



## **THE COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into the skills capacity within local government to deliver sustainable communities**

#### **Memorandum by Institute of Historic Building Conservation**

#### **BACKGROUND**

1. The Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC) is the professional body of the United Kingdom representing conservation specialists and historic environment practitioners in the public and private sectors. The Institute exists to establish the highest standards of conservation practice, to support the effective protection and enhancement of the historic environment, and to promote heritage-led regeneration and access to the historic environment for all.
2. The Heritage White Paper re-affirmed the core position of our built heritage to the planning system. The set of skills held by professionals involved in conservation of the historic environment are a key concern for the planning system as a whole.
3. The IHBC has been carrying out consultation on skills and services of conservation professionals *How to care for places and people: Historic Environment conservation skills and services*. This builds on previous extensive analysis to describe the variety of skills required of IHBC members engaged in planning-related activities under current legislation and under the proposed new heritage legislation<sup>1</sup>.
4. The consultation document integrates the Institute's own skills standard - our 'Areas of Competence' - with models and outcomes relevant to local and central government corporate priorities. These range from the support needed to create sustainable communities (based on the work of Sir John Egan) to the new expertise required to achieve economic and quality-of-life outcomes that might be highlighted under new evaluation criteria of local authorities.
5. The summary of the descriptions of the activities of the conservation professional, as set out in the consultation document, shows the wide range of skills and duties required. These include activities that are:
  - inter-disciplinary (involving planners, architects, urban designers, engineers and community development professionals);
  - mediatory (interfacing between often polarised archaeological, architectural and community interests);

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix 1

- people-based (with major conservation initiatives such as restoration projects rooted in community needs and aspirations and specialist craft skills);
  - environmentally aware (bringing benefits as wide-ranging as bio-diversity, traditional designs and materials, waste reduction, and carbon reduction often in life-time analysis);
  - vision-led (seeing the value of long-term strategies and programmes);
  - outcome-focussed (optimising heritage outcomes where there are competing objectives: social, economic, environmental, fiscal)
  - technically aware (knowledge of new and old technologies to achieve high standards of comfortable, low energy living in historic fabric).
6. We are also aware on parallel work being undertaken by the Urban Design Alliance (UDAL). This is called Capacitycheck and is due to be published in March 2008.
7. We have concerns that despite the strong evidence of the value of heritage to the economy to community well-being<sup>2</sup>, the national guidance on building sustainable communities pays it scant attention. We think that the CLG desire to promote “place-making” and encourage communities to take a pride in their locality can be strongly supported by good practice in conservation. But the opportunities may be being lost because of the existing lack of skills and resources in LPAs let alone those implied by impending legislation.

### **CONSERVATION STAFF IN PLANNING DEPARTMENTS**

8. It is considered good practice for each Local Planning Authority (LPA) to employ at least one qualified conservation officer as, in determining listed building applications, there is a statutory requirement to “have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses”. Yet a recent survey<sup>3</sup> revealed that only 67% did so. Conservation and historic environment professionals are only one of a number of professions employed by LPAs, in addition to planners, to cover specialist duties. These include architects, urban designers, landscape architects, ecologists, transport planners, highway specialists, arboriculturists and housing specialists as well as conservation officers. Where specialist staff are not employed, or at least retained as consultants, the core planning staff must cover specialist roles as best they can. This inevitably has an effect on the overall efficient use of resources and reduces the potential for high-quality outcomes in the discipline involved.
9. Recent Government policy has focussed on place making and design quality. Quality outcomes rely on the facilitation skills of conservation and design officers. Heritage assets make a significant contribution to the wider planning, regeneration, sustainability and place making agenda which can be achieved without unacceptable compromise. The objectives of such policy will simply not be achieved in many places without significant increases in skilled staff. A number of other studies have recognised this in the recent past<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Heritage Green Paper, passim

<sup>3</sup> IHBC-English Heritage Quantifying Local Planning Authority Conservation Staffing; *Part 1* 2006

