

Background and Issues Paper

The North Wales Conservation Officers Forum (NWCOF)

1. Background:

The Forum was established following local authority re-organisation in 1997. Phil Ebbrell of Denbighshire County Council was responsible for coming up with the idea and arranged the first Forum meeting at Bodelwyddan Castle.

2. Purpose and Organisation of the Forum:

The Forum meets twice per year and every North Wales Conservation Officer is invited. Conservation Officers from Powys has recently requested to become members. The main purpose is to share information and experiences on important conservation issues. All north Wales unitary authorities and Snowdonia National Park Conservation Officer staff are members of NWCOF. The venue and chair of meetings are rotated alphabetically.

The agenda items are set beforehand to mirror the items to be discussed at the next Built Heritage Forum (BHF). (NWCOF meetings are timed to precede the bi-annual BHF). Other agenda items are also identified by north Wales Officers and selected topics are forwarded to Cadw for inclusion on the BHF agenda. Examples of NWCOF agenda items have been: -

- 1) VAT on works to listed buildings
- 2) Buildings at risk
- 3) The identification/ definition of curtilage structures at listed buildings

Presentations and discussion are to be given on topics such as successful regeneration schemes, presentations of new regulations and guidance and significant appeal decisions.

Some of the new actions and initiatives introduced by Cadw up until 2010/ 2011 as a result of the interaction between NWCOF and the BHF have been significant. These include jointly funded buildings at risk surveys that now cover all Welsh unitary authorities (UA's). The success of the Welsh authorities in applying for THI can partly be attributed to awareness raising and mutual guidance afforded by the two Fora. Also e.g. changes in regulations for compensation in Article 4 Direction cases were achieved as a result of initial representations made by NWCOF members.

The formation of the Fora has resulted in many benefits however by 2010 some NWCOF members were raising concerns that both NWCOF and the BHF could not develop further in terms of co-

ordinated actions. Cadw were also exploring whether the proceedings of the BHF could be improved at that time. Buildings at Risk is one instance of how improved measures had been established through the Fora, nevertheless further measures to develop the initiative had stalled. Although BAR surveys have been instigated since 1997, corresponding action to develop a national strategy and campaign to address risk, allied to local initiatives, had not developed in conjunction with surveys. Joint Cadw / UA action has been confined to pilot schemes in Monmouthshire and a current BAR initiative in Conwy County Borough Council. This was perceived by NWCOF as a drawback of the existing arrangements.

3. Evolution in Liaison:

During 2010 discussion was initiated at NWCOF on ways in which the BHF meeting and proceedings could be improved. There was also consideration of the way that NWCOF could also evolve and improve by linking in more closely with the BHF. Work by North Wales Conservation Officers on the manner in which collaboration could develop was also thought relevant. (the 2009 report).

A paper was prepared and reported to the BHF in 2010 (see attached). The aim of the paper was to create more integration in the work of Cadw and amenities bodies in the following areas: -

- 1) Planning and co-ordination of national actions
- 2) Prioritising of actions and creating exemplar schemes that can be rolled out on a wider scale.
- 3) Grant scheme co-ordination and other initiatives
- 4) Using BHF to provide interactive workshops on key topics to improve conservation outcomes.

Since 2010 several topics have been the subject of workshops at the BHF. However it must be said that although workshops have been held to inform attendees about such topics as conservation area management and enforced sales there is still no significant development of forward planning and collaboration. This is due to the current lack of real collaboration between local authorities. There is also still an understandable reluctance of Cadw to provide a practical lead in many subject areas in the absence of partnership working at a local level. Both organisations and Fora need to become more integrated to create more unified working to achieve common outputs and outcomes.

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BUILT HERITAGE FORUM – ISSUES PAPER

1. Background:

- 1.1 The Built Heritage Forum (BHF) was first established in about 1997 and has been a successful means of liaison between local unitary authorities and Cadw. Attendance has grown to include archaeological trusts and other conservation organisations. The issue of reviewing the current format of the BHF was raised at the May 2009 BHF. This issue was included as an agenda item for discussion at the 27th April 2010 North Wales Conservation Officers Forum (NWCOF).
- 1.2 NWCOF generally felt that, although the existing BHF format has been a successful forum for many years, it is now opportune to critically examine its purpose, procedures and outcomes to see whether improvements can be achieved. This paper has been drafted as a constructive document that would act as a catalyst for debate on reviewing the BHF format. This paper has been circulated to and agreed by all members of NWCOF.

