**CONSULTATION ON THE POTENTIAL MERGER OF THE FOUR WELSH ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUSTS**

Response from the Society of Antiquaries of London

The following answers to the specific questions asked and supplementary observations are submitted on behalf of the Society of Antiquaries of London following consideration by the Society’s Policy Committee.

**Would you agree that a merged Trust would be better able to provide advocacy for archaeology and the historic environment in Wales?**

That may be so but to make the case it is necessary to analyse and explain in what respects other national organizations and institutions, particularly CADW and the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historic Monuments Wales, the National Museum and National Library, are unable to provide such advocacy effectively. How much more independent would a single Welsh Archaeological Trust be, in the light of its statutory duties? The four separate Trusts have already demonstrated an ability to work effectively in partnership, for instance in setting up the Archwilio HER system, and there was nothing preventing the Chairs and/or Chief Executives of the Trusts acting as a group to present arguments and raise issues.

**Would merger of the four Trusts have a positive or negative impact on your organisation?**

This question is not applicable in our case.

**Will merger of the four Trusts make communication and engagement with your organisation easier or more difficult?**

The Society of Antiquaries of London, and especially its strong Welsh Fellows’ Group, has consistently sought to maintain regular and effective dialogue with the existing Trusts, as with the other organizations mentioned above. Inevitably, several employees and trustees of the Trusts are also Fellows of the Society of Antiquaries.

The Society does not, of course, seek to interfere in any way in the work of the Trusts. At the same time, the historical status of the Society as a very long-established learned society with a Royal Charter since 1751, and the diverse scholarly and intellectual authority within its Fellowship, do generate both some right and responsibility to take a constructive interest in the directions of heritage-related policy and the quality and range of archaeological work, in its many current facets: fieldwork; conservation and planning policies (affecting buried and undersea archaeology, buildings and standing monuments); curation; presentation and public engagement. Through the Policy Committee, the Society has regularly contributed to Welsh Government consultations on heritage legislation and planning orders. It is therefore proper for the Society to wish to be able to serve as a critical friend to all organisations and individuals, large and small, active in the fields that are its concerns as defined by Charter: “the encouragement, advancement and furtherance of the study and knowledge of antiquities and history in this and other countries”.

Rather than easing communication and engagement (or not), it is recognised that a major reorganisation in the form of the merger of the Trusts into a single structure will primarily provide an opportunity for supplementary developments that will strengthen the whole, diversely-based, framework of engagement and input substantially.

**Can you envisage any outcomes, positive or negative, that may result from the merger of the four Trusts?**

Positively, the plan can only be that such a merger should secure the financial viability and sustainably of the Archaeological Trust system of national and regional archaeological services in Wales. We cannot presume to serve as business planners in such a respect, and no doubt the issues have been assessed and evaluated with proper thoroughness. Certainty of structure and facilities is unquestionably much to be desired. It is understood that some level of merger on the basis of the present four-Trust pattern is unavoidable; the process is one that must be engaged with positively to ensure the best possible outcomes.

It is inevitably possible to identify fields within archaeology as a whole where expertise (for instance in human skeletal remains; geology; archiving; categories of finds, buildings and townscapes) could be enhanced through national rationalisation, without diminishing provision. The converse, though, must be that the merger process is conceived also as a cost-cutting exercise: not only in the process of rationalisation but also in creating a single body that will therefore be the more vulnerable in the future to administrative policies prioritising economies.

To reach firm conclusions, we need to see a detailed audit of the functions and services, capacities and skills, provided by the four Trusts at present and recently, and what the proposed distribution of responsibilities and staff will be between the proposed central hub, which at present is described simply as comprising ‘the upper tiers of management’ and the regional level — which it appears is expected to remain with the four quarters of the current framework.

**Any other thoughts on the potential merger?**

Since some form or forms of merger are seen as necessary and inevitable, the view of the Society is firmly positive and supportive, seeing opportunities here to reinforce a state of affairs in Wales that, despite practical problems, has much to commend it. That runs from the structure set up in the 1970s to additions through recent legislation from the devolved government in Wales, and this was explicitly foregrounded in a discussion document, ‘The Future of Archaeology in England: A Manifesto’, issued by the Society in 2020 and to be the focus of a one-day conference in November this year. In the case of any and every system of public heritage management and curation, the question of ‘Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?’ is inevitably an urgent one: every nation, state or major regional administration with such responsibilities needs an authoritative independent body that able to review, assess and advise on policy and practice. That it should act in a spirit of supporting the professional and statutory organisations and their staff should go without saying. Such a body is likely, for instance, to be intrinsically more adaptable to respond to new issues, such as, for instance, aspects of ‘contested heritage’.

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