

Report by the
Comptroller and Auditor General

Access to properties grant-aided by English Heritage

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Executive summary

1 This report is about how English Heritage promote people's enjoyment of historic buildings. English Heritage receive an annual grant-in-aid from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (the Department) and in the last three years alone they have awarded £24 million in grants towards the repair of historic secular buildings. Grant recipients include public bodies such as local authorities, charitable bodies, private owners and conservation groups such as building preservation trusts.



2 Specifically, we looked at how English Heritage go about making grants and, in particular, at how their requirement that owners of grant-aided properties provide access to the public works in practice. So the report focuses on one of the Government's key objectives, which is to achieve wider public access to all aspects of the work that the Department fund.

3 To test the access arrangements, with the co-operation of English Heritage we conducted a postal survey of grant recipients, and complemented this by using consultants to conduct a "mystery shopper" survey – which included visits to properties. In this way we simulated, so far as possible, the conditions under which a member of the public might seek to gain access to a grant aided property.

4 Our main findings are summarised below:

(a) On the information about access arrangements

English Heritage have recently taken action to improve the accuracy and public availability of information about the arrangements for access to individual properties. They have still to confirm the access position for about a fifth of the 551 properties they originally identified as having access obligations, but have the work in hand. Meanwhile, in publishing their own access guide they have taken control of a key access enabler. And by publishing it on their website (www.english-heritage.org.uk) they have made it available in the most modern medium – although finding the information is not straightforward. As English

Heritage have not in the past carried out physical testing of access themselves, they have not been in a position to pursue owners who might not be complying with access requirements (paragraphs 2.5 to 2.9).

(b) On the extent and cost of access to properties

Despite their aim of providing access, English Heritage have little information on the number and cost of visits. The results of our work suggest that 90 per cent of properties have been visited by members of the public in the last year, with wide variations in visitor numbers probably reflecting to an extent the different types of properties. Similarly, there were variations in the cost of visits, with just under half the properties not charging at all and most others charging £4 or less. English Heritage now provide advice on their website about how to complain about access problems, but do not do so in the paper version (paragraphs 2.10 to 2.12).

(c) On the ease of arranging visits

In the large majority of cases properties were open to the public, in accordance with the grant conditions. But being unable to contact a property is a barrier to access, and this occurred in a significant minority of cases. And in 12 cases where access was refused, either English Heritage's records are wrong or it appears that grant recipients are not complying with their access conditions. For the properties where an appointment to visit was required (some do not require an appointment) 86 per cent required less than two weeks notice and over a half required less than a week, and arranging visits was generally quite easy – with most owners friendly and accommodating (paragraphs 2.13 to 2.17).

(d) On the experience of visiting properties

Having arranged visits, on turning up at properties our mystery shopping consultants were able to gain access in every case, and on the majority of their visits they were made welcome. The accessibility of car parking and wheelchair access is a matter for owners, but English Heritage have issued guidance to them, and to help prospective visitors English Heritage have provided information about these facilities in their new access guide. The guide probably understates the ease of parking, with most properties having parking nearby, but it appears to overstate the availability of wheelchair access (paragraphs 2.18 to 2.24).

(e) On the perspectives, of owners and representative bodies

We thought it important to seek the views of property owners and managers, and leading organisations active in the world of historic properties on the operation of arrangements for public access. The overwhelming majority of owners and managers who responded to our survey thought that members of the public showed respect for property, although eight per cent had concerns about the security risk of opening to the public – a concern also mentioned by the Association of Preservation Building Trusts. The Historic Houses Association and the Country Landowners Association thought that English Heritage's access requirements strike an appropriate balance between satisfying public demand for access and enabling owners to apply for repair grants, but thought that more rigorous access requirements would adversely alter this balance (paragraphs 2.25 to 2.29).

(f) On grant giving

English Heritage have published criteria for assessing whether grant support is appropriate and take into account public funding from other sources in determining grant awards. They also have procedures to ensure that the financial need for grant aid is assessed in all cases. In 20 of the 50 cases we examined, their procedures also require this assessment to be supported by a financial appraisal of the applicant's means to establish how much the applicant can be expected to contribute. In five cases a detailed appraisal had not been done. English Heritage require grant aided work to be awarded on the basis of competition except where action is required as a matter of emergency or where it is considered more cost-effective to re-appoint existing contractors and they have appropriate arrangements for ensuring that grants are issued on the basis of work actually done (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.6, 3.9 to 3.11, and 3.13 to 3.16).

Our conclusions and recommendations

5 The great majority of grant recipients seem to be complying with the access conditions attached to their grants, and in an example of modern government, English Heritage have aided public access by making their new access guide available in electronic form. However, the access position remains unclear for a significant number of properties and in a minority of cases our consultants encountered practical obstacles to access.

6 English Heritage have appropriate arrangements for assessing the financial need for grants including, where appropriate, an appraisal of the applicant's ability to contribute to the costs involved. But, as the arrangements for appraising applicant's means are not being followed in all cases, where this is required, there is the risk that money is not always used to best effect.

7 In the light of our findings we recommend that English Heritage:

- Press ahead with the work they have already begun to ensure that they have a full and reliable record of which properties access conditions apply to;
- Monitor trends in the number of visits to properties to gauge whether they are achieving their access objectives;
- Physically test the access arrangements in ways which simulate the experience that a member of the public might have to be able to pursue owners who might not be complying with access requirements. The techniques we have used for this piece of work could also be applied by English Heritage;
- Consider what more can be done to capitalise on their initiative of developing a new access guide. For example, by making their website information more accessible;
- Ensure that in all cases grants are awarded on the basis of a financial needs assessment which includes, where appropriate, an appraisal of the applicant's means.