

SPECIALIST INFORMATION SYSTEMS SUPPORTING THE WORK OF CONSERVATION OFFICERS IN ENGLISH LOCAL PLANNING AUTHORITIES

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Summary

- A This report is related to a rapid survey of local authority resources for the conservation of the historic environment commissioned by English Heritage from David Baker and Gill Chitty, and carried out in October and November 2001. The work of archaeological officers is supported by 100% coverage of Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs), but it was not known how far conservation officers enjoy support from similar specialist information systems. 179 local authority based members of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation with e-mail addresses were sent a short e-questionnaire. 73 (41%) responded, amounting to 21% of all 354 district / borough / unitary local planning authorities.
- B Based on this sample, at least half, perhaps up to two-thirds, have no specialist supporting systems. Of the 34 respondents with systems, 65% covered only historic buildings and areas while 32% had wider content. 82% of the systems were maintained; 50% were five years old or less, and 12% over ten years old. System content was strongest for photographs, weak for planning history, and virtually lacking in material from one-off and area surveys and documentary sources; in a crude measure of these five categories of information, all / most was 25%, some / few 50% and none / unanswered 25%. 85% had some photographic coverage, only 5 on them dealing solely with casework. Only half the reported systems have an index database for retrieval of information; the same applies to GIS facilities. More systems have 'few' or 'none' scanned photographs than 'many' or 'some'; 65% had no scanned drawings.
- C 59% offered other comments on other matters. There were a few cases of positive system-building in progress, but several cited lack of resources, difficulties with internal arrangements for IT and poor inter-departmental or inter-authority relationships as obstacles to the development of needed systems. Links with SMRs are poor. There is frustration over the unavailability of the statutory lists digitised by DCMS.
- D Such markedly differential progress over developing supporting information systems for archaeological and historic built environment conservation can be explained in terms of cultural, organisational and resource-related factors. In the past these have combined to give them a lower priority for most conservation officers. In the 21st century, the objective is 'informed' conservation and explanation of the historic environment, tasks for which there has never been a greater demand for information.

Introduction

- 1 Work on a recent study of Local Authority Historic Environment Resources (the LAHER project) included gathering some preliminary data on the extent to which Conservation Officers dealing with listed buildings and Conservation Areas are supported by maintained record systems in the same way that Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) support the work of Archaeology Officers. The project was commissioned by English Heritage and carried out by David Baker and Gill Chitty in October and November 2001.
- 2 The immediate context was the Green Paper on the reform of the planning system, published in December 2001. The LAHER project ran in parallel with work on resources for planning work, commissioned by DTLR from Arup Economics and Planning and the Bailey Consultancy, and published in February 2002. Wider contexts were the Comprehensive Spending Review 2002, and the expected response from government to *Power of Place*, the statement by the historic environment sector coordinated by English Heritage, which was published in December 2001. A key background document was English Heritage's *Informed Conservation* (Clark 2001).
- 3 Though the brief for LAHER had specifically excluded gathering new material, it was felt that the absence of data about specialist information systems for the conservation of historic buildings was a major shortcoming. The detailed assessment already done on largely archaeological SMRs had shown that, though many do include buildings, current legislative arrangements and the effects of the two-tier local government system mean few of them work directly with listed building control processes (Baker 1999). Work on information requirements for listed building consent applications, based on a relatively low questionnaire return of 38 local planning authorities (LPA), had not been able to shed much light on the matter (Oxford Brookes 2000).
- 4 Accordingly, a short e-mail survey with seven simple questions was incorporated into the LAHER project. Its urgent deadlines could not accommodate full analysis of the returns, and only the results of the first question about the existence of systems were incorporated into the draft final LAHER report submitted in November 2001, though a summary of the main findings was included in the version that went for publication in April 2002. This document reports on the finding of the whole e-mail survey, whose analysis was part-supported by English Heritage. Gill Chitty commented helpfully upon a draft.
- 5 ***This document has the status of a final draft for consultation. It is currently uncertain (24 April 2002) whether it will be published more widely in this or any other form. It represents the author's views but not necessarily those of English Heritage. The discussion section following the report of the survey is intended to stimulate debate about the wider issues raised. Comments should be sent to David Baker of Historic Environment Conservation at dbb@suttons.org.uk and Dave Batchelor of English Heritage at David.Batchelor@english-heritage.org.uk or 23 Savile Row London W1S 2ET.***

