

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR SCOTLAND

## CONFERENCE 2009

### Report from the Chair of HEACS, Liz Burns

[This is a reconstruction of a presentation made from prompt notes rather than a formal paper. It also includes additional references to the Minister's speech.]

For the past six years it has been my privilege to present the HEACS Annual Report to the HEACS conference and Public Meeting. You will appreciate that on this occasion I do so with mixed feelings – great pride and pleasure that HEACS was able to bring something new and distinctive to the sector, and real regret that its work is now at an end (I will not say completed), and that I am not, as I had expected, handing over to a successor.

The full report (HEACS Sixth and Final Annual Report 2008/09) is on the HEACS website: [www.heacs.org.uk](http://www.heacs.org.uk)

It has two purposes: first, to present the annual report for the period from September 2008; second, to review and reflect on HEACS work over the six years since it first met in 2003.

It is in two parts: the Chair's report is my introduction to the report and my reflection on what has been done, and includes acknowledgement of the help and support given to Council. The formal Annual Report is the official record, approved by Council. It offers a factual account of HEACS business, activities and resources over the year, as well as a closing commentary which is more reflective, including consideration of unresolved issues and 'unfinished business'. The Report was laid before Parliament earlier this week, to comply with statutory requirements.

I came to this post as an outsider, and though I like to think of myself now as fairly well steeped in the historic environment, I want here to draw on the report to share with you my impressions, as an incomer, of the historic environment sector in Scotland. In other words, what I am proposing now is my 'gloss' on the report, with particular attention to:

- the picture of the sector which has emerged over the six years;
- ways of working and their consequences;
- two aspects of the sector traditionally viewed as weaknesses;
- some thoughts on wider relevance of the sector;
- a brief conclusion, and acknowledgements.

I want to start by sketching in, for those here who may be less familiar with HEACS, some bits of background.

The context in which HEACS began its work six years ago was very different from the present:

- it was a time of optimism;
- change and growth were possible;
- there were big lottery projects under way, and more in the pipeline;
- Historic Scotland's income was increasing.

But at the same time

- Historic Scotland was undergoing its first quinquennial review for ten years;
- it was also about to see a number of changes in senior posts;
- it was also the subject of very negative press coverage.

HEACS's task was to provide independent strategic advice to Scottish Ministers on matters relating to the historic environment in Scotland. In the course of six years it prepared advice on nine major topics plus a series of responses to consultation documents, including the consultation on the review of Historic Scotland.

Six of the nine topics, and the response to the Historic Scotland Review were essentially about infrastructure: central government; local government; non-government organisations; legislation; audit of the historic environment; economic impact; skills and materials, including issues of training.

The remaining three topics were more specialised but still of strategic importance: ecclesiastical heritage; criteria for taking properties into care; engaging young adults.

In other words, HEACS effectively carried out a strategic review of Scotland's historic environment sector.

A few facts about HEACS:

- an advisory NDPB;
- NOT an executive body (therefore no responsibility for implementation);
- strategic;
- NOT casework (which was a disappointment to some);
- Appointed through the public appointments system;
- NOT representative.

Nevertheless, its members came from a good cross-section of sector interests:

- from all three sectors – government, voluntary and private; plus academia;
- wide range of professions and specialisms: architecture, conservation, history, planning, archaeology, museums, marine archaeology, urban regeneration, funding;
- all are leaders in their field.

Supported by:

- small, but very experienced, expert and committed secretariat;
- adequate budget;
- freedom to develop own ways of working.

Characteristics of the Sector, as it emerged from HEACS's journeyings and research:

- the use of the term 'sector' is more than justified. I know that some dislike its use, seeing it as an attempt to define boundaries where none should exist, but it is a way of encapsulating a sense of a large number of disparate organisations and groups with a shared interest and purpose. It may be helpful to think of a Venn diagram in which the ovals are drawn with dotted rather than solid lines, to indicate permeable boundaries;
- the 'oval' marked historic environment sector would include within it smaller ovals for government (local and national), voluntary sector, and private sector, plus one for academe;
- the sector has to deal with policy, strategy, legislation, regulation, resources, delivery, as well as research, publications, advocacy;
- Historic Scotland has to work with all of these, which creates a very complex management task, requiring a difficult balancing act;
- the sector is large, with hundreds of organisations, most of them at local level – which is hardly surprising, given that that's where the historic environment is!
- it is complex and diverse: stretches from local to global (think of Scotland's disproportionately high number of world heritage sites); on land and under the sea; includes a very wide range of interests and specialisms, including some very powerful vested interests;
- it is economically significant (See HEACS report on the Economic Impact of the Historic Environment in Scotland on [www.heacs.org.uk](http://www.heacs.org.uk)). 41k FTE jobs directly supported, and a further 20k indirectly; £2.3 billion into the Scottish economy in a year;
- huge public support: the sector attracts millions of visitors each year, and generates an estimated £28 million in volunteer work in a year;
- as a sector, it is singularly well endowed with highly qualified experts; is seeing interesting new developments in traditional craft & building skills; is looking for ways of stimulating demand for appropriate skills and materials;
- has been shown to be reasonably successful in engaging young adults;
- is active, energetic, committed – even passionate; and
- is hospitable, welcoming, eager to share knowledge with visitors.

There is much to celebrate! AND YET.... .

The sector has been reluctant to promote itself and as a result is:

- under-estimated;
- under-valued;
- under-represented – it is too often not 'at the table' where key discussions and decisions are made.

The sector – surprisingly for one which produces so much excellent research – has been slow to measure itself as a sector, leading to:

- a lack of basic data;
- a case not being made;
- low priority in the pecking order for resources.

