

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Response from Prospect Heritage Branch

Prospect is an independent trade union representing over 120,000 members working in a range of jobs in both the public and private sectors, including in aviation, agriculture, communications, defence, energy, environment, heritage, industry and scientific research.

In response to the consultation question:

What would be the advantages and disadvantages of merging the functions of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales with the functions of other organisations, including Cadw?

RCAHMW performs several valuable functions in the historic environment sector in Wales including:

- Compiling and curating the National Monuments Record of Wales (NMRW), which along with the National Library of Wales (NLW) and National Museum Wales (NMW) is one of the major national collections. The NMRW comprises an active, publicly accessible database of sites, integrated with an extensive public archive of archaeological and architectural records.
- Specialist recording and survey, which both supports the statutory protection of listed and scheduled sites and goes beyond this in programmes of new research and investigation.
- Providing expert advice on sites to planners and those involved in statutory protection, in addition to interpreting the historic environment for RCAHMW's public users.
- Providing outreach and engagement with public users, including hard to reach audiences, through educational work, exhibitions, and visits; and by making the records of the NMRW available remotely via the web.

As a body outside government, RCAHMW enjoys a flexibility that enhances its effectiveness. It has the ability to raise external funding, enter into partnerships, and make innovative use of ICT. The SWISH partnership with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) which provides and develops, on a sustainable basis, an ICT platform for the curation and delivery of information is a good example of this. Such agility and innovation could well be hampered when operating within the government framework.

Currently, at one remove from government, RCAHMW is able to provide impartial advice to decision makers in the historic environment sector. Such advice could be compromised if RCAHMW is also part of the decision making apparatus. We can think of no examples of bodies such as RCAHMW currently working within government. RCAHMS is an independent organisation outside of government, as is English Heritage which amalgamated with the English Royal Commission. Both the other national collections – NLW and NMW – are independent institutions, and as such are able to collect, curate and make available collections without direct government influence.

The danger of taking an independent commission into a larger government department is illustrated by the fate of the Historic Manuscripts Commission which was merged with the National Archives. Since this merger the work on securing archives outside of public records has been severely curtailed, as a debate in the House of Lords recently highlighted. See link below:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldhansrd/text/120529-0002.htm#12052948000325><http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldhansrd/text/120529-0002.htm#12052948000325>

With reference to the ***wider Welsh Government policy objectives, such as the regeneration of communities***

RCAHMW does a great deal to record, interpret and disseminate records and information on the key historic industries and industrial areas of Wales (e.g. coal and slate) and engage with those communities through education and outreach. This educational work is particularly relevant to the fight against child poverty, and RCAHMW has worked with schools and colleges to directly engage young people with their heritage. It remains to be seen if the recording and interpretation of such sites, landscapes and communities would be supported in a merged government body whose primary interest would be the statutory protection of buildings and monuments. Likewise, would RCAHMW's innovative use of web technology to provide remote access to their information and archive records be sustained in a merged government body?

In relation to ***the current systems employed for protecting and managing the historic environment in Wales***

In recent years RCAHMW was subject to a Governance Review, and was later assessed as part of the Welsh Historic Environment Assessment Exercise. Both subsequent reports commended the work of the Commission and its team of dedicated expert staff, and highlighted their important contribution to the heritage sector in Wales, as it is presently configured. Any merger, should this course of action be decided upon, must significantly enhance the situation and must not adversely affect RCAHMW's contribution to the sector, or its ability to provide the current level of service. It is essential that if a new body is created through a merger of functions, it includes the key areas of work currently carried out by RCAHMW as a statutory part of its responsibilities that cannot easily be shed through future strategic changes, and that other functions carried out by RCAHMW are reviewed to see if they should also be placed as statutory duties.

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