Design of survey, analysis and reporting

- 5 A rapid survey was devised because it was not practicable in the timescale either to survey all 354 non-County local planning authorities with responsibilities for planning work on listed buildings and Conservation Areas, or to devise a rigorously defined and selected sample, having first identified the various kinds of local arrangements involving county teams, lead authorities or consultants.
- 6 Accordingly, through the good offices of Gus Astley, Membership Secretary of the Institute of Historic Buildings Conservation (IHBC), a list was obtained of all members with local authority posts and e-mail addresses. Having removed duplicate individuals in the same authority, questionnaires were sent out to **179** people / authorities, with requests to forward them if the wrong person had been inadvertently selected. **73** replies were received without prompting, amounting to a good return of **41%** of those circulated, or **21%** of all 354 authorities.
- 7 The 73 respondents were:

Type of Authority	No	% 179	% Type of Authority
District or Borough Councils	50	69	21
Unitary Councils	14	19	30
Counties	6	8	18
London Boroughs	3	4	9

An assurance was given with the e-questionnaire that individual local authorities and their officers would not be identified in the report.

- 8 Responses were entered on to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. In some cases, anecdotal responses had to be interpreted; replies of 'yes' to alternatives of 'all-many-some-few-none' have been taken as 'many'.
- 9 Two analytical frames were used. One covered all 73 respondents whether or not they have a system, and was applied only to Question 1. The other covered the 34 (51%) respondents with a system sufficiently specialised and complex to enable them to answer most of Questions 2 – 6. Analysis of responses to Question 7 on 'any other comments' used materials from anyone who offered it.

Question 1: existence of a specialised information system

1 Do you have an information system supporting your conservation work, other than the general departmental planning applications system or a Buildings-at-Risk Register ?

If NO please indicate and return. If YES please also answer the other questions.

- 10 27 of all respondents (37%) have no specialised supporting system whatsoever. The figure rises to 33 (45%) with the inclusion of six whose systems appear to be either rudimentary or little more than a general departmental Planning Applications System. It rises again to a 'best'-case of 40% and a worst one of

49% after removing the six County Councils with systems not directly engaged in development control. 51% therefore have systems of some kind.

- 11 Possession of an e-mail address indicates a relatively sophisticated capability for information management; those who responded are likely to have been those most positively interested. The conclusion is that **between one half and two-thirds of all local planning authorities with responsibilities for exercising controls over listed buildings and Conservation Areas have little or no support for their work from a maintained specialist information system.**
- 12 These bald figures need some qualification. The dividing line between the six rudimentary systems excluded from the analysis and those that were included was not well defined. More detailed investigation would be required against clearer criteria, such as was done for SMRs. There is a remote possibility that some of the 'no' LPAs are getting a full specialist service backed by an information system from a County team but did not mention it in their return.
- 13 The absence of systems appears to be significantly higher in Unitary Authorities (28%) than in District / Borough Councils (21%) and London Boroughs (11%).
- 14 *Issues raised by this question include:*
 - (a) Whether the high figure for LPAs without the support of a maintained specialist information system would be confirmed by more detailed survey.
 - (b) How many County teams survive and are able to provide Districts / Boroughs with effective specialist advisory services fully supported by an information system in the same way as archaeological planning is supported by SMRs; what effect any future diminution of the county role in planning may have on their continuance.
 - (c) How many County SMRs include historic buildings but are not actively involved in servicing casework or accumulating the material that arises from it. This is an important issue for defining what constitutes a 'SMR'.
 - (d) What level of contact and coordination exists between Archaeological Officers and Conservation Officers over using listed building data for monitoring development proposals where it exists on SMRs.
 - (e) The extent to which Unitary Authorities have been able to develop comprehensive historic environment records covering archaeological and historic built interests: they ought to be the ideal test-bed. Some UA s not accessible through IHBC-provided e-mail addresses are known to have comprehensive records; two that were contacted reported having no system for historic buildings conservation yet are known to have active and developed SMRs.
 - (f) How many Buildings-at-Risk Registers are exist and are actively maintained. They were deliberately excluded from qualification as a full

specialist supporting system, yet there were few references to them as separate systems despite several opportunities. This may relate to the LAHER findings that at least a quarter of District Councils have never kept a Register and many of those compiled have never been updated.

