

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Wrexham Area Civic Society

To Chair of Committee,

Please accept these comments from the Wrexham Area Civic Society (WACS) on the inquiry into Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy.

I have concentrated on the role and experience of the Civic Society in the 'third sector'.

1. I became aware of this consultation not through an overarching body that disseminates information to bodies in the third sector throughout Wales, but through my professional institute branch organisation. So my first point is that such an overarching body should exist within Wales.

2. Wrexham Council has over the past couple of years carried out reviews of almost all of the conservation areas in its area. WACS has commented on all of the draft character appraisals, totalling about 20, and most of its comments have been accepted as improving the documents.

3. From these appraisals a number of common threads have emerged on how this particular local authority fulfils its role in implementing Assembly historic environment policy.

- i. there is not a corporate approach to local authority works in conservation areas,
- ii. highways works in particular do not reflect the sensitive nature of these areas,
- iii. highway signage can be insensitive through its size and design and duplication,
- iv. fencing around council sites can be inappropriate,
- v. inappropriate use of materials and repair techniques in buildings and boundary walling,
- vi. a reluctance to fully appraise the quality or otherwise, and appropriateness of development that has taken place since the designation of particular conservation areas,

4. WACS has also recently commented on other council consultation documents relating to Buildings at Risk and Heritage Strategies. From these documents it is clear that there is a reluctance to fully confront the lamentable condition and lack of repair of some listed buildings in council 'ownership'. There was also a lack of appreciation of the need for regular condition reviews of such buildings.

5. WACS has also found it necessary to copy comments on consultation documents to key councillors because it found that its comments were being 'edited' in committee reports to Members. This 'editing' resulted in some comments being omitted or changed, altering their meaning. Matters have improved since a letter of complaint was sent to officers.

6. WACS does however receive some support from the local authority in its annual awards scheme to encourage and reward good development in the borough. Council officers have submitted examples of good development for consideration, and been part of the judging panel, and the chair of the planning committee has regularly been part of the award presentations.

7. The Society is also aware that some confusion exists regarding the role of CADW; in relation to the Assembly, the local authority decision making process, and the public as land and property owners.

I hope these comments which draw on the experience of the Wrexham Area Civic Society are of some use to the Committee in its Inquiry.

Regards

Geoff Foy

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Chartered Town Planner
Member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation