

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Matthew Rimmer

Dear Sir/Madam,

As someone who has a keen interest in the historic environment and history of Wales I would like to submit my comments on the proposed merger of the RCAHMW and Cadw. I have answered each question in the order it was posed.

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

A. The systems in place at present are not perfect by any means, there are certain areas of Wales where the importance of the Historic Environment is not fully appreciated and as a result of which sites and features which could and should have been protected have been and continue to be lost or unnecessarily altered. There are also certain types of historic site which suffer from a lack of understanding and recognition, the significance of such sites is often underrated and as such are they are placed at greater risk of damage and ultimately being lost. In my opinion such sites include early industrial areas such as mines and quarries, upland archaeology such as dry stone wall networks, sheepfolds, early settlements and traditional buildings. Military sites of historical importance also tend to be overlooked in Wales which is unfortunate as Wales played a key role in the conflicts of the early to mid 20th Century.

Q. 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)?

A. I feel that while the current policy is good at promoting certain types of historic site, for example castles and selected periods of history, it fails to adequately acknowledge or promote other periods and aspects in Welsh history and the associated sites. Because of this many people, especially visitors form the impression that the history of Wales begins and ends with Castles and the Welsh Princes. There is also, in my view an unfortunate tendency to focus on those sites which are perceived as having a tourism value, thus placing lesser importance on a site of greater historical interest because it is not perceived as "tourist friendly".

Q. How well do the policies for the historic environment tie in with wider Welsh Government policy objectives (such as the regeneration of communities)?

A. Many communities have a strong sense of place in Wales, and their history and how it is perceived is a key part of this. Unfortunately as communities face growing outside pressure and influences such as the number of young people leaving their communities to find work and their place being taken by incomers who often have little understanding or interest in the history of the place they live. The promotion of the historic environment is extremely important but I feel that at present not enough is being done to promote an interest and sense of ownership of their past within communities, the focus often leaning more towards the promotion of the historic environment as a tourist attraction only.

Q. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of merging the functions of the RCAHMW with the functions of other organisations, including Cadw?

A. This is a difficult question to answer as the outcome of such a merger would depend entirely upon how the merger is handled. At this time I find it hard to envision any real advantage to the history and people of Wales of such a merger. The disadvantages are many, the foremost being the loss of the RCAHMW itself. The Commission is a hugely important part of the history of Wales and has evolved since 1908 into what we have today, to lose it would be to lose a part of Welsh history. Another major disadvantage would be the likely loss of impartiality from government which the RCAHMW has when identifying sites and areas of historical importance. Any organisation or institution which forms part of government is more likely to be influenced by political motives, something which should not happen when attempting to establish the importance of a given site or building or the promotion or recording of any given period in history. In my view Cadw's decisions to provide statutory protection to certain buildings or sites is at times unduly influenced by the politics of the Welsh Government, a perfect example of this being the ongoing demolition of the First World War airfield at Sealand, as unique and important as any site in the history of Wales and now lost to future generations. One has to ask the question, had the decision whether or not to list those buildings been that of an organisation which was not influenced by the politics of the Welsh Government, would the outcome have been different?.

Q. 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 that respect?

A. I can only speak of my experience within Gwynedd. Gwynedd Council appear to have little interest or involvement in preserving the historic environment and at times play an active part in damaging it, for example by carrying out works on or near protected sites without adequate consultation. The Gwynedd Archives service is important but has been affected by funding cuts. The role played by the Welsh Archaeological Trusts is of great importance, though it seems this is often hampered by a shortage of funding.

In closing it is my feeling as a Welsh citizen and a keen historian that the proposed merger of the RCAHMW and Cadw would, if it goes ahead, be a huge blow to the history of Wales and how it is promoted, recorded and protected. While Cadw undoubtedly play an important role in the recording and protection of the historic environment it is too overly influenced by politics to be really effective.

Matthew Rimmer