Question 2: coverage of the information system

2 Does your information system cover only historic buildings and areas, or is it part of a wider system for historical or all aspects of environmental conservation ? Please indicate ONLY or WIDER. If WIDER, what is included ?

- 15 Of the 34 respondents, 22 (65%) have systems covering only historic buildings and areas, and 11 (32%) have wider involvements.
- 16 Nine gave some detail about those involvements. Two appear to be comprehensive records acting also as SMRs, and one is associated with an Urban Archaeological Database. Five also include scheduled ancient monuments, though only one used the potentially wider term of 'archaeological sites'. Trees covered by Tree Preservation Orders are covered by three, Historic Parks and Gardens by two, SSSIs by one, and historic landscape by one. In two cases Grants were cited; Buildings at Risk and 'parish files' figure in one each.
- 17 ***Issues raised by this question include:***
- (a) Whether the existence of wider departmental information systems has promoted or held back the development of specialist ones. A good information culture and adequate levels of resources might help promote them. But equally the existence of a general system with minimal historic environment holdings in a context of stretched resources might be regarded departmentally as adequate in the circumstances and act as a deterrent to further action.
 - (b) How environmental conservation and explanation are managed by authorities; the extent to which environmental aspects and conservation processes are split up administratively between departments, or carried through incompletely due to lack of resources.

Question 3: maintenance of the information system

3 Is your information system systematically maintained ? If YES, for how many years has this been done ?

- 18 Most systems, 28 or 82%, are maintained.
- 19 24 (71%) gave the period of maintenance for their systems. For 17, 71% or 50% of the full total, it is five years or less. Four are over 10 years old.

- 20 These figures should be seen in the light of how the value of a system increases as it is maintained and used. One system, in supporting a county-wide advisory service for over twenty years, has accumulated lengthy casework holdings spanning a succession of house-owners and the results of several surveys including the accelerated listing review of the 1980s.
- 21 **Issues raised by this question include:**
- (a) Why 4 (12%) are not maintained, and whether this is related to temporary or permanent staff shortages.
 - (b) What was the spur for creating most systems in the last five years.
 - (c) The value of an accumulating maintained system as perceived by LPAs.

Question 4: classes of information in the system

4 What classes of information are collected for your information system? Please indicate ALL / MOST / SOME / FEW / NONE
planning history; photographs; one-off surveys, drawn / written; area or thematic surveys; primary or secondary documentary or academic sources; other (specify)

- 22 Here, and in Question 6, there may be some confusion between the total population of listed or other historic buildings, and the number of opportunities for collecting information since the inception of a maintained system.
- 23 Even without distributing the 'yes' answers equally between 'all' and 'most', there is a general peak at 'some' with a tendency towards the 'few' / 'none'

	all	yes	most	some	few	none	un-ans	total
planning history	4	3	5	8	4	7	3	34
photographs	6	6	8	9	3	1	1	34
surveys, one-off	1	3	0	16	4	8	2	34
surveys, area / theme	1	3	0	11	8	7	4	34
sources, documentary	0	3	1	12	10	1	7	34
TOTAL	12	18	14	56	29	24	17	170

- 24 Combining the seven measures into three main groups confirms the dominance of 'some' + 'few', as does analysis by individual authority.

	all / yes / most	some / few	none / unans	total
planning history	12	12	10	34
photographs	20	12	2	34
surveys, one-off	4	20	10	34
surveys, area / theme	4	19	11	34
sources, documentary	4	22	8	34
Total	44	85	41	170

No of Authorities	No of categories	Type of categories
6	3 or more out of 5	all, yes or most
18	2 or more out of 5	some or few
10	2 or more out of 5	none or unanswered

