Briefing note

"UNLOCKING BUCKINGHAMSHIRE'S PAST"

THE FUTURE OF THE SITES AND MONUMENTS RECORD

PURPOSE

A Future for Our Past (The Buckinghamshire Archaeological Management Plan – adopted October 2000) identified the maintenance and development of the County's Archaeological Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) as a high priority for the County Archaeological Service. The purpose of this report is to advise the Portfolio Holders for Planning and Transportation and Community Services and the Buckinghamshire Countywide Archaeological Advisory Committee of potential new legislation giving SMRs a statutory status, report the conclusions of a data audit of the Bucks SMR and to seek approval for its future development. Approval is sought for two distinct actions:

- The appointment of a new post to address backlogs and other deficiencies identified by the SMR data audit
- the preparation of a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a proposed "Unlocking Buckinghamshire's Past" to promote public and educational use of the SMR.

THE LEGISLATIVE POSITION

The recent Government Review of Policies Related to the Historic Environment has recommended the development of SMRs into fully fledged Historic Environment Information Records covering historic buildings and landscapes as well as traditionally defined archaeological sites and finds. The Review saw investment in IT and enhanced public access as critical and proposed that these records should eventually be accorded statutory status. The latter issue has moved on much faster than expected with the tabling of opposition amendments to the Culture and Recreation Bill currently before the House of Lords. An amendment tabled by Lords Renfrew, Redesdale and Freyberg and supported by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat front benches seeks to provide a statutory basis for SMRs with reference to proposals contained in the previous government's 1996 Heritage Green Paper. Lords Redesdale and Renfrew both referred to the 1998 crisis in the funding of Buckinghamshire's SMR. It is understood that the government is not implacably opposed to the amendment and that there is a reasonable prospect of it being enacted within the lifetime of this parliament.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE SMR DATA AUDIT

The Buckinghamshire SMR is a publicly accessible environmental record of the archaeological resource of its area which is used for planning, conservation and educational purposes. It is part of a national network of SMRs which are normally maintained by the local County or Unitary Authority. The Data Audit has enabled the identification of improvements required in five key areas:

1. IT: Install the Exegesis SMR system linked to GIS *(Achieved 2000/2001)*. Improve use of IT for service delivery through the Electronic Records Management and "Unlocking Buckinghamshire's Past" Projects.
2. Content: Implement a Data Inputting Programme to clear the backlog (est 1.5 years work) and undertake essential editing of existing records by the end of FY 2005/6.
3. Policy and Planning: Produce an SMR Manual based where possible on national documentation but adding local modules as specified.
4. Access and Outreach: Undertake the "Unlocking Buckinghamshire's Past" Project.
5. Resources: Seek English Heritage support for the Data Inputting Programme and HLF grant for "Unlocking Buckinghamshire's Past".

These conclusions are consistent with those of a national assessment of English Sites and Monuments Records conducted in 1998 which found the Buckinghamshire SMR to be functioning at about 50% of a specified attainable standard. In their response to our draft audit report English Heritage have expressed particular concern about the scale and implications of the inputting backlog (letter attached). Existing resources are insufficient to undertake public outreach work or to resolve the data inputting backlog. Pressures are also being experienced as a result of a 45% increase in SMR visitor numbers and growth in the demand for conservation advice primarily related to projects promoted by the Chilterns Conference and BCC's Countryside Strategic Initiatives Team (e.g. Chilterns Chalk Heritage, Whiteleaf Hill, Langley Park & Bernwood Projects).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS: UNLOCKING BUCKINGHAMSHIRE'S PAST

The public interest and educational potential of SMRs is widely recognised and funding is now available through the Heritage Lottery Fund. Under a specific funding stream "Unlocking Britain's Past" individual SMRs may submit community access and outreach proposals for up to £100,000 with at least 10% of matching partnership funding. **Advice received from English Heritage suggests that the Buckinghamshire SMR could not expect to make a successful HLF bid without resolving its present backlog of data inputting and demonstrating adequate provision to sustain the benefits of such a project.** The Heritage Lottery Fund will support community access and outreach but not for SMRs which have substantial inputting backlogs nor will the HLF or English Heritage provide funding for the clearance of such backlogs because this would be seen as subsidising a core local authority function.

If a realistic plan to resolve the SMR backlog can be defined then it would be possible to develop the "Unlocking Buckinghamshire's Past" project. To prepare the bid research would be undertaken to target the needs of specific groups such as schools, local historians and community groups, visitors and tourists etc. It is intended that the project would have a significant IT element involving delivery across the Internet but would not be exclusively IT based. There are opportunities for joint working with colleagues in the Community and Education Services as well as external organisations. To guide the project's development it is proposed that a Steering Group should be set. It is estimated on the basis of experience elsewhere that a minimum of 3 months work would be required to prepare the Heritage Lottery bid – a

suitably experienced member of staff is understood to be available within Community Services to undertake this work at a cost of c £6000.

SMR INPUTTING PROGRAMME RESOURCE ISSUES

Two options for addressing the under-resourcing of the SMR have been considered:

A. Appoint an Archaeological Assistant (scale 3) to assist the existing team of 2 officers (scales 5 and 7). Cost c £20,000 per annum.
B. Restructure the County Archaeological Service by replacing the current Archaeological Officer (scale 5) post with two scale 5 posts - an Archaeological Planning/Conservation Officer and an Sites and Monuments Record Officer. Cost c £26000 per annum.

English Heritage has indicated a willingness to pump-prime option B over a 3 year period but would not support option A. In their opinion option A may not be sufficient to support an HLF bid. It is therefore proposed that option B is adopted.

Note: Options for fixed term or part-time contracts have been rejected as insufficient and unable to meet HLF and EH criteria.

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14/2/2000