE 1: HHI is recognised as the authoritative voice for privately-held historic properties in Irish policy-making, securing meaningful reforms that support property owners

The policy environment is both challenging and opportune. Missed opportunities to liberalise Section 482 threaten member viability, insurance costs are unsustainable, and skilled craftspeople remain scarce. Meanwhile, short-term letting reform is stifling rural tourism before it is even enacted. Yet government has shown willingness to engage on heritage matters, and Ireland's climate commitments create opportunities to position historic properties as part of the solution. We must act now to shape policy rather than react to it, and to build the evidence base that makes our advocacy credible and compelling.

KR1.1: Reform has been secured for Section 482 tax relief, addressing Revenue's public access requirements and property categorisation issues

KR1.2: A comprehensive economic evidence base underpins an annual 'HHI State of Ireland's Historic Houses' report

KR1.3: HHI is regularly cited as the representative body for private historic properties in government policy documents and heritage strategies

KR1.4: A new planning model for historic structures has been devised for consideration by government

OBJECTIVE 2: Members have consistent access to expert advice, peer learning, and practical guidance enabling them to preserve and manage their properties effectively

The challenges facing property owners are becoming more complex and technical. Traditional knowledge transfer within families is no longer sufficient. Members need HHI to connect them with expertise and with each other, particularly as our membership diversifies to include property types with different conservation challenges.

KR2.1: Five knowledge-sharing opportunities are delivered annually

KR2.2: Practical guidance resources have been produced addressing priority member needs across at least three major thematic areas

KR2.3: Member satisfaction with knowledge-sharing support has reached 90% in annual surveys

KR2.4: A curated network of trusted experts is accessible to members across conservation, legal/tax, estate management, and biodiversity domains

OBJECTIVE 3: HHI is the collective public face of Ireland's historic houses, building sector profile and facilitating public engagement

Public awareness of Ireland's historic houses is fragmented, and members rarely have the resources to promote themselves alone. Our [2020 Historic Irish Houses: A Creative Reappraisal](#), supported by Creative Ireland, mapped substantial public engagement potential, much of which remains untapped. A strong public profile drives visitor numbers, builds the constituency for effective advocacy, and secures the sector's social value. HHI must extend its events programme into coordinated sector promotion, leaving individual property promotion to members.

KR3.1: A public-facing digital platform (interactive map, services directory, events calendar) drives engagement with member properties

KR3.2: Events are delivered across at least three provinces annually, ensuring geographic accessibility for members and the public

KR3.3: 'Discover Ireland's Historic Houses' campaign has launched, supporting regional trails and tourism partnerships

KR3.4: HHI and member properties achieve significant media coverage, with at least 20 pieces in national and significant regional media annually, demonstrating public interest and sectoral relevance

KR3.5: A flagship annual creative programme is delivered in partnership with Creative Ireland or the Arts Council, advancing the Creative Reappraisal's vision

OBJECTIVE 4: Strategic partnerships with government, commercial entities, and peer organisations amplify HHI's impact and deliver tangible value to members

HHI cannot achieve its aims alone. Government agencies control funding and policy levers; commercial partners can address practical member challenges like insurance costs; Irish and European peers offer learning and credibility; academic institutions provide research capacity. The organisation's growing profile and track record (particularly through Capacity Fund delivery) creates partnership opportunities that didn't exist before. We must capitalise on this credibility whilst building on proven successes.

KR4.1: A strategic partnership with Maynooth University is delivering member benefits through student placements, research collaboration, and knowledge-sharing initiatives

KR4.2: Commercial partnerships have expanded into three new thematic areas (e.g. tax advisory), delivering enhanced value to members

KR4.3: Three distinct collaborative projects have been delivered with at least one peer heritage organisation (e.g. Irish Landmark Trust, An Taisce, ICOMOS Ireland, SEAI, OPW etc.)

KR4.4: HHI is an official Heritage Week partner, coordinating marketing, press, and programming with Heritage Council for maximum sectoral impact

OBJECTIVE 5: Members have access to significantly expanded financial resources for conservation, restoration, natural heritage management, and sustainable operations

Survey data shows biodiversity grants are the strongest member consensus priority, yet funding gaps persist across conservation needs. HHI's successful Capacity Fund delivery has proven we can be a credible funding intermediary. Government is investing in climate and biodiversity initiatives where historic estates can play a role. We must leverage our track record to secure and distribute resources at scale.

