



Report on the Present  
and  
Future Protection of  
Thatched Structures in  
Ireland



Volume 1:  
The Action Plan



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## Preface

This report was commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DOEHLG). Following extensive consultation, the Heritage Council published a policy paper *Irish Thatched Roofs and The National Heritage* in 2002. A steering group comprising the DOEHLG, the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), the Heritage Council, the Office of Public Works (OPW) and Wexford County Council has been examining the issues surrounding thatch structures on the whole island of Ireland. This group decided that a report setting out a three-year plan of action was necessary.

There has long been concern about the decline of historic thatch in Ireland and through the work of DOEHLG, EHS and The Heritage Council a number of strategies and policies have been proposed and implemented. Despite these efforts, though, historic thatch is being lost at an accelerating rate. There are many reasons for this including the fragmented nature of the trade, a widespread lack of detailed knowledge of historic thatch materials and techniques, varying and conflicting government policies.

This Action Plan, in the view of the authors, charts a way forward to address all these problems, based on a detailed study of the current status of Irish thatch and the many years experience of the authors in recording and preserving thatched structures.

We are indebted to the Steering Group for their support and guidance but our real reward will come from seeing the plan implemented.

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## 1.00 Introduction and Summary

The research undertaken by this study documents a significant and continuing loss of the historic thatch structures in Ireland.

By a 'historic' thatched structure we mean those thatched buildings where the roof framework dates from pre 1900, around the time when cut roofs of machine sawn timbers became commonplace taking over from 'vernacular' roofs of roughly sawn and split logs, and where there are several coats of thatching achieved in local materials and traditional style.

The fate of historic thatch is, of course, just one aspect of the loss of the vernacular, but it is an aspect that has proved particularly vulnerable and yet, it has long been an icon of rural life in Ireland. The thatched roof was, and still is to many people, the symbol of rural Ireland embodying in a very particular way local distinctiveness and a true vernacular tradition.

**It is clear that there is a real crisis in the survival of historic thatch in Ireland and without action it is possible to say that outside of folk museums, very little historic thatch will soon be left. This is ironic considering that thatch in new house construction is fast becoming a status symbol, breaking with recent perceptions of thatch being associated with poverty.**

There are now so few (circa 1300) historic thatched structures left in Ireland that a strict conservation approach is justified for the most complete roofs.

The situation in Ireland is not unique. Scotland had a similar (though in many ways a more 'primitive') heritage, now almost gone. According to one authoritative report, only around 20 historic thatch buildings survive in the whole country. In Wales CADW (Welsh Historic Monuments) report that the remaining thatched buildings constitute just 0.23% of listed buildings.)

Historic English thatch was rescued by vigorous government intervention by the Council for Small Industries in Rural Areas, immediately following the Second World War.

The EHS study '*A Sense of Loss*', charts the dramatic loss of vernacular thatched buildings in the North from circa 40,000 in the 1950s to 217 in 1993 and probably only 150 today of which 110 are 'listed'.

We believe that record of loss is similar throughout the island.

Our findings leave us in no doubt that unless sustained radical action is taken soon, the number and quality of Irish thatched houses will continue to decline and the centuries of cultural tradition embodied in them will be lost.

In this report there is evidence to suggest that the rate of decline in the number of historic thatch roofs is accelerating. We are about to reach another critical drop, perhaps similar to that which occurred in the 1940s and '50s with a generational change as we approach a 'critical mass' of historic roofs – the number of thatch roofs necessary to sustain a thatching industry.

- Accordingly, where historic thatch, under-layers and roof structures survive, it is important to retain all the historic features. The documents detailing the 'listing' or inclusion in the Record of Protected Structures must specify in some detail exactly what is important and what must be retained. Grant support must be sufficient to provide incentive for the correct specification to be implemented.
- Where original roof structures and/or under-layers survive but the top layer is not a traditional local material (e.g. imported reed) policy and support should be aimed at replacing the outer layer in the local traditional material and thatching style.

- Where roof structures and under-layers have been lost, but where the vernacular structure merits statutory protection in its own right, policy and support will be directed at returning the whole roof to the local traditional materials and style taking into account the requirements of Building Regulations.

Thus, for historic thatched structures, the only justifiable policy is to retain and restore the local distinctiveness, the local traditions. We do not support the view that continued use of imported materials is justifiable, even in the short term, as the evidence we have gathered suggests that locally grown appropriate thatching materials are available. Currently, locally grown materials could satisfy 30% of demand and, with the right policies, full sustainability could be achieved. We believe that the growing of local materials is essential to a sustainable industry. It is crucial that government makes a sustained and significant investment before it is too late. The implementation of a 5-year strategic traditional thatching materials programme to ensure an adequate supply of locally grown materials whether reed or straw, would quickly regulate the supply of vernacular roofing materials. We propose that given time, thatch can become as self-sustaining as 'lime' now is. From being a rare and specialised material only fifteen years ago, lime is fast becoming commonplace again in building conservation and is even being used in new buildings.

Historic thatch conservation policy and practice should also be in accord with relevant national and international policies, in particular the ICOMOS Charter on Vernacular Buildings.

This report summarises the research findings of the study and the issues arising. It details an action plan to address the issues to ensure a sustainable future for Irish thatch.

**We believe that there is an opportunity to reverse the decline of historic thatch and to trigger a renaissance in traditional local styles, materials and techniques, to counter the trend towards non-vernacular materials including 'global thatch' styles and imported materials. Capitalising on this opportunity will lead to a new understanding of, and pride in, a distinctiveness and identity that will contribute to the preservation of the remaining historic thatch in Ireland and ensure the rejuvenation of a truly sustainable craft industry.**

## 2.00 Key Findings of the Research

### Records of Thatched Buildings

A number of surveys of thatched buildings have been carried out to date, many at county and regional level, some at national level. However, the scope and content of surveys differ vastly with the result that there is no comprehensive or accurate picture of the numbers or condition of surviving thatched buildings in Ireland as a whole.

