



## IHBC RESEARCH NOTES

### **Market Intelligence: Local Authority Conservation Specialists Jobs Market 2023**

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#### **Executive Summary**

- The Institute's continuous data from 1998 (26 years) now covers 2,214 posts.
- The year of 2023 saw a decline of 20% in the number of advertised vacancies by comparison with 2021 and 2022.
- Recruitment levels remain well below those in the first decade of this century.
- 90% of the vacancies were for full-time posts on the permanent establishment
- There has been a distinct move away from part-time and/or fixed term posts more evident in recent years.
- Specific fixed-term posts in support of centrally generated grant-aid project posts declined sharply in 2023.
- The average median salary for advertised posts in 2023 was £37,892 marking a rise of 5.1% over the previous year (and with the exception of 2022, the largest annual increase for seven years).
- The equivalent average full-time salary [in the UK in 2023] according to Office of National Statistics calculations was £35,000.
- 68% of local government recruiters in 2023 expected job applicants to be Full Members of IHBC (or working towards this status) although this was a slight fall from 73% in 2022.
- As has been the case of over two decades, reactive development management advice, appeals and enforcement continue to be the dominant prioritised job functions and continuing resource constraints possibly reflected in only limited prioritisation of more proactive tasks.
- Somewhat against a long-standing trend in London of higher CO salaries reflecting higher living costs etc., average median salaries were 4.5% below the national average in 2023.

- Only one post in North Branch was advertised in the whole of 2023 and recruitment activity remains low in the area covering Cleveland, Cumbria, Durham, Northumberland and Tyne & Wear.

*NB: although the IHBC is active across the United Kingdom, analysis in this Research Note relates only to information gleaned about England's Local Authorities. (see paragraph 1.4)*

## **1. Background**

1.1 This annual review aims to compliment the information gathered periodically by Local Authority Conservation Provision Studies undertaken by IHBC.

1.2 The Institute's cumulative data set relates to local authority conservation posts advertised commenced in 1998. This now comprises over 2,200 posts over 26 years. [\[1\]](#)

1.3 Analysis of local government job vacancies in the calendar year 2023 for IHBC aims to help form a picture of the market in respect of workload requirements; qualifications; levels of remuneration etc.; regional variations and other trends. Specific fixed-term nationally supported project posts declined sharply in 2023.

1.4 Advertised posts are monitored weekly and although statistics are collected for Scotland and Wales (but not Northern Ireland) this Note relates only to England as the annual total of vacancies for the other two Home Countries are statistically insignificant and insufficiently numerous to delineate separate meaningful statistics.

1.5 Since 2015 data has also been collected where unsuccessful recruitment within six-months has required the local authority to re-advertise. In 2023 the number of re-advertisements was relatively small (seven) and five were within three months suggesting some urgency to appoint, with one authority waiting more than 6 months.

## **2. Size of the market**

2.1 Historically, advertised posts in England grew steadily in the late 1990s and for eight years between 2001 and 2006 exceeded 120 per year (with a peak of 158 in 2003). A sharp year-on-year fall then ensued so that by the depth of the Recession in 2011 and 2012 only 26 vacancies were advertised each year. Recruitment has generally not returned to levels at the start of the century averaging only about a half to two-thirds of the pre-Recession numbers but in the recent past this has also been distorted to some degree by the prolonged pandemic.

2.2 Advertising in 2023 was at about the same level as in 2020 and 2016. The reduction by about 20% from the previous two years may reflect the current parlous state of local government finances as referred to in Section 8.

2.3 Unlike the last several years when it seemed customary to recruit in the first quarter, the second quarter (April to June) was the most active recruiting period in 2023.

### **3. Part-time working v. fixed-term posts**

3.1 As was also noted in 2022 a distinct return towards the traditional pattern of employment, i.e. permanent posts in 2023 (90%) is discerned, a feature of recruitment much more commonplace in the late 1990s [2]. Some of which may be attributable to the conclusion of fixed-life grant-aided schemes such as Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) projects while a notable reduction in part-time working was also evident (11.5%).

### **4. General salary levels**

4.1 Advertised salaries are almost invariably expressed as a range. [3] Employers usually expect successful candidates to be appointed at the bottom of the quoted scale, progressing upward on the basis of qualifications and/or experience [4] but as has usually been noted in recent years, no vacancies in 2023 appeared to be tied to specific career progression milestones and thus to salary increments.