- 25 This also shows the relative strengths of the five types of information. As might be expected, photographic coverage is strongest. Planning coverage is spread fairly evenly across the three groups. Surveys of all kinds and documentary sources are consistently weak, which suggests reactive rather than proactive systems. 12 responses in the 'other' category included two references to Buildings at Risk; a survey of paving stones in all Conservation Area streets; sets of watercolours, drawings and paintings; condition survey information; parish gazetteers derived from a County SMR.
- 26 *Issues raised by this question include:*
- (a) The extent to which the LPA rigorously enforces requirements that applications must contain sufficient information before accepting them for registration, covering the significance of what may be affected and what impacts may be caused by implementation of the proposals.
 - (b) The usefulness of arrangements for information transfer between central general departmental information systems and maintained specialised ones, with particular reference to liaison over 'destruction' days in the former.
 - (c) The extent of strategic policies adopted by the LPA for undertaking surveys to achieve a given level of intelligence about the historic resource in its area.
 - (d) The amount of time available and the scope provided in job descriptions and personnel descriptions for collecting information, either generally or in relation to specific applications.

Question 5: photographic coverage

5 What systematic photographic coverage is held on your information system? Is it casework only? Are there area or thematic surveys?

- 27 29 (85%) have some photographic coverage. This is generally consistent with the answers given to the previous question. What it actually covers obviously varies and would need to be investigated further. Only 5 (15%) said it is casework only. A series of other categories had to be worked out from answers to the questions about casework and surveys, as tabulated below.

Coverage	
Some listed buildings	2
All listed buildings	3
All listed and local listed buildings	4
Some listed buildings and Conservation Areas	5
All listed buildings and Conservation Areas	2
Casework	3
Buildings at Risk	1
Grants-related	1
Other (aerials)	1
Unspecified	4
Unanswered	8
Total	34

28 Several photographic records were products of the accelerated listed building review of the 1980s, HERS schemes or Article 4 Directions. Three responses commented on the presence of large collections and the absence of resources to do anything about making them more accessible and usable.

29 *Issues raised by this question include:*

- (a) The extent to which the provision of resources for conservation work embraces a recording culture, including a photographic capability and supporting budget, the latter covering materials and clerical assistance in dealing with pictures taken so that they are accessible in future.
- (b) The extent to which there is awareness of, and easy access to, any separate collections of photographs made and held outside the Planning Department or created as a result of a moment-in-time survey.

Question 6: computerisation

6 *How far is your information system computerised? Do you have: an index database for retrieval of information (YES / NO); scanned photographs (MANY / SOME / FEW / NONE); scanned drawings (MANY / SOME / FEW / NONE); GIS other than constraints maps showing listed buildings and Conservation Areas (YES / NO - if YES, covering what?).*

30 Only half of the reported specialist information systems have an index database for retrieval of information, and in two cases this is in spread-sheet format. As might be expected, the same return came for the question on GIS facilities.

	yes	no	unans	total
Index database	17	15	2	34
GIS	17	15	2	34

It must be asked whether those without a digital retrieval capability are on the margins of viability as specialised systems within the terms of this study, and

whether those who express comfort with a hand-crafted card index have a real point or are concealing personal unease with IT.

- 31 The growing use of digital storage for images and the accessibility of the necessary hardware is another test of the extent to which systems have been able to develop usefully. A few systems without index databases do have some scanned photographs, though over half of all systems have 'some' / 'few', and only 18% have 'many'. The figures for scanned drawings are much weaker.

	many	some	few	none	unans	total
Scanned photographs	6	8	10	8	2	34
Scanned drawings	2	4	3	22	3	34