In the North, the Environment and Heritage Service carried out the 'First Survey' of *Buildings of Special Architectural or Historical Interest* in the years 1970–1994. The survey identified 400 thatched buildings of which 120 were listed. In the years 2000–2003, the Environment and Heritage Service undertook a detailed survey of all known thatched buildings and recorded 152 structures of which 110 are listed. The findings of these surveys highlight not only the rate of loss of thatched structures, but also the value of protection afforded by listing, as the greatest losses have occurred where buildings did not have statutory protection.

In the South, thirteen counties have carried out surveys of thatched buildings, the work ranging in date from the early 1980's to the present day. The brief for these surveys has not always been consistent, with decisions on scope and content being made on individual cases. Of the counties with surveys achieved, the percentage of buildings surveyed appearing on the Record of Protected Structures (RPS) differs greatly from county to county. A questionnaire was sent out to all counties in 2003 requesting details of thatched house surveys such as the estimated or confirmed numbers of thatched houses and the number of thatched buildings appearing on the county RPS. Based on the replies and on other surveys, it is estimated that there are approximately 2000 thatched dwellings in Ireland in 2004. However, there are a number of factors which indicate that these figures do not give the full picture.

- Some of the surveys are over ten years old and there is a considerable rate of loss.
- Surveys in the South relate only to domestic thatched structures.
- Surveys rarely pick up houses where thatch survives under tin or modern coverings.
- Some of the survey figures are clearly based on estimates rather than accurate surveys and seem optimistic.

We believe the actual figure of surviving historic thatched buildings is somewhere closer to between 1300 and 1500, for the whole of the island.

### The Thatching Trade

A list of thatchers was compiled as part of this study. This list currently numbers 108 thatchers, details of which were obtained from the authors' own contacts and the following sources:

- List of delegates attending the Heritage Council Thatch seminar in Athlone, 1999
- Irish Georgian Society Website
- Environment and Heritage Service (NI)
- Case Study interviews
- Mourne Heritage Trust

Although this list would indicate that the thatching trade in Ireland is relatively healthy, it should be noted that some thatchers listed have retired or are no longer involved in the trade. Also, some of those listed work either sporadically, depending on demand, or part-time and many are close to the end of their working lives. It is recommended that further research should be achieved as a matter of urgency to accurately ascertain the numbers of active thatchers. The traditional materials and the local styles of thatching should be documented at the earliest opportunity in order to properly inform the conservation of historic thatch.

As part of this study, a list of thatchers working in Great Britain was compiled and questionnaires distributed to ascertain how many of these work in Ireland on a regular basis. Of the 27 questionnaires returned, only six thatchers have previously worked in Ireland.

The study identified 12 suppliers of locally grown thatching material, including hazel scollops. It also highlighted the existence of a number of small-scale growers, each providing small quantities of thatching material, usually straw, sufficient to cover three to five roofs per year. Five suppliers of imported materials are listed in the study, some of whom are large-scale operators, supplying material throughout the country. Most of the imported materials consist of water reed from Turkey and Poland. Although imported materials have a reputation for high and consistent quality, there is now some evidence that this is declining or becoming more variable in the last few years.

## **Training**

There is currently no formal or accredited training scheme for thatchers anywhere in Ireland.

Previous courses included a City and Guilds qualification which ran once approximately ten years ago in Wexford and a one-year course in practical thatching run by Limavady Technical College.

Some weekend and weeklong courses are provided in Co. Clare. Courses include an introduction to reed and straw thatching for simple and complex roofs, hands on experience of different thatching techniques and a tour of local examples of traditional thatched houses. The Mourne Heritage Trust is currently running awareness courses for owners, professionals, and statutory bodies, but this is a one-year only programme. FAS and CITB have expressed an interest in providing an apprenticeship scheme but none is available at present.

Currently, persons wishing to gain a recognised thatching qualification learn the thatching trade in England. This situation is obviously not ideal, as this course (run by the English Countryside Agency) provides no grounding in Irish historic thatching methods.

## **Support for Owners**

Much of the information available on thatching in Ireland is aimed at conservation professionals such as architects, conservation officers, surveyors and the thatching trade. Most of the information aimed at 'lay' owners of thatched buildings derives from English thatched roofs and thatching styles.

There is little direct support for owners of thatched structures in Ireland and there is no central information source. In general, conservation officers recognise that they are not sufficiently knowledgeable with regard to thatch and thatching in order to advise with authority. The absence of agreed thatching specification standards and detailed practical information compounds this problem.

## **Insurance**

The information collected throughout the course of the study relating to the insurance conditions of a thatched property shows wide variations. As is evident from the case studies, many owners do not have an insurance policy, as they perceive the cost to be prohibitive. However, other owners reported that insurance costs were not excessive. Insurance for thatched buildings, as part of a farmyard complex or farm business appears to be more cost effective and easiest to obtain. A total of seven companies are listed as providers of insurance for thatched properties in the North, five in the South and one company, based in England that provides cover in Ireland.

## **Life Expectancy and Care of a Thatched Roof**

Estimating the life expectancy of a thatched roof is a topic to be approached with care, as there are many conflicting accounts and claims. As an approximate estimate, a long straw (winter wheat) roof lasts from 7 to 10 years between spar coats; oaten straw lasts between 5 and 7 years; combed wheat reed lasts approximately 15 years and water reed up to 25 years. However, there are many variations on this, including grant related information that indicates an average re-thatching period of all materials and styles of 7 to 10 years.

