



INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

Egan Review Secretariat
Consultation Response
Zone 3/E1
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London
SW1E 5DU

Mr David J Chetwyn, MA, MA, MRTPI, IHBC
IHBC Consultations Secretary
142 Richmond Street,
Penkhull,
Stoke-on-Trent,
Staffordshire,
ST4 7DU

Tel: 01782 413896
Mob: 07974 099635
E-mail: consultations@ihbc.org.uk

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Dear Sirs

Review of Skills

I refer to the current review of built environment professionals' skills.

The Institute of Historic Building Conservation is the professional body representing conservation specialists and practitioners in the public and private sectors in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. 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.

Before responding to the specific questions, the IHBC wishes to raise four points, one of procedure and three of principle:

1. Procedure: The timescale of this Consultation

The 4-week consultation period does not conform to criterion 5 of the Cabinet Office Code for public consultations which specifies a 12-week period. We are concerned that this limited timescale has not allowed time for fully considered responses, and that no justification has been given for failure to conform to the Code.

2. Principle: Sustainable Communities are more than just New Communities

The IHBC strongly welcomes the Government's enthusiasm, most recently expressed by John Prescott

in his speech to the Prince's Foundation, for providing a sense of place and identity through high quality design. We appreciate the Government's keenness to focus on major new projects, and to use these opportunities to avoid the mistakes of the past, and to promote high quality. However these major projects will always be the exception rather than the rule: a very high proportion of construction work will be within existing communities. Delivering the Government's aims for environmental sustainability, in particular, will require major works to the existing building stock. We hope that the Government will recognise the overlaps with skills needs for managing change to make existing communities more sustainable, and the scope for developing and disseminating such skills through this Review.

3. Principle: The Historic Environment is a vital part of Sustainable Communities

The Historic Environment is a vital ingredient of sense of place and of the quality of life, and therefore of Sustainable Communities. The skills involved in preserving and enhancing it need to be included. _

4. Principle: Construction Industry Training must include work on Traditional Buildings

Approximately 50% of construction work involves repairs or alterations to the existing building stock. Construction industry training, at both professional and craft/trade levels, relates almost exclusively to new work. The skills shortages in the Construction Industry are compounded by the lack of training in work on traditional buildings, including historic buildings.

Response to the questions:

Question 1:

Simply “skilling up” will not ensure that those skills are delivered effectively. There is a pressing need to change the culture of Government, regional development agencies, funding bodies and local authorities. Government needs to develop and deliver a holistic approach, taking forward the principles of the Sustainable Communities Plan. Major resources at local level are needed to both ensure pro-active planning, and deliver full public involvement in the process. Fundamental reform of regeneration funding in the UK, together with a new European Regeneration Framework (State Aid), are essential prerequisites of delivering sustainable communities.

Question 2.

The sustainable communities agenda needs to be delivered at national, regional, and local level. Government needs to provide an integrated framework, and regional agencies can provide strategic direction on major projects, but the key role in delivery must lie with local authorities.

Question 3.

a. Both developers and local authorities need to invest in the skills needed to deliver quality outcomes. Developers need to consider the wider environmental, social, and economic context of their projects, and the implications beyond their site boundaries from the outset. Developers involved in high quality new developments and regeneration need to work in partnership with public bodies, delivering their product against the context of robust master-planning and the provision of a high quality public realm. They also need to recognise the need to invest in involvement of local communities throughout the process.

b. Government needs to provide clear guidance on best practice, and the resources to deliver it. The shortages of planners in Local Government were highlighted in 2002 (‘Resources for Planning’- Arups) leading the Treasury to deliver £350M to support this sector. The continuing shortages, and retention difficulties, continue to be highlighted by the ODPM / EO (‘Local Government Pay and Workforce Strategy’, 2003). The Local Authority Conservation Provision Survey (English Heritage / IHBC, 2003) highlighted the high level of skills held by members of the conservation profession. However, it also identified that staffing levels were hopelessly inadequate in many local authorities. This not only harms the quality and speed of planning decisions, but also curtails pro-active heritage regeneration activities, such as bidding and establishing area enhancement and regeneration grant schemes.

c. By the planning application stage, there is often little scope for meaningful community involvement, as the major decisions have been made by the developer, often on a fairly narrow basis. Meaningful community involvement needs to take place much earlier. Masterplanning and development briefs need to be produced in close consultation with local communities to ensure that local needs and aspirations are built into the planning process, rather than just the short-term interests of the developer. Local planning authorities need to be pro-active in involving communities in the preparation of Development Frameworks. Involving communities is a very time-consuming process; securing *ongoing* community involvement and “ownership” (rather than just input during the development process) needs continuing investment of time and resources. Involving schools (and indirectly the parents) can be a very positive way of engaging communities, and getting them to think in terms of the future.

Question 4.

