



Local Authority Conservation Provision



“The part played by local authorities in the stewardship of the historic environment is of fundamental importance.”

The Historic Environment: A Force for Our Future December 2002

APPENDIX: A

For the first time we now have a clear picture of how local authorities deal with our historic environment. The overwhelming impression is of a conservation service that is frequently over-stretched, under-resourced and operating without many of the necessary policy and data ‘building blocks’ that would ensure an effective, efficient and balanced service.

Local authorities are likely to face considerable difficulties in addressing their responsibilities for managing the historic environment unless they can identify more resources and incentives to improve performance, such as the introduction of local performance indicators which reflect the extent of the historic assets in their care.

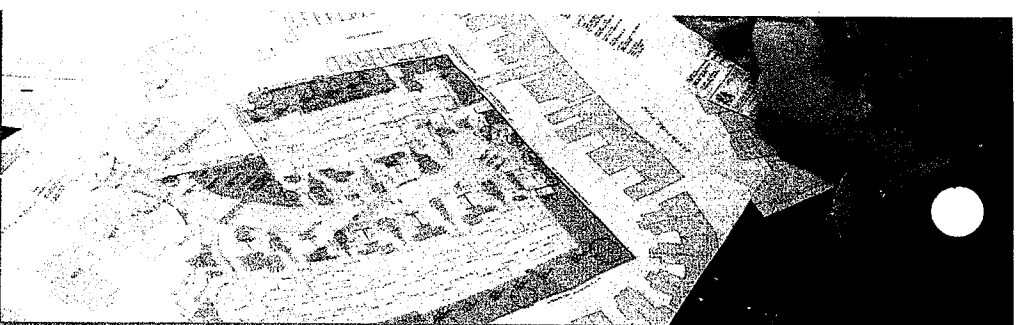
This summary of research findings is taken from the *Survey of Local Authority Conservation Provision in England* conducted on behalf of English Heritage and the Institute of Historic Building Conservation in 2002 by the School of the Built Environment, Oxford Brookes University.



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Key findings

The historic resource and its management

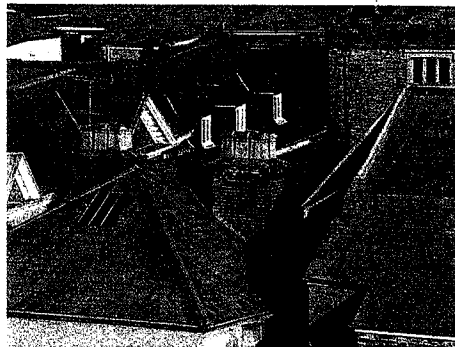
- Most local authorities have responsibility for managing a substantial resource of historic assets, on average 1,200 listed buildings and 28 conservation areas.
- Nearly a third of authorities do not keep registers of listed buildings at risk.
- More than two thirds of 'front-line' planning authorities do not maintain an integrated historic environment database.
- Nearly three quarters of conservation areas do not have character appraisals.
- Over two thirds of authorities do not identify buildings of special local interest.

The lack of sufficiently comprehensive information about the local historic resource is likely to limit the ability of authorities to make properly informed decisions about its future, both in terms of development control and also through more strategic action and holistic management of the historic environment.

Financial resources for conservation

- Conservation spending by local authorities has declined in real terms over the past five years.
- Nearly two thirds of authorities do not have a budget for conservation area enhancement.
- Half of all authorities have no grant programme of their own, and those that do have faced falling budgets over the past three years.
- There is only a slight increase in partnership grant spending by authorities (e.g. with the Heritage Lottery Fund or English Heritage).

The positive contribution that conservation of the historic environment can make to local and regional regeneration is being limited by falling spending levels in real terms.



Top Historic roofscape in Launceston.
Bottom Successful new development in the centre of York.

Service provision and organisational structure

- 85% of local authorities can draw on at least some in-house conservation expertise. Those without their own specialists draw mostly on advice from either the county council or external consultants, although a few operate without specialist advice.
- The average local authority has the equivalent of 1.7 full time conservation specialists, but there are big variations between authorities.
- Staffing levels have remained static over the past three years.
- Two thirds of responding authorities have no dedicated technical/administrative support for their conservation services.

