



BUILT ENVIRONMENT FORUM SCOTLAND (BEFS)

VOLUNTARY SECTOR WORKSHOP REPORT:

on Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland and HS / RCAHMS merger

GLASGOW - Wednesday 10th July 2013

The Lighthouse, Mitchell Lane, Glasgow

PERTH – Thursday 11th July 2013

AK Bell Library, 2-8 York Place, Perth

CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction
- 2 The draft Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland
- 3 The proposed Merger of Historic Scotland and RCAHMS
- 4 Acknowledgements and participants

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the workshops was to discuss the Joint Consultation on the Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland and the merger of Historic Scotland (HS) and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS). Two events were organised by BEFS in July 2013 aimed at capturing the views of community-based volunteers engaged with the historic environment. The participants were contacted primarily through the networks of BEFS members, e.g. the network of local civic groups supported by the Scottish Civic Trust, Archaeology Scotland volunteers, National Trust for Scotland members centres, and AHSS cases panels. The two events, in Glasgow and Perth, were attended by over fifty participants from a range of voluntary organisations. Presentations were given on the draft Strategy and the merger by Luke Wormald of Historic

Scotland, and the format for the remainder of the workshop was round table discussions, first on the Strategy and following that, on the Merger.

The views below were expressed by participants of the two events, and do not reflect the views of BEFS, Historic Scotland, RCAHMS or the Scottish Civic Trust.

2 DRAFT HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY FOR SCOTLAND

General: It was welcomed that the strategy appeared to be written in plain English. There is not much new here in terms of policy content – the objective seems to be around ‘doing it better’.

It was commented that the definition could do more to encompass a landscape perspective and importance of a holistic approach/context of an asset.

Mainstreaming: The cross-cutting mainstreaming agenda was seen as important but questions were asked about how the 3rd sector was going to be engaged. There was also a question about which Scottish Government departments have been involved in the development of the strategy.

The need for better connections between the historic and the natural environment was discussed. The national Trust for Scotland was highlighted as an organisation which seems to deal well with conserving/protecting/enhancing both its natural and built assets in a holistic way. Can we learn from them?

Tensions between the historic environment and the sustainability agenda were raised. The need for a better evidence base for the role of the historic environment in achieving a sustainable Scotland was highlighted. The climate change sector was also noted as a sector we could learn from in terms of mainstreaming and a priority for developing joined up policy development.

Valuing volunteering: The point was made that the Scottish Government needs to ensure that there are open two-way channels with the voluntary sector. The sector has an important role to play in protecting and promoting the historic environment but clarity in relation to expectations of their role in the future was essential. There was general agreement that the voluntary sector needed to feel more valued by government, national and local.

In recent years RCAHMS in particular has increasingly recognised the value of community involvement, through for example the Scotland’s Rural Past project. It was also commented that since the economic downturn, volunteering has become ‘two tier’ – some volunteers now being charged for the experience. A skills framework could usefully recognise the value that volunteers bring by creating some record or system of accreditation so that voluntary experience can be demonstrated as a valid activity in career development (this may help attract younger people to the sector). It was also commented that the demographic of volunteers with an interest in heritage is ageing – how can this be addressed, particularly as retirement age is increasing?

The value of volunteering and community work to our physical and mental health was discussed. Could more historic environment organisations highlight these benefits when promoting engagement with their work?

It was noted that there is already a wide range of activities/groups available to volunteers but we need to get better at promoting these activities, particularly to young people.

Community engagement: the view was that consultation with local communities is reducing. Where (for example) local civic trusts would have, in the past, had informal dialogue and regular discussions with planners – on general matters concerning development as well as particular cases, this has reduced significantly. Yet planners would benefit from the insight about places and knowledge that residents can share; information about the ‘ethos’ of a town, knowledge of the local community and sense of identity. Civic trusts want to contribute more - a statutory consultee role could be explored. Currently community councils (statutory consultees) are very varied in terms of activities undertaken and many deal mainly with minor matters rather than more strategic issues relating to development in places.

The point was made that there might be a statutory role for local groups e.g. AHSS cases panels or local civic trusts to play in local decision making in relation to the historic environment. Local groups often felt that they were not listened to by local authorities. Leadership in local authorities was essential as was the need to ensure properly trained staff who had to make decisions e.g. listed building consent, conservation areas etc.

Community empowerment: If responsibilities and assets are going to be transferred to communities then safeguards need to be put in place. An overarching framework was still needed.

Informed decision-making: It was noted that if decisions are made at planning officer level, community groups cannot appeal the decision made. It was commented that there is a threshold in terms of number of submissions that need to be made before a case goes to planning committee.