KR5.1: €50,000 in grant funding and financial supports is successfully administered to members annually

KR5.2: A dedicated biodiversity/natural heritage fund has been established - with the aid of a suitable partner - and is supporting member projects

KR5.3: Expert grant application support (internal or contracted) is available to members at below-market cost, and demonstrably improves success rates compared to unsupported applications

KR5.4: A member support fund exists covering both emergency hardship situations and legal challenges on novel heritage/planning issues

OBJECTIVE 6: HHI has the organisational capacity, financial sustainability, and strategic clarity to deliver on its expanded ambition and serve a growing, diversified membership

The decision to expand membership opportunities fundamentally changes both our potential membership and our complexity. We are positioning for international recognition whilst managing immediate policy crises. Our fractional CEO model and small team have delivered impressive results, but the organisation's ambition now exceeds its current structure. We need the baseline data, the financial sustainability, and the human capacity to execute on our strategic priorities simultaneously.

KR6.1: Membership has grown from ~200 to 400 members, with year-on-year growth in supporter tier membership

KR6.2: At least 80% of organisational revenue comes from non-grant sources on a year-on-year basis

KR6.3: A comprehensive mapping of Ireland's extant historic houses has been completed, informing the work of HHI and its partners, and supporting academic research

KR6.4: A permanent staff team of at least four FTE is consistently delivering on HHI's strategic priorities

KR6.5: Member-led committees are regularly convened along geographical, thematic and special interest lines

KR6.6: An HHI-backed volunteering programme has been piloted, and its findings implemented

Organisational Excellence

The ambitious objectives set out in this strategy will only be achieved through the efforts of our Board, staff team, members and volunteers. We want to honour that commitment through our actions as an employer and membership organisation.

The Board of Directors and leadership team will strive to:

Support professional development

Provide opportunities for staff and volunteers to develop both personally and professionally through tailored training and opportunities for wider sector engagement.

Prioritise wellbeing

Focus on the health and wellbeing of our team through flexible working arrangements, recognition of the challenges inherent in heritage sector work, and collaborative management approaches.

Strengthen our governance

Commit to ongoing training and development for board members, introduce fixed term limits and invite external expertise on to the board. Adhere to the highest standards of governance, transparency, and accountability at all levels of the organisation, ensuring members' trust is well-placed.

Foster community

Build a strong, supportive community among our membership where knowledge is freely shared, challenges are collectively addressed, and success is celebrated together.

Remain member-focused

Ensure that every decision, project, and initiative is tested against one question: does this serve our members' needs and advance their ability to preserve, restore, and share their properties?

Appendix A: Methodology

Facilitated Discussion

In-person workshops and conversations were conducted with both the full Board and the staff team in order to identify the organisation's priorities for the coming five years.

Stakeholder Engagement

In tandem with discussions at Board level, we conducted a wide-ranging consultative exercise with key external partners. We combined one-to-one engagements with a comprehensive membership survey.

Objectives and Key Results

This strategy was designed, and is expressed, using the Objectives and Key Results (OKR) methodology. OKRs are deliberately few in number and focus the organisation on its most important priorities.

OKRs are intended to form a central part of an organisation's day-to-day operations. At every level of seniority and in every decision taken, we should be considering whether our actions contribute to one of our OKRs. They should empower team members both to capitalise on opportunities that support our objectives, and to cease activity that does not.

Each OKR has three distinct elements:

Objective

An objective, in this context, is the end state we want to reach once this strategy has been completed. It is intended to be aspirational and is set in the present tense - an expression of how we want things to be when this strategy cycle is finished.

The 'Why Now' Statement

This statement explains why the objective was chosen as an area of focus within the strategy.

Key Results

A Key Result (KR) is the way in which we know we have achieved our objective. It is - to the greatest extent possible - something we can measure. It is unambiguous (we will know when it has been achieved). Crucially, Key Results are designed to be stretching, carrying with them a tacit acknowledgement that we might not achieve perfect success in every case.



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