It is worth noting that the estimates given in the replies to the 1940s Irish Folklore Commission questionnaire, 'Roofs and Thatching' on the subject of the longevity of thatch roofs, are not dissimilar to those of today, where claims for the poor quality of materials are attributed to high nitrogen levels as a result of intensive farming practices.

There are many factors affecting the longevity of thatch:

### Decay Factors

- Elements of climate and microclimate such as sunlight, precipitation, wind, roof pitch and orientation, shade/overhang by cables, trees and other vegetation
- Attack by vermin and birds
- Type and quality of materials: Thatchers, particularly those who import reed from Poland and Turkey insist that the life span of an imported reed roof is at least double if not triple that of Irish reed. These claims are not based on scientific evidence, comparative studies or guarantees of durability given by the exporters of reed from Turkey and Poland; neither are these claims supported by guarantees from Irish thatchers to house owners.
- Thatching method including level of skill of thatcher, depth of coat and protective treatments.
- Maintenance: Annual patching, treatments and repair following weather damage

## **Grants**

There is little overall co-ordination or consistency of conditions between grant-giving bodies, resulting in owners relying on advice from individual conservation advisers, surveyors, contractors, thatchers and insurance companies, all of whom may have only a partial picture of best practice and support available. There is a lack of discernment and agreed standards and in some agencies there are few if any conditions relating to the quality of conservation workmanship or materials used. Some grant-giving bodies (Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Invest NI, Northern Ireland Housing Executive) are not primarily interested in Conservation Standards and this can result in grant-aid having a detrimental effect on the historic integrity of a vernacular roof.

Uptake of the Gaeltacht grants is very low. The requirement of the building occupant to be an Irish speaker in order to avail of the grant may be one reason why this is the case. Although the primary purpose of the Gaeltacht grant is to support Irish speakers, we believe that the vernacular character of the area is a major factor in conserving the cultural landscape. Accordingly we believe that the building, not just the owner, should be seen as the beneficiary of grant aid. Similarly, the occupancy status of a thatched dwelling, whether owner-occupier or rented, uninhabited or seasonally occupied, should not be a deciding factor in conservation grant-aid.

The fact that many vernacular and thatched buildings are not included on the county RPS means that that many important historic thatch roofs are not eligible for Local Authority Conservation Grants. Such additional funding and support could tip the balance in favour of a building being repaired as opposed to inappropriate intervention such as the removal of a historic roof framework.



### **3.00 Issues**

A summary of the issues identified in the research phase of the study can be grouped under five themes

#### **1. Protection**

The available evidence points to a rate of loss of historic thatch roofs that is accelerating at an alarming rate. Immediate protection of remaining historic thatched structures is fundamental to the successful conservation of historic thatch roofs. Protection and conservation practice must be based on information collected through a comprehensive national survey.

#### **2. Knowledge**

There is widespread lack of knowledge 'on the ground' where it really matters, and as a result owners and conservation professionals are not in a position to properly guide correct specification and quality standards. The knowledge of good practice is available, but not disseminated. There is an urgent need for agreed industry standards being widely available.

#### **3. Education and Training**

The need for a comprehensive and practical guidance and training strategy is clearly evident from the surveys, interviews and questionnaires achieved as part of this study.

Education and training needs to be directed towards

- The Thatching trade
- Building owners
- Statutory bodies
- Construction professionals including builders and conservation advisers
- The general public

#### **4. Implementation and Grant Support**

Significant grant-aid on an ongoing basis is required, as the conservation of historic thatch roofs will require the best possible conservation advice and practice together with repair or a new spar coat at regular intervals. Collaboration in the administration and conditions of conservation work and grant support from the different grant bodies will be necessary.

#### **5. Co-ordination**

A body with overall responsibility for the co-ordination of all policies and procedures relating to thatch is required to ensure efficient use of the limited resources for its protection. It should be located in one government agency or department.

In the South at present, the overall policy is to devolve as much responsibility as possible to the regional authorities but the need for centralised co-ordination of policy is clear.

## 4.00 The Action Plan

### Thatch Action Plan

### Theme 1 – Protection

Our review of the available surveys and interpretation of the many variables we encountered in the data indicates that only circa 1300/1500 historic thatched structures survive in Ireland today, representing less than 0.1% of the total building stock.

Of these, some thatch roofs have limited heritage merit with imported reed thatch and the absence of historic underlay or roof framework. In contrast, some of the most historically important thatch roofs now lie under corrugated iron.

Active protection of the extant historic roofs is paramount in a situation where only a small sample of the national vernacular roofs survives. The number need only fall by a further small percentage and there will not be sufficient roofs to support a thatching industry that is skilled in historic thatch techniques.

**Protection of historic thatch roofs can be achieved.**

#### **Action 1.1**

***All buildings where the historic thatch survives should be placed on the relevant Record of Protected Structures (each planning authority has a separate RPS) as soon as possible.***

- A lack of resources has been cited by some counties as the reason for not completing the thatched structures surveys, while other counties openly admitted that thatched buildings would not be their priority, even in some of the 'richest' areas for vernacular buildings. In other counties it seems that the Councils do not yet understand the national value of thatched buildings and are reluctant to add any vernacular buildings to the record. In our opinion, vernacular buildings are grossly under-represented on the RPS, and the low numbers of surviving historic thatch raises their status to one of national importance. This lack of protection must be overcome by persuading Planning Authorities of the value of the remaining thatched buildings and by encouraging them to place all historic thatch structures on the RPS. The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage (NIAH) surveys could be used to identify thatched buildings of regional/national importance and thus make a strong recommendation for them to be included in a RPS. Buildings judged to be of national/international importance can be designated as 'National Monuments' but this is likely to be for the very few seminal buildings of immense historic interest. However, we believe there is merit in establishing a list at a national level to allow a comprehensive overview of the importance of surviving thatch buildings. We recognise this cannot be done under the existing legislation. We regard this as a major impediment to the conservation of historic thatch and an urgent review of the legislation is recommended.

