### Understanding and Utilising Cultural Heritage throughout the Planning Process

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<th>Heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and effective conservation delivers wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits.¹</th>
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The ongoing changes to planning policy and restricted resources at local authorities and English Heritage highlight the continued importance of accurate and comprehensive planning application submissions to ensure applications are validated, approved in a timely manner and result in sustainable development in accordance with adopted planning policy and guidance.

With regard to policy changes, the government has recently consulted on revised national planning practice guidance to accompany the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). This new online guidance² has been refined and promotes better community involvement, with a user friendly format designed to make planning guidance more accessible and easier to be updated. The draft guidance maintains the approach to conserving heritage assets in a manner appropriate to their significance. This is a core principle that underpins the assessment of impacts on heritage assets or their setting.

Alongside emerging guidance there are also a number of changes that have been instigated by the current government that have implications for cultural heritage as part of the planning process. Following the government spending review, it was announced that English Heritage will restructure in 2015. This will occur at a time when local authority cultural heritage staffing resources continue to be reduced. A recent report by The Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC), supported by English Heritage, into England’s local authority conservation staffing shows the impacts of continued long terms cuts, with the number of conservation specialists in English councils falling by 4% in 2012, part of a substantial 33% cut since 2006³.

Understanding and utilising cultural heritage throughout the planning process is key to ensuring that, at a time of ongoing changes to policy and reduced resources at local authorities and English Heritage, sustainable development is secured in a timely manner and that heritage assets are conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance.

Terence O’Rourke’s experience on a housing scheme near Wellington in Somerset provides an opportunity to highlight the importance of identifying the role of cultural heritage from project inception through to delivery of development on the ground. In particular, the project highlighted the importance of establishing appropriate mitigation at an early stage and accounting for contingencies based on a thorough understanding of baseline information.

Preliminary work at this greenfield site involved the production of a desk based assessment, non-intrusive survey (e.g. site walkover and geophysical survey), monitoring of geotechnical trial pits, trial trenching and ongoing consultation with the Somerset County Archaeologist.

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³ [http://www.ihbc.org.uk/skills/resources/5th-rep-LAStaff.pdf](http://www.ihbc.org.uk/skills/resources/5th-rep-LAStaff.pdf)
This enabled an understanding of the heritage resource that could then be used to appraise the development scheme and feed into the master planning exercise at an early stage. This also ensured that archaeological works could be integrated into the overall works to minimise the impact on the construction programme and enable the archaeologists and other contractors to understand what each other needed to achieve, keeping costs under control and obviating unplanned delays.

Extensive pre-planning surveys enabled the preparation of a detailed and focused Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI) as part of the Environmental Statement, which once agreed with the County Archaeologist, was used to guide the necessary fieldwork and ensure appropriate mitigation measures were in place to prevent any adverse impacts on the cultural heritage resource.

Following the approval of the planning application the mitigation strategy was implemented and four identified areas were subject to a strip, map and record exercise ahead of development taking place.

These excavations revealed a wealth of artefacts including a number of stone tools dating to the Palaeolithic period and evidence of a Bronze Age farming landscape consisting of field systems, enclosures, track-ways and paddocks.

The most striking discovery was that of an unknown high status complex of medieval buildings. The use of the site remains a mystery but the stone foundations, together with finds of roof slates, glazed ceramic roof tiles, and beautifully decorated floor tiles, show that these were substantial buildings of high status, perhaps part of a religious or manorial site.

Whilst the scale of finds was unexpected, appropriate mitigation provided an opportunity to utilise the cultural heritage resource for the benefit of the developer, and academic and public communities alike. Information on the discoveries was disseminated through media days, public exhibitions and online resources, and will subsequently be deposited in an accessible archive.

Developer funded archaeology and cultural heritage work continues to evolve and the positive association with our past remains of fundamental importance to businesses and cultural heritage professionals alike.

The importance of understanding and utilising cultural heritage throughout the planning process is key to ensuring a sustainable balance between development and the conservation of the historic environment.

Edward Youngson, Terence O’Rourke.

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