Conservation and regeneration officers should be included in the list. Qualities highlighted in the Sustainable Communities Plan including good people skills (8.30) and personal qualities (8.31). All involved should be able to “think outside the box”. A grounding in development economics, modern regeneration practice, and urban design (in particular the differences between subjective matters and more objective measures of urban quality) would be beneficial to all professions. However, there is also a need for different professions to appreciate the limitations of generalised training and the need for specialisation. Problems arise where mainstream professionals attempt to undertake specialist work.

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Question 5.

This is a major question which requires more thorough consideration than the consultation timescale allows, notably in terms of dialogue between all the professions involved, and cross-reference to the Government's new Skills Strategy. The analysis needs to relate not just to delivering new sustainable communities, but to ensuring improved sustainability across all communities. Environmental sustainability is a key and growing issue, particularly in the light of the Energy White Paper.

There has been some discussion of moving towards a single built environment profession. This would effectively impede the modernisation of planning and regeneration functions and lead to more mediocre development. Members of a single profession could have a wider breadth of expertise, but by definition little depth in most instances. Specialisation provides depth of expertise. Regeneration in inner city areas, rural communities, villages, industrial cores and other areas requires specialised skills which can be provided by putting together professionals with considerable depth of experience. The act of compiling the team provides the breadth. Many of the complex schemes delivered in the past decade would have been far less successful if less specialised staff had been involved.

Better links and shared understanding need to be developed between the professions involved. Potential models are provided by the coming-together of the "Edinburgh Group" of professions leading to the newly-launched common Accreditation Framework for professionals involved in Building Conservation, and the grouping of the "portable heritage" conservation professions into the National Council for Conservation-Restoration. The current Review offers a potential opportunity to build links and synergies between the professional groups, and for influencing Government to take a more holistic approach linking Urban Design more closely with the other professions involved, and to provide a more coherent approach to developing and resourcing the skills required.

Question 6

This needs to be reviewed in the context of the Government's Skills Strategy (including National Occupational Standards) and through dialogue with all professions involved.

- a. A far greater emphasis on the qualitative aspects of regeneration and creation of sustainable communities is needed.
- b. See 4 above. This could be either a foundation course or a specific module common to a range of courses.
- c. The various professional institutes involved, supported by the Sector Skills Council(s), would have to agree the content and delivery.

Question 7.

Professional institutes should emphasise the need for robust continuing professional development. There should be better communication channels between different institutes and other national bodies, adopting a joint approach where possible to promoting best practice.

Question 8.

There is considerable variation in the skills within local planning authorities. Some local authorities lack proper advisers and specialists in urban design and conservation (LACPS, 2003). Where such skills are absent, the quality assurance function of the planning system is reduced. Planners are in very short supply (Arups 2002; LA Pay and Workforce Strategy 2003). Design and conservation skills are also extremely variable within the architectural profession.

Question 9.

Firstly, the level of remuneration needs to be sufficient to make built environment professions an attractive career choice. Secondly, there needs to be a commitment by Government and local authorities to maintaining and training skilled built environment teams. Thirdly, there is a need to market the professions and create a more dynamic image. This would be helpful in attracting more creative individuals into the professions.

Question 10.

See 9 above. It is not a case of re-branding, rather of promotion. Engaging schoolchildren in the issues would help (see 3c).

Question 11.

Economic and financial skills vary greatly in both public and private sectors. In the current bidding culture, many public sector professionals have direct experience of developing and delivering projects.

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But there is a need to raise awareness in both public and private sectors of modern urban economics and new regeneration practice. There is a gulf of understanding between the activities of new, entrepreneurial developers, and older developers with narrower vision. This question needs to be aimed equally at the private sector.

Question 12.

Of particular benefit would be to develop a basic awareness of qualitative factors in the provision of new facilities, and an emphasis on the importance of using talented professional teams to design projects. There needs to be an understanding that quality of design can often make the difference between a project succeeding and failing.

Question 13.

Training on the delivery of sustainable communities, especially the importance of quality solutions, should be compulsory for decision makers, especially those in the planning process.

Question 14.

The development industry is woefully under-informed about sustainable development. There is little commitment to developing in a sustainable manner. The Government must take a lead, through building standards and fiscal incentives for sustainable practice. Disincentives to sustainable practice, such as full rate VAT on refurbishment works, need to be dealt with. The current culture of short-termism, concentrating on minimising capital expenditure rather than lifetime costs, needs to be challenged.

Questions 15 & 16.

The IHBC is happy for the contents of this letter to be quoted or reproduced in any way.

Conclusions

This Review is a vital opportunity for providing the skills base for both creating and sustaining Sustainable Communities. To do this, its scope needs to be widened to include Historic Environment skills. There is a strong need for capacity building within built environment professions to deliver the Sustainable Communities agenda and promote awareness of the benefits of good design and heritage regeneration. Such capacity building is also needed in the development industry, by political decision makers at all levels, and by funding bodies. There is a clear need for significantly better resourcing of urban design and conservation specialist staff within local authorities. The means of delivering the skills required, and the implications for the professions need to be considered at greater length. The IHBC is keen to be involved in this process.

Yours faithfully

Dave Chetwyn
Consultations Secretary