- 32 There were 14 responses on the scope of GIS, and further investigation is needed to delineate what may be a fast-changing scene. Seven seemed to be referring to a general departmental system with various categories of information represented on a series of layers. Two referred to what may be a developed sub-set of the departmental system: one linked photographs and descriptions of listed buildings through GIS; the other was described as a GIS database for statutory and local listed buildings, each with a short description, date of listing, planning history and any enforcement, but apparently without photographs linked.
- 33 **Issues raised by this question include:**
- (a) The extent to which IT developments facilitate the collection of images through the availability of digital cameras and appropriate hardware / software, including scanning equipment.
 - (b) The extent to which capturing scanned images of buildings or drawings relates to the stimulus or requirements of special projects, the special interests of a Conservation Officer, and wider departmental IT capabilities or policies.
 - (c) How fast GIS systems are being installed in planning departments, and the extent to which they are usefully serving the information needs of conservation for the historic environment.
 - (d) Where databases do exist, are they based on proprietary software (eg 'Access') or bespoke commercial software (eg ORION, HBSMR).

Question 7: any other observations

7 *Any other information or comments you would like to make.*

- 34 43 (59%) respondents were moved to make some further observations, ranging from the terse to outpourings of frustration.

- 35 Two responses set out positive approaches to **system-building**, one describing the mechanics and the other offering an important context.

‘We are currently restructuring our computer data base, which has existed in one format or another for the last 12 years or so. Originally dbase 3 for BAR survey data from 1986, later Lotus, recently Access. All LB descriptions scanned in. Loading digital photos about three quarters complete. Existing contract to identify all the curtilages and curtilage buildings, for inclusion in the GIS overlay, and to allow the curtilage buildings to be added to the computer data base. Future tasks include transferring notes from the general computer files about unauthorised works, and then compiling planning history notes. The BAR work needs to be updated using the photographs and publicly available information on ownership. These future tasks will depend on adequate staffing, but the buildings at risk work must be done somehow soon, in order to target staff and financial resources.’

‘Best Value is making us look at our core business and obtain details on a few aspects we can monitor properly, including BAR, CA assessments with detailed programme to do all 56 by 2004.’

- 36 **Resources**, or the lack of them, was a recurring theme.

‘Limited resources = never enough time to organise records properly, increasing frustration and hindering retrieval. County Archae Unit has an amazing database developed to support projects ... and showing what can be achieved with dedicated staff and resources. Hope to be able to access info on completion of projects.’

‘Works p/t for a large authority; no time to maintain record systems or collect data / photographs’

‘Helpful for everyone to have a properly organised data base / library / linked pc based system for own and public use. Am only cons / design staff member in DC section of one of the largest inner London boroughs with huge pressures on the historic built environment. As long as EH only fund posts based on no: of listed building apps etc rather than reality of difficulty, challenge and opportunity, this dire state will continue.’

‘Lack of staff and financial resources make it difficult to develop databases – unlikely in near future. Soon have access via GIS to *** SMR.’

‘I’d like to use website only now being implemented after 4 years as a planning history tool but time demand for updating would be prohibitive.’

‘With c.3,500 LBs and 76 CAs, the scope for expanding our system is limited by resources.’

‘Useful to digitise photos but impossible to find the time to scan them into a software system (even if we had the proper software and equipment !)’

‘No systematic database of information about buildings. Recently set up a database for photographs as taken, but lack staff resources to enter the tens of thousands already held, let alone scan them. Currently developing a database for LB’s, LLB’s and other bldgs in CA’s, capable of storing more information. Hold and publish lists of specialist craftsmen and materials suppliers and a library of brochures and product information. Team librarian / archivist / database officer needed but there no chance of getting one.’

- 37 Several were faced with **IT issues** and at least one queried the need. It was a little surprising that the trawl only produced one reference to the Orion HMS system given the level of interest apparently shown in it a few years ago.

'Computerisation not always the answer. Own phot record in f/cabs by desks gives instant retrieval for int & ext queries. Need for centralized digitized record prob greater in large rural LA with scattered historic resource than in urban authority.'

'Dbase systems are ORION HMS – still in devt stage and the UAD – a GIS system EH funded to be launched end Nov 2001. Systems not linked; compatibility problems still being resolved.'

'I work for 3 authorities, all using different systems. The laptop I use to carry around info cannot cope with any of the necessary virus checks and different systems, so compatibility is impracticable and the potential of the systems is therefore not fully accessible to me.'

