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Historic Buildings: Local Action Conference Report

This year's North West Branch Day Conference explored the ways in which local initiatives might unlock the potential for the historic environment to play a greater role in shaping the future of places. It was held at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester, in September, and chaired by Mike Brown, the IHBC Policy Secretary. Further details are available since a full conference report has been prepared for the IHBC NW web page, where the speakers' PowerPoint presentations can also be found.

Setting the Scene: Localism in the Historic Environment

Chris Smith OBE, from EH, discussed: Empowering Local Communities. Although 'local' was considered new, the support from local people had always been vital, he said, because conservation was not just about buildings.

The main problem Smith identified with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was that in the presumption in favour of sustainable development the Brundtland definition was being undermined: social and environmental elements were considered but were overshadowed by the economic dimensions.

The future held so many unknowns, not least the regulatory responsibilities the Secretary of State would be granted. Another unknown was the definition that would be used for an asset of community value. It was perhaps best to see these unknowns as opportunities. EH has had to acknowledge that good Neighbourhood Plans may deliver great historic environment management, but EH would have to work out how it could respond to individual communities.

As a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review, EH would lose £51m from its budget by year 4, i.e., 33%. Across EH as a whole, in excess of 200 jobs would go. There were new targets for the National Collections Group (NCG), which would mean 'leaner structures'. The NCG responsibilities include EH's 420 sites and monuments with their collections and archives and the National Monuments Record. EH's grant budget would be much reduced, although currently it is still £1m. For now the local (regional) offices would remain. All of this would have a radical impact on EH. There would obviously be an impact on the heritage sector, but EH would fight hard to still provide the support for local services: liaising with Local Authorities and supporting community groups.

Smith ended by asking: what is localism? Localism means giving communities more responsibility and the Big Society was about encouraging communities to take that responsibility.

Dave Chetwyn from DJC1 Planning looked at: What is Localism and What Does it Mean for Heritage? Localism stemmed from a (Government) perception of planning in the recession, in which planners were seen as 'enemies of enterprise'. Given the (NPPF) presumption in favour of sustainable development, did the Government know that social/environmental and economic aspects were linked rather than polarised?

Chetwyn tried to give a flavour of aspects of Neighbourhood Planning and the work of Neighbourhood Forums. Neighbourhood Forums would need a minimum of 21 people (following amendments to the Localism Bill), have a 5 year shelf life and the membership would need to reflect the inclusivity, diversity and character of the area/community.

Policy will be evidence based. The evidence base will be economic, social/community, infrastructure and environmental issues. New and existing evidence will be used to identify key issues. This will inform the formulation of clear aims to address these issues and the aims will lead to policy and proposals.

The success of localism will depend on support, skills and capacity: to facilitate community and stakeholder engagement and to inform research and analysis. This sort of work would be not the domain of amateurs, although it might perhaps be within the remit of some fairly switched-on civic societies. Chetwyn raised a question with respect to the future availability of essential skills that are currently associated with town planning and place-making practitioners. If these were not available in the public sector would community groups be prepared to do the work of the local authority and engage experts to advise them?

Local plans also raised questions of compliance with European Directives/legislation and National Legislation (Planning & other). Also with an expected low electoral turnout in Neighbourhood Referenda there was potential for a 'democratic deficit', in which the majority was disempowered.

Community engagement will need specialist support; events need to be relevant, stimulating and fun; proposals need to be realistic; community engagement needs to be targeted and accessible. All of this raises the question of resources: who would provide or pay for community engagement, capacity building, professional support, evidence and implementing neighborhood planning? Will it be some private business benefactor?

Hugh Rolo, Director of Innovation for Locality, discussed Asset Transfer of Historic Buildings in the UK 2011. He said finding a sustainable use for a place was not just about buildings. He mentioned the Quirk Review and how it had recommended recipes not blueprints - the Localism Bill was based on similar principles.

Rolo explained the role of Locality's Asset Transfer Unit and gave some examples of asset transfer projects. The problem at the moment was that there was too much emphasis on debt reduction, whereas there was a need to focus more on equity and invest money from pension schemes in such asset transfer schemes.

Local Management of Historic Assets

Tony Burton, Director of the Civic Voice, discussed Localism: Heritage Threat or Opportunity.

Civic societies engage in a range of activities: protectionist, celebratory and practical. Members had an emotional link to their place and the thing that makes a place distinctive is its history. So Burton asked: who is right when it comes to places – the

community or the council? We also need to agree the role of the expert in the Big Society!

Localism constitutes a “power shift” in which the community became the client. The proposals included communities’ rights: to buy, bid and run community assets. Communities will be involved in pre-application consultation and be part of neighbourhood planning.

The NPPF was based on a “pro-growth” presumption in which the default answer was “yes”, which would weaken heritage protection and also town centres and the Brownfield agenda. Would there really be a “power shift” or would it simply be about “pro-growth” rhetoric? Also, if communities were to play a real role - support and resources would be needed – a point Chetwyn had made earlier.

Professionals would need to tap into emotions and ‘move from duty into desire’: this was an attitude of mind not a methodology. Burton recommended that we embrace localism and be confident that people did care.