It was emphasised that ‘the system’ must be robust – that effective management of the historic environment requires both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ approaches; changing hearts and minds while also ensuring effective enforcement. Double standards are commonly applied – people value the heritage but can resent the processes involved in managing change.

Enforcement: There is very little enforcement to ensure protection of heritage assets (due to lack of local authority funds – but what can be done to address this?). Endangered buildings (Buildings At Risk?) could be prioritised for enforcement action.

Raising awareness: We need to share best practice more. We also need to get better at communicating to the general public about what the sector does/how the system works – the merger presents an opportunity to do this.

Apathy and/or lack of awareness of the issues surrounding the historic environment or how to get involved was discussed. Interpretation at historic sites was seen as key to helping people understand the value of the historic environment and to build interest locally. Sites are also often poorly signposted, particularly across local authority boundaries.

New technology and social networking could be better used across the sector to get the message out and to communicate across existing networks.

Implementation: The main interest was in HOW this Strategy will be implemented? How will the governance and responsibilities for delivering strands of activity work – particularly given that the Strategy sits across organisations and is not resource driven? Further information sought on the financial incentives – in particular available to local authorities. There was support for ‘growing the cake’ in terms of finance and working together.

Monitoring of the strategy was considered to be key. It was noted that currently the outcomes and actions are quite broad and it might be very easy to say that the strategy is being delivered, without any meaningful understanding of how it is being done. What will the measures of success be?

It was felt that more information was needed on the role and purpose of the working groups, and boards proposed and who will be in control/answerable. It was noted that the strategy must have full sector buy-in in order to succeed – will there be a sign up process of some kind?

Participants recognised the economic context and the point was made that the strategy should be upfront about the limitations created by lack of money. The strategy should not be overly-ambitious in its aspirations or expectations. Is the financial outlook the dam blocking the flotilla?

It was noted that there might be a role for umbrella groups e.g. the Scottish Civic Trust to provide support to communities/volunteers about how they might be able to deliver aspects of the strategy.

Building an evidence base: There was a discussion about the need for more evidence gathering in relation to the value of the historic environment – social, cultural as well as economic. The third/voluntary sector could have an important role to play in gathering evidence.

Heritage of the Future: The importance of connections between the Strategy and the new Policy on Architecture and Placemaking was highlighted. We need to encourage people to think of what we’re building now as the heritage of the future and aspire for better.

3 PROPOSED MERGER OF HISTORIC SCOTLAND & RCAHMS

Motives for merger: There was some discussion about the motives for the merger. Is this purely a cost savings exercise? Some felt that the two bodies function well now, so why change? Is there a political desire to ‘nationalise’ all cultural bodies under one umbrella?

Impacts on wider sector: there are concerns around how the merger will impact on the NTS and other smaller trusts. Will charitable status create more competition in the sector?

Heritage management functions: A key theme of the discussion was around the view that HS does not intervene enough/object - community groups represented in the discussion seek more support in challenging development proposals that are believed to be contrary to Government policy – a lack of intervention by HS or SNH is perceived as a ‘green light’. How can this situation be improved with the creation of the new body?

Concern was expressed over the trend towards local authorities making more decisions, and the diminishing role of Historic Scotland. Would this be reversed when the merger happened or would the situation get worse? If the new body had a diminished role in respect to heritage management functions then local authorities needed to be encouraged and trained to use their powers more successfully. Training for members of planning committees should be considered. This 'middle' section between communities and central government was identified as a key priority in terms of education and mainstreaming. Lack of awareness in local elected members for example can be a barrier to informed decision-making locally.

It is clear that greater clarity is needed over the various roles and responsibilities involved in heritage management decision-making.

Local authority capacity/skills: it was argued that planners are not taking heed of listings/designation that is created centrally by Historic Scotland. The success of the system relies on skills and knowledge within the local authority planning departments and a strong relationship between central and local government. This is all the more important now that the duty to notify HS of decisions on B listed buildings (in addition to C listed) is being removed.

Listing as a designation simply recognises an asset – there is a plethora of other relevant information (much gathered by volunteers) that can be used to inform decision-making. There is a lot of cynicism about listing - in particular how useful the content on the 'lists' is in informing an owner what they can do to a building. There is scope for improved information for home owners when purchasing a listed building or building in a conservation area.

Supporting community based project work: In relation to developing projects, community groups are finding that local authorities are less able to provide support (including financial) and more responsibility is being placed on community groups to develop projects and raise funds – capacity and support is needed here. Community groups are also finding that they are being turned down for funds for capital works, since such work ought to be being undertaken by the local authority.

