

# Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

## Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

### Response from Adam Gwilt (contributing in a personal capacity and as a Friend of RCAHMW)

**Question:** *How appropriate and successful are the current systems employed by the Welsh Government for protecting and managing the historic environment in Wales?*

**Response:**

1. The historic environment is such a broad and multi-faceted concept involving very many tangible and intangible elements and cutting across many subjects and disciplines. Therefore, systems need to be flexible, holistic, creative and integrative - with different organisations contributing their different strengths to the whole.
2. I feel that systems and organisations in Wales have tended to be a little overly administrative and anonymous. There has been an over focus upon threat and damage minimisation, conservation ethics *above all else*, with a predominance on surface landscape and site based survey, quantification and description of the historic resource. These approaches, in some ways, fail to discriminate the exceptional, the distinctive and the important historical resource on the one hand, from the typical, more abundant and perhaps less sensitive resource on the other.
3. In order to effectively and appropriately manage and protect the historic environment, it needs to be well understood and continuously researched. Too little emphasis has been placed upon funding, conducting and attracting research led excavation, an interest in trialling new ideas and thinking and addressing and targeting national research agenda priorities.
4. Archaeological excavation and material culture research provide the fine grained characterisation of places, sequencing and histories (places, objects, people). These projects and studies also have the capacity to connect more directly with ancient people. Stories about peoples and cultural identities are key and relevant hooks for the wider

public and communities of Wales. By inspiring local communities and the wider public, it can be argued that wider popular protection and support for the historic environment will be enhanced and strengthened. Therefore, more focus on these areas are warranted, to act as a dynamo and motivator, ensuring enhanced relevance, profile and protection.

5. The potential limitations and drawbacks of heritage organisations operating directly as part of Government need to be realised and honestly assessed. Organisations which operate at 'arms-length' from Government may derive significant benefits and positive outcomes. It is to be hoped that the enquiry will carefully review options which scope new organisational structures for the future sitting beyond and outside of direct Government control.
6. Current and future systems employed for protecting and managing the historic environment need to be sustainable, looking with a long-term eye upon protection and presentation, rather than with short-term financial and political objectives in mind.
7. There is a considerable and unfortunate current conceptual and geographical disjoint or fault-line in current Government structures and systems in Wales, which isolates the protection of historic and archaeological sites and landscapes on the one hand, from museums and research projects on the other, dealing with material culture and holding artefact collections retrieved from historic and ancient places. For the visitor or user, the experience of the historic environment is a fractured one – places in landscapes barely integrating with collections of objects retrieved from excavations, chance finds or through metal detecting or archives. However, the answer is not, in my view, a pan-merger process into Government, but cross-organisational partnerships, enabling many staff in different organisations to combine and play to their strengths – each organisation being recognised for its niche, role and strengths.

**Question:** *How well do the Welsh Government's policies promote the historic environment in Wales (for instance, in terms of interpretation, accessibility, attracting new audiences and tourism?)*

1. I think the question should equally link *policy* to *practice* – also considering the current barriers and challenges that tend to inhibit integration, cross-organisational & cross divisional collaboration and optimal delivery.
2. From a distance, in recent years, *VisitWales* has not promoted and marketed the historic environment as the 'signature Wales offer'. Instead, active sports, landscapes and food have tended to dominate

media literature and adverts. In my view, Wales is not very strong on pushing the cultural identity message and brand, in order to attract audiences and tourists – for instance, in comparison with Scotland and Ireland.

3. Overall, there would seem to be a long way to go in the journey of improving interpretation and accessibility to the historic environment. However, Cadw, RCAHMW and Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales have all made recent improvements in this area. The picture is piecemeal and patchy though, with scope for improvement though greater collaboration, skill sharing and cross-organisational projects which allow *all* contributing bodies to shine and flourish.
4. Great leaps could be made, if objects and archives could increasingly be connected with visits to sites and landscapes, through creative interpretation, greater use of funded new media schemes, signposting and marketing. In my view, the Welsh Government needs to support, encourage and help interlink national and regional museums and archives into a wider historical network of monuments and landscapes.

**Question:** *How well do the policies for the historic environment tie in with wider Welsh Government policy objectives (such as regeneration of communities)*

1. As above, the question should also link *policy* to current *practice* – considering the current barriers and challenges that tend to inhibit integration, cross-organisational & cross divisional collaboration and optimal delivery.
2. Policies relating to the historic environment would equally appropriately tie in with Government sustainability, learning, skills and cultural objectives. These additional objectives sit very easily within a subject area - looking at continuities and changes in human experiences across time.
3. The Welsh Government needs to continue to foster, support and match-fund major redevelopment projects that have the capacity to generate new skills, jobs and inward investment – even in these troubled times of austerity. However, regeneration is not solely economic – it can also be social, educational, creative and even emotional and spiritual, so Government needs also to look at enabling and funding projects which bring people together, developing skills, community identity and personal learning pathways using and engaging with the historical environment.
4. There is much good work going on within Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, regional museums and local history archives that help to develop skills, confidence, community identity and

participative engagements with the past. However, these areas seem only loosely to be tied into policies on the historic environment *per se*. Another encouraging development is in the flourishing of community history and archaeology projects and posts at present, within the Welsh Archaeological Trusts, University sector and Cadw. These may rely upon grant and charity funding to a great degree, so policies which encourage sharing of best practice, enable funding streams to be accessed and develop partnerships are very helpful.