Professor Ian Wray, representing the Oxton Society, discussed the Small Society: Oxton and its Secret Gardens.

The Oxton Society (in Birkenhead) was involved in various projects including: planning applications; tree work and planting; Christmas lights; guided walks and history; and the Oxton Design Award. The key theme was income generation. Since 2001, the annual Secret Gardens of Oxton event had included 75 gardens, it had attracted 36,000 visitors and £195,000 had been raised.

The Oxton Society had tried to establish good business relations. It saw localism as a threat, having built up good working relations with the Local Council. They had received funding and tried to influence policy, for example: they had worked on the Conservation Area character appraisal in order to develop a Management Plan. The Oxton Society was happy to work with the Local Authority but not to take over its work. Wray made the point that if all communities became active it would put huge pressure on Local Authorities’ resources. This reinforced Chetwyn’s points about local skills and capacity and resources again.

Elaine Griffiths MBE, from Gorton Monastery Manchester, spoke on the theme of Social Enterprise and Sustainable Communities.

In the 1970s Gorton suffered industrial decline, slum clearance, it lost its community and the Monastery was stripped out. After a failed scheme to turn the building into flats, squatters moved in and the building deteriorated.

The Monastery of St. Francis & Gorton Trust, was established in 1996. Local groups were set up to make the building a centre-piece for the community again. In 2005 work began on site and the building opened in 2007. It was run commercially, as a social enterprise, and used for conferences, corporate events and weddings.

There are proposals to create a Monastery Community Village, adjacent to the building. Although sustainable living has to be about re-cycling buildings, it is also about bringing back skills and it is part of the health and well-being agenda.

Michael Scammell, Historic Buildings Officer for the South Downs, gave a presentation about creating local lists. Previously Scammell had worked for Cheshire East Council.

When creating Local Lists it is necessary to set guidelines e.g., how 'local' you want the system to be and whether consistency is important. You have to consider who speaks for a locality and who makes the decisions? Also, is there still a place for expert opinion? Obviously, criteria for selection need to be established.

Cheshire East assumed power in April 2009. In the former boroughs: Macclesfield had an established Local List, adopted the year before; Congleton had no Local List but had been preparing one; and Crewe and Nantwich had a Local List as an appendix to the Local Plan. Parish Councils and Amenity Societies had been consulted and involved to different degrees. Some consultees had made strange nominations, but the amenity societies had given reliable and consistent responses.

There were lessons for the future: 100% coverage would not happen; work-groups varied in confidence and competence; submissions needed expert screening before being adopted; and finding a critical friend was a good idea.

After lunch delegates took advantage of one of two walking tours in the adjacent Castlefields area: the canals or the Liverpool Road Gateway.

Project Delivery

Sara Hilton, the Head of Heritage Lottery North West, discussed Funding Local Action.

Although the economic outlook is still uncertain, the good news for heritage is that Lottery ticket sales have remained extremely strong. Additionally HLF's share of good causes income has increased recently, from 16.7% to 20%. These two factors means HLF will have much larger awards budgets in the next few years than they had expected.

UK-wide annual awards budgets 2009 – 2013 will rise annually from £180m to £300m; and the regional budgets from 2009 – 2012 will rise annually from £7.3m to £10.2m; the 2012 – 13 figures were still to be confirmed. This was heart-warming news after the earlier news about EH's budgets.

Delegates were reminded of HLF's strategic aims: conservation, engagement and education. Keeping heritage assets in beneficial use obviously has to be set against the background of Government cuts and the expectation that communities will provide services previously offered by the state. Historic buildings could be kept in

beneficial use, either by involving private enterprise or community groups, at a much reduced cost to the taxpayer.

A range of projects have been funded in the North West. Rotunda, in Kirkdale Liverpool, was a Grade II listed Georgian terrace. Very few historic buildings remained in this deprived area that had been cleared for social housing. The Rotunda community group is the sort of group the Government will be relying on for localism in the Big Society.

David Trevis-Smith, Chairman of the UK Association of Preservation Trusts (APT), discussed Raising the Stakes: Rescuing Historic Buildings at Risk.

He distinguished between the two types of BPT: the Single Project or Area BPT, which preserves a single building or group of buildings, and the 'Revolving Fund' BPT, which preserves buildings in a specific category or buildings within a particular geographical area. The 'Revolving Fund' BPT re-invests any surplus into the next project - hence the notion of a revolving fund. Recently there have been few examples of revolving fund BPTs.

Community empowerment could 'raise the stakes: Local Referendums would mean BPTs were able to challenge unsympathetic development and the Community Right to Challenge meant BPTs would be able to offer to deliver services. Would Assets of Community Value include local Lists of heritage assets? BPT projects would help retain community assets but would the Right to Bid mean buildings went to the highest bidder?

"Sustainable Development" needed defining and the definition needed to recognise the social, environmental and cultural benefits of heritage-led development, as well as economic ones.

The key question was whether the Localism Bill meant we would be raising the stakes or making 'mis-stakes'. Without resources the aspirations that underpin the Localism Bill would be undeliverable, but in terms of raising the stakes the potential role of BPTs to help deliver the localism agenda would need recognising and focused enabling resources would be needed. This would be a good opportunity to incentivise revolving-fund BPTs.

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