

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Professor J. Smith and Dr Ll. Smith

We write in response to your invitation as Chair of the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee to contribute to the inquiry into Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy. This submission is made by us as persons who served as Commissioners on the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales: J. B. Smith, 1984-98 (Chairman, 1991-8), and Llinos Smith, 2000-10 (Vice-Chairman, 2005-10). Since our retirement from these positions we have kept abreast of heritage papers in the public domain, including the Welsh Historic Environment Assessment Exercise, Final Report, April 2011 (the Chitty Report).

1.0 We wish to respond in particular to the question raised by the Committee as to 'what would be the advantages and disadvantages of merging the functions of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales with the functions of other organisations, including Cadw'. We would strongly oppose any policy that would see the merging of the Commission with Cadw for the following reasons.

2.1 The Commission, an Assembly Government Sponsored Body, is an organisation that reflects the important 'arm's length' principle recognized by UK Governments. The Secretary, its Chief Executive, is invariably a professional archaeologist or architectural historian and answers to a body of Commissioners appointed by virtue of their professional qualifications and experience in archaeology, architectural history or other specialised field relevant to the heritage.

2.2 Cadw, by contrast, from its inception has remained an executive arm of Government and is described as the 'historical environment service of the Welsh Assembly Government'. It has no governing or consultative body comparable to the Commissioners of the Royal Commission or the Trustees of the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts.

2.3 By virtue of its status and structure, the Commission alone of the two major bodies fulfils the requirements of the vital 'arm's length' principle. It provides a means of ensuring that members of staff of a Government-sponsored body do not answer directly to a Government minister, but are able to share their responsibility for the interpretation of the past with persons appointed for their expert knowledge and dispassionate objectivity.

3.0 The Chitty Report examines the workings of Cadw, Commission and Trusts in relation to three key functions, namely Survey and Investigation, Archives and Records, and Public Engagement. It is the Commission and the Archaeological Trusts who provide the power-house in the crucial first two of these functions, the Commission's responsibilities clearly set out in the Royal Warrants of 1908 and 2000.

4.1 We are firmly of the view that precipitate merger of the key organisations would not be of benefit to Welsh Heritage. It would be a decidedly retrograde step and would bring no certainty whatsoever of improved cost-effectiveness in the heritage sector.

4.2 We have had regard to the considerable emphasis laid in the Chitty Report upon the degree to which the Welsh heritage bodies are committed to purposeful collaboration. It was found by the Chitty inquiry that positive reorientation of organisational structure and strategy is already happening in Cadw and the Commission and a number of initiatives are in hand that are addressing gaps and lack of "joined-up" approaches. We would firmly recommend that progress be made towards the fulfilment of the concept of an over-arching 'Historic Wales' identity for historical environment partnerships in Wales. Sustained collaboration will then be possible without incurring the damage to the fulfilment of key functions that could follow forced merger.

4.3 Development along these clearly indicated lines would ensure that no countenance would be given to impetuous propositions such as the suggestion that the National Monuments Record of Wales, the heritage record for Wales for which the Commission alone has the responsibility in accordance with the Royal Warrant of 2000, should be accommodated in the National Library of Wales, and thereby severed from the investigation branch of the Commission. Without constant enhancement from the progressive extension of information and increased knowledge and understanding that stems from the work of the Survey and Investigation branch, the functions of the NMR would be seriously damaged and the fulfilment of its very purpose grievously impaired.

5.0 We recognize the need for innovative change in the heritage sector, and the Chitty Report and other recent papers provide clear evidence that the Commission and the Archaeological Trusts have the resolve to put necessary and advantageous change to effect in an efficacious manner.

6.0 We are at a loss to understand why the issue of any merger has arisen at this juncture, when the Welsh Assembly Government has before it, in the form of the Chitty Report, the findings of a thorough assessment exercise undertaken at the request of the Minister for Heritage, conducted by a panel of distinguished and independent experts in the heritage field, and completed as recently as April 2011. We are convinced that this authoritative report indicates a way forward in Welsh heritage policy that avoids the dangers inherent in the ill-considered proposals for speedy merger, and one which ensures that the capabilities and potentialities of the heritage bodies for Wales are used in a purposeful and cost-effective manner.

We trust that these submissions will be of assistance to the Committee, and we look forward to reading the results of its discussions.

Yours sincerely,

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