<sup>4</sup> Appendix 2

10. These objectives were undermined, in our view, by the failure of the Egan Review to include conservation staff amongst other categories of built environment professionals despite substantial evidence of their role in the promotion of sustainability<sup>5</sup>. This meant that the known current shortages of conservation professionals were not recognised let alone any future need. This failing has subsequently been perpetuated by the Academy for Sustainable Communities whose skills gap survey did not include conservation<sup>6</sup>.
11. The shortage of conservation staff is not just a recruitment matter, as the recent survey<sup>7</sup> showed. While significant numbers of authorities failed to attract applications from suitably qualified people, others had vacancies arising from:
  - Local Government restructuring;
  - Departmental restructuring;
  - Recruitment embargoes;
  - Budget restraint.
12. Our own monitoring of advertised salary scales for Conservation Officer posts in LPAs shows a recent decline (taking into account inflation)<sup>8</sup>. We do not think this is helpful to the recruitment of new members of the profession. Younger recruits are desperately needed as the profession has a preponderance of older members.
13. The Institute also has concerns that in LPAs the role of conservation is given insufficient attention because conservation professions have little representation in the upper parts of the staffing hierarchy. This highlights the need for strong mainstream guidance to LPAs on its importance.
14. The Institute believes that action is required, over a sustained period, to increase the numbers of qualified conservation professionals. This is unlikely to be achieved by leaving the matter in the hands of LPAs and academic institutions. The former rarely have the resources to support lengthy in-service training, and the latter seem increasingly reluctant to provide relevant courses. Several of these have closed in recent years, possibly because of the low student numbers involved and high tertiary institution recruitment targets. Nationally led action is needed.

## **MATTERS ARISING FROM THE TERMS OF REFERENCE**

### **Changes to knowledge and skills requirements.**

15. The Committee will receive evidence from others on the likely impacts of the Planning Bill. The Institute would like to point out that there will also be significant impacts arising from the implementation of the Heritage Bill which is soon to start its Parliamentary process. These will be direct, in the form of increased delegation of responsibilities to the authorities, and indirect, in the increased reliance on other specialists incorporating conservation-aware approaches in their day-to-day work. Clearly, the implications of the Heritage

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<sup>5</sup> BS7013:1998, *A guide to the principles of the conservation of historic buildings*

<sup>6</sup> ASC, *Mind the Skills Gap*, 2007

<sup>7</sup> IHBC-English Heritage, *Op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Appendix 3

Protection Review for LPAs with qualified conservation staff will be significant and for those without it may be much more serious. This will also have significant implications for the knowledge and skills of planning staff.

### **Most pronounced lack of skills**

16. The Institute has drawn attention to a general lack of conservation skills in LPAs. This will be compounded by three specific areas of skill and knowledge:
  - Implementing the Heritage Protection Review. This has both locally defined and national aspects. Its introduction will also impact on architects, developers and property owners who will need to understand its implications. The need to provide help and advice will impact heavily on LPAs and therefore their staff.
  - Implementing the place-making agenda. Conservation is known to have a strong beneficial influence on place making (the 'heritage dividend'<sup>9</sup>).
  - Implementing the climate change agenda. Historic buildings are a sustainable resource, with embodied energy, from renewable resources, readily repaired with renewable resources and which do not commonly require substantial 'carbon heavy' intervention.
17. There is also a need for investment in generic skills such as management, negotiation and IT.

### **Councillor skills**

18. The Institute has concerns about the current standard of skills amongst elected members and of the adequacy of levels of specialists training to improve this. Conservation is a specialism with many technical aspects and, as our consultation on skills and services indicates, one that requires the integration of many different disciplines. While heritage cases are often dealt with under schemes of delegation by planning officers with a range of conservation understanding, we are occasionally uncomfortable with the competence of planning committees when deciding on difficult proposals which involve heritage assets, sometimes compounded by conflicting social or economic priorities. We are concerned that heritage interests may be further undermined by the proposal in the Planning Bill for local review by councillors of delegated decisions. While those making decisions will need training in the new procedures, it is not clear that this will encompass all the necessary specialisms required.

### **Specialist support agencies**

19. We are grateful to the public funds from the heritage agencies and the Heritage Lottery Fund that have given our members the opportunities to improve their skills in their workplaces, whether voluntary or professional.
20. Typically, historic environment conservation specialists have developed their own skills from a variety of starting points usually being trained and educated within a single profession or discipline, including architecture, planning, history and archaeology. There is essentially only 'ad hoc' support for education and professional progression, which reflects the lack of credible

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<sup>9</sup> English Heritage, *Heritage Dividend*, 1999 and 2002

support which government or its agencies show for the building conservation specialism. This lack of support spans, at the very least, two key departments, DCMS for culture and DCLG for planning, their corresponding sector skills councils, Creative and Cultural Skills and Construction Skills, and the two government agencies, English Heritage and CABE.

