

Briefing on Local Government Archaeology Services

To inform the Lords Grand Committee debate on 'Protection and improvement of local arts and cultural services including museums, libraries and archaeological services', 30 March 2017, 1pm.

Key facts:

- **Over 90% of known archaeological sites are undesignated and therefore rely solely on the planning system and environmental stewardship for their protection – both systems which require local authority archaeological support and expertise**
 - **There has been a 33% decline in local authority archaeology staff since 2006**
 - **Archaeological advisors lever on average 40 times their annual salary in developer money and create public benefits which are at risk where services are cut.**
- **There is a trend towards less effective service delivery models, which increases risk for developers and weakens heritage protection**

Background to the issue

Archaeological services provide expert advice to local planning authorities and fulfil a vital role in the planning system. They maintain historic environment records (HERs), advise on the implementation of national planning guidance to sustain and enhance heritage assets, monitor compliance with planning requirements including through the use of conditions, and undertake community outreach.

There is a strong consensus in the archaeological sector that the provision of archaeology services and HERs is under severe threat due to financial pressures and the changing nature of local service provision¹. Although the NPPF makes good provision for the protection and investigation of archaeological sites, it is of little effect if there are insufficient archaeological advisors to ensure its implementation. Recent experience shows that when local authorities fail to identify the issues and make planning recommendations, the protection afforded to archaeology falls away quickly.

We need local authority archaeology services in order to;

- Ensure that planning authorities have the expert advice necessary to identify potential historic environment concerns and monitor developer submissions for quality and accuracy, whilst managing attendant risks and minimise costs of challenges and disputes
- Ensure that developments which go ahead are sustainable in the terms of national planning policy
- Reduce the risk that developers will inadvertently have to deal with the conservation of important archaeological remains which have been revealed during the course of construction, when budgets and programmes have been set, thus preventing delays and unnecessary costs
- Uphold the reputations of planning authorities
- Ensure that Government is not challenged on its ability to meet obligations under the Valletta Convention (the *European convention on the protection of the archaeological heritage*)
- Ensure that archaeological sites are saved from being put at risk as local authorities without archaeologists give planning permission without any provision for investigation or protection.

Why are protections weakening?

In spite of the NPPF's requirement for planning authorities to have access to a HER supported by expert advice, there has been a 33.2% fall in staffing numbers within local authority archaeology services since 2006 – from just over 400 to 271 – and they continue to decrease at a relatively steady rate of 3-4% per year². As the economy has recovered since 2008 the construction sector has rebounded and planning applications have increased, with a growing demand for archaeological advice. We are aware of the following problems:

- Planning authorities without access to any archaeological advice (e.g. Middlesbrough)
- Planning authorities with limited access to archaeological advice, unable to cope with current demand (e.g. Lancashire)
- Services under threat of closure
- Services facing severe cuts that will leave them unable to meet future demand
- Services withdrawing from comprehensive services and entering into new models for service delivery which often deliver significantly weaker protections for archaeology.

Key asks:

- The archaeological sector has long pressed government for a **statutory duty on local authorities to maintain historic environment records and the expertise that supports them**. This would ensure that any local authority who, at present, does not fully appreciate the value of archaeology services would be prevented from withdrawing provision. This statutory duty would benefit from a strong statement in national guidance to highlight the need for local authority specialist advisors to ensure that historic environment safeguards are upheld.
- The sector would also like to see changes to planning guidance to include greater specification for what is required of historic environment services. This would help to ensure that local authorities who seek to adopt new service delivery models are not undermining the intention of the NPPF's provision to safeguard the historic environment.
- We fully accept the need for local authorities to adapt to pressures in the current climate. However, it is imperative that **authorities are held to necessary standards** and, where possible, assisted by the archaeological sector and supported by national government and their advisor Historic England in designing and developing models for the future which are fit for purpose.
- We also wish to ensure that Historic England has the strong backing of government in its efforts to deliver on its obligations on this issue, as set out within the Culture White Paper³.

Conclusion

Government has stated many times in recent months that they are committed to upholding protections for the historic environment as set out in the NPPF³. However, without clear action on the situation facing local archaeology services (along with conservation specialists) the viability of the system of protections will be eroded from beneath, leading to harm to the reputation of the planning system, increased risk for developers and a planning system that cannot deliver sustainable development.

References:

1. We commend the work undertaken by John Howell MP and Lord Redesdale in the production of the Report into the *Future of Local Government Archaeology Services* which looked closely at this issue (http://www.appag.org.uk/future_arch_services_report_2014.pdf)
2. Historic England, Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers, and Institute of Historic Building Conservation (2016) *An Eighth report on Local Authority Staff Resources* (<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/eighth-report-la-staff-resources/>)
3. DCMS, *Culture White Paper*, p.36: "Historic England will identify how it can offer more support to local authorities, reduce demand on local services through clearer guidance, and encourage new delivery models that make the best use of resources, in the light of the review of local authority archaeological services."
4. Rt. Honourable George Osborne (2014) *Reply to a letter from The Heritage Alliance* (<http://www.theheritagealliance.org.uk/tha-website/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/GO-to-KP-31-8-15.pdf>)