

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

RESPONSE TO CWaC CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL SERVICES 2015

1.0 Repetitive Consultation

- 1.1 Our comments are confined to museums and the Historic Environment Team. The Chester Archaeological Society responded at length to the consultations on these services in 2014 (see [Response to CWaC Growth & Prosperity 'New Ways of Working' Consultation](#) and ['Chester: Exploring the Evolution of an English Frontier City': A New Vision in Response to CWaC Archaeology Service Users Consultation](#)). We consider that our earlier views are still relevant, and members and officers are referred to them. We therefore do not propose to respond in detail to the present consultation but merely to draw attention to a number of important points.

2.0 The Importance of Heritage

- 2.1 Of all the Council's leisure and cultural services, we consider that Chester's heritage has by far the greatest potential for bringing tourists (and their money) into the borough and encouraging them to stay, as well as being a source of interest, pride and identity to residents. The benefit of heritage in terms of life satisfaction (which can also be measured in financial terms) has been well documented in *Heritage Counts*. Thus high-quality heritage services can be considered an investment. Despite this, we consider that CWaC has lost its way in heritage matters: staff cuts have already been savage (which in fact limits the potential for using volunteers in some areas); the loss of expertise makes earlier achievements such as the EU-funded Portico interpretation project on the City Walls difficult to repeat; and we see no public signs of direction or joined-up thinking.

3.0 Museums

- 2.1 Here we are concerned with the Grosvenor Museum in Chester. In our view this should be the 'hub' museum for the borough, should tell the whole story of the city, neighbourhood and region up to the present day (including the exhibitions of recent history currently staged at Chester History and Heritage) and should serve as a starting point for discovery. The present museum building is admitted not to be fit for purpose and a new or considerably enlarged building is needed.

4.0 Historic Environment Team

- 4.1 The most urgent task for the Historic Environment Team is the publication of unpublished excavations carried out in Chester from the 1960s onwards, followed by the synthesis of more recent developer-funded excavations; both of these would have a major impact on our understanding of the history of the city. The next priority is to ensure that this knowledge reaches the wider public through appropriate interpretation projects, reinforcing local identity. Such a programme would also provide a steady stream of opportunities for special exhibitions, generating news and income.

5.0 Management, Networking and Strategy

- 5.1 To reflect the many and varied benefits of the subject, we consider that CWaC should appoint a high-ranking officer with a deep understanding of heritage to provide professional leadership, reporting directly to elected members. S/he should coordinate not only the work of the Museums Service and Historic Environment Team but also Archives, the Archaeological Planning Advisory Service and Conservation. S/he should also liaise as necessary with external bodies such as Historic England, the University of Chester, commercial heritage and archaeological organisations and local societies. Far from being cut, staff should be nurtured and strengthened.
- 5.2 There needs to be an overarching vision and strategy for Chester's heritage. The Chester Archaeological Society has just published a draft document [Two Thousand Years of An English Frontier City: Protecting, Understanding and Helping People to Appreciate Chester's Heritage](#), in the hope of stimulating serious debate on this subject.

6.0 Funding and Means of Delivery

- 6.1 We do not propose to take a firm position on this matter. Council expenditure on heritage services should be seen in the context of the actual and potential financial benefits. Moreover, other local authorities have succeeded in winning substantial external funding both for constructing new museums and for archaeological projects, and CWaC should learn from their experience. Regrettable though it may be, it might be possible to charge for admission (at least for visitors from outside the borough) to a new, vastly improved museum. The recent failure of CoSocius should be learnt from. It should be remembered that fully outsourced, commercial organisations would tend to 'follow the money', and that might not be consistent with any local agendas. Rather, for organisations so fundamental to local character and identity, external funding should be sought that take them in the direction in which they ought to travel. Useful advice gained from hard-won experience might usefully be sought from professional bodies such as the Museums Association and the Society of Antiquaries of London.

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