

Budget Cuts to North Yorkshire County Council Historic Environment Team (March 2014)

Current Situation

The North Yorkshire County Council historic environment team provides specialist advice and guidance on the historic environment of the county of North Yorkshire.

The main roles of the service are:

- Providing archaeological advice to local planning authorities
- Providing pre-planning guidance to developers and residents, and archaeological advice to landowners and agents
- Providing guidance on archaeological work across the county, including commercial and community-led excavations
- Maintaining and managing heritage information and access to it (including curating the North Yorkshire Historic Environment Record)
- Promoting the historic environment of the region

The service covers the county of North Yorkshire outside of the Yorkshire Dales and North York Moors National Parks. North Yorkshire is the largest county in Britain and has a significant and diverse archaeological heritage.

The service is currently made up of 4 members of staff, including an HER officer, and is part of the Waste and Countryside Service (WACS) at North Yorkshire County Council.

Recent Budget Cuts (agreed in February 2014):

The Council agreed a number of budget cuts on February 19th (2014) for the coming year (2014/15). This included a proposed saving of £477,000 in the overall budget for the Waste and Countryside Service as a whole, including an estimated £155,000 reduction in staff costs 'in particular in respect of waste, archaeology, biodiversity and ecology'.

(From North Yorkshire County Council Executive Report, Appendix M, pg 163 - see <http://democracy.northyorks.gov.uk/committees.aspx?commid=17&meetid=2073&agendaid=2159> Item 5: Executive Report – APPENDICES BOOKLET).

The budget report states that the Council will 'introduce service reductions towards minimum standards necessary to meet statutory duties and corporate policy objectives' including reducing spend on environmental specialisms (Appendix J, pg 147).

The overall value of the agreed savings to be met by staff restructures and staff reductions within the service is £265,000 over the next year (2014/15). The Council are also proposing to "Reduce capacity to deal with planning applications, strategic policy and forward planning, whilst reviewing opportunities for charging."

These cuts are part of Council measures to cut their overall budget by £94 million over 4 years (to the end of March 2015) with additional cuts of up to £73 million anticipated for the period 2015-19.

Key Issues:

The Historic Environment Service is already streamlined and any further cuts are likely to have a negative impact. The role of this service is not discretionary – the council have clear responsibilities towards the historic environment under the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the CBA is concerned that they will not be able to meet these responsibilities in the future if these cuts are implemented. Cuts to the service are also likely to impact on the Historic Environment Record, which has obvious long term implications for the future of archaeology across the region.

There are seven district councils in North Yorkshire who each contribute towards the funding of the county service in return for access to specialist archaeological advice. However, since 2009 this joint service level agreement has only allowed for two days of advice per week (shared between the seven local authorities) with input only up to the point of planning applications being determined. Any input beyond this (including monitoring any archaeological work that is carried out) is not covered in the service level agreement and it is unclear how consistently these planning authorities are asking for further archaeological advice or following existing guidelines as there is currently no capacity within the county service to monitor this. If the county service is cut it is likely that this situation will worsen and that planning applications will be approved without appropriate consideration being given to potential archaeological impact. The CBA believe that this is in breach of the National Planning Policy Framework and is likely to result in the destruction of archaeological sites without record.

The Historic Environment Team does currently provide a full archaeological advisory service internally to North Yorkshire County Council on County Council and County Matter planning applications (including minerals and waste, and highways).

[NB original paragraph changed to correct factual inaccuracies about the status of the joint service level agreement in ~North Yorkshire, 6th March 2014]

In their report the County Council state that “opportunities are being taken where possible to generate further income in order to protect services. This approach is already being carried out within Directorates and is being supplemented by a Council wide overview of further income opportunities. This work is not yet complete but will feature as part of the 2020 North Yorkshire Programme and, it is hoped, will help make a contribution towards the residual savings requirement.”

As seen in other parts of the country (for instance, in Worcestershire) archaeology services have the potential to generate income through commercial work, service charges and grant-funded projects. However, without sufficient staff in post to put this into practice, the service is likely to be increasingly vulnerable to cuts in future (which is a particular worry considering the anticipated budget cuts predicted by the Council over the next 4-5 years).

Suggested Action

Although the budget has been agreed, the detail of how the cuts will be implemented, or the impact it will have on the historic environment team, is not yet clear. It is therefore vital that councillors are reminded of their responsibilities to heritage under the NPPF and are asked to clarify exactly what impact the new budget will have on the service, and how the County Council’s responsibilities to

heritage and archaeology will be met in the future. The CBA will be writing to the Leader of the council (Councillor John Weighell - <http://www.northyorks.gov.uk/article/25142/Bedale-division>) to express our concerns and to ask for clarification on these points.

If you are a local resident you can also find details of the county councillor for your area via the council's website - <http://democracy.northyorks.gov.uk/Committees.aspx?councillors=1>