5. I would say that wider Government objectives should not *define* policies for the historic environment, although relevant links from historic environment to wider objectives are positive and to be encouraged.

**Question:** *What would be the advantages and disadvantages of merging the functions of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of Wales with the functions of other organisations, including Cadw?*

1. I am concerned that the proposed merger seems to be a little one-sided from an external perspective, with the assumption that the Royal Commission will be merged into Government as part of Cadw, seemingly being a foregone conclusion. I am also concerned about the speed with which the consultation process is being conducted and it is to be hoped that a range of options for change will be fully considered, prior to decision making.
2. I would observe that the need and motivations for a merger of the functions of the Royal Commission with Cadw have been insufficiently defined and explained in this consultation document and process. What would be the criteria, both qualitative and measurable outcomes, against which to aim and measure a successful merger process? It seems to me, in the absence of these being defined and explained, difficult to justify and weigh up the different options for change in an even-handed, transparent and considered manner.
3. With regard the recent performance and operation of the Royal Commission, I feel in many ways that it has been operating very efficiently and effectively over past years. Operating at 'arm's length' from the Welsh Government has enabled it to operate freely, efficiently and to highest professional standards, at times contributing distinctively within the Heritage Sector, providing an important additional voice and helping to frame a robust and sustainable sector. I am impressed by the diverse and specialist skills base and dedication of its staff, continuously delivering diverse and valued outcomes. Its performance in producing a wide range of accessible and authoritative publications and digital resources has been

exemplary. Through media, outreach and learning endeavours, it has considerably raised its distinctive public profile. Staff have recently developed and led important cross-organisational projects relating to archive, shared databases and digital technologies, showing acumen, creativity, leadership and an ability to attract significant additional charity funding streams.

4. I feel a merger with Cadw would:-

- lead to greater anonymity, loss of identity, loss of creativity and loss of independence of the surviving organisations operating in the Heritage Sector, contributing to loss of public profile and reach and a deterioration in the quality of advice and care provided
- lead to a considerable loss in the professional staff skills base in Wales -long-developed, nurtured and specialist roles lost, with negative effect on the Historic Environment and at considerable cost and harm to current Commission staff
- involve apparent short-term financial savings, which in the medium and long-term, would be revealed as having seriously negative effects on the Historic Environment, in the process damaging the considerable cultural and economic benefits it creates for Wales. In other words, it would be revealed as operating in a non-sustainable and non-efficient way.
- tend to prune and cut current areas of work and influence to the minimum, by selecting and operating a minimal definition of statutory responsibility and with limited ambition, scope and published priorities.

**Question:** *What role do local authorities and third sector organisations play in implementing the Welsh Government's historic environment policy and what support do they receive in this respect?*

1. This strikes me as a potentially dangerous and contentious question – a means of possibly exploring the irresponsibly offloading Government responsibilities in the future, onto externally funded bodies, in order to save money. I would strive for Government to maintain commitment and responsibilities at a time when local authorities and third sector are also suffering cuts and under pressure. A long-term view could yield greater gains and successes.
2. Local authorities and third sector organisations need to be able to define their own policies and priorities with some degree of independence. However, when interests and objectives converge, then shared and mutually beneficial outcomes and partnerships may be agreed.

3. I think regional museums and archives could play a very beneficial and stronger role within wider national history and archaeology interpretation and presentation policies and strategies than they currently do. Museums are indoor history and learning hubs, with rich ranges of collections and projects to enthuse, engage and inspire many visitors and communities. They are natural foci for visitors interested in the past. It is a shame that they seem to be currently on the margins of wider policies relating to the historic environment, their strengths, staff skills and experiences not being networked and marketed.
4. Bodies such as the National Trust and National Park Authorities have clear and strong roles to play in relation to historic environment policies. However, I am not familiar with the extent and strength of support they currently get.
5. Charities and grant giving bodies are extremely influential in attracting engagement, research and creative projects, which may complement and be in sympathy with Government policies and objectives. One of the key advantages of sitting beyond direct Government control may be charitable status and the ability to tap into these funding streams in creative and targeted ways, in order to add to the critical mass of projects and work going on in Wales. In terms of support Government may help to frame wider objectives, encourage and foster interest, bring together people and encourage best practice, also at times providing essential seed-corn and match funding to enhance the success rate for grant applications.
6. The higher education and university sector needs increasingly to be drawn into the Welsh Government's historic environment policies. Academics, both working inside and beyond Wales, may be extremely influential contributors and drivers for additional research funding streams, however they will only engage more closely, if they perceive funding and agenda gains and benefits, by doing so. It seems to me that university history and archaeology departments could be more involved, tasked and more closely integrated into historic environment policy writing and practice.