Guidance note

Assessing historic assets that are proposed to be demolished or partially demolished

This note, authored by CARE in conjunction with the IStructE and ICE, is intended to provide clear guidance for engineers who are requested to inspect and report on historic assets.

Background

The Conservation Accreditation Register for Engineers (CARE) is a register jointly run by the Institution of Structural Engineers (IStructE) and the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE), with an accreditation process for members who work on historic buildings and assets throughout the UK, and in Ireland, through Engineers Ireland. It is now widely acknowledge by statutory bodies, including local planning authorities, Historic England and English Heritage.

At present, there is no guidance for chartered engineers who are requested to report on historic structures, be it a listed or a non-designated heritage asset, to guide them when demolition or partial demolition is being sought. This has been exemplified by a number of buildings which have been lost, supported by poorly written reports and advice, and which could well have been saved with a well-considered approach, and appropriate experience.

The intended guidance note is set out below, and is likely to be utilised widely when a historic asset is at risk from demolition. This note will be sent to statutory and other interested parties for consultation and endorsement.

Introduction

In England, Wales and Scotland, historic assets include buildings and structures which are listed (Grade I, II* and II in England and Wales; Grade A, B and C in Scotland), scheduled ancient monuments, non-designated heritage assets (those identified by the local planning authority as being of local interest), or assets situated in a conservation area.

The terminology in other jurisdictions may vary, but the principles of how to treat or care for historic assets are likely to be similar. Such buildings are afforded either legal protection, or require consideration, under planning policy. Wherever in the world an engineer is working, they should comply with the local and appropriate jurisdiction.

If an engineer is approached to provide a report on a building where a client or owner is pursuing partial, or full, demolition, then the engineer needs to give very careful consideration to whether such demolition is justified. It should be noted that causing damage to listed buildings, etc. is a criminal offence, and sanctioning unjustified damage may also be considered an offence.

Collusion in building a case for unjustified demolition may be deemed as encouraging a criminal act and certainly breaches professional codes of conduct for engineers.

Competence and experience

The professional codes of conduct of both the IStructE and the ICE require that engineers should **only undertake tasks for which they are competent**. In addition, they must act with integrity and fairness, have regard to the public interest, as well as due regard for the environment and for the sustainable management of natural resources; the latter includes the embodied carbon of existing buildings and structures.

An engineer requested to report in the above circumstances on a historic asset should ensure they have appropriate experience and may find it helpful to explain to their client that they will need to act as an advocate for the building.

The Conservation Accreditation Register for Engineers is regulated by the ICE and IStructE, with the register published on the ICE website (www.ice.org.uk/download-centre/conservation-accreditation-register-of-engineers). Accreditation demonstrates advanced attributes in conservation that exceed those required for professional membership of either institution. This approach is endorsed by the UK government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

If not accredited, an engineer would be expected to demonstrate competence with recent, relevant experience advising on comparable historic assets, including those in poor condition. An engineer without appropriate competence should decline the commission.

Assessing a historic asset

The following steps outline aspects that would be undertaken in a competent assessment:

1) Establish the designation of the asset to understand if it has legal protection. This can be done by accessing online resources or by contacting the relevant local planning authority.

2) Assess the significance of the asset.

3) Review historic information, such as previous planning applications and photographs.

4) Request all relevant information from the client/owner, such as previous reports, drawings and information on risks.
5) Carry out a detailed site inspection to establish the overall condition (both good and bad) of the asset. The inspection should determine whether movement noted is historical or progressive, and whether it can be arrested without the need to resort to demolition. Inspection and assessment can be significantly enhanced by appropriate physical access, such as use of a mobile elevated work platform (MEWP), or visual access via drones, as well as additional surveys, such as verticality and timber decay.
6) Undertake dynamic risk assessments as you proceed in order to determine whether the building is safe to enter or what alternative options can be used to inspect the structure safely. Health and safety must always take priority for such assessments.
7) Always work from the presumption that the asset should be retained unless there is an imminent risk of collapse or third parties are put at risk.
8) Note that temporary works may be required to provide support to allow a full assessment to be made.

Reporting on a historic asset

Any report supporting an application for listed building consent or conservation area consent should include:
1) the brief provided by the client and, if demolition or partial demolition is proposed, the reasons why this is considered necessary
2) an indication of the experience of the engineer in assessing historic assets, including those in poor condition, as well as the engineer's qualifications
3) a clear statement on the status of the building in relation to statutory protection, including a statement of historical significance
4) a clear statement of the areas of the asset that have been structurally assessed and reasons why any areas have been omitted
5) a clear description of the issues arising out of the assessment, with records of measurements taken (where appropriate), photographs to record defects, sketches, etc. This should include areas in sound condition
6) conclusions providing an overall assessment of the condition of the asset, including identification of the major issues, and options for temporary or remedial works if necessary
7) clear justification if partial demolition is deemed necessary, along with drawings, sketches or marked-up photographs to indicate the areas affected
8) clear and concise justification if full demolition is required, setting out the reasons why and alternative options and or temporary works which have been considered. The report should also state whether any parts of the building/structure can be retained/stabilised
9) a non-technical summary to allow non-specialists to clearly understand the conclusions and recommendations.

If any extent of demolition is required, it will be necessary for the engineer, or another conservation professional, to prepare a statement of historical significance and to apply for listed building consent, or scheduled monument consent, as appropriate.

The engineer is strongly recommended to contact the local planning authority at the earliest stage to discuss the asset and to receive the planning authority's advice. If the guidance steps set out above are not followed, the local planning authority is likely to refuse an application. Local planning authorities increasingly require buildings to have been inspected and reported on by a CARE registered engineer.

This guidance note has been prepared on behalf of the Institution of Structural Engineers and the Institution of Civil Engineers. The note is a consultation draft which will be sent to other statutory or interested parties for endorsement.