21. Training has often taken place in the workplace, supplemented, where personal circumstances allow, by an internationally respected range of conservation courses across the UK, most represented through the IHBC's accreditation system of recognising courses<sup>10</sup>. While the IHBC acknowledges the public funds provided by the heritage agencies and the Heritage Lottery Fund which have given our members opportunities to improve skills in their workplaces, the specific professional sector covering historic environment conservation still cannot claim to have either a comprehensive skills audit nor an informed sponsor to government that can promote the benefits it brings. Thus the advantages of training up a wide range of professionals and trades are being lost.
22. There are many professionals who are able to offer good advice and training in areas relevant to our members. A number of agencies are involved in this, notably English Heritage, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), and IHBC, and a range of providers support the broad, inter-disciplinary skills-base that the IHBC promotes, these include Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and the English Historic Towns Forum (EHTF).
23. Improvement beyond current standards will require two things:
  - an increase in the numbers of qualified specialists, especially planners, with more specific conservation training;
  - a significant increase in understanding, by development control officers and policy planners, of how conservation strategies can underpin wider objectives and understanding, by architects, builders and property owners, how preservation and maintenance can effectively reduce carbon emissions, and how traditional construction techniques, materials and designs may benefit everything from biodiversity to health
24. None of this will happen unless the Government gives specific backing to standards of service delivery, training and employment opportunities that will in turn give prospective students of the conservation trades and professions the confidence to undertake study and training.
25. The Committee will hear from others about the shortages of resources for a range of specialisms. General support for training in a range of cross-disciplinary skills is also needed.

### **Effectiveness of Government support**

26. Since the creation of the DCMS there has been a tendency for DCMS and CLG to regard the heritage role of LPAs as the other's problem. This has resulted in a lack of focus on much needed support for LPAs, where the vast majority of decisions affecting heritage assets are made. The Institute is not really concerned where resources come from, so long as they are provided. We urge

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<sup>10</sup> [www.ihbc.org.uk](http://www.ihbc.org.uk)

the Committee to ensure a more joined-up approach on policy and resources for conservation in LPAs.

### **Long-term LPA mitigation of skills gaps**

27. At present, only a few enlightened authorities are attempting to bridge the skills gap. IHBC has little confidence, bearing in mind the downward pressure on LA budgets and the high public profile of many other services, that there will be any large scale improvement without carefully targeted intervention at national level with either major incentives or strict requirements [carrots and sticks]. We appreciate the current move for LA priorities to be achieved with Local Strategic Partnerships and consider it essential that nationally agreed standards of service delivery should be introduced to ensure adequate resourcing.

### **FUTURE PLANS**

28. The Institute would like to be involved in future initiatives to undertake:

- The employment of qualified conservation professionals in all LPAs;
- The development and funding of training in cross-disciplinary skills – place making (design, strategy and resourcing), design quality, Egan principals, carbon reduction, sustainable communities etc.);
- The training of planners in conservation issues;
- The training of councillors with a decision-making role in the importance of heritage and conservation issues;
- Building on the work of the National Heritage Training Group in developing traditional building craft skills<sup>11</sup>;
- A national strategy for investment in conservation and other specialist planning skills.

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<sup>11</sup> [www.nhtg.org.uk](http://www.nhtg.org.uk)

## **Appendix 1: How to Care for People and Places**

This is attached as a separate document.

## **Appendix 2**

### **Corroborative evidence on conservation skills**

Atkins' research for DCMS and English Heritage into processes of local delivery pin down the key role played by conservation professionals in securing sustainable community benefits from our places:

*'Conservation specialists working at district level are fully 'plugged in' to the local scene and to the community. These services know the physical character of their area and the detail of development pressures and proposals very well and they have usually developed a network of contacts within the community. These services tend also to be resourceful in enlisting or partnering with others in the authority and elsewhere to deliver outcomes and schemes. They use highly developed negotiation skills in their close dealings with owners and the general public. District conservation services deliver physical change on the ground, frequently by seeking and initiating multi-funded projects, often leading to management of relatively large capital projects.'* (Historic Environment Local Delivery, Consolidated Report, Atkins, April 2006, p.50, para 5.2.3)

Sustainable community integration in conservation is well captured by Atkins again in its description of the role of the conservation officer:

*'For conservation specialists, engagement with owners and developers is often generally closer and more sustained throughout a development scheme. This is inevitable since, in contrast with archaeological resources, which often must be recorded and removed prior to development, it is often the historic buildings or places which are themselves the subject of development or modification. However conservation specialist engagement with owners and developers is also more often proactive, and is associated with partnership, encouragement and persuasion, particularly related to buildings at risk, bidding for external funding and grant aid schemes.* (Historic Environment Local Delivery, Consolidated Report, Atkins, April 2006, p.14, para 3.2.11)

At the same time, wider research has been slow to recognise the potential of conservation skills and training to address the needs of the wider sectors. Construction skills (Altogether Stronger, Skills Needs Analysis for construction, 2005, Executive Summary, p.7), notes the weaknesses in inter-disciplinary and project-based skills, and the appreciation of sustainable outputs:

*Managers... are weaker in the soft skills needed for successful partnering. There is a lack of understanding of the impact of the Government's wide ranging sustainability agenda on what and how the industry builds... growing concern as to the skills... with design and the management of projects.*

The Academy for Sustainable Communities (Mind the Skills Gap, The skills we need for sustainable communities, 2007) again fails to recognise the correlation between the conservation skills sets and those identified by Egan as underpinning sustainable communities. However it did note that:

*Research undertaken for this study, along with existing information, shows that ... there are also labour shortages across the sector, concerns about some technical skills, and recognition that generic skills are lacking in many areas. (p.6)*

It goes on to identify as part of its overarching findings that:

*'Delivering sustainable communities requires balance and compromise to create aspirational yet deliverable projects. The best projects result from full engagement of all professionals, working together to develop solutions and sometimes compromising on their individual objectives'. (p.6)*

Unwittingly, they have succinctly summarised exactly what the conservation professional must achieve to secure conservation successes.

Historically, local authorities have played a key role in allowing the conservation professional to develop their skills. Our current consultation document, 'How to care for places and people', notes how the institute's standards, our 'Areas of Competence', originate in the local authority's conservation service. The ASC survey also found that local government procurement strategies are diminishing the opportunities for the development of the complex and holistic skills sets that :

*A number of factors point to the frequent and increasing use of consultants to undertake core or supplementary public sector functions. This throws up a number of issues to be addressed, including ensuring that public sector workers have the skills to efficiently manage consultants. (p.6)*

However learning and professional development within conservation is increasingly less an option, and aspiring conservation professionals appear increasingly cautious in their professional development, looking to establish careers in traditional disciplines such as archaeology, planning or architecture.

Consequently, despite the central role played by conservation strategies in securing strong sustainable communities, the training needs of these professionals typically have been addressed on an individual and usually an *ad hoc* basis, one frequently involving remarkable personal commitment, and often encouraged only by the IHBC as the professional body that encourages the holistic training essential to create a 'conservation professional'.

**Appendix 3**

**LOCAL AUTHORITY CONSERVATION OFFICER PROVISION**

**SALARY ANALYSIS – ADVERTISED POSTS 1998 –2007**

YEAR	POSTS SAMPLED	STARTING	FINISHING	MEDIAN	STARTING	FINISHING	MEDIAN
		AVERAGES BASED ON ALL POSTS			AVERAGES “SMOOTHED”*		
1998-1999	87	18,301	21,658	19,979	18,313	21,578	19,945
1999-2000	93	19,867	23,073	21,470 (+7.5%)	19,901	23,059	21,480 (+7.1%)
2000-2001	86	17,892	23,459	20,675 (- 3.8%)	17,717	23,413	20,565 (- 4.3%)
2001-2002	123	20,978	24,396	22,687 (+8.8%)	21,021	24,356	22,688 (+9.3%)
2002-2003	136	20,484	25,315	22,899 (+1.0%)	20,411	25,311	22,861 (+0.1%)
2003-2004	158	23,246	26,705	24,976 (+8.3%)	23,111	26,603	24,857 (+8.0%)
2004-2005	151	22,748	27,474	25,111 (+0.5%)	22,713	27,498	25,105 (+1.0%)
2005-2006	139	24,440	28,599	26,519 (+5.6%)	24,624	28,550	26,587 (+5.6%)
2006-2007	138	25,529	30,099	27,814 (+4.6%)	25,385	29,944	27,664 (+4.0%)
2007-2008	102	25,464	29,970	27,712 (- 0.3%)	25,999	29,402	27,770 (+0.4%)
2008-2008							
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	<b>1213</b>						

**Notes:**

- Smoothed figures removes bottom three & top three starting & finishing salaries to discount extremes of low career-grade posts and high-end London vacancies etc.