

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

COMMENTS ON LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL DECISION TO FREEZE ITS HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT RECORD AND ABOLISH ITS ARCHAEOLOGICAL PLANNING ADVISORY SERVICE

Summary

The Chester Archaeological society strongly urges Lancashire County Council to reverse its decision to freeze its historic environment record and abolish its archaeological planning advisory service.

This decision is contrary to the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework; it is likely to lead to poor quality planning decisions and the permanent loss of elements of the historic environment, to the detriment of the present and future generations; it will progressively reduce the capacity of the historic environment to contribute to prosperity and public well-being; and its contribution to the Council's spending priorities will be minimal.

Detail

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Chester Archaeological Society concerns itself not just with Chester but with the whole of Cheshire and neighbouring areas. The historical counties of Cheshire and Lancashire share a long boundary, intertwined histories and have a number of joint societies; thus this decision is a matter of legitimate concern for the Society.
- 1.2 We understand that, in response to budgetary pressures, the County Council intends to close five museums, freeze its historic environment record (HER) and abolish the associated archaeological planning advisory service. Here we wish to focus on the HER and the archaeological planning advisory service and to urge the Council in the strongest terms to reconsider.

2.0 The Importance and Benefits of HERs and Archaeological Planning Advice

- 2.1 HERs maintained by qualified staff are fundamental to knowledge of the historic environment of an area; they are thus vital a) to the planning process, to ensure sustainable development; and b) to the preservation, investigation and interpretation of that environment for the benefit of present and future generations.
- 2.2 The importance of HERs and the need for local authorities to have access to them is stated unequivocally in the *National Planning Policy Framework (2012) (NPPF)*, para 169:

Local planning authorities should have up-to-date evidence about the historic environment in their area and use it to assess the significance of heritage assets and the contribution they make to their environment. They should also use it to predict the likelihood that currently unidentified heritage assets, particularly sites of historic and archaeological interest, will be discovered in the future. Local planning authorities should either maintain or have access to a historic environment record'.
- 2.3 Heritage in general makes a significant contribution to economic development and social well-being: see *Heritage Counts 2014: Section 1. The value and impact of heritage* (<http://hc.historicengland.org.uk/content/pub/2190644/heritage-counts-national-2014.pdf>). For example, on page 7 it states: 'The impact of heritage visits on life satisfaction was found to be slightly higher than the impacts of participating in sport and the arts'. On page 3 it states: 'Visiting heritage is worth £1,646 p.p. per

year. Sport is worth £993 p.p. per year in terms of impact of wellbeing'. Properly staffed HERs are fundamental to the understanding and enhancement of heritage sites and to the recognition of such sites in the future.

3.0 The Risks of Freezing the HER and Abolishing the Archaeological Planning Advisory Service

- 3.1 Freezing the HER (and thus allowing it to become out of date) and abolishing the archaeological planning advisory service carries with it risks for the local authorities involved:
 - 3.1.1 It will become progressively harder for local authorities in the county to distinguish between legitimate historical concerns and 'nimbyism'.
 - 3.1.2 Developments are likely to be permitted which are not sustainable in terms of meeting the requirements of NPPF.
 - 3.1.3 There could well be disruption to construction when unanticipated archaeological remains are discovered.
 - 3.1.4 Archaeological sites will be at risk, either through being destroyed or severely damaged when that damage could have been mitigated; through inadequate investigation; through inadequate reporting of results – all as a result of no or minimal specialist advice. It should be remembered that the historic environment is irreplaceable: 'Once it's gone, it's gone forever'.

4.0 Organisation and Funding

- 4.1 We recognise that with two tiers of authorities, most planning decisions in Lancashire will probably be made by district councils. Nevertheless, strategic decisions will be made by the county council. Thus, all councils in Lancashire need access to an HER and an archaeological planning advisory service. It makes sense both in terms of effectiveness and efficiency for there to be one HER and one service, financially supported by all the councils in Lancashire, rather than expecting each council to maintain its own record and service.
- 4.2 In the Council's reply of 18 January 2016 to Dr Mike Nevell, Chair of Council for British Archaeology North-West, on this subject it states that in future the HER might be managed 'at no cost to the County Council'. If the Council can find external funding for a professional service, that is fine, so long as it does not involve conflicts of interest. If, however, the implication is that volunteers may be used, then again there are risks: volunteers make a valuable contribution in the heritage field but they do this under the guidance of professionals, not as a substitute for them. Legally, where would planning officers stand if they based their decisions on poor-quality information in the HER provided by unqualified personnel? (see also 3.1.1 above).
- 4.3 One cannot disagree with the Council's stated priority of protecting vulnerable people'. However, in all local authorities, archaeology sections are small and social care costs are vast: the two activities are on different scales of magnitude. In Lancashire the Council for British Archaeology quotes £100,000 for heritage vs £383m for adult social care. It is difficult to avoid feeling that the loss of £100,000 will make little difference to social care outcomes but a lot to heritage and the long-term attractiveness of the county as an attractive place to live, work and visit.

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