- Establish a comprehensive data base

There are major gaps in the thatched structures database.

- Some counties are not adequately surveyed while others have no studies, records or survey of thatched structures.
- The level of information gathered even on recently completed surveys is neither comprehensive nor consistent. The criteria for identifying historic thatch have not been laid down. The surveys do not identify historic thatch roofs, local variations of style within counties and do not suggest dates for the oldest layers of thatch. The surveys do not establish a significance rating based on the age of the roof, the number of coats of thatch, the rarity or typicality of materials, the rarity or typicality of the thatching style, the rarity of thatch buildings at townland and parish level. The surveys do not employ agreed standard terminology for thatch or for other features of vernacular buildings.
- There is little or no existing documentation relating to buildings with thatch surviving under tin or corrugated cement.

- There are no agreed criteria for 'listing' of vernacular buildings that recognise the value of regional and local variations.

The importance of the remaining thatched houses of Ireland is such that a comprehensive, detailed thatch survey is justified. This should be carried out in a single year, as a matter of urgency. The survey must have agreed aims, standard definitions and terminology and detailed responses on all aspects of style, materials, techniques and dates. The survey should specifically seek and record information relating to local variations and local terms for thatch, thatching implements, materials, methods, styles and finishes.

Surveys must be regularly checked and updated and therefore on-going commitment is required. Surveys must be carried out by professionals who have an expert knowledge of vernacular roofs and who can identify all elements of historic thatch whether roof framework, underlays, thatching materials, methods, techniques, styles and finishes.

#### **Action 1.2**

***The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Environment and Heritage Service should commission or facilitate through the Heritage Council and Local Authorities, a systematic comprehensive survey of thatched structures in Ireland to include the collation of all existing surveys, together with an analysis of the new information to identify regional and local characteristics.***

In the North, the second *Survey of Historic Buildings* should be completed soon with information on materials and styles collected for all thatched buildings. There is evidence to suggest that the substantial grant-aid has stabilised the numbers of thatched structures but in our view emphasis needs to be placed in the future on ensuring that the local thatching traditions are respected and conserved. A review of thatch grant aid over the last twenty years is part of that survey and the results should be instructive in terms of longevity of repair work, materials used, costs etc.

#### **Action 1.3**

***The Environment and Heritage Service should proceed to publish the results of their detailed survey of thatched structures.***

All owners of thatched structures need to be made aware of the heritage value of their property to avoid any inadvertent damage. This could best be done quickly by publishing a short leaflet describing the state of thatched buildings in Ireland, the protection afforded by the legislation, with a directory of sources of advice and information. This action is seen as a 'stop-gap' measure that can be quickly implemented until a full protection and advisory service is in place.

#### **Action 1.4**

***The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Environment and Heritage Service should commission an illustrated leaflet describing the state of thatched buildings in Ireland, the protection afforded by the legislation and sources for advice and information. It should be aimed at owners and all relevant conservation and grant-aiding bodies in order to raise the levels of awareness regarding the heritage value of thatch. The leaflet should be regarded as an initial provisional measure until full protection and survey information is available.***

### Information gathering as a reference base

As the situation is currently characterised by a lack of authoritative information and conflicting claims the collation of a comprehensive 'state of the art' database is crucial. This should consist of: -

- **Knowledge of the local thatching traditions**  
This will be achieved through the new survey as identified in Theme 1, together with the collation of all previous surveys and other existing documentation, and interviews with active and retired traditional thatchers.
- **Knowledge of available thatching materials**  
The types, quantities and seasonality of availability, cost and quality of materials should be established. The current position has been to a degree established as part of this study.
- **Directory of Thatchers**  
A directory of thatchers has been compiled as part of this study. The directory should be published as a service to building owners and to encourage more thatchers to participate in the initiative.
- **Thatching details, specifications and standards**  
As the basis for preparing the *Irish Thatching Handbook*, see Theme 3.
- **Insurance**  
Availability and an understanding of cost factors should be addressed. Advertise in trade journals to identify further brokers and companies.

#### **Action 2.1**

***A centralised database should be established as a repository for all information relating to historic Irish thatch, regularly updated with an efficient system of information dissemination. The 'Irish Thatch Advisory Group' as recommended in Theme 5 would provide the 'home' for the database. The Department of Irish Folklore at UCD should be asked to record interviews with active and retired traditional thatchers.***

### Thatching Materials

The removal of barriers to the provision of traditional thatching materials as identified in the Thatcher's Questionnaires could be achieved, for example, in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture. The Department itself and its agencies such as TEAGASC and schemes such as REPS have the capacity and structures to provide support and expertise in the matter of growing local materials such as the encouragement of the growing of cereal crops for the provision of thatching straw. Positive measures such as the EU re-classification of cereals grown for the provision of thatching materials would exclude such cereal growing from quota restrictions and reduce the challenges faced by thatchers in locating good quality straw for thatching.

