13 December 2013

Dear Sir or Madam

Tyne and Wear Specialist Conservation Team: Proposed Budget Cuts

I am writing to you on behalf of the Council for British Archaeology (CBA).

The CBA was established in 1944 and is the national amenity society concerned with protection of the archaeological interest in heritage assets. We have a membership of 620 heritage organisations who, together with our thousands of members, represent national and local bodies encompassing state, local government, professional, academic, museum and voluntary sectors. Local planning authorities have a duty to notify the CBA of applications for listed building consent involving partial or total demolition, under the procedures set out in ODPM Circular 09/2005.

I am writing to express the Council for British Archaeology’s deep concern at the proposals in the Council’s budget reduction to reduce their financial contribution to the Tyne and Wear Specialist Conservation Team by 50%, saving approximately £11,000.

This relatively modest investment by the Council provides enormous value for the people of Gateshead, creating opportunities for local people to be involved with their heritage, contributing to enhancement of neighbourhoods and levering in significant amounts of developer funding to the local economy. The loss of these benefits to Gateshead from the archaeology service is not inevitable and we would urge the Council to reconsider their proposals.

The current Tyne and Wear Specialist Conservation Team is a well-established and well-regarded professional service with in-depth expertise across the region. The proposed cuts would put this already stream-lined service at risk. This is likely to have a significant negative impact on the conservation and protection of the historic environment of the region and the ability of local residents to engage with their local heritage, as well as creating additional financial risks for the Council and local developers.

The Council has obligations as a planning authority to ‘recognise that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and conserve them in a manner appropriate to their significance’ (National Planning Policy Framework, pg 30). The NPPF also clearly states that Local Authorities should either maintain or have access to archaeological information in an Historic Environment Record (HER) as well as expert advice.
to inform its planning decisions. It is currently unclear how these obligations can be effectively met if the current provision of archaeological services to Gateshead is cut back.

If the archaeological service provision to Gateshead is cut there is a serious risk that development will be approved without a proper assessment of archaeological impact at an early stage in the planning process. This can result in unexpected discoveries of archaeological remains during development, which not only poses the risk of unnecessary and potentially illegal damage to irreplaceable archaeological sites, but can also lead to significant delays and disruption, thus putting major future developments at risk and jeopardising future investment in the region. Failure to comply with planning requirements may also leave the Council open to judicial review, at significant additional cost.

With this in mind, it would be useful to have more detailed information about how the Council propose to maintain their responsibilities to local heritage with a substantially reduced archaeological service.

Gateshead is an area with significant heritage value. It is particularly known for its important industrial heritage, but the area also contains nationally significant sites from earlier periods, including the Roman Fort at Whickham. The importance of the area’s heritage and its potential to attract local and national support and funding is shown by the Dunston Staithes restoration project, which has recently attracted large grants from English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Garfield Weston Foundation.

We understand that the current economic situation is extremely difficult and that savings need to be made by Local Councils in many areas. However, we strongly feel that this relatively modest saving by Gateshead Council is a false economy that will disproportionately affect an essential service that is of great importance and value to both the Council and the residents of Gateshead.

We would strongly advise that the proposed cuts are reconsidered. Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the budget proposals. We would be grateful if you could please keep us informed of any decisions on this matter, and we would welcome the opportunity to contribute to any future discussion.

If there is any assistance or further information the Council for British Archaeology can supply, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely

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Director

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