

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Development Management Sub-Committee
DATE	18 July 2013
DIRECTOR	Gordon McIntosh
TITLE OF REPORT	Scottish Government Consultation on the Historic Environment

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report outlines the consultation by Scottish Government on the first Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland and the proposed merger of Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission for Historic and Ancient Monuments for Scotland. It presents a consultation response in Appendix 1 of this Report.

2 RECOMMENDATION(S)

2.1 It is recommended that the Committee:

- (a) Approve the consultation response on the draft Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland and on the proposed merger of Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission for Historic and Ancient Monuments for Scotland for submission to the Scottish Government as set out in Appendix 1.

3 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

4 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There are no known legal, resource, personnel, property, equipment, sustainability and environmental, health and safety policy implications arising from this report.

5 BACKGROUND / MAIN ISSUES

5.1 The Scottish Government is currently carrying out a joint consultation on two related issues affecting the historic environment:

- The Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland and
- the merger of Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RACHMS).

The new Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland will set the future direction for Scotland's historic environment. Central to this is the establishment of a new lead body will support its delivery. The decision to merge Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission follows the commissioning of a business case for merger in July 2012.

The Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland

5.2 The scope of the strategy is ambitious as it covers the historic environment sector as a whole and presents four overarching priorities:

- Cross cutting approach to historic environment
- Understand – investigate and record
- Protect – care and protect
- Value- share and celebrate

It proposes a 3 tiered structure at a national to implement the strategy – Board; an operational group underpinned by three working groups.

5.3 The definition of historic environment presented in the strategy includes intangible sensory elements. The impact of this on our role as local planning authority is unknown as the tenor of the document is pitched at a high strategic level and the practical operational implications have yet to be made explicit. The proposed response in Appendix 1 highlights the need for detailed policy guidance similar to the former Memorandum of Guidance, which gave practical advice that assisted in determining planning applications.

5.4 There is a strong emphasis on mainstreaming the historic environment at national policy level in recognition of the contribution it makes to place making; economic development and tourism; social cohesion and its strong relationship with the natural environment. Whilst this is welcomed it is unclear how this would translate to a local level.

5.5 The major weakness of the strategy is that there is no action programme included to implement it. The challenges facing the sector are identified, but not adequately addressed. The document also includes examples of good practice that would be better sited in an appendix so that the strategic policy element is easier to identify.

The merger of Historic Scotland and RCHAMS

5.6 The proposed merger is presented alongside that of Scotland's first ever historic environment strategy rather than as an outcome of it. This presupposes that the merger, in whatever form it takes, is the best vehicle for delivering the strategic vision which would seem to be premature. For example the strategy highlights the need to strengthen the relationship between the natural and built environments, but does not consider creating one holistic environmental body for Scotland as a possible option.



5.7 The proposed merger would see the current Historic Scotland policy function remaining within Scottish Government and the implementation, regulatory oversight, property management and Historic Scotland research functions moving

to a new body together with the research and recording functions of RCHAMS. From a planning perspective one of the strengths of the current regulatory system is that Historic Scotland is part of the Government. Of concern is that this could be weakened by creating a new body at arm's length from government despite checks and balances being put in place. It is also unclear what the implications are for the regulatory function if the new body is to have charitable status.

6 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 6.1 The Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland and the merger of Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RACHMS) documents
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/05/1373>
- 6.2 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1997/9/contents>

7 REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

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**Joint Consultation on the Historic Environment Strategy and the merger
of Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and
Historical Monuments of Scotland**

Consultation response from Aberdeen City Council

This response is made by Aberdeen City Council in its role as local planning authority. The following comments were approved by the Development Management Sub-Committee on 18 July 2013.

A Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland

Aberdeen City Council welcomes the production of the draft Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland, in particular its emphasis on mainstreaming the historic environment within all parts of policy.

Q1 Definition of “Historic Environment”

Given that the strategy encompasses the sector as a whole, the positive role of both the tangible and intangible aspects of place is rightly included in the definition of the historic environment. What impact such a broad definition would have however on the operational regulatory aspects of historic environment planning is unclear.

