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Y Gweinidog Tai, Adfywio a Threftadaeth
Minister for Housing, Regeneration and Heritage



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref HL/06340/12

Ann Jones AM
Chair
Communities, Equality & Local Government Committee
Ty Hywel
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Dear Ann

Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy

Thank you for your letter of 10 October 2012. I welcome the contribution the Committee's inquiry is making to the debate on the Welsh Government's Historic Environment Policy.

In my evidence to the Committee I explained that the next eighteen months will be a crucial time for the historic environment as the Welsh Government continues to seize the opportunity, through the Heritage Bill, to take a fundamental look at the current systems and practices in place to protect our historic environment.

In commissioning the working group to explore the options for future delivery of The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales' responsibilities, I emphasised my concern to ensure the future resilience of these important services at a time of unprecedented public service funding cuts.

The Royal Commission does good and important work and we need to consider how best this can be maintained in difficult times. As the Minister for Heritage it is equally important that I consider the range of knowledge, skills and expertise needed to sustain functions and services across the whole historic environment and how knowledge, skills and expertise can be maintained and organised in the most efficient way.

My recently published Historic Environment Strategy sets out the priorities that all stakeholders in the sector will play a part in delivering. There may be tough choices given the resource constraints and it will be imperative to maintain a focus on outcomes as much as on organisational models.

Whilst this work continues it might be helpful to offer the following observations in relation to the key themes raised in the evidence you received:

The fact that the Chitty report had addressed a number of issues

The Chitty report published in 2011 was commissioned in response to a governance review of the Royal Commission. This second exercise was quite narrow in that it focused on whether there was duplication and overlap in activities between bodies in the sector and whether these activities could be delivered in a more streamlined way. One of its key recommendations was for organisations to build on collaboration that already existed in the sector. These issues now need to be considered in a harsher financial context.

The timing of the proposal, which many felt was being rushed and should not proceed before a full consultation and the introduction of the Heritage Bill

Discussions that consider the future of organisations are uncomfortable and unsettling for staff and it is important that work of this nature has pace. I am however clear that given my Ministerial responsibilities in this area it is right that I should examine how the resilience of the historic environment sector can best be secured for the future. Should I conclude that change is required, I would of course expect to consult fully on the nature of that change.

The distinct roles and functions of the RC and Cadw

A range of important functions and activities are carried out by different organisations across the historic environment sector. While some activity may be unique to particular organisations, this review is considering the synergies that exist in the current system and whether the current organisational structures around those functions and activities are fit for purpose. The distinct role of the Royal Commission needs to be considered fully as part of this process. But I have already indicated that it will also be important that in due course we examine the distinct functions being carried out by others, including Cadw, the Welsh Archaeological Trusts and local authorities.

Risk of losing skills and expertise

The review was instigated to seek to retain and develop the current skills and expertise across the historic environment sector. I value the expertise that we have at the moment. I am committed to retaining skilled and expert staff that lie at the heart of my ambition for developing the historic environment sector.

A loss of independence – many witnesses referred to the importance of the arm's length principle with regard to the RC

I understand that the Working Group has been actively considering a range of governance models. I have yet to receive their recommendations but I would expect the issues surrounding independence, to include the provision of independent advice, as well as the need for me to have available a source of expert advice to be among the matters on which we will need to take decisions in due course.

I would like to inform the Committee that I have taken no decisions yet in relation to these matters. I am still awaiting the report from the Working Group I established. All the issues that you have brought to my attention will need to be considered before coming to a final view and I will of course inform the National Assembly for Wales of any decisions that I make.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Huw', written in black ink.

Huw Lewis AC / AM

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