'Card index flexible and never crashes. But loss of BAR computerised register in transfer to new system was a blow. Our problem, as with many local authorities and their computer systems is that the demand rapidly outstrips capacity. Our systems crash through overload frequently.'

38 Several drew attention to difficulties arising from **inter-departmental** and **inter-authority** relations, the latter often including a SMR.

'I work closely with the CAO but do not directly use the SMR.'

'No link between our system and *CC or our purpose designed planning system linked to our GIS. Scope for future linkages being explored. Lack of co-ordination on infosys through the authority; no policy on records and archives. Trying to provide the hook within our emerging cultural strategy, though proving difficult with the lead service, Leisure who view it as their service plan. Problems with finance dept.'

'Close liaison with *CC with both hb's and archae. Completing a photographic survey of all LB's and copying info on disk to *CC and a complete survey of BaR.'

'*CC system v comprehensive and available to *BC if desired.'

'The dataset focuses mainly on listed buildings, but includes 2000 unlisted vernacular buildings recorded in 1969 by architectural students. It is used by archaeologists and conservation officers of the county council but rarely referred to by district conservation officers.'

'Much of the input to the HER on HB's through casework. 1997/8 > 2/3 DPAs employ own HBO's lessening supply of info for these areas. Planning material is still added for the whole county. The HBOs make use of the record but this would be increased with electronic access. *DC is developing a basis record system, *BC are not.'

39 There were several complaints about the inaccessibility of the **statutory lists computerised by DCMS**, an obvious basic source for starting a system.

'Trying for last 18 months to extract an IT-based LB database from an unhelpful NMR. Why can CCs have this sort of information and not share it with their DC's? Time and staff resources not available in small councils but no-one else willing to help us - even where they already have it in an IT format!'

'Extremely useful if the data base of list descriptions were made available to Local Authorities by EH / DCMS; great resource implications for LA's to manually input this data themselves.'

'EH so far unable to provide more than partial coverage of list descriptions in electronic form so cannot add to our GIS.'

'There is an opportunity to share resources and where possible get a compatible approach; EH as lead organisation should provide access to data in their records.'

'The computerised record should be released (and kept current) to LA's by EH / DCMS.'

Discussion

- 40 The results of this rapid survey raise three main questions about:
- (a) the relevance of information for the conservation and promotion of the historic built environment
 - (b) the notable under-development of information systems for the historic built environment compared with Sites and Monuments Records primarily serving archaeological conservation
 - (c) what steps can be taken to improve the situation.
- 41 The role of information in conservation, and in the social uses for which conservation is pursued, have become increasingly recognised during the last decade. The general thrust of policy is that information
- (a) is the essential basis for achieving adequate understanding before making decisions about conservation or explanation
 - (b) has intrinsic value alongside the historic survivals it represents, and as a substitute for what no longer exists
 - (c) must be properly managed for survival and accessibility, not as an end in itself, but to serve a wide range of needs now and in the future
 - (d) needs to be mediated for presentation according to user and audience.
- 42 The overall context of conservation work has been moving decisively towards developing mechanisms in which information and information systems play a fundamental part. They are the basis for Conservation Plans and Statements of Significance, applicable to any aspect of the historic environment, as explained in English Heritage's recent publication 'Informed Conservation' (Clark 2001). In the world of environmental planning, cross-sectoral strategies are developing in the form of historic landscape characterisation and urban databases and strategies. Planning Authorities are beginning to formulate criteria-led policies for the historic environment that encompass the range of its attributes regardless of whether they are buildings or something else.
- 43 Thirty-five years after the first SMR was created in Oxfordshire – including buildings and intended to serve the public as much as the planners – those original objectives are coming back into focus. The possibilities of developing comprehensive local information systems to serve the full range of users are now being seriously considered, at least in theory, against the background of a few successful examples.
- 44 Archaeological SMRs achieved full coverage in England some years ago, however fragile it sometimes seems. By contrast, at least half, and possibly as many as two-thirds, of English local planning authorities have no specialised system supporting the work of their Conservation Officers.

