

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Lynne Rees

My response focuses on the following two questions:

- 1. How appropriate and successful are the current systems employed by the Welsh Government for protecting and managing the historic environment of Wales?**
- 2. What role do local authorities and third sector organisations play in the implementing the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy and what support do they receive in this respect?**

It is impractical that the Royal Commission for Ancient Monuments and CADW remain solely responsible for the protection of heritage buildings and sites. There are buildings within Welsh towns and communities that may not be of unique national significance but are iconic because of their roles in local history.

The recent failed campaign to save Customs/Port Talbot Dock & Railway House in Port Talbot from being completely demolished indicates that the local authority cannot be relied upon to protect its heritage. This was a fine, dressed stone building from the late 19th century that was structurally sound. It was one of the few remaining buildings in the town that documented Port Talbot's contribution to the major industrial developments in South Wales and beyond. It was a building with direct connections to the Talbot family, without whom the town of Port Talbot would not exist.

It sometimes seems that planning, at a local level, often leaves a lot to be desired. Decisions can be driven by party politics or short term financial benefits rather than longer term considerations for the health of a community. If a local authority is not prepared to create its own lists for heritage buildings within its boundaries, can the government intervene? Can the government enforce a compulsory list-making to ensure that buildings of local significance to the community are protected?

Third sector organisations, e.g. housing organisations, can also be driven by the extent of the grant money available for their projects. Whilst the creation of new housing should of course remain a priority, it should not take place at the expense of a community's heritage. The loss of iconic buildings to contemporary and often anonymous replacements risks the eradication of a town's physical history. Could government policy choose to offer more support to housing organisations that work to protect and renovate existing buildings rather than those who wish to demolish them in order to create as many units per square foot as possible?

When we hear the word 'regeneration' we tend to think about the future, how communities can be re-animated and encouraged to move forward. But we are all also products of our

past - we have been shaped by it - and when all links with our history and heritage are broken we become poorer. I trust that the Welsh Government will take the appropriate steps to avoid such loss.

Regards
Lynne Rees