There is a need for authoritative testing of thatching materials and water reed in particular to ensure an efficient supply of locally grown materials and to identify and remediate quality issues where they arise. Research achieved for this study indicates that the two most important factors underlying the quality of water reed are water quality and annual winter harvesting. The importation of water reed poses a threat to the sustainability of local reed beds. When harvesting ceases, reed beds deteriorate rapidly. Water reed quality also depends on controlling water levels. Similar issues arise as regard to the coppicing of hazel and willow for rods, spars and scollops.

Specific actions would include:

The encouragement of the growing of thatch materials in Ireland

Current situation

- i. The close working relationship between thatched house owner, thatcher and supplier of materials exists only in a small number of cases.
- ii. The thatching industry is not formally organised and it does not have a system of co-operation and networking. It is made up of individuals who operate separately.
- iii. Imported water reed is readily available in large quantities and is roof-ready i.e. it requires minimum preparation. It is perceived to be of superior and reliable quality, but there is some evidence that standards are declining or becoming more variable.
- iv. The study has identified a significant number of small-scale cereal growers, and a number of harvesters of good quality water reed that is cut by hand in the traditional manner. These suppliers are not guaranteed a market and find it difficult to sustain their local small-scale traditional operations against the large-scale industrial style businesses that import thatching materials.

Proposed Measures

It is suggested that TEAGASC and the Department of Agriculture would play an important role in implementing these initiatives.

- A. A grant-aid scheme for historic thatch roofs that requires the use of local materials, as a condition of good practice, will encourage the use of home grown material.
- B. A guaranteed market will encourage more growers of good quality materials. The provision of storage for un-sold stocks would facilitate existing growers and encourage new growers.
- C. The development of an Irish Seed Savers Association initiative would ensure that adequate stocks of grain of cereal strains suitable for thatch are available.
- D. The establishment of a point of exchange where thatchers could indicate their needs and growers can provide materials accordingly.
- E. Setting a programme of planting trials for testing and promotional purposes.
- F. The proper maintenance and management of reed beds and coppices through active intervention in order to ensure water quality and best practice in harvesting.
- G. The promotion of collaboration between landowners, reed bed harvesters and the state's Wildlife Services in order to ensure quality habitats generally, and estuarine habitats in particular. Environmental designations such as SACs and SPAs provide positive habitat conservation and management structures for new working partnerships for the sustainable development and management of reed beds.
- H. Examples of international best practice in the renewal and management of reed beds should be examined. England and France provide good examples for case studies where both the improvement in water quality and reed bed management have increased the supply of quality local reed for thatching.
- I. A number of the most important Irish reed beds and the harvesters associated with them should be identified and selected to participate in a pilot initiative to guarantee excellent quality reed for historic thatch roofs. The selected reed beds would be geographically spread throughout the country to include those areas where reed is a traditional thatching material such as the Shannon Estuary, the River Suir, the Blackwater River and Ballysodare Bay. The pilot project could be implemented through a number of water and wildlife heritage and environmental agencies such as the DOE/HLG Parks and Wildlife Service and EHS (natural heritage) through local rangers and regional managers in the context of SPA/SAC designations, the EPA, and the Wildlife Officer of the Heritage Council.

- J. The production of quality straw suitable for use on historic thatch roofs could be encouraged by including the growing of appropriate crops as a *Measure* in the EU/Department of Agriculture Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS) and ESA (Environmentally Sensitive Areas) Schemes. The existing *Conservation of Farm Buildings Measure* could be adapted to play a pro-active role in the conservation of historic thatch.
- K. Study and collation of historic survey material such as held in the UCD Folklore Department, Ulster Folk Museum etc would reveal specific information of the types and strains of historic crops.

**Action 2.2**

***The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and the Environment and Heritage Service should liaise and collaborate with other relevant departments and agencies to support the development of the production of thatching materials. In the South this could be delegated to the Heritage Council.***

The publication of ‘The Irish Thatching Handbook’, a handbook of thatching details, specifications and standards, with an emphasis on regional styles and traditions would provide a fundamental service in ensuring the future of historic thatch structures.

The clear role of the Handbook is to firmly establish the importance of thatch in the minds of all those involved whether thatchers, owners, building and conservation professionals, statutory bodies and the public in general.

It is proposed that the book is prepared on a ‘commercial’ basis with an author selected by an expert panel who would act as a steering group to guide the publication process. We suggest that the Heritage Council is best placed to facilitate this publication, supported by information supplied from EHS, OPW and DOEHLG.

The availability of the unparalleled research and survey information would give the handbook an authority that would make it marketable far beyond the ‘direct’ market of owners and associated contractors and professionals.

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**Action 3.1**

***The Heritage Council is best placed to commission the publication of The Irish Thatch Handbook with support from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, OPW and the Environment and Heritage Service.***

The handbook can become the basis of a wide-ranging Education Programme comprising

- Intensive training for Local Authority Conservation Officers
- Workshops and Practical Training Days (cf. Mourne Heritage Trust)
- A forum and newsletter for owners, the thatching trade and professional advisors to keep up to date with developments such as insurance availability, identification and conservation of historic thatch, the care of vernacular buildings
- Open days and site visits to projects in progress

**Action 3.2**

***An education and training programme aimed at Local Authority Conservation Officers to ensure agreed standards and criteria. This programme could be run by experts in historic thatch roofs and approved thatchers with support from the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, OPW and the Environment and Heritage Service. The programme would include Workshops and Practical Training Days (cf Mourne Heritage Trust). University courses in relevant subjects could be incorporated into this programme to encourage research and study.***



**Support and training for thatchers**

Previous policy documents and discussions papers have suggested supporting the establishment of a 'trade body' to co-ordinate and represent the views of thatchers. Having interviewed a number of thatchers we do not believe this is a feasible and sustainable way forward as the industry is characterised by self-employed thatchers or small companies, highly competitive with wide-ranging and strongly held views. There is little likelihood of a single common voice and resources could be wasted trying to achieve one.

