

STRATEGY WON'T PAY THE MORTGAGE: A VIEW FROM THE NORTH

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My task today is to give you a flavour of the way in which the government heritage agency in a what we are no longer supposed to call "the best small country in the world" is reacting to the recession – or not.

A word about our remit – HS = EH + bits of DCMS and DCLG.

- Heritage policy function working direct to Ministers (recently changed)
- Policy advice to other bits of government in Scotland, e.g. planning
- Designation-specific role
- Operator of visitor attractions
- Managing trunk roads archaeology
- Government grants for historic environment, inc'g archaeology

Our primary role is "safeguarding the nation's historic environment and promoting its understanding and enjoyment."

My starting point is that national agencies like HS are not there primarily to represent those employed in the sector, but to sustain the assets. Of course the two are intimately interlinked, but to a large degree what we may be able to offer by way of mitigation of the impacts of the recession will be done through our traditional roles, both formal and informal.

On the legislative front, Scotland has taken a more gradualist view than has been the case in England. As EH has recently pointed out, much desired reform can be achieved within existing legislative frameworks, and this has been our stance through the debate on heritage protection reform. Although we have not pursued statutory status for HERs, for example, we will be revising existing legislation in a variety of useful ways - and our slot in the parliamentary timetable is still open.

On the planning front, our sequence of events has also been different. Our major planning reforms are enacted, and being rolled out. They will provide a framework for more effective integration of the historic environment into planning and development control, especially lending additional weight to plan policies – there is huge opportunity here to get historic environment built in at the roots of the improved system, where it will be more immune from wayward committee decisions. One obvious area where improvements may well appear quite quickly is in the area of enforcement of planning conditions, for many years a Cinderella topic.

As in England, government planning policy guidance documents are contracting, with our Ministers matching their English counterparts in their enthusiasm for shrinking even the new SPP23 (replacement to our equivalents to PPG15 and 16) and its companions into a much more concise, single, high-level document. With this will come the need to have more lower-level guidance (although I'm not sure whether we will actually call it guidance – perhaps advice?) about process and content.

We are also already seeing Scottish Historic Environment Policy (SHEP) taking its place alongside planning policy on the shelf of government guidance – coming out from behind the skirts of our planning policy colleagues.

This combination of very high level recognition of the needs and potential of the historic environment, coupled with the possibility of infilling the detail with a suite of tailored advice, has real potential to improve performance. Simple, tough, policy-level guidance combined with genuinely useful advice – maybe not so quite frightening as some suggest? Clarity, simplicity, and focusing on the locus are the watchwords of the month, and we are putting a lot of work into clarifying and simplifying roles and responsibilities, and avoiding double-handling.

The key to the success of archaeology in the planning process has always been the progress that we make in achieving recognition of its relevance and the sound integration of expertise into the mainstream of planning departments. Robust conditions and resolute enforcement remain vital, and that will not change. There is, undoubtedly, going to be pressure on planners to allow corners to be cut, but sound national policies backed up by local action can do much to secure positions. Central government can, and will, intervene through call-in when plan policies or guidance are set aside for expediency, but we will choose our ground with care.

My development assessment colleagues report the same levels of reduction in planning applications and statutory consent cases, but interestingly a sharp increase in work on environmental assessments and strategic assessments – suggesting that the historic environment is really getting upstream.

Speaking of streams, and trite as it may be, I have long thought we have a lot to learn from sewage. No amount of economic justification, recession or not, will get a development through planning with inadequate sewerage. We need to be working even harder to ensure that our planning colleagues consider archaeological mitigation just as vital as waste water drainage. Perhaps we need to stop trying to be sexy and try being a little more pungent.

One key way in which central government can support local government and the sector more generally is to lead by example. We are currently refreshing and restating the “protocol” – the principles by which government departments are held responsible for proper care of their own historic estate and for adequate consideration of its needs during planning of activities and mitigation during works. Part of our work involves ensuring that the whole historic environment is taken into account, not just designated monuments and buildings. This involves asserting the social value and economic potential of historic assets rather than simply stating their intrinsic worth. The recession is going to make us all think harder about values as well as costs. Brass tacks rather than gold-plating.

