

MEDIA RELEASE

CONSERVATION CUTS SET TO DELAY PLANNING APPLICATIONS, WARNS NEW REPORT

- Numbers of staff down at a crucial time for the planning system -

A dramatic cut in local conservation specialists could significantly delay planning applications, warns a report from the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC), English Heritage and the Association of Local Government Officers.

This year's *Annual Report on Local Authority Staff Resources*, shows an accelerating drop in conservation and historic environment experts against a sharp increase in planning applications for them to manage.

Lack of experts to deal with planning applications

"Over the past 12 months the number of conservation officers working in local authorities has dropped by 13.5 per cent. The number of archaeological officers is down by close to nine per cent, so that means that historic environment expertise has fallen by almost 12 per cent," says Eddie Booth, president and secretary of IHBC.

In contrast to falling staff levels, the figures on planning application decisions have risen by more than five per cent, and listed building consent decisions are up by just over seven per cent.

"If these trends continue it is likely that the demand, as demonstrated by these applications, will exceed the capacity of the local authorities to be able to respond with suitably qualified experts. This will have a direct impact on services for customers, whether householders, businesses or those concerned about their local areas." explains Eddie Booth. "This lack of resources also means that local authorities won't be able to meet their conservation obligations under the

Government's existing planning legislation, or even under forthcoming planning policies such as the draft National Planning Policy Framework outlines.”

Chair of English Heritage, Baroness Andrews is also concerned about the loss of expertise highlighted in the Report. “The imbalance between the numbers of staff and the volume of planning applications shown in this report are of extreme concern at a time of change in the planning system,” she comments. “The historic environment is not a soft target; loss of expertise could lead to loss of elements of England’s heritage, which once gone, cannot be recovered.”

The report can be read at www.helm.org.uk/LASR

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Notes to editors

In early 2011 there were 957.5 full time equivalent (FTE) historic environment members of staff in local authorities in England. This comprised 606.5 FTEs working on building and area conservation and 351 FTEs archaeological staff. These figures represent a reduction of 5.6% since comprehensive data was first collected in 2003; this breaks down into a reduction of 9.2% for Conservation Officers and a slight increase of 1.4% for Archaeological Officers. A high point in terms of numbers of historic environment staff was reached in 2006 when 1224 FTEs were working in local authorities, since then there has been a 21.8% reduction in numbers. In the past year there has been an overall reduction of 11.9%, with a reduction of 13.5% for conservation officers and 8.9% for archaeological officers (see figure 1).

Whilst the planning application decisions show uplift in the past year of 5.2%, and listed building consent decisions show a slightly larger increase of 7.1%, the local authority historic environment staff resource has reduced by 11.9% over the same period.

Institute of Historic Building Conservation: The IHBC is the principal professional body for building conservation practitioners and historic environment specialists working in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, with connections to the Republic of Ireland. For more information, please visit <http://www.ihbc.org.uk/>

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