We favour an apprentice scheme to encourage the training and development of a cohort of new thatchers supported by FAS/CITB, co-ordinated by the Irish Thatch Advisory Service as proposed in Theme 4. CITB support apprenticeship schemes in the North of which the most relevant is the recently established stonemasons apprenticeship scheme. Run from Armagh College of Further and Higher Education, this works by stone masonry companies agreeing to take on an apprentice with 'day release' to college. Minimum numbers of circa fifteen participants is required to make the course viable. The emphasis here must be one where knowledge of historic thatch and the skills of traditional thatching materials and styles will be passed on by those traditional thatchers currently practicing in Ireland. It is critical to the success of the conservation of historic thatch to identify a structure to facilitate the involvement of older individual thatchers in the practical 'on-the-job' training of apprentices. We suggest that this apprenticeship scheme should be co-ordinated by the Irish Thatch Advisory Group who would 'place' apprentices with recognised expert thatchers. The new HLF Bursary Scheme for traditional skills training could provide a funding source for NI based apprentices.

**Action 3.3**

***The Department for the Environment Heritage and Local Government with support from OPW and EHS should enter into discussions with FAS and CITB to establish the potential of a Thatching Apprentice scheme which would include on the job training with approved experienced thatchers. If an Irish based scheme should not prove viable, scholarships could be offered to Knuston Hall Training College in England followed by a placement with an approved thatcher skilled in Irish traditional style.***

If best conservation principles are to inform the styles and materials to be used in historic thatch buildings in order to ensure a future for a viable repository of tradition and knowledge, it is evident that substantial grant-aid is justified.

Grant support can be directed in a number of ways.

- Grants offered to building owners
- Direct assistance to thatchers
- Support the growing of materials.
- Subsidisation of apprenticeships

At present, grant support is confined to building owners. Thatching grants in NI are available from Northern Ireland Housing Executive, EHS and Invest NI. In the South the DOEHLG, the Heritage Council, the Local Authorities and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs give financial support for the renewal and repair of thatched roofs. Criteria for grant eligibility vary between granting agencies. In many instances no conservation conditions are applied to the re-thatching of historic thatch roofs. The absence of conservation conditions from some grant-aid support for thatched roofs is a significant factor in the destruction of historic roofs.

Standard conservation conditions for receipt of grant-aid for historic thatched roofs should be determined and implemented by all grant agencies to ensure best practice in the renewal of historic roofs and to maximise efficiency of support.

#### **Action 4.1**

***There should be a single specification for work to historic thatch that all (all island) regulatory and grant giving bodies will use in their approval criteria. Additional criteria (e.g. Irish speaking Gaeltacht areas) can be used as long as conservation standards are upheld.***

DOEHLG (Architectural Heritage Advisory Unit) will co-ordinate with the other grant-aiding bodies to publish “*Guidelines and Standards for the Conservation of Historic Thatch Roofs*”. The publication will clearly articulate the criteria for establishing historic thatch status. It will create a significance rating ranging from international to local where the rating will inform priorities and levels of funding. The publication will cross reference to specification details in the ‘Irish Thatching Handbook’.

#### **Criteria for Grant Aid**

- The thatch roof conforms to the criteria that define ‘Historic Thatch’ (See *Irish Thatching Handbook*). The proposed intervention consists of repair or re-coating.
- The building qualifies for protection / listing for a reason other than historic thatch and it requires roof replacement. Example: the Hezlett House, Co. Londonderry after a fire.

#### **Other features qualifying for the grant (as well as the thatch): -**

- The roof framework
- Chimneys and gables:
- The provision of temporary protection such as tin, other waterproof sheeting or free standing protective structures as at Grange Bellew Co. Louth. Such structures may be used while awaiting full repair.

**Materials**

- Must be historically justified; either they match the current thatch or an identifiable layer or underlay.
- Imported material should only be agreed to where there is clear evidence that all efforts have been made to procure local material and have proved unsuccessful.

**Notes**

A grant-aid decision should be based on the significance of the thatch. It should not be based on the status, whether economic, social or cultural, of the owner or occupant.

There is considerable cost by the grant giving bodies in administering thatching grants. Under the current situation the grant giving bodies

- Issue specifications and criteria
- Assess and inspect applications
- Assess quotations
- Check quality of work
- Administer grants

These are specialist areas of work and it is fair to say that most officials in all the grant bodies will not have the detailed knowledge of all regional styles etc.

This builds the case for a single panel of specialist advisors that all the grant giving bodies use, backed up by regular CPD events.

**Action 4.2**

***A panel of Historic Thatch Conservation Advisors should be established by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Environment and Heritage Service to advise grant-aiding and regulatory authorities. A programme of standard setting and CPD will need to be set up to maintain and develop standards.***

A panel member would have specific and expert knowledge of all aspects of historic thatch whether of type, quality, source and supply of appropriate materials; of thatching methods, techniques and local styles; of underlays, historic thatch roof frameworks, thatch finishes and protective treatments.

A panel member could be called on to:

- Inspect thatched structures; identify historic thatch and assess significance rating; make recommendations to grant-aiding bodies
- Facilitate and advise owners on repair and maintenance work on protected structures, recommend appropriate traditional thatchers as per local style.
- Supervise conservation of historic roofs.
- Devise and deliver training courses to encourage increase in the use of local styles on non-protected structures and new buildings.
- Identify sources of appropriate high quality local materials. Support growers by providing advice and contact with thatched structures owners and thatchers.
- Compile Conservation Reports where the vernacular roof and building require an integrated conservation plan.