The recession might actually be good for some aspects of the historic environment itself. Refurbishment of existing buildings, rather than demolition and greenfield replacement, is already firmly in the frame. The combination of recession and climate change awareness may offer real synergies, for example speeding up the adoption of realistic whole-life energy costing. This might suggest that buildings archaeology is as good a place to be as any. Threats from speculative house-building will certainly reduce in the short term at least. Yes, there will be a loss of mitigation work, but operating margins have always been squeezed in this sector, so its loss may mean little in terms of profit and loss – although much in terms of turnover. It does seem that this is the area where cost-over-quality pressures have been greatest in recent years.

Putting on another hat, as owners, in the work on our own estate, in “Ministry of tidy ruins” mode, we will certainly be ensuring that archaeological standards do not slip, despite serious cashflow reductions caused by a fall in visitor numbers. We are looking at how we can package bundles of necessary maintenance to offer an attractive investment for any Minister wanting to promote local skills, with training and upskilling offered by working alongside our experienced craftsmen.

As employers, in terms of our own staffing levels, most vacant posts are being frozen for the foreseeable future – exhibiting that stagnation of employment to which Kenny Aitchison has drawn attention elsewhere, with each individual pressed to do more work more concisely. There are inherent dangers for standards here, of which we are acutely conscious.

Likewise, on the trunk road programme, where we manage the archaeological requirements for our sister agency Transport Scotland, we can and consciously will ensure that the government does not try to build its way out of recession at the cost of poorly served heritage. The programme of archaeology conducted in advance of the building of the new Parliament building at Holyrood has been a very useful object lesson that even Ministers are not immune!

Speaking of public works, one area where I think we would all welcome clarity is exactly how, when or if some of the central government ideas about using infrastructure projects to help fuel the recovery will be firmed up. As one involved in scoping such projects, personally I remain sceptical about how fast large projects can be brought forward, and indeed what good it will do. There is a real danger, if projects due to start in say 2105 are brought forward to 2012, that the construction sector will overheat when the brought-forward work meets the green shoots of the recovery.

The real challenge here is maintaining the capacity of the commercial archaeological sector. If practitioners leave or are forced out now, there may not be enough to go round when development begins to take off. As our first speaker has pointed out, recovery will happen – the problem is knowing when and being ready to meet it. Business restructuring may be forced upon us, but it needs to encompass a recovery strategy rather than just being survival tactics. That is not going to be easy, for anyone. We may talk optimistically of the recession as allowing a period of upskilling, yet on Thursday last week Skills Development Scotland, the lead skills agency for Scotland, announced a restructuring of their workforce with 400 voluntary redundancies. None of us, as I said, is immune!

To conclude on that note, on my return to Edinburgh, tomorrow I expect to learn how much less money we will have for the Archaeology programme in 2009-10 than we had this year – probably a cut of around 20-25%. So for those who think they would like to get out of the commercial sector and into community archaeology or research, I’ll close by sharing with you the rationale on which the pain of cuts and cancellations will be spread. I suspect they will have a lot in common with other major grant giving organisations. You’ll see note that capacity, community and continuity are the focus:

The dispositions we recommend will try to protect the following:

- Projects on sites which are under imminent threat of destruction
- involving voluntary or community groups and/or smaller heritage/conservation trusts.
- Projects where the HS grant input is a relatively small percentage of a complex funding matrix, which might unravel if we withdraw.

- Projects where we have a legal or strong moral commitment to continuing – for example where work is being done by grant-aided research students on time-critical research degree schedules.
- Projects with a well-publicised commitment to a specific start date for fieldwork.
- Projects whose deferment might trigger the collapse of a trust or company.

The converse of these considerations must apply, and so any reductions will therefore impact hardest upon:

- Projects where there is little or no public/community engagement or outreach.
- Projects undertaken by large official/academic institutions whose stability is not in doubt - even when these projects are of high importance to HS and partners.
- Projects where HS is the sole or major source of shared funding.
- Services where HS provides centralised support to local authorities or to project directors on a call-off or ad hoc basis.
- New (or revived backlog) projects where no commitment of any sort has yet been made to start-up in 2009-10.

We believe the above premises represent a responsible way of structuring the difficult decisions to be taken – but that does not mean that I will enjoy making Tuesday's bad news phone-calls.