Observations of a UK heritage consultant working in the Republic of Ireland

The importance and value of heritage, both cultural and natural, is internationally recognised, and the need to develop and protect it has been firmly on the agenda of the international community since the mid-20th century. Throughout this time, the definition of heritage has been revised and refined, with over-arching, all-encompassing definitions established by international institutions like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). Yet, despite this, the concept of heritage remains a slightly nebulous one.

Its scope, driven in part by public perception, can be variable and wide-ranging, incorporating a broad array of both tangible and intangible resources, whilst its strong links to other disciplines, like ecology and landscape and visual, further blur the lines. The subjectivity inherent in defining exactly what comprises an individual’s heritage (or, equally, that of a community, social/ethnic group, town, region or nation) makes it difficult to apply an all-encompassing approach that is universally relevant. This variability is particularly noticeable when considering heritage across different geographies and jurisdictions; subtle nuances exist, both in nomenclature and policy, which can prove to be a stumbling block to the unprepared. This is not exactly a groundbreaking revelation, but it is important that EIA practitioners understand how these differences are manifested in the legislation and policy of different jurisdictions, and how to accommodate this variability in their work from project to project.

This article presents some brief, high-level observations on the variability described, and the issues it can present from an EIA perspective, using the recent project experiences of a UK based cultural heritage practitioner working in the Republic of Ireland.

A comparison of the terminology, scope and policy encountered in England and the Republic of Ireland provides an interesting juxtaposition, which, hopefully, will prove informative for other practitioners.

One fundamental difference observed between the English and Irish systems relates to the scope of cultural heritage, and the terminology used to describe it. In England, cultural heritage consultants largely focus on the historic environment and are concerned primarily with tangible resources (e.g. archaeological remains, monuments, buildings and landscapes). Natural heritage, including designated sites like Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs), is generally considered separately, under the remit of other specialists. Regulation of natural heritage sites is also considered independently, even at the local authority level. In Ireland, however, management of cultural and natural heritage is much more closely aligned. At the national level, as is the case in England, there are separate bodies responsible for the protection of cultural and natural heritage (the National Monuments Service (and Built Heritage and Architectural Policy/National Inventory of Architectural Heritage) and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, respectively). Unlike in England, though, these bodies are under the auspices of a single government department. At a local level, county heritage officers have a responsibility for cultural and natural heritage, and advise planning authorities on both aspects. It may, therefore, be requested that consultants cover both cultural and natural heritage within a single EIA chapter. Whichever method is used, both elements of heritage are captured, but, whether you are a UK practitioner working in Ireland or an Irish practitioner working in the UK, early consultation and robust scoping is recommended to ensure that your assessment adequately meets the expected requirements.
The terminology used, specifically in the context of cultural heritage, is also different between the two systems and this has an impact on the way in which data is captured and presented. A distinction is drawn in the Irish system between cultural heritage that is ‘archaeological’ and that which is ‘architectural. Broadly speaking, 1700 AD is a point in time used by the National Monuments Service and the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage to distinguish between the two, with data captured by these two bodies presented and protected in separate ways. This leads practitioners to consider the two separately, and structure their impact assessments accordingly. This distinction, whilst acknowledged, is less rigidly defined in the English system.

A key difference between the English system of heritage protection and that used in the Republic of Ireland relates to the ‘mechanisms’ of protection used. In both countries, protection is afforded to all elements of cultural heritage, with a series of ‘designations’ used to afford extra protection to certain, specific assets. In brief, extra protection is afforded in England through designations such as Listed Buildings, Scheduled Monuments or Registered Parks and Gardens, which are compiled and maintained by Historic England, forming the National Heritage List for England. The protection afforded by these designations also extends to the setting of heritage assets.

Guidance places greater emphasis on the setting of architectural assets, particularly in the context of Architectural Conservation Areas (ACAs – comparable to locally designated Conservation Areas in England). An understanding of these differences, familiarity with the differing mechanisms of protection and knowledge of the multiple sources from which data must be accessed are essential for international practitioners working in the Republic of Ireland, or collaborating across jurisdictions more generally.

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1 This article focuses on a comparison with the English system only, for the sake of simplicity. There are also differences between the systems used in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which further highlights the level of variability that practitioners may encounter.

2 Defined in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) as ‘the surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of the asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral’.

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