4.2 The average starting salary in England in 2023 was £35,318 with the average finishing salary £40,466 giving a median salary level of £37,892. This was a 5.1% rise over 2022, a smaller increase than 2022 (the largest annual rise since 2001-2) but generally greater than in annual rise the preceding five years. [5] By comparison, the Office of National Statistics calculates the average salary in the UK for full-time employees in 2023 was £35,000. [6].

4.3 Two caveats usually apply regarding potential distortions to the national conservation officer salary averages:

- a) at the bottom, 'career grade' posts (including interns and trainees) with untypically low starting salaries are evident usually recruiting newly graduated but inexperienced staff; or, uncommonly high-end salaries (typically senior management positions) mainly located within London councils and reflecting higher living costs;
- b) regional variations - where higher salaries have traditionally been paid in London, and the South-East throughout the period of this data set - and lower ones, usually in the West Midlands and South West and;
- c) sampling sizes - where larger Branch samples overall tend to offset regional anomalies.

Further comment is made about this in Section 7.

### **5. Qualifications and expertise**

5.1 Stated educational requirements varied significantly in 2023 as set out in Table 1. Recruiters did not always explicitly refer to Full Membership of the IHBC or that applicants should be working purposefully towards this

nor was a distinction always made as to whether such membership was essential or merely desirable.

5.2 Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that in 2023 a significant proportion of applicants (68%) were expected to be either Full Members of IHBC (or rather less commonly working towards full membership). While this educational requirement is not quite as high as in 2022 (72.6%) it nevertheless suggests strong awareness of the IHBC's recognised set of professional competences and the Institute's professional status.

5.3 A sole requirement of RTPI or RIBA membership for posts was hardly evident in 2023 [a mere 4 posts or 5.7%] and membership of other allied institutions, in particular the RICS or CIfA were not notably cited as a crucial qualifying requirement.

<b>Table 1. Educational Requirements (where IHBC uncategorised membership was also a consideration) 2023 (2022 in italics)</b>				
Degree only	8	11.43%	<i>16</i>	<i>19.04%</i>
Degree + Post Graduate Qualification + IHBC	4	5.71%	<i>16</i>	<i>19.04%</i>
Degree + Post Graduate Qualification + RTPI	1	1.42%	<i>1</i>	<i>1.19%</i>
Degree + IHBC as the principal standard (with or without RTPI/RIBA as an alternative)	40	57.14%	<i>29</i>	<i>34.52%</i>
Degree + RTPI membership only	-	-	<i>1</i>	<i>1.19%</i>
Degree + RIBA membership only	1	1.42%	<i>1</i>	<i>1.19%</i>
Qualification	5	7.14%	<i>2</i>	<i>2.38%</i>
Qualification + IHBC (or RTPI)	9	12.85%	<i>14</i>	<i>16.66%</i>
Post Graduate Qualification + IHBC	-	-	<i>1</i>	<i>1.19%</i>
Post Graduate Qualification	-	-	<i>2</i>	<i>2.38%</i>
Other: HNC 6-7, Prince 2 etc. only	2	2.85%	<i>1</i>	<i>1.19%</i>
	70	100%	<i>82*</i>	<i>100%</i>

## **6. Roles & responsibilities**

6.1 Workload priorities set out in job descriptions always need to be evaluated with caution. Posts very rarely indicate percentage allocations of time to individual tasks and these priorities are not necessarily adhered to in practice once the post holder is appointed. Sometimes these are dictated by more senior management but occasionally the appointee has some discretion over outputs.

6.2 The priorities set out in the job advertisement do not always tally with those in the formal job specification – which is inevitably more wide ranging [\[7\]](#) and may express the overall long-term management objectives for the service rather than just immediate short-term priorities. It is not possible to capture all the functions of job specifications but priorities and some trends can usually be discerned.

6.3 The need for ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘self-motivation’ (suggesting ‘*you’re on your own*’) continue to be frequently cited in job adverts and this remains especially true for junior, less well remunerated posts. Mentoring is rarely referred to.

6.4 While the recruitment process is sometimes seen as the opportunity to update a job description and refocus on specific current priorities, in deconstructing workload requirements in 2023 it is also quite clear that in practice it is short-term, time-limited, high priority tasks such as development management advice or the processing of listed building consents that dominate to the extent that 44% of posts placed this first and foremost (and greater still if ranked as the second priority). In almost every instance this task was also tied to involvement with planning appeals and associated compliance and enforcement action.

