

SUBMISSION FROM THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF LONDON IN RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON DEVELOPING AHRC'S STRATEGIC DELIVERY PLAN

Thank you for inviting the Society of Antiquaries of London to respond to this consultation.

The Society of Antiquaries of London (SAL) is a UK registered charity and is Britain's oldest learned society concerned with the study of the material culture of the past. Founded in 1707, our Royal Charter of 1751 defines our objectives as 'the encouragement, advancement and furtherance of the study and knowledge of the antiquities and history of this and other countries'. Its membership comprises an elected college of around 3,000 Fellows from the fields of archaeology, art and architectural history (including heraldry), heritage conservation and material culture studies. The Society is a registered charity and leading non-Government organisation working in the cultural heritage sector. It awards grants from its own funds for academic research and the conservation of historic buildings and is an active member of the Archaeology Forum, an umbrella body of UK-wide NGOs concerned with the investigation, management and interpretation of the historic environment.

The Society is also an Accredited museum and holds a pre-eminent collection of paintings, prints, manuscripts and artefacts together with the country's leading research library for archaeology and the cultural heritage. It also maintains for public enjoyment Kelmscott Manor in Oxfordshire, the former country home of William Morris, Fellow of the Society, and leader of the English Arts and Crafts movement. Thus as a leading national Learned Society and as a museum, the Society is actively engaged in all areas of debate on heritage and curatorial policy.

The Society is not an IRO and so is not in a position to respond to all the consultation questions. However, it is and has been a partner in AHRC-funded projects, and is in a position to gauge research and funding issues across the disciplines and subject areas with which it is concerned, and our responses are based on these perspectives.

AHRC'S FUTURE PRIORITIES

Q.1. What in your view should AHRC's priorities be?

AHRC's fundamental priority should be enabling and supporting high-quality and innovative research across the range of Arts and Humanities disciplines, recognising and encouraging the benefits of inter-disciplinary approaches.

SAL has no view on specific research priorities by discipline or subject area but would argue the need to support research into the material aspects of the past (including its curation), and to recognise that this embraces research domains that sometimes have low recognition in the eyes of established disciplines, span traditional disciplinary boundaries, or have specific resource requirements linked to their

intrinsic methodologies. Investigation of the past through its material remains – from fine art, through buildings history to the archaeology of deep prehistory – frequently requires multi-disciplinary enquiry that must draw on expertise in social sciences and STEM disciplines and approaches. Fieldwork and excavation in Archaeology – the primary source of understanding of 99% of the span of human history – is a case in point. We consider some of the implications of this in our response to Qs 9 and 11 below.

Q. 2. Are there emerging themes which are not dealt with by the AHRC and should be?

SAL has no response to make to this question.

Q.3. To what extent should AHRC be seeking to direct arts and humanities research (e.g. in the form of themed funding calls, or by funding leadership awards in specific subject areas)?

SAL recognises that strategic funding frameworks are essential for transparency and accountability, and that there is a place for some top-down directive programmes in support of critical national or international priorities, but is strongly of the view that the best generator of research quality and relevance is the research community itself and that this needs to be supported effectively through responsive modes of funding that are sufficiently flexible and agile to engender and support bottom-up innovation, initiative and quality. Get this right and everything else will follow.

Q.4. In what ways should AHRC be engaging future generations of researchers (graduate students, early career researchers...) in the work of the AHRC, for example, in relation to horizon scanning and strategy development?

SAL no response to make to this question.

THE VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH

5. In what ways should AHRC be making the case to UKRI/government/the taxpayer for the future of arts and humanities research? (And how, if at all, should we be making it differently for different audiences?) We would welcome succinct examples from your institutions/subject associations which could help us make this case forcefully.

AHRC should stress the intellectual, social and economic value of understanding the past through research based on scientific principles. Understanding the past is relevant to present and future generations and the tasks of safeguarding, protecting and disseminating knowledge about heritage are important for the world of today. Research and debate about, as well as respect and appreciation for, the material remains of the past created by all peoples in all parts of the world are fundamental to our understanding of ourselves.

These have practical implications and benefits at a variety of levels and across a range of issues. Understanding of the historic environment is key to its effective stewardship, which has economic and wellbeing impacts ranging from heritage-led regeneration and tourism, through the public health benefits of informed planning and placemaking, to helping model and develop adaptions to climate change.