2. Purpose of the BHF:

- 2.1 The following are considered to be the present primary purposes of the BHF:
 - To act as a Forum for the exchange of views on subjects/issues and to agree future actions for partners.
 - Imparting examples of good practice.
 - Updating partners with information on changes to legislation, guidance and giving presentations on chosen topics/organisations etc.
- 2.2 The BHF has been instrumental in achieving beneficial outcomes on many issues. Initiatives such as National Building at Risk surveys have been formulated and completed following debate and agreement at the BHF.

3. Potential Purposes for Exploration:

- 3.1 Since 2008 and the publication of the report local authorities have been exploring new ways to work collaboratively. The 'Making the Connections' (MTC) exercise carried out by North Wales local authorities in 2008/2009 included an examination of future options for specialist planning service delivery. The report of the North Wales MTC conservation officers' group was released in summer 2009 and concluded that managed joint working between authority officers for selective project based tasks should be explored further.
- 3.2 Collaborative working is likely to become increasingly important as local authorities are subjected to greater financial pressures. Partnership working with organisations including Cadw represents a significant opportunity for local conservation services to become more cost effective. The BHF is the principal regular liaison mechanism between local authority conservation officers and Cadw. Officers

consider that the BHF could provide part of a focused and effective vehicle for collaborative working in the following areas: -

- Co-ordinating national conservation actions and initiatives on a joint/partnership basis with local authorities.
- Formulating specific pilot schemes and exemplar partnership projects and cascading these schemes from a national scale to local level.
- Creating more targeted and effective conservation grant schemes at local and national level.
- Assessing and progressing improved collaborative local authority working in areas such as listed building control delegation and production of guidance and conservation area preservation and enhancement (see final report of North Wales MTC Officers' group 2009).
- Tourism projects and heritage site promotion/interpretation.

3.3 During times of increased financial stringency for all government and local public sector bodies the pressure on resources for specialist planning services is expected to increase. The BHF could also offer opportunities to provide more cost effective continuing professional development to personnel of local authorities, trusts, amenity bodies and government organisations.

4. Current BHF Format:

4.1 NWCOF considers that the current high number of officers attending the BHF and the 'round table' type format for proceedings does have disadvantages. The numbers attending the BHF has steadily grown and there are proposals to invite additional organisations. This creates a crowded conference and that many authorities are sending more than one officer. NWCOF believe that there is a high turnover of officers attending for many local authorities. This does not facilitate a consistency of viewpoint and the attendance of different local authority officers does not give a depth of knowledge of previous BHF, proceedings. Participation in debate is frequently limited to a small % of the same officers.

4.2 Additionally the NWCOF sense that local authorities are not taking as active a part in both the discussion and proceedings of the BHF. This includes actions between as well as during meetings. The impression is of less involvement by local authorities in preparation for the BHF and less constructive discussion and agreement on actions during the Forum. This may be caused as much by increasing day to day workloads/pressures on local authority officers as by the format of the BHF. There is a feeling that for many the five hour plus return journey to Builth Wells is a high price to pay for the limited outcomes created by BHF.

4.3 The above is not to be taken as a criticism of Cadw as there is agreement that Cadw's organisation and leadership of the Forum is to be applauded. It must be recognised that when Cadw request either responses to consultations or contributions of say examples of good practice from local authorities, these are generally poorly addressed.

5. Options for the Future:

5.1 NWCOF feel that if the BHF is to be more effective it must be adapted. There is a danger that it is becoming a 'talking shop'. It is recognised that significant responsibility for this should be with local authorities.

- 5.2 The following suggestions are considered to be worthy of exploration: -
- Restricting attendance of BHF to a single officer per local authority or adopting another approach to reduce overall numbers.
 - Confining the BHF to an annual event.
 - Integrating the BHF more closely with North (and South) Wales conservation officer groups. There is likelihood that these regional groups will assume greater importance and management influence if MTC proposals are implemented. The NWCOF may well be adapted in the long term to provide more of a direct management role in co-ordinating collaborative working. If this proves to be the case it would make sense to form direct links with Cadw and other conservation agencies/bodies (including archaeological Trusts).
 - Review North and South Wales Officers Forums so that they could provide more of a local impetus for discussing and agreeing regional collaborative working priorities with Cadw attending. These could take place at bi-annual intervals with one being timed to coincide closely with the annual BHF to maintain a national perspective and co-ordinate national initiatives etc.
 - More focus in BHF proceedings on Cadw's annual programme and priorities together with integration into regional forums' agendas and action programmes for the coming year.
 - CPD and presentations linked more closely with on-going national issues and identified areas of skills/knowledge deficiency. These should preferably be aimed to facilitate actions where local authorities wish to achieve improved or best practice e.g. – Delegation, enforcement, repairs notice, obligations payment for conservation and preparation of directions. Inviting expertise from Cadw itself, and all sectors public and private to give presentations.
 - Exploring new formats for the BHF e.g. brain-storming, workshop formats etc.....