45 In terms of quality, the English SMR assessment of 1998, with a return of virtually 100% for a longer and more thorough questionnaire, allowed the scoring of systems against an index of functional development and effectiveness. This had six headings of information content, data quality / assurance, system linkages, users, management context and system organisation. No SMR achieved 75%; 89% scored between 35% and 65% of the standard; 84% scored below 60% of it; the average score across the six factors was 50%. The current rapid exercise could not support a similar analysis because a much shorter questionnaire did not cover several aspects of functionality, but few of the 34 systems covered by this present study would exceed 50%.

46 The reasons for the gap between archaeology and historic buildings in provision for information systems can perhaps be considered under the inter-related headings of **culture**, **organisation** and **resources**.

47 Some elements of issues about **culture** surfaced in one comment.

‘For LB’s, data-bases are secondary to design application. LB’s are not primarily a curatorial matter. The LB aspect should follow the DTLR ‘By Design’ model; the heritage record should develop existing sketchy listing descriptions to enable their more meaningful application. The existing archaeological approach, reactive to a proposal, benefits the record rather than the development.’

There is a view that building conservation is mainly concerned with ensuring good design and acceptable development facilitate continuing uses – the original or a conserving alternative – for physically conspicuous structures and places. Preservation ‘as found’ is part of the process but not the overriding objective; information as a ‘finder’ has a subservient role. In contrast, archaeology is seen as mainly concerned with historic elements that have lost economically viable uses and face threats from decay or development. Systematically stored Information is more important because archaeological elements may be quite difficult to find or recognise; the lack of options for alternative uses increases the importance of creating and storing an accessible record when preservation is not possible.

48 The view that things are either useful or useless is rather polarised, and does not adequately take into account the full range of uses incorporated in the concept of an historic environment. Usefulness is now much more explicitly recognised in relation to education, community values, tourism, and, of course, research itself. These contexts bring new perspectives. The historic aspect of anything, whether now useful or useless, relates to what has happened in the past, so must be knowledge-based, and knowledge is based upon recorded information. The archaeology of an historic area undergoing economic regeneration may not directly affect those who live or move there, but can be useful as an important source of awareness encouraging social cohesion. Heritage tourism in all its forms combines a leisure ‘useless’ activity on the part of its participants with an economic ‘useful’ one for its organisers and promoters.

49 Another cultural issue may be self-reinforcing. Endemic shortage of resources has kept many conservation officers mainly on the casework treadmill for much of their professional careers, and made them anxious to avoid anything that

detracts from this overriding day-to-day priority. Some are suspicious of, or even worried by, rapidly developing information technology. Their position contrasts with that of archaeology officers, equally pressured by casework and in need of IT support, but driven along the information highway since the 1970s by a combination of DoE / English Heritage and determined professional pressure.

- 50 The **organisation** issue has been partly explored in the main LAHER report. Two-thirds of all archaeological officers in local government planning are based with their SMRs at county level, separate from conservation officers who are almost all in District / Borough or Unitary Authorities. There is little opportunity for collaboration between two overlapping conservation traditions that have much to give each other. Too many archaeology officers have to combine planning and record-keeping functions, reinforcing the view of some conservation officers that recording and information management is not part of their role, and making it difficult for those who see its importance to become involved.
- 51 This, of course, links with the issue of **resources**, whose deficiencies have also been highlighted by the main LAHER study. If conservation officers are not sufficiently aware of the importance of information and the need for systems, they are unlikely to be able to persuade managers making difficult budgetary decisions about the need for provision to be made. Yet the increasing number who do feel they ought to be so equipped will still make little headway without the support of the kind of policies and action that created SMRs in the later 20th century.

