



Wales Senedd Members

By Email

JL/H086/WH

24th June 2024

Dear Member of the Senedd

Ahead of the debate in the Senedd on 26th June. We are seeking your support to address the severe cuts to our heritage and culture in Wales. Prospect union represents over 10,000 members in the heritage, culture and arts sector in the UK.

I would like to provide you with some lived experience from our members on the effect the cuts have had to their work and the impact this has for Wales and future generations.

Before I move to that I would like to make the contextual point on the impact for each institution in having to find the savings in such a short period of time. The 10.5% budget cut announced by Welsh Government just before Christmas 2023 required senior management in each of the organisations to reach difficult decisions on the future structure to fulfil its key functions within a 3 month period.

National Library Wales

Preventative Conservation. Of the 8 staff in the Conservation Section, 3 have left or will be leaving in the next few weeks. This is having a huge impact on all aspects of conservation and preventative conservation work with staff affected involved in:

- Making bespoke archival boxes to store and protect items in the collections
- Checking and cleaning new accessions to the Library for mould/pests etc.
- Monitoring the environmental conditions in the building and the condition of collections

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- Emergency response to incidents such as water leaks, damage to items etc.

The two staff who make the boxes (in addition to monitoring and emergency response) have left/will be leaving and will be replaced with 1 member of staff.

The one member of staff who was full time in the quarantine/cleaning room (in addition to monitoring and emergency response) has left. This means that there will only be a staff member to undertake assessment and cleaning of new collections for 2 mornings a week.

If either of these two staff members are sick or on annual leave there will be no cover in these roles.

These functions are core to the Library's operation and to the security and safety of the collections. If items with mould or pests within them are taken into the storage areas due to items not being checked or cleaned properly the results would be catastrophic. This isn't a potential threat, it has already happened at Carmarthenshire Archives and the result was that the service was closed for several years with no public access and a huge cost to repair the damage. Items could be lost forever. In addition there is reputational risk if this were to happen at NLW.

A suggested mitigation measure is that the Library could reject valuable collections if they are deemed to be in bad condition or a risk to the existing collections.

Making boxes may seem like a mundane and unimportant function but archival boxes play an essential role in conserving the collections. They protect items from dust, light and form a microclimate so guarding against fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Bespoke boxes prevent damage to items while being moved and used. They were also essential in minimising the damage to collections during the fire at the Library in 2013 protecting valuable collections from the water used to fight the fire. Without them the losses would have been exponentially worse.

Enquiries. We currently have no one dealing with licencing/enquiries for AV material from the Screen and Sound Archive. This is a singleton role as one of the staff left on VS and the other is on maternity leave. We cannot deal with enquiries and licence content leading to a loss of income to the Library and much less exposure of the items in our collections to the public. This is not a function where the enquirer can wait – often the request is to use film that day or the following day. If we cannot make content available to broadcasters Wales history becomes invisible to the public and the stories of the people who made modern Wales – quarrymen, miners, the Greenham Common women becomes hidden.

Born Digital Archives. We currently have 3.25 FTE processing and cataloguing archives and manuscripts (down from 4.25 when a vacant role wasn't filled in 2023). We aren't able to keep up with new acquisitions meaning that somewhere in the region of 70-80% of archival material isn't catalogued and goes straight into the backlog. It is invisible to the public.

We are altering the way we work to mitigate this – by providing a brief high level description for all collections so they will be visible but this will be very little help to an inexperienced researcher having to go through 60 boxes based on a 50 word description.

While this is far from ideal for paper archives, when it comes to digital archives this is catastrophic. With digital files you simply cannot put them in a backlog and expect them to still be usable in 20 years time. We currently have 1 staff member FTE on digital archives (down from 2). There is simply not the capacity to transition to processing born digital archives and the 50 word description method is simply not enough as we need to go through the process of virus checking and transferring all files into archival secure formats

Diversity. We've made huge progress in decolonising our collections thanks to project funding in archives, art and the Dictionary of Welsh Biography. We've made collections which reflect Welsh society better more visible, made valuable connections with communities and added new content to the collections. This is all done on project funding which is coming to an end or will do so soon. Once these roles are lost we will not only stop making progress, we will fall back as we won't be able to maintain these links and the progress made in diversifying our workforce with motivated and newly qualified young professionals will be lost.

National Museum Wales

Two key areas of concern:

1. Loss of specialist staff
2. Increasing struggle to provide the first class visitor experience expected of a national museum.

Many key curatorial staff found their jobs deleted from the new structure, including those responsible for Ceramics, Agriculture and the Rural Economy, Geology and large sections of the Botany department. In addition, we lost our only Archivist. Their skills and knowledge have been built up over many years, much of it specific to Wales. Not easily replaceable.

Conservation section was badly affected yet again. The Conservation Engineer and Conservator – Small Industry Objects were both initially axed. The Chief Conservator (Social History) fell on her sword in an attempt to save these posts.