The idea of a national awards system like Britain in Bloom was suggested.

Historic Environment Records: It was noted that up-to-date evidence and information is vital for informed decisions to be made regarding the historic environment. While it was felt that the new body must be properly resourced to be able to carry out the investigating and recording necessary, communities could also take a role in filling some of the gaps in data collected on historic assets and areas. RCAHMS has taken some steps towards allowing communities to carry out this kind of work but more could be done. Existing opportunities for communities to share historic environment data they might hold should be made clearer

It was noted that many volunteers and communities are still not aware of the many resources already available to them, e.g Canmore, PastMap, SCRAN, HS's technical conservation & guidance documents etc. The new body could do more to signpost and raise awareness of the resources it holds.

Heritage champions: The merger presents an opportunity to inform the general public about management of the historic environment – the system, principles, good practice etc. There is a role here for 'influencers' and 'persuaders'.

Competition for funds: Clarity is needed on the potential impact of the new body competing in the same 'pool' for funds and how small organisations might compete effectively within the same pool. It was noted that a positive effect would be new funding possibilities available to the organisation if charitable status is achieved.

Relationships with new organisation: HS seem far away/distant 'experts', RCAHMS as an organisation is more approachable.

Decentralisation was discussed and the need for continuity for communities – in the past there was a specific Historic Scotland contact for each area, which tended to stay the same for long periods. Satellite/regional offices would also allow for greater volunteering opportunities for people living outside the central belt.

The new body could also helpfully coordinate more activity across local authority boundaries. Landscape Partnerships were noted as one vehicle where this is already happening.

It was felt that Government must be clearer about what they mean by 'leadership at all levels'.

Functions: The merger process must ensure that in bringing together all functions, smaller functions/units are not lost. It will be important to understand how activity being undertaken by the new body connects with local initiatives – and that activity 'bubbling away nicely' at local level must not be undermined by a change at strategic level.

Questions were asked about the impact of the merger on the work of RCAHMS, particularly its surveying and recording functions. It was highlighted that the physical archive built up by RCAHMS is hugely valuable and must not be lost.

The retention (and development) of existing skills and expertise at both organisations was seen as absolutely essential.

Grant giving functions: Participants were concerned about how the priorities for grant giving, both to conservation projects and organisations, might change when the new body is formed. It was felt that the priorities/criteria in terms of projects looking for government support should be made clearer to provide transparency about how these decisions are made.

Properties in care: We need to think laterally about the use of properties in care beyond operating as visitor attractions, to providing facilities to a wider range of users for a wider range of purposes – people like interesting venues. Tensions were identified between the new body as an owner of significant heritage assets, a tourist operator, and a regulator. It was felt however, that these are well set and mitigated in the business case.

The potential to strengthen the relationship between the new body and NTS was discussed, particularly in relation to tourism and properties in care.

Education & outreach: It was considered that there might be considerable potential for the new body to take a greater role in making connections with education and lifelong learning.

4 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND PARTICIPANTS

The event was organised by Gemma Wild of the Scottish Civic Trust on behalf of the Built Environment Forum Scotland. Thanks go to everyone who participated in the workshops, and in particular to Luke Wormald (Historic Scotland) and Diana Murray (RCAHMS) for presenting and taking part in a question and answer session; Jo Robertson (BEFS) and John Pelan (BEFS/SCT) for helping with facilitation; and Architecture + Design Scotland for providing meeting space at The Lighthouse. Individuals from the following organisations participated in the event:

AHSS

Archaeology Scotland Member

Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists

Bowling & Milton Community Council

Breadalbane Heritage Society

Built Environment Forum Scotland

Citizens Theatre

Comrie Community Council

Drumchapel Community Council

Dumfries Historic Buildings Trust

Dunblane Community Council

Fortingall Roots Project

Friends of Glasgow West

Friends of Perth & Kinross Heritage Trust

Friends of Seafield House

Glasgow Archaeological Society

Hawick Archaeological Society

Historic Scotland

Historic Scotland member

Hoddum & Ecclefechan Community Council

James M MacLaren Society

Montrose Society

NTS Glasgow Members Centre

Perth & Kinross Heritage Trust

Perth Civic Trust

Renfrewshire Council

Royal Commission for the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Scotland

Scottish Civic Trust

Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

Stanley Mills Owners Association Management Committee

Strathaven John Hastie Museum Trust

Tayside and Fife Archaeological Committee

The Cumbernauld House Working Group

West Stormont Historical Society