It is also a sector operating within a legislative framework built up over years, and now in many respects no longer fit for purpose, and in need of review. The Minister's announcement this morning of plans to modernise the legislation is welcome (Scottish Government news release, 20 May 2009).

In addition, the sector is operating within regulatory systems operated by both national and local governments. The commitment and resources at local government levels vary widely, not least because, unlike the natural environment, the historic environment does not benefit from the protection of a statutory duty of care.

All in all, however, the historic environment sector is clearly a sector of considerable strategic importance.

I want to look now at HEACS' ways of working, particularly in terms of interaction and dialogue.

Many of you will remember the brouhaha which followed the demise of the Historic Buildings Council and the Ancient Monuments Board. It was in a way a dialogue – though by all accounts a fairly fractured and fractious one – between the government and the sector, to which the government's response was the establishment of HEACS.

It seems appropriate that HEACS chose to work in ways which were open and outgoing and which revolved around extensive interaction and dialogue:

- working groups;
- meetings with organizations;
- seminars for briefing and consultation;
- verbal and written evidence;
- editing of reports in full committee (!!!);
- peripatetic council meetings;
- study tours;
- annual reports, conferences, and public meetings.

This was unexpected, and aroused interest.

It is clear from the Minister's speech today that the emphasis on dialogue will now continue into a new phase. At its best, if properly led and constructed this on-going dialogue will lead to a whole new stage in the relationship between government and the sector, becoming a dialogue about policy and strategy, about partnership and shared goals and interest, not solely about money.

This will require leadership, sometimes from one side, sometimes from the other. It will inevitably lead to a focus on the mechanism, the channel for communication with and representation from the sector. We heard earlier something of the Minister's response to the HEACS report on infrastructure, a response which laid down significant and welcome markers, which demonstrate that arguments have been heard:

- the recognition of the process which has begun towards the development of a representative mechanism;
- government commitment to support the process, and to find additional resources;
- commitment to consultation earlier in the policy process – what is known as 'pre-consultation consultation';
- acknowledgement of the need for resources for capacity building;
- offer of on-going dialogue at strategic level with leaders from key bodies in the sector.

In effect, the Minister was giving the green light, accepting the report in principle but leaving it to the sector, with support from Historic Scotland, to determine the mechanism.

Once some of these discussions – for example about the relationship between the historic and natural environments – get under way, it will be essential that this sector is in a position to identify properly recognised and authoritative delegates to represent it. There will be times when it will not be possible to send numbers of people 'to the table' – indeed there may be times when only one or two representatives are permitted. Continuity of representation may also be an issue. Notice too that the Minister spoke in terms of months, not years.

Working through this will not be easy at a time when organisations are anxious about their own future, and are more likely to be inward-looking, but much may hang on it.

It is for you to seize the opportunity.

I want to move on now to look at two characteristics of the sector traditionally seen as weaknesses but which can equally well be seen as great strengths.

The first is the dependence of the sector on funding from the government. There are three points to be made:

- given the new evidence of the significance and the productivity of this sector, it is right that government should support and invest in it;
- without the wider sector, government cannot meet its objectives for the historic environment;
- it is important to see the relationship as one of complementary and mutually dependent roles, working towards shared goals. Government funding of the voluntary sector is not a charitable act.

The second is the dependence on voluntary action. Again, there are three points to be made:

- the VDS report on volunteering in the sector shows what a huge resource volunteers represent – an estimated £28 million of work time in a year – time, skills and energy willingly given;
- this makes a reality of the idea of the historic environment as a public good with responsibility being shared by government and the public;
- it is time therefore to treat volunteering and voluntary action as the valuable resource they are, a resource to be properly supported and managed, and above all not to be downplayed or taken for granted.

On a more idealistic plane, it is now widely recognised that voluntary action should be measured:

- in terms of what it delivers – and it would be interesting now to do further research, looking at what the work of volunteers delivers in terms of sites excavated, buildings preserved, doors opened, gardens tended ...
- and in terms of what it represents, namely that voluntary action is one of the main ways in which we as citizens can defend some of our basic human rights by using them responsibly. I am thinking here of the right of free speech, the right of free assembly, and the right to take action collectively to seek change or to prevent change.

Voluntary action is in itself a very positive statement of the kind of society in which we want to live. It is now recognised at global level as being essential to democracy, and is one of the criteria by which the ‘health’ of democracies is measured. Statistics on volunteering have now been recognised by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and are to be incorporated in countries’ Annual Accounts. Scotland’s historic environment sector is playing its part!

This leads on to a brief consideration of the wider relevance of the work of this sector to a range of government priorities, and of the importance of being alert to a wider range of policy areas to which the sector is contributing:

- key plank for tourism
- education
- the economy
- employment
- social and community policy
- Government strategies on ageing, on youth, on intergenerational activity, on volunteering ... .

All of this confirms the strategic importance of the historic environment sector, and helps to scotch the myth that it is a barrier to growth.

HEACS' Closing Report summarises what HEACS achieved, and Liz Davidson in her presentation built on that. I would cite four points from the list on page 6 of the Report:

- a capacity and willingness to explore issues in a way which would not have been possible for the Government itself;
- setting new baselines through evidence gathered;
- from the evidence gathered and the recommendations in the reports, providing the sector with a set of tools for further development of issues and of the relationship with Government at local and national levels;
- setting markers for future developments, for example in terms of strengthening of the legal framework.

It is too early to measure impact, but it may be that the most significant and lasting impact will lie in the process which has evolved and the new dialogue which is beginning. It is for government and the wider sector to take it forward, to follow up on key recommendations, and to use the tools provided by the evidence in HEACS's reports.

On behalf of HEACS Council I wish you all every success, and thank everyone who has helped to make these six years so memorable.

Liz Burns  
May, 2009