18th December 2013

Dear Sir or Madam,

Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service: 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.

I am writing to express the Council for British Archaeology’s deep concern at the proposals in the Council’s budget plan to drastically reduce their funding to the Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service (WAAS) over the next 3 years.

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 the proposed large-scale cuts, to be implemented by 2017, will severely undermine an essential and nationally renowned service that is of great value to both the Council and the residents of Worcestershire.

The model of service delivery for WAAS is innovative and has been hailed as a great model for other services by national bodies, including English Heritage and the joint Local Government Association. It is already in-line with the model of service delivery that the council is proposing in its corporate strategy ‘Moving Towards Self-Financing Discretionary Services’ (published in September 2013) with 50% of the service’s funding already coming from external sources, including grants and commercial activity. This not only demonstrates how successful the model is, but also what good value for money the Worcestershire Archives and Archaeology Service currently represents to local tax payers.

In its first year of operation (to July 2013) WAAS reported a total of 40,393 visitors to the service at the Hive, with 2711 people signing in to use the Historic Environment Record, 4344 people accessing original archives and over 1100 first time archive users. In addition to this, the service engaged with over 6800 people through outreach activities during the year. This is a fantastic achievement and further highlights the level of public interest and support for heritage activities in the area.

WAAS has a very successful track record of attracting external funding for heritage activities through grants and commercial work. Archaeology can generate a large amount of investment from the private and commercial sectors through the planning system. However, this is only possible by maintaining
suitably qualified, experienced staff in post to monitor planning applications and to update and manage the Historic Environment Record. The proposed cuts are likely to decrease the amount of commercial revenue the service is able to bring in rather than increasing it, something that is clearly at odds with the council’s corporate strategy.

Cuts to the service are also 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. Please could you supply more detailed information about how the Council’s statutory responsibilities to heritage (including planning related duties) will be met in future, if this proposal goes ahead?

I’m sure that you are aware that 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.

We must also stress the importance of maintaining public access to the Historic Environment Record, particularly considering the current focus on local and neighbourhood planning within the planning system, something that the Hive currently supports very effectively (as seen, for instance, in the successful Worcester Villages Historic Environment Resource Assessment project which has attracted external funding from English Heritage).

We are also concerned that the proposals include plans to introduce additional charges for access to services. Please can you supply more information about what these additional charges will comprise? WAAS already charges for a number of its services, including commercial access to data (including the HER) and searches that require staff time, whilst maintaining free access for private researchers and students. Additional charges for services to the public may prevent local people from accessing the archives and HER, which will in turn have a negative impact on local engagement with the historic environment.

Cuts to ‘non-statutory’ roles are also likely to have a negative impact on the ability of the service to support engagement of local people with the historic environment, as well as sharply reducing their ability to attract money from external funders through community-based projects and activity (which they currently do very effectively). The Archaeology and Archives team already has a large and active community of volunteers who contributed an impressive 2665 hours of work to the service in the year up to July 2013, and although we would support an increase in the numbers of volunteers supporting the service, we do not feel this can be achieved without also maintaining sufficient professional support and expertise.

With all of this in mind we strongly advise that the proposed cuts are reconsidered. 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 further information the Council for British Archaeology can supply, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

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Director

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