

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Nigel Clubb

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's historic environment policy - Bolisi Llywodraeth Cymru ar yr amgylchedd hanesyddol

I am responding to the the open letter by the Chair of the Committee, Ann Jones AM, seeking views by Friday 29 June on the inquiry into the Welsh Government's historic environment policy, specifically on the option of merging the Royal Commission (RCAHMW) with Cadw and/or other organisations. Although born and raised in Wales, my working life has been with the historic environment in England, in local government, with English Heritage (twice) and with the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. I was Director of the National Monuments in England for 15 years and was a member of the Project Team which managed the English Heritage/RCHME merger.

1. With a distinguished track record and history, RCAHMW is one of the great cultural organisations of Wales and proposals for its ongoing functions need to be considered very carefully. The cultural inheritance of the people of Wales places a huge emphasis on the landscape as part of the distinctive identity of Wales. The strength of RCAHMW is its contribution to the strategic overview of the knowledge base which supports the management and enjoyment of the historic environment in Wales. It achieves this by its unique integration of investigative and dynamic recording and archival functions. The creative iteration and interplay between these helps to prioritise the development of the knowledge base, taking into account the needs of conservation, but also including a more holistic view, beyond statutory designation and casework, of how the historic environment has shaped, and continues to shape Wales. Through its on-line services, RCAHMW encourages people to engage with this holistic historic environment, again well beyond designated assets.

2. The priorities of Cadw as currently constituted are the the promotion and conservation of the properties it manages and the designation of statutory assets and subsequent casework. Its online services are focused on these activities. Whatever aspirations there may be for developing synergies between the two sets of functions, a merger of Cadw and RCAHMW in isolation, without a fundamental inquiry into the status and functions of Cadw, or restructuring to nurture the potential synergies of merger, risks a downgrading of the priority of the investigative and archival functions to the detriment of encouraging the people of Wales to engage with the historic environment at a more holistic level.

3. An inquiry into the management of the historic environment in Wales should be looking at structural change in terms of both Cadw and RCAHMW. Why are all the functions of Cadw established within the Welsh Government's structure, rather than with a more 'hands-off' body with appropriate decisions reserved to Ministers? Setting up a new sponsored organisation which embraces and safeguards the functions of both bodies - and takes the development of the potential synergies very seriously - has to be a more strategic and visionary option than a rapid winding up of RCAHMW and and reallocation of its assets, (chiefly the expertise of its staff and the archive).

4. Splitting up the investigative and archives functions of RCAHMW, say between Cadw and the National Library of Wales (NLW) respectively, could prove to be an unsatisfactory option. This will break the links which are at the heart of RCAHMW's strengths. Notwithstanding its established curatorial strengths, NLW will find it hard to establish itself as a new player in the historic environment

and there will be a real risk that the RCAHMW archive will cease as a dynamic record and become instead a historic archive which is not updated and/or seen as firmly based in the historic environment sector.

5. Finally, if change is to take place, it is essential that the current strengths of RCAHMW are safeguarded and potential synergies with new bodies are indeed developed and not forgotten as the years pass by. If bodies assume RCAHMW functions, their governing boards and committees must be directed by Ministers to continue and develop the investigative and archival activities and must have members with well developed interests in this work. They should be required to appoint staff at a senior level with the appropriate expertise and experience to lead those activities and act as champions for them externally and internally.

Yours sincerely

Nigel Clubb