The definition excludes one key word for it become a meaningful tool, which is "past". A suggested revised definition is as follows:

“Scotland’s historic environment is the evidence for past human activity that connects people with place and past times. This includes physical structures, features, artefacts and archives as well as the intangible associations that help us to understand and feel what places and communities were once like.”

Q2 The vision

No comment.

Q3 Overarching principles

Whilst we agree with the sentiments behind the three stated principles, b) “Be ambitious: do more both to preserve and maintain the historic environment and secure the many associated benefits” and c) “Face the challenges” are more exhortations rather than guiding principles.

The bullet points beneath these headlines reveal more. In particular the “assumption to conserve” and “conserve the wider setting and context of our historic assets” need to be given higher prominence by being turned into a principle. From a practical day to day standpoint a principle like this would be the cornerstone of a revised SHEP and supporting policy guidance.

Q4 Cross-cutting

We welcome the aspiration behind this aim as the historic environment needs to be seen as an important element of place making rather than being bolted

on as an afterthought. Mainstreaming of the historic environment in Government policy formulation is a positive move.

The proposed actions however seem to be confined to what Government will do centrally with no cascading down to local government and other sectors. For example will there be an expectation or compulsion for local government to reflect cross-cutting in a formal way at a local level? This does happen now, but often on an ad hoc basis.

Exploring and strengthening the relationship between the natural and built environments is needed, particularly in rural Scotland. It was disappointing that this proposed action was not fleshed out further in the strategy. If this is a serious proposition then this could impact on the proposed merger between Historic Scotland and RCHAMS. Combining them with Scottish Natural Heritage and creating one holistic environmental body for Scotland is an option that does not seem to have been considered. Equally this combined natural and built heritage approach could be reflected in requirements for plans and programmes produced by local authorities.

We agree that decisions should be underpinned by evidence although this should always be proportionate. This should be one of the principles underpinning the strategy.

Q5 Understand – investigate and record

The proposed actions focus on continuing existing research and recording programmes. From a local planning authority perspective they appear rather piecemeal and un-coordinated; the strategy is an opportunity to create more clarity as to what research is being undertaken and who holds what information and data. As a guiding principle information should be accessible - free, available to all and online.

Q6 Care and protect

More detailed guidance is needed by local planning authorities in undertaking their duties with regard to the historic environment. We would welcome the production of a revised Memorandum of Guidance or similar document. The City Council is keen to participate in any collaborative working group set up to manage the historic environment as outlined in the proposed actions on p33.

Community planning and developing options with the voluntary sector offer great opportunities however they are resource hungry; requiring more skilled conservation input and those skilled in community engagement.

Q7 Share and celebrate

We recognise the positive role that the historic environment has with regard to tourism and education. Celebration of it can also be a powerful tool in improving community cohesion and local identity.

Q8 Delivering the vision

The strategy is a good starting point and the Government is to be commended for having made this first step. Producing a document that covers all of the

historic environment and all the sectors and players within it is a difficult task. A slimmer strategy focusing on first principles supported by examples in an appendix, rather than in the main body of the text, would set the overarching context for an action plan that would deliver the vision.

Q9 Realising the ambition

The major weakness of the strategy is that there is no credible accompanying action plan. There are proposals for an overarching Board to manage and coordinate activities identified in the strategy, but little indication of delivery and timescales. Reference is made to three working groups being set up to look at key areas and themes, but not what these areas are.

B Proposed merger of Historic Scotland and RCHAMS

It is unclear whether the proposed merger is an outcome of the strategy or the other way around. It reads as though they are separate inter-related streams of activity. Our concern is that in not having agreed the strategic vision for the nation's historic environment first, the best form that the nation's dedicated body should take is being prejudged. The architectural presupposition that form should follow function is apposite here.

From a local planning authority perspective one of the strengths of the current regulatory system is that Historic Scotland is part of the Government. Our concern is that this could be weakened by creating an arm's length body despite checks and balances being put in place. This would appear to have been the case in England and we would do well to learn from their experience.

Whilst we are aware that there are understandable concerns from staff in these two organisations about the future direction and name of the new body, it is our view that Historic Scotland is a well established "brand" name that should be retained. The research and recording functions of RCHAMS would sit comfortably under that name. Keeping the Historic Scotland name would reduce public confusion and save the considerable costs involved with re-branding.