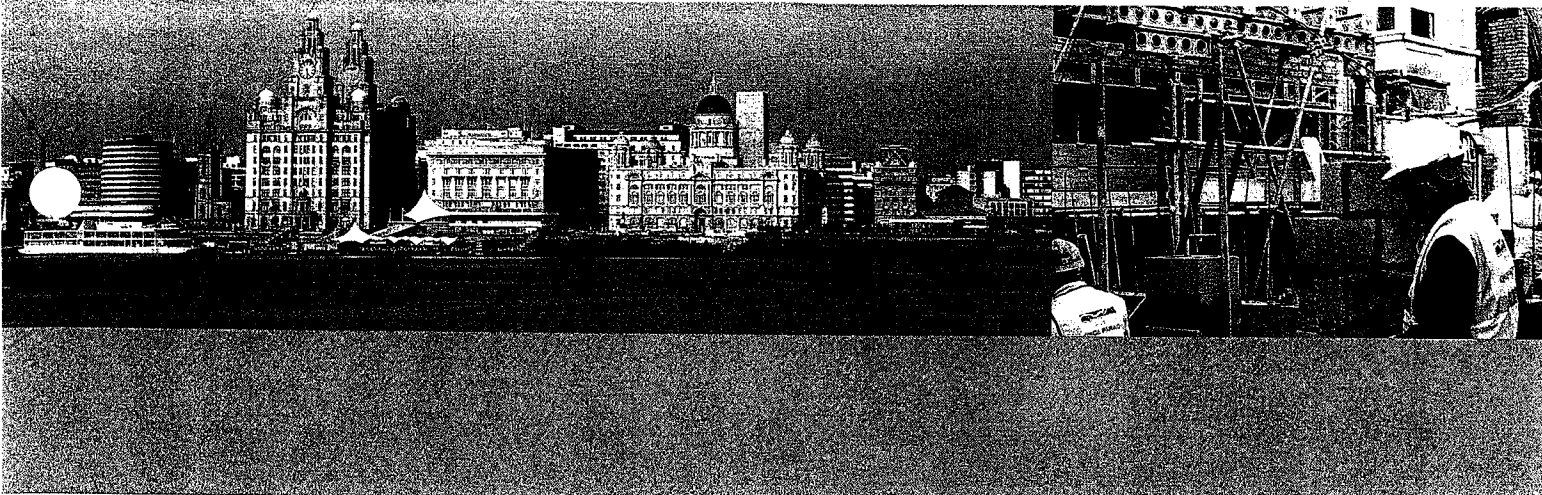
- Most specialists act as in-house advisors to development control colleagues rather than being directly responsible for processing the applications.
- In only about a quarter of cases does the lead conservation specialist attend committees regularly or sit on departmental management boards.

The overall picture is of a specialism with limited resources and influence, despite the high profile and often controversial nature of the work.

Skills and pay

- Local authority conservation specialists need to be multi-skilled in order to carry out their work effectively; most are highly qualified with over two thirds holding post-graduate qualifications.
- There is little consistency in the professional and academic qualifications or experience required by authorities in employing conservation specialists, and they come from a variety of professional backgrounds, the most common of which is town planning followed by architecture.
- Nearly two thirds of all post holders are members of IHBC.
- Well over one third (38%) of conservation specialists earn between £21,000 and £25,000.
- There are considerable regional variations in salaries with specialists in London and the South East earning significantly more than the national average for conservation staff whilst those in all other regions earn less than the average.

Local authority conservation specialists need to be multi-skilled in order to carry out their work effectively but salaries are generally modest, with the median being nearly £2,000 below the national average for all employment. Salary levels in London and the South East distort the national picture.



Conservation activities and workloads

- Conservation specialists are routinely engaged with a very wide range of activities, and in general workloads are increasing in nearly all areas. Resource levels make it difficult to do this all at the same time.
- Workloads tend to be dominated by reactive development control casework, which takes up more than half the time of an average specialist.
- Most are directly involved in pre-application negotiations and offer urban design or architectural advice.
- Nearly all conservation officers also do some policy and statutory plan work, advise owners and carry out conservation area designation.
- The greatest increase in workload in the last three years has been in developing and delivering best practice and performance standards such as Best Value.
- Relatively limited resources are put into enforcement. 47% of authorities reported no conservation enforcement action, 82% brought no prosecutions in 2001, 88% served no Repairs Notices and 82% served no Urgent Works Notices.

Most specialist practitioners feel that they could be more effective if they were to spend a greater proportion of time on proactive work.