The volume of work generated by this approach would support the growing of appropriate materials, a sustainable number of traditional thatchers and regular delivery of appropriate training. The outcomes will be advantageous to all stakeholders in the conservation of historic thatch roofs whether owners, thatchers, providers of materials, grant administrators and conservation staff of the grant-aiding bodies. Most importantly, the integrity and sustainability of historic thatch roofs will be assured.

**Action 5.1**

***We propose the establishment of an 'Irish Thatch Advisory Group' to advise on all official policies and grant schemes relating to thatched structures and the thatching trade including growers. This Group may be facilitated by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to provide the Secretariat.***

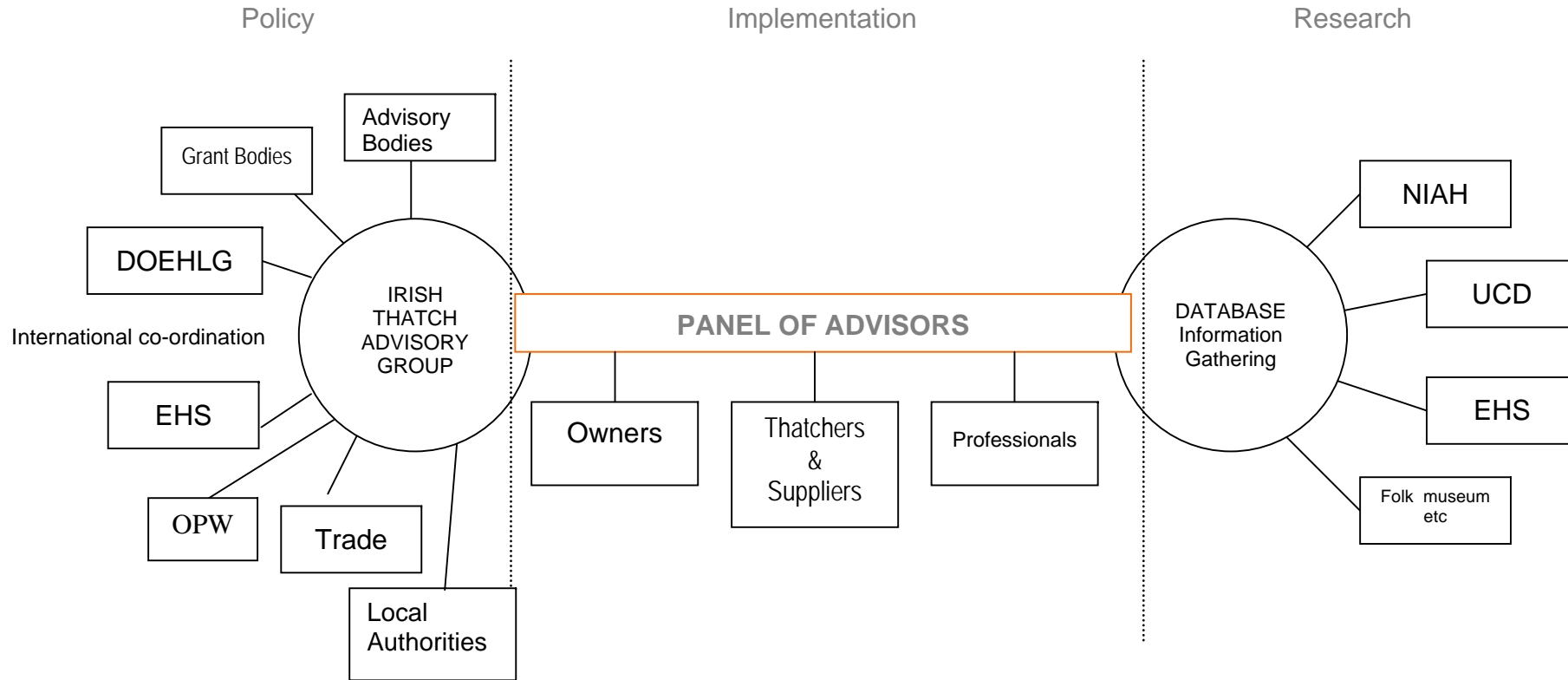
The Irish Thatch Advisory Group is central to the implementation of the Action Plan. The following diagram is an indication of the communication routes needed to ensure a free exchange of good practice and adherence to historic integrity.

The Irish Thatch Advisory Group is set up by and under the direction of DOEHLG and EHS, but membership is widely drawn to ensure agreement on Policy. Membership organisations need to include: -

- Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.
- The Heritage Council.
- Local Authority Heritage Officers.
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive.
- Historic Building Council.

The Policy formulation is also informed by the Research Programme and the Irish Thatch Advisory Group providing the 'home' for the comprehensive database as identified in Theme 2.

The focus of the Group is 'Implementation' – a service to owners, thatchers, growers and professionals, as identified in Themes 3 and 4, delivered by the panel of Advisors appointed by the Group.



## 5.01 Outline Implementation Costs

### Assessment of demand

Say:	- 1300 thatched buildings	
	- biannual maintenance	650 / year
	- re-ridge and repair every 5 years	= 185 / year
	- re-coat every 15 years	= 86 / year

### Average:

- Thatch time:	3 weeks for 2 thatchers say 30p / days / roof	= 2580p / days / year
- Spar coat and ridge time:	1 week for 2 thatchers say 10p / days / roof	= 1850p / days
- Bi-annual maintenance:	1 day for 1 thatcher say 1p/day/roof	= 650/ days

To maintain and conserve current historic thatch in Ireland needs 5080 man-days / year – say 40 thatchers full time. That is the minimum scale of the ‘historic thatch’ industry required or approximately 35 roofs / thatcher.

