Cheshire West and Chester Council
58 Nicholas Street,
Chester,
CH1 2NP

7th February 2014

Dear Sir or Madam,

Cheshire West and Chester Council: Budget Consultation

I am writing to you on behalf of the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) to express our deep concern about the impact that the current proposed budget cuts (and projected staff losses) at Cheshire West and Chester Council are likely to have on the region’s Archaeological Planning Advisory Service (APAS) and Historic Environment Team, and to request more information about how these cuts are to be implemented.

The CBA 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’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. This advice is currently provided by the staff at APAS who between them have many years of professional experience.

Cheshire has many nationally important archaeological sites, with Chester itself being one of only five historic urban centres in England designated under the Ancient Monuments Act for its archaeological significance. If the archaeological service provision to Cheshire West and Chester 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. This is clearly at odds with the council’s future aims to encourage economic growth in the region. Failure to comply with planning requirements may also leave the Council open to judicial review, at significant additional cost.

Archaeology can generate a large amount of investment from the private and commercial sectors through the planning system and can therefore contribute to the economic growth of the region. 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. This is increasingly important considering the current focus on local and neighbourhood planning within the planning system.

CWaC currently has a good record of producing local and town plans, including the extensive Chester Characterisation Study that was recently completed with advice and support from APAS. However, although these documents play an important role in ensuring local heritage is dealt with properly through the planning process, they also require professional staff with the relevant archaeological knowledge and experience to support and implement them.

The archaeology and heritage of the Cheshire West and Chester region is not only of national, and in some cases international, importance, but is also of an extremely complex nature. We are particularly concerned that the proposals to cut management posts are likely to result in the loss of senior archaeological staff with many years of experience. The posts that are likely to be affected are not just those of general managers, but of senior professionals who have the necessary in-depth archaeological knowledge, specialist skills and expertise to deal effectively with the region’s unique heritage and to balance this with the needs of future development. We would strongly advise the Council to ensure that these essential in-house skills are maintained.

We understand that the current economic situation is extremely difficult and that savings need to be made by Councils in many areas. However, as outlined above, we believe that further cuts to APAS and Historic Environment Team will severely undermine the ability of the Council to fulfil its statutory duty to heritage across the region.

Please could you supply more detailed information about the impact these current budget proposals will have on the Archaeological Planning Advisory Service and how, if any further cuts are proposed to the service, the Council intends to meet its statutory responsibilities to heritage (including planning related duties) in future?

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]

Dr Mike Heyworth MBE
Director
mikeheyworth@archaeologyuk.org