

STANDARDS IN PRACTICE: THE REGISTERED ARCHAEOLOGICAL ORGANISATIONS SCHEME

Archaeological sites in the UK are protected by varied legislation and by planning guidance and procedures but, in landscapes that are full of the past, it is inevitable that many sites will be affected by the development processes that surround us. To regulate this potential destruction local authorities run curatorial services that vet planning applications and advise on needs for preservation, assessment, mitigation of potential damage or 'preservation by record' (usually through excavation). The work required is undertaken by an archaeological organisation that may be independent or may be attached to a local authority or a university. All such units are run on commercial lines and competition for some projects can be fierce. There will always therefore be some temptation to cut corners or to employ staff at lower rates of pay. Curators will check that individual projects are carried out to the right standard, but how can we be sure that those who are entrusted with excavations follow all the best practices? These include for example correct treatment of finds and archives, a full set of employment policies (from equal opportunities to decent site huts), outreach programmes that serve the public well and, of course, publication that is always prompt and to a high standard.

Regulating the competition

Ensuring these standards are met is the role of IFA's Registered Archaeological Organisations scheme, in existence now for seven years. Like other professional organisational registration schemes, the RAO scheme links the Institute's *Code of conduct* and the actual practice of archaeology by organisations. All Registered Archaeological Organisations (RAOs) have formally resolved to carry out their work in accordance with the IFA *Code of conduct* and other by-laws. Adherence to these principles is reviewed through a regular process of application to the scheme, and there are mechanisms for complaints to be investigated and disciplinary action taken if necessary.

As a consequence, the scheme has performed a key function in the effective implementation of standards. As with individual membership, corporate commitment to the RAOs is a public assertion of the will to implement and develop professionalism within archaeology.

Peer review and continuous improvement

There are currently 47 organisations that have joined the scheme; employing more than 1500 archaeologists they represent a significant proportion



Monuments and excavators both need the protection of guaranteed good practices. Photograph Oxford Archaeology

(approximately 30%) of the people engaged professionally in the active investigation of the archaeological record. The scheme operates on the basis of peer review and a belief that we can all improve the standards and practice of archaeology. Continuous improvement and openness are therefore key principles underpinning the application, inspection and complaints procedure. This is often misunderstood. Conceptions that the scheme should be draconian, operating as a martinet maintaining a permanent vigil are fundamentally flawed.

The scheme's effectiveness as a force for improvement can be demonstrated from a number of perspectives. For instance, through the annual application process it has made over 800 recommendations to organisations for changes in procedure, policy, or employment related matters. In the vast number of cases these recommendations have resulted in positive action; very rarely do the same issues come up in consecutive applications from the same organisation. As a consequence, standards have moved forward for the sector as a whole. For instance, in the past two or three years training and appraisal policies in organisations have been significantly enhanced.

Complaints and corrections

Therefore, quietly and incrementally, the RAO scheme ensures adequate care is taken of our historic environment and that people undertaking the work are treated properly. The lack of noise and bluster should not be mistaken for inactivity. In relation its role as regulator, the RAO Committee takes complaints as a serious issue, although if a case represents a serious breach of the *Code of conduct* it would be referred to a disciplinary hearing. The complaints process looks to openly identify errors and correct them – again this is best achieved in an environment where RAOs feel that a critical but reasonable approach is maintained by the Committee. It is a sign of maturity to accept that where organisations provide professional services (with their consequent

characteristic of high knowledge intensity), there will be service failures. No organisation will ever provide a perfect service every time; the complaints process needs to be understood in this context. Again, outside the limelight, real change has been effected, problems resolved and improvements made.

Expanding registration

The RAO scheme has therefore been a positive force for change; many challenges, however, confront its development for the future. First is the current bias towards contracting organisations in the scheme. While the benefits of the scheme are more obviously tangible to contracting organisations, providing a form of quality assurance for clients, the IFA is determined that the scheme should appeal to the broadest range of organisations that are involved in archaeology: contractors, consultants, curators, universities, museums, government bodies and amateur groups.

The *Code of conduct* is a manifesto to which we can all subscribe, enabling development of a common understanding between all archaeologists. Equally, to the wider community the demonstration of common standards strengthens society's view of archaeology as an activity that has recognised, consensual regulations.

The RAO Committee is aware that it needs to amend its application procedures to make application from a wider number of bodies easier and more transparently relevant. This is a process that we have already begun. We recognise that extending the scheme may take time, but it is a process to which we are wholeheartedly committed.

Here is a truism: all professions must have a significant component of rigorous self-regulation or they disintegrate. The pressures that confront us from the outside are far greater than those from within our sector; it is time to find a common accord. We recognise that the RAO scheme will only flourish if it can appeal to the 'catholic church' that includes not only professional contractors but also amateur groups, curatorial authorities, universities and other institutions. We want your participation and involvement.

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