6.5 Unless any one of the following are clearly specified as a principal focus such as conservation area designation, appraisal and review; planning policy input; compliance and enforcement; heritage-at-risk issues or local listing; large-scale, long-term resource hungry workload areas are assigned distinctly subsidiary status.

6.6 Although only two posts made conservation area designation appraisal or review the top workload priority, a further twenty-nine made this a secondary or tertiary priority. Previous annual reviews have noted the inadequacy of many past area designations as highlighted by the infrequency of periodic statutory review and/or published appraisals and this is a reflection of the low percentage of conservation areas in England without any form of appraisal and/or management plan [\[8\]](#) even fewer of which meet current Historic England best practice standards. [\[9\]](#)

6.7 Also notable in 2023 was little concerted attention seemingly given to two other significant areas of work: buildings-at-risk (with only two local authorities making this issue the top workload priority); and local listing.

6.8 These lacunae, may reflect functions that require consistent and sustained resourcing over an extended period while additionally the issue of local listing, promoted via the Secretary of State in 2019 with pilot schemes in 2020, has not led to prioritised, widespread adoption, nor to best practice standards. Also, distinctly notable in 2023 was the low priority afforded general external advice to the public or community engagement.

6.9 When there is a contraction in the range of heritage workload undertaken (often stemming from resource constraints) the ability to deliver a well-balanced service (as widely described in established delivery models of excellence) [\[10\]](#) is correspondingly reduced and may also adversely impact on the proper exercise of statutory functions. Failure to maintain effective and appropriate standards for the management of the local historic environment would thus be considered to fall below what the Institute would consider a best practice service.

6.10 While some minor rebalancing from **reactive** short-term tasks (particularly development management) had been detected in 2022, this was evidently less the case in 2023. Interaction with the development management process remained a clear priority with more **proactive** resource hungry workload: e.g. conservation area designation, review and management plans; buildings-at-risk; and local listing [\[11\]](#) assuming distinctly less importance - undertaken only when or if residuary time and resources could be found. It also remained a concern in 2023 that so few local planning authorities clearly identified advice to individual historic building owners and occupiers as a notable priority or responding to queries from the general public.

6.11 This annual snapshot has always made clear that the relative priorities defined above should not necessarily imply that other important workload activities are not already taking place or that a wide range of other tasks are never carried out (i.e. those generally regarded when undertaken as are necessary for a balanced conservation service).

6.12 The absence of such tasks [q.v. Endnote 7] does however call in to question the level of a council's commitment to and resourcing of a full and balanced heritage service in relation to the quantum and range of the heritage assets needing to be properly managed. [\[12\]](#)

6.13 Full job descriptions accompanying vacancies often include multifarious miscellaneous heritage management tasks required of the new post-holder but they may not necessarily represent the actual priorities as seen by the authority's officer management team or elected councillors.

## **7. Regional variations**

7.1 Interpretation of variations in salaries and comparisons to previous years require some caution. The turnover of posts in some Branches has been reasonably consistent for some years e.g. East Anglia and the South

West but others have been unfailingly low, particularly in the North and to a lesser extent West Midlands as shown in Table 2. [\[13\]](#)

<b>Table 2 Vacancies per English Branch Five-year sample 2018-23</b>						
<b>Branch</b>	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
East Anglia	10	12	13	12	5	16
East Midlands	7	8	8	5	10	14
London	7	17	12	7	9	9
North	1	2	4	3	4	5
North West	6	5	10	7	2	7
South	9	10	9	4	8	1
South East	4	5	8	7	9	12
South West	11	11	9	9	5	10
West Midlands	4	6	5	8	6	6
Yorkshire	11	8	4	7	1	8
<b>Total</b>	70	84	83	69*	59	88
<b>Note:</b> In 2020 no posts were advertised in April because of Covid						

7.2 The overall salary variation figures for IHBC Branches in 2023 are set out in Table 3, but as noted above when the total job vacancies within any one IHBC Branch area are quite small this data is not always a reliable guide.

7.3 Overall, the median salary in England for 2023 was £37,892 marking a summary rise of 5.1% increase on 2022 but clearly not applying across all Branches and also a reflection of where posts with lower seniority were prevalent as noted especially in London where the Branch average was below the England average for the first time in many years. In past years median salary scales in London and the South East had been consistently higher than in other regions, reflecting higher living and travelling costs (as might reasonably be expected).