Future work

- 52 Wide circulation of this report amongst conservation officers would help raise the profile of the issues and allow individual authorities to assess their provision.
- 53 It would also help form a view whether any further survey work is needed to establish the characteristics of the present situation. As noted above, there is an obvious contrast between this survey and the 1998 assessment of SMRs. The level of detail employed in the latter cannot usefully be researched across all systems held by conservation officers at this stage in their development. However, two pieces of work would fill out the picture and make any conclusions drawn tentatively here more secure as the basis for future planning.
- 54 First, the presence / absence of usable systems ought to be established definitively, together with indications of where there are definite plans for introducing one in the near future. If not covered by the English Heritage / IHBC Local Authority Conservation Provision project (LACP), it could be done as part of regional information-gathering for the proposed State of the Environment Report, perhaps through active collaboration between English Heritage Regional Offices and the regional groups of IHBC, ALGAO and IFA.
- 55 Second, a carefully selected sample of cases ought to be examined in detail including visits and interviews in order to obtain a clearer in-depth picture of the situation. It ought to be carried out against a comprehensive template such as

was used for the SMR assessments, partly so that it can be clear what has been included and what excluded from consideration, and partly so that the scope for convergence between systems for archaeology and historic buildings can be properly assessed. A dominant driver should be the views of users about what kinds of information they would like to access and by what means. This would be an essential pre-requisite for any national guidance about planning any future development of systems.

- 56 Without such guidance it will be difficult for the whole issue to attain a higher profile. Without that profile it will be difficult to stimulate the demand for organised training that increases awareness of the potential value of information, as an incentive to understand how to find what exists, gather any more that might be needed, and then use it effectively for the task in hand.
- 57 The building of that profile could usefully commence with the discussions that are beginning in the context of '*Force for our Future*', the government's response to '*Power of Place*'. They would receive added momentum if the outcome of formal consultations on the planning Green Paper properly reflects the connections between the agenda of '*Informed Conservation*', adequately detailed planning applications affecting elements of the historic environment, and a more efficient planning system.

References

- Baker, David, 1999. An Assessment of English Sites and Monuments Records for the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers.
- Baker, David, and Chitty, Gill 2002. 'Local Authorities Historic Environment Resources'. English Heritage *forthcoming*.
- Clark, Kate, 2001. *Informed Conservation*. English Heritage
- Oxford Brookes University 2000. *Local Authority Practice and PPG15: Information and Effectiveness*.
- Power of Place, English Heritage 2001
- Force for our Future, DCMS / DTLR 2001

Appendix – covering letter for questionnaire

Dear Colleague

It would be most helpful if you could find time to respond to this e-mail survey, before the end of Monday 29 October.

Together with Dr Gill Chitty (ex-Lancs CC) I am doing a rapid piece of work for English Heritage on the resources - staff and budgets - available to English local planning authorities for all aspects of historical conservation (historic buildings and areas, archaeology, historic landscape etc). This is in connection with a larger survey on planning resources commissioned by DTLR from Arup and Jim Bailey, in relation to the forthcoming Green Paper on planning and the Comprehensive Spending Review 2002. Our own timetable is horrendously short and our work is restricted to existing data without collecting any new material. It should not be confused with a longer term project running into 2002 and also sponsored by English Heritage, the Local Authorities Conservation Provision project, as mentioned in *Context* and at the 2001 Annual Conference.

The only exception we are making over data collection concerns information systems, a topic on which we know plenty about archaeology (through my assessment of the English SMRs in 1998) but very little about the historic built environment. Several SMRs do include historic buildings, but few seem to underpin PPG15 development control, Conservation Area work, etc. systematically in the same way that SMRs underpin PPG16 archaeological development control (as the Bedfordshire Historic Environment Record did from 1974 to 1997). The recent Oxford Brookes study on PPG15 information requirements with listed building consent applications suggested there is little useful contact between Conservation Officers and archaeological SMRs.

In order to obtain a quick impression of the situation we are therefore sending this e-mail to all local authority-based IHBC members with e-mail addresses, courtesy of Gus Astley's membership database. I have selected one name per authority, and apologise in advance if it's not the right person - please draw it to his / her attention. If you know of colleagues not on the e-mail list above but likely to respond quickly, could you please forward this message.

A high rate of return is obviously very important at this time. The results will be aggregated and individual authorities will not be identified. We need as much to know if you do NOT have a system as to know what you do have. Any pre-existing statements that can easily be copied would be gratefully received.

The simplest way would be to interleave the small number of questions below with answers and send it straight back as a reply. It ought not to take too many minutes ...

With many thanks in anticipation

David Baker (IHBC MIFA - ex Bedfordshire CC)

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