### Estimate of Costs

Fees for Advisors	€300,000
+ research / training costs – say	€200,000
	€500,000

### Costs of grants based on ‘full’ demand.

Grant for spar coat & ridges say €3000 x 185 / year	= € 550,000
Grant for re-thatching say €7,000 x 86	= € 600,000

TOTAL	€ 1,650,000/year
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## 5.02 Estimate of cost of setting up and running the Irish Thatch Advisory Group

Year 1	Survey and research	€	700,000	
	Start up panel of Advisors	€	100,000	
	Commission Irish Thatch Handbook		30,000	
	Carry on current grant system.	€	1,000,000	*to be checked against records
	Total	€	1,830,000	
Year 2 and following	Panel of Advisors	€	300,000	
	Launch and distribute Irish Thatch Handbook		10,000	
	Research, Training, Education	€	200,000	
	Running costs Irish Thatching Advisory Group	€	100,000	
	Ongoing Survey	€	100,000	
	Grants to Owners	€	1,100,000	
	Total	€	1,8100,00	/ year

Notes: Current dispersed grant aid schemes, if dispensing grant at a level required to maintain the historic thatch stock, would be spending €1,100,000/year, plus grant administration costs.

Commitment needs to be at least 15 years to achieve significant results.



### **5.03 Summary of Action Plan and Programme**

#### **Theme 1: Protection**

##### Action 1.1

All buildings where the historic thatch survives should be placed on the relevant Record of Protected Structures (each planning authority has a separate RPS) as soon as possible.

##### Action 1.2

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Environment and Heritage Service should commission or facilitate through the Heritage Council and Local Authorities, a systematic comprehensive survey of thatched structures in Ireland to include the collation of all existing surveys, together with an analysis of the new information to identify regional and local characteristics.

##### Action 1.3

Environment and Heritage Service should proceed to publish the results of their detailed survey of thatched structures and review of grant statistics.

##### Action 1.4

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Environment and Heritage Service should commission an illustrated leaflet describing the state of thatched buildings in Ireland, the protection afforded by the legislation, and indicating sources for advice and information. It should be aimed at owners and all relevant conservation and grant-aiding bodies in order to raise the levels of awareness regarding the heritage value of thatch. The leaflet should be regarded as an initial provisional measure until full protection and survey information is available.

#### **Theme 2: Knowledge**

##### Action 2.1

A centralised database should be established as a repository for all information relating to historic Irish thatch, regularly updated with an efficient system of information dissemination. The 'Irish Thatch Advisory Group' as recommended in Theme 5 would provide the 'home' for the database. The Department of Irish Folklore at UCD should be asked to record interviews with active and retired traditional thatchers.

##### Action 2.2

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Environment and Heritage Service should liaise and collaborate with other relevant departments and agencies to support the development of the production of thatching materials. In the South this could be delegated to the Heritage Council.

#### **Theme 3: Education and Training**

##### Action 3.1

The Heritage Council is best placed to commission the publication of *The Irish Thatch Handbook* with support from The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, OPW and Environment and Heritage Service.

##### Action 3.2

An education and training programme aimed at Local Authority Conservation Officers to ensure agreed standards and criteria. This programme could be run by experts in historic thatch roofs and approved thatchers with support from The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, OPW and the Environment and Heritage Service. The programme would include Workshops and Practical Training Days (cf Mourn Heritage Trust). University courses in relevant subjects could be incorporated into this programme to encourage research and study.

#### Action 3.3

The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government with support from OPW and Environment and Heritage Service should enter into discussions with FAS and CITB to establish the potential of a Thatching Apprentice scheme which would include on the job training with approved experienced thatchers. If an Irish based scheme should not prove viable, scholarships could be offered to Knuston Hall Training College in England followed by a placement with an approved thatcher, skilled in Irish traditional style.

### **Theme 4: Implementation and Grant Support**

#### Action 4.1

There should be a single specification for work to historic thatch that all (all island) regulatory and grant giving bodies will use in their approval criteria. Such a specification must include regional variations. Additional criteria (e.g. Irish speaking Gaeltacht areas) can be used as long as conservation standards are upheld.

#### Action 4.2

A panel of Historic Thatch Conservation Advisors should be established by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and Environment and Heritage Service to advise grant-aiding and regulatory authorities. The panel would undertake specific commissions on instruction from any one of the bodies. A programme of standard setting and CPD will need to be set up to maintain and develop standards.

### **Theme 5: Co-ordination**

#### Action 5.1

We propose the establishment of an 'Irish Thatch Advisory Group' to advise on all official policies and grant schemes relating to thatched structures and the thatching trade including growers. This Group may be facilitated by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to provide the Secretariat.

## Outline Programme

Start is date of adoption of the report

Action	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
1.1	Commissioning Survey	Database	Survey Update (Annual)
1.2	Commissioning Publication and Dissemination		
2.1	Database Commissioning	Database collation	Database launch
2.2	Establish Study Group	Study Group Report	Testing & Trials
3.1	Commissioning	Publication	
3.2	Training & CPD	Training & CPD	Training & CPD
3.3	Establish Study Group	Study Group Report	Thatch Training Apprenticeship
4.1	Establish Study Group advertise	*1	*2
4.2	Commission Advisors	Advisors available for Call-off commission	Meetings
5.1	Establish Irish Thatch Adv. Gr.	Grant Procedure Launch	Database launch

Note:

Programmes will be ongoing.  
The Outline Programme represents a three year start-up period.

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