<b>Table 3. Variations in Median Salaries by Branch 2023</b>			
Region	Sample	Median (£)	Variation (%)
East Anglia	10	38,309	+ 1.10%
East Midlands	7	35,951	- 5.12%
London	7	36,157	- 4.57%
North	1	32,911	- 13.14%
North West	6	36,597	- 3.41%
South	9	38,680	+ 2.08%
South East	4	40,003	+ 5.57%
South West	11	37,522	- 0.97%
West Midlands	4	32,659	- 13.81%
Yorkshire	11	36,465	- 3.79%
Total (& Average)	70	(37,892)	

7.4 In 2023 the notable variations were lower than average median regional salaries in seven of the ten Branch areas offset slightly by higher than average salaries in the South East.

## **8. Local government finance**

8.1 To place local authority levels of recruiting and conservation officer posts in some context, statistics from the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities showed that in 2023 local authority net current expenditure on services in England was budgeted to be £117.6bn of which £73.7bn accounted for three statutory services: education, adult social care, and children’s social care.

8.2 The Local Government Information Unit found that in the past 14 years, allowing for inflation, councils in England had suffered a 50% fall in their spending powers. From 2010 to 2022 the amount of central government grant was cut by 40% in real terms while in the same period councils raised council tax by 30% in real terms.

8.3 Despite the announcement in early 2024 of a £600 million uplift for statutory core services (of which heritage management is not identified as one); funding for statutory services is still 10% lower than it was in 2010. It therefore can be clearly seen that non-statutory services have borne the brunt of the cuts.

## 9. Concluding Note

9.1 The jobs market for permanent local authority conservation specialists continued to recover in 2023 after the deleterious impact on advertised vacancies of Covid, the conclusion of fixed-term HAZ posts and despite a continuing squeeze on local government finance.

9.2 This represents a welcome return to stable departmental establishments after several years where it appeared that fixed-term posts were becoming more prevalent if not the norm. Nevertheless, the level of recruitment in 2023 is less than half the number about two decades ago and perhaps a reflection of continued uncertainty about the economic outlook and the public sector.

9.3 The Institute intends to publish a further market intelligence report on the local authority conservation specialist jobs market 2024 in early 2025.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Between 1998 and c.2009, information concerning local authority vacancies was drawn principally from the weekly pages of *Planning* magazine. Thereafter the decline in planning related posts, the switch to the (typically) fortnightly publication of *Planning* coupled with the development of the IHBC's web-based jobs pages saw the advertising of conservation posts move almost exclusively from the former to the latter. Advertising now rarely appears elsewhere and thus the data in this Note is not drawn from sources beyond IHBC and is considered to be near definitive.
- 2 Of these one was maternity cover [12 months]; one a trainee post [12 months]; two were fixed term grant schemes and one post of 24 months duration was advertised twice during the year.
- 3 Occasionally only a fixed starting or finishing salary is stated. Ranges are usually also given even where appointments are part-time (pro-rata) or fixed-term.
- 4 Salary progression has generally been on the basis of an annual increment within the overall scales with the individual spinal-point progressions within the quoted range usually being short.
- 5 To compensate for the effect of unusually low or unusually high ends of salary ranges a comparative analysis is also made by subtracting the three highest and three lowest starting and finishing salaries during the year from the overall sample. This nevertheless generates very similar figures to the overall averages above.

- 6 Officer for National Statistics  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/annualsurveyofhoursandearnings/2023>
- 7 Usually with a catch-all requirement to encompass 'such other duties as may be required from time to time' or similar phraseology
- 8 Estimated to be about 25%
- 9 Estimated to be about 10%
- 10 For example see IHBC Guidance Note: Annual Conservation Management Statements – Best Practice GN2014/2 accessible at: [https://ihbconline.co.uk/toolbox/guidance\\_notes/consManag.html](https://ihbconline.co.uk/toolbox/guidance_notes/consManag.html)
- 11 This is notwithstanding the short-term and inconclusive local listing pilot schemes sponsored by DLIUHC that commenced in 2020-21 on which no evaluation report has been published
- 12 See IHBC Guidance Note GN2014/3 Oct 2014 Planning Authority duties in the provision of appropriate specialist advice in England, accessible at: [https://ihbconline.co.uk/toolbox/guidance\\_notes/index.html](https://ihbconline.co.uk/toolbox/guidance_notes/index.html)
- 13 but allowance must be made where there had been fixed-term/short life initiatives such as grant-aided schemes