6. In what ways should AHRC place a greater emphasis on the relationship between research and practice?

SAL has no response to make to this question.

7. In what ways should AHRC place a greater emphasis on the relationship between research and teaching?

SAL has no response to make to this question.

8. What can AHRC do to increase diversity within its funding portfolio (in relation e.g. to diversity of project focus, researcher or institution)?

Responsive modes of funding, open to the widest constituency and with quality as the overriding criterion, should be the key to achieving diversity in these respects, provided that applications undergo fair and properly informed assessment which will ensure that there is no structural bias towards traditional research domains at the expense of more recent disciplines and inter-disciplinary endeavours. We develop this point further in our response to Q. 11.

RESPONDING TO A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

9. How fundamentally is the emphasis on collaboration with non-academic partners and interdisciplinarity changing the research landscape? What are the opportunities/challenges here?

Although welcome, the emphasis on collaboration with non-academic partners has had little fundamental effect on the research landscape, which is still dominated by University researchers and university-led applications. The potential benefits of such research collaboration – broader perspectives, embedding applied research, developing the mutually-supporting relationship between cutting-edge thinking and practice – are obvious. If there is a genuine desire to develop this, and to broaden diversity (above), then the obvious priority is to widen access to AHRC funding by framing eligibility criteria for IROs so that they better reflect the real research landscape rather than the sector inhabited by HEIs and publicly-funded institutions.

In the research areas with which SAL is concerned the costs of genuine interdisciplinarity are perceived as a significant barrier to the success of an application, anecdotal evidence suggesting that projects involving small single-subject teams within the silo of a traditional discipline are more likely to be funded than highly-

rated projects that are more expensive because they require larger genuinely interdisciplinary teams. Meeting this challenge will require thinking about the extent to which the body of assessors on which AHRC relies is drawn from traditional arts and humanities disciplines, and the way in which its decision-making is structured, predicated upon and conditioned by traditional disciplinary silos.

10. How can we work together to find a common voice, particularly when we have to react quickly to new funding opportunities?

SAL has no response to make to this question.

11. How, if at all, should AHRC change the way in which it makes awards (e.g. scale of opportunity, funding mechanisms, assessment procedures)?

Within the research areas with which SAL is concerned there is a strong perception that neither the research agendas nor the specific resource requirements of research into the past through its material remains are as well understood in the assessment process as those of traditional arts and humanities research disciplines. In particular, the methodologies and professional protocols of archaeological fieldwork, investigation and analysis (defined in its broadest sense to include, for example, buildings history) have a high cost compared to conventional historical research. It is important that the panels deciding such applications should include genuine expertise in, and understanding of, the research arenas and methodological requirements, especially where these involve inter-disciplinary working, in order to ensure that decisions properly reflect value-for-money rather than mere cost.

AHRC'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING COMMUNICATION, ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT

12. What should AHRC's role be (if any) in supporting public communication of research?

AHRC has a fundamental responsibility to ensure that the results of research that it funds are properly communicated to academic, professional and public audiences. The best way to ensure this is to allow suitable provision within project funding for publication, communication and engagement. For academic and professional audiences a major issue here is Open Access. Ideally, all projects should generate a Gold OA publication setting out the key results which should be resourced as part of the project grant, tied to a publication / dissemination strategy. These should be available through UKRI's *Gateway to Research*.

13. What should AHRC's role be (if any) in supporting wider public engagement with research?

As above: where public engagement is practical and appropriate this should be encouraged and funded through project grants.

14. In what ways should AHRC be supporting the development of research impact?

The best way to ensure research impact is to fund innovative high-quality research and to support researchers in sharing and disseminating their results with, and encouraging take-up by, likely end-users and public audiences. Non-academic partnerships that build in applied research offer a very good pathway to achieving real impact. Funding communication and networking with potential users as an integral part of projects, as appropriate, is another. AHRC should hold or sponsor research seminars or events targeted at the audiences which it believes are critical for developing research impact.

AHRC needs to re-think its approach here: the current emphasis on the processes of impact assessment, rather than constructive and effective support for researchers in getting their results adopted and used in real world situations, is a waste of resource, a barrier to flexibility and innovation, and has become a byword for bureaucratic futility resulting in some quarters in an almost wilful misunderstanding about the nature of ‘impact’.