

THE ARCHAEOLOGY FORUM

a grouping of independent bodies concerned with archaeology

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LOCAL AUTHORITY HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SERVICES

I hope that you will recall that when you met with representatives of The Archaeology Forum on 16 November 2010 we discussed the essential role played by local authority historic environment services, and their vulnerability in our current economic circumstances. Of particular interest to the Forum is the work of archaeology officers, who, in addition to their management of Historic Environment Records, their work with local communities and their strategic and plan-making duties, are also responsible for identifying development proposals that have archaeological consequences and for advising planners and developers on appropriate mitigation.

Almost all of the advice given by archaeological officers is concerned with undesignated heritage assets (which comprise 90%+ of the total resource). It includes agreeing with the applicant a programme of archaeological work to inform the planning decision, and when necessary scoping out the necessary programme of archaeological investigation, analysis, publication and archiving, to ensure that sites and buildings are not destroyed by approved development without being researched and recorded.

Archaeological officers cannot, however, provide that front-line protection, nor maintain the all-important HER, if they don't exist. The latest statistics have just been published and make worrying reading (www.helm.org.uk/LASR). These show that the number of staff is falling while the number of planning applications is rising – trends that we know are continuing and

which will put ever-increasing pressure on remaining staff. We know local authority services are adapting to working with fewer resources, but we fear that the anticipated continued increase in development will result in poorer service provision and a loss of protection to archaeological sites and other heritage assets. In addition, behind the steady downward trend in the number of specialist advisers lie signs of a looming crisis through decreasing numbers of local services. We know of more than one authority that has chosen to dispense with any archaeological cover, and several others are considering following suit. We believe that to do so would be a great disservice to Council Tax payers, and would prevent the authorities from meeting the requirements of PPS5, or delivering the advice and protection the NPPF envisages. We also understand from recent experiences that re-establishing archaeology services that have been dispensed with and restoring the appropriate level of protection for archaeology is considerably more expensive than maintaining the services.

We know that you have worked hard to try to protect the historic environment, and the services that manage it, through the NPPF drafting process and on other occasions. We are most grateful for this, and would support you in your continuing efforts. I enclose a copy of the Forum's briefing note on the value of archaeological services, should it prove useful in your discussions with DCLG and others. Amongst other issues it focuses on ensuring the necessary country-wide infrastructure is in place to ensure good planning and the appropriate treatment of the undesignated heritage that is so often of national as well as local importance.

We recognise that Government is attempting to secure the future of local authority historic environment services through the NPPF. At this stage we are unsure whether these provisions will prove to be sufficiently robust, and it may be that Government will have to return to the Forum's preferred solution of placing a statutory requirement on local authorities to have access to such services – a provision in the Heritage Protection Bill that gained cross-party support and was found not to place any significant extra burden on most authorities.

We will also continue to work with colleagues in the sector to monitor the situation in local authorities and address problems as they arise – including seeking the views of local communities affected – and will liaise with English Heritage and your Department where there are policy implications.

In the mean time, if we can help in any way, or if you have any advice for us, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Peter Hinton
Convenor