Quality of service and internal/external relationships

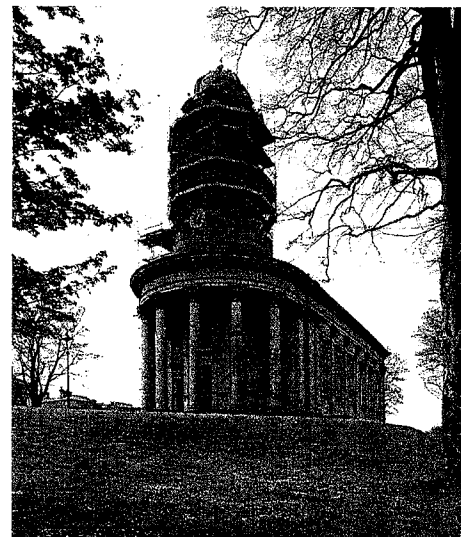
- Only 38% of authorities have adopted locally derived Best Value performance standards specifically for their conservation service. Specialists in authorities using performance indicators are evenly split about whether or not this has improved the delivery of their conservation service. Currently there are no nationally agreed indicators.
- 88% of respondents rated relationships with planning colleagues as 'good' or 'very good'.
- 84% rated relationships with English Heritage as 'good' or 'very good'.
- 71% rated relationships with archaeologists as 'good' or 'very good'.
- The worst relationships reported by conservation specialists were with public utilities (25% 'poor' or 'very poor').

Generally speaking, conservation specialists enjoy good relationships with professional colleagues inside and outside their authorities, but there are a number of areas where better links need to be forged.

How do conservation officers feel about the service they provide?

The respondents considered that:

- Conservation plays a large role in planning. The status, role and weight of conservation in the planning process deserved better recognition. They would welcome a greater statutory role for conservation.
- Conservation officers want to spend more time on proactive work and less time on reacting to problems.
- Although many are now involved in Best Value exercises, there are no national performance indicators for conservation, and no benchmarking for conservation services.
- Conservation has a wide-ranging community, economic and environmental role.
- Conservation officers spend a significant amount of time working with communities and in regeneration schemes on non-development control issues but did not feel this was always fully recognised.



Left Street furniture causing clutter, Victoria, London.

Top Repairs to Congregational Chapel, Saltire, West Yorkshire.

Bottom Ironbridge World Heritage Site, Shropshire.

Action

The study identified the considerable contribution that specialist staff make, but also the pressure they were working under. It identified a number of issues that need to be addressed:

1 An historic building conservation service should offer a **balanced comprehensive service to nationally agreed templates**. Skills need to be devoted to a wide range of complex matters beyond responding to listed building and conservation area consent applications. Many tasks need to be undertaken at the same time.

2 There are no benchmarks for conservation. Whilst it would not be appropriate for a single national standard, **specific guidance on balancing the conflicting priorities of conservation officers' workloads would be helpful**. In the future there needs to be a **suite of local performance indicators** capable of being applied to the specific circumstances of each authority's heritage resources.

3 **Local authority conservation management needs to be more integrated** ensuring for example that development control advice is followed by compliance/quality assurance or that enforcement also delivers reductions in buildings at risk.

4 There needs to be **easily accessible, interlinked historic environment databases** to assist in decision-making.

5 There is insufficient awareness of how the wider economic and social benefits of conservation could be effectively applied. **An increased role for conservation specialists in regeneration activity** would bring considerable benefits.

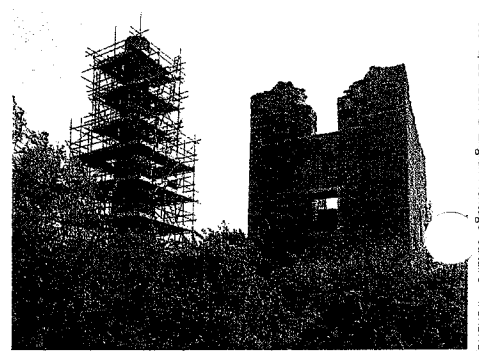
6 Ways need to be found to **unlock the potential of proactive urban design skills of conservation professionals** which many local authorities currently employ on reactive development control advice.

7 Within the revised local government structures there is a need to **ensure conservation has a higher political profile** and the concept of **historic environment champions** more widely and effectively developed.

8 The service currently appears to be stretched. **An increased ability to undertake more proactive work is only likely to be achieved through greater resources** from within local authorities and through central Government, improved training for officers and councillors and better procedural advice.

9 The IHBC in conjunction with English Heritage needs to develop **a strategy to raise professional standards for local authority staff** engaged in specialist conservation services.

10 **Central Government, English Heritage and other agencies need to consider how they can more effectively engage with local authorities** to support their historic work.



Above Consolidation of the former tin and copper mine engine house, Godolphin Breage, Cornwall.

This report represents the baseline against which future similar studies can measure changes in the provision of historic environment services by local authorities. Work is needed to link this information with other similar studies being carried out for archaeological services so that future surveys will cover the whole of the local authority historic environment service. English Heritage and the IHBC will be working with the DCMS, ODPM, the Local Government Association and other stakeholders to find ways of improving the management of England's historic environment.

The full report is available on:
www.english-heritage.org.uk
www.ihbc.org.uk
or from:
English Heritage
Customer Services
PO Box 569
Swindon SN2 2YP
Telephone: 0870 333 1181

March 2003
Product Code 50785

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