The Conservation Engineer officer has left. This individual was the only qualified member of staff in the Museum able to sign off our working machinery as being safe to run. He had received specific training in order to fulfil the Museum's statutory requirement under the Provision and Use of Working Equipment Regulations 1998.

Now, if one of our historic working machines stops working or breaks, we have no means to fix it. This impacts visitor experience and our ability to care for our collections as laid out in our Charter. These items cannot be left for months or years until funding becomes available. They will rust, rot, deteriorate and require enormous investment to get working again.

The Principal Conservator Industry is very concerned that these objects could present a risk to visitors and staff if they break down while being operated. This type of work is a scarce skills and we may not be able to find individuals with the skills and knowledge to work on these items, many of which are over 100 years old.

Many activities concerning the conservation/maintenance/display of large objects require two qualified staff members to ensure safe working. Now only have one to cover 4 sites.

We previously had 5 qualified/experienced officers to manage asbestos related items in the museum. We now have only one qualified staff member (the Principal Industry Conservator). Asbestos is found in over 400 of our geology types and many of our social history and industry collections throughout our museums. We don't have an Asbestos Officer and this now galls on one single staff member to oversee this on top of his 'main' job. Many staff now have multiple responsibilities and roles.

Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments Wales

Five people in our organisation took voluntary redundancy, which is about a fifth of our workforce. They were all long-standing members of the RCAHMW team, meaning we lost more than 100 years of experience almost overnight.

We have less capacity to continue survey work. At the moment we can only run a skeleton system of providing good information and advice to the built heritage sector. The limited capacity within the survey team also means that we have less ability to react quickly to heritage at risk – but we are often the only organisation able to record sites and buildings at risk which are not listed or in the listed buildings consent process – and our limited resources mean that we cannot always respond to unexpected events – for example recording a building which has been destroyed by fire or flood.

From the public's perspective, the most notable change to the RCAHMW is the slower service available from the enquiries team, as they have gone from a team of 4 in 2018, to a team of two today. This means that the public reading room is only open for three days a week now, instead of five. Enquirers can also expect to wait five weeks for an initial response now, whereas they used to get an initial response within a week.

Senior management's plan for a long-term solution to this reduction of service is to make more of our records available online, so that people do not have to get in touch with us directly, or visit us in person. Whilst we welcome this plan as a long-term solution, it involves a lot of staff time and resources in the short term, staff time and resources we no longer have.

The two most popular and well used collections we have are the aerial photographs and the site files. We have recently received funding from the Welsh Government to digitise and rehouse part of the aerial photographic collection, but this process takes time, and in the meantime the majority of our aerial photography collections remains insufficiently catalogued and therefore unavailable.

Our aerial photography expert was one of those who took voluntary redundancy, which means we have lost decades of knowledge about the collection, and the remaining staff do not have the capacity to continue making the aerial photographic collection available on request.

Additionally, while we are enthusiastic about making more of our collections available and accessible online, this will require a greater awareness of the copyright implications of individual records. Our copyright expert (who was also our librarian) was one of those members of staff who chose to take voluntary redundancy.

Finally, although any mitigation funding enabling us to recruit members of staff on a short-term basis is welcome and would be put to good use, it is impossible to plan strategically for the long term when those members of staff will have to go by the end of the financial year. Whilst we agree that digitising the collections is the best way to make them accessible in the long term, the work cannot be completed in less than a year.

Concluding comments from Prospect Union

The contribution heritage makes to our society and our economy is immense. The cut in funding in this sector means that it faces a crisis which is especially acute for this year and sadly worryingly chronic for future generations.

Prospect research tells us the heritage sector is a good financial investment returning £5 into the economy for each £1 invested (Prospect High 5 campaign). Cuts to heritage budgets will damage the Welsh economy.

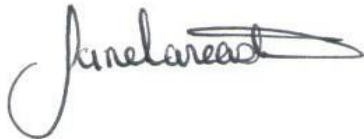
There are becoming accessibility issues to museums and library services and this must be contrary to the spirit of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. Poor accessibility to these sites also affects the visitor experience our concern is people will stop visiting and this will damage our economy and equally important the wellbeing of people. The benefits of heritage and provided experiential opportunities to access and engage in our heritage is not to be underestimated. There are good examples of this:

- a study of cultural engagement in Scotland found that people attending museums or libraries were around 20 per cent more likely to report good health
- another study found that the positive mental health aspects of visiting museums and heritage sites was most pronounced in areas of high deprivation
- a comprehensive review of evidence found that “historic places and assets, and interventions associated with them, can have a wide range of beneficial impacts on the physical, mental and social wellbeing of individuals and communities”

- 80 per cent of people agree that heritage sites and projects make their town or city a better place to live. Key benefits included “supporting local economies, making local areas more physically attractive, encouraging local pride, and increasing social cohesion.”

On behalf of Prospect members in the heritage sector we seek your support and call for investment in this sector. Please support this campaign.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jane Lancaster', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jane Lancaster
Assistant Secretary

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