RE: Gateshead budget consultation 2015/17 and the impact of proposals on the historic environment

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to you on behalf of the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) in response to the current budget consultation being undertaken by Gateshead Council. Our comments relate to the proposed reduction in dedicated advice on archaeology, listed building/conservation, design and landscape. We wish to stress the value of these services, underscore our support for their continued delivery, and consider ways in which the obligations to deliver these services could be salvaged within the context of the present financial difficulties facing the authority.

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.

We are encouraged that the Council sets out in the consultation an appreciation of its statutory duties towards listed buildings, conservation areas and archaeological remains within the planning process. The National Planning Policy Framework also sets out strong guidelines on historic environment as one of its twelve core principles (2012: para. 17). As part of this, archaeology and historic environment services are vital for the delivery of sustainable development through planning, performing multiple beneficial functions such as; (1) assessing development proposals for potential impacts upon the historic environment, providing advice on the significance of historic environment assets and on how that significance can be better revealed or enhanced; (2) conducting investigations to increase knowledge and understanding of the past; and (3) designing mitigation strategies which protect heritage whilst also minimising the risk of unforeseen cost and delays for developers.

The CBA also agrees with the high valuation of the historic environment in the Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan for Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne 2010-2030, Planning for the Future. Within this document Gateshead is recognised as being an area of high concentration of heritage assets but also recognises that the fabric of the whole city relies upon more everyday parts of the historic environment for its inherited
character which is valued as part of the culture and identity of those who live and work in the area. The Strategy states:

“Development needs to renew and improve the public realm, its built form, its environmental performance and the mitigation of climate change. The right development in the right location, moving away from standard solutions can be used to enhance heritage assets, townscape characteristics and local distinctiveness. The historic and natural environment, the townscape that we have inherited, and the enhancement of these, should be a starting point for consideration of any development.” (12.13)

Heritage-led regeneration in the city is also noted to have made a “huge contribution” to the area (14.33), with continued respect for the historical legacy (policy UC14) of the historic environment being recognised as a key principle for future development.

Without a proportionate provision of specialist historic environment advice it is unreasonable to assume that the Council will be able to deliver these aims and the specific policies CS1, CS15, UC3, UC13, and UC14, and will result in a decline in the quality of decision making and overall quality of the environment, with impacts upon (as the Strategy states) local distinctiveness and character, the ability to create safe and inclusive environments, and local high quality design.

The CBA recognises the extremely difficult financial situation in which Gateshead and many other authorities find themselves in the present economic climate. We understand that budget cuts are essential and that the constriction of some services is unavoidable. However, we believe that the manner in which the consultation proposes cuts to historic environment services continues Gateshead on a highly damaging trajectory in terms of its ability to meet its obligations under local and national policy and maintain and enhance the historic environment for the benefit of all residents and visitors, both now and in generations to come – one which began with the 50% cut to the shared Tyne and Wear Specialist Conservation Services in 2013. Without dedicated specialists the authority will be less able to interpret significance of heritage assets and judge the impact of development upon local people and their heritage in a manner befitting the above outlined aims of the Council.

More information is required for us to make detailed comments on the proposals and we would like to request this in order to ascertain what the proposed ‘very limited amount of advice’ would entail and how the services would function, including how external consultants would be used and how the new structures would work alongside the remaining Tyne and Wear conservation and archaeology services and Historic Environment Record. What information does exist, however, is extremely troubling.

We urge the Council to think carefully on what other options exist before the dedicated advice on archaeology and listed building conservation is cut completely. Other local authorities who have made similar decisions to remove specialist advice (for example Northamptonshire and Merseyside) have spent considerable sums re-activating services in subsequent years when the negative effects of the decision have become evident. In the case of Northamptonshire, 80% fewer cases were identified as having impacts upon the historic environment in 2009 when there was no specialist historic environment service than there were
in 2010 when the service was restored. This indicates the lack of ability to provide consistent oversight of the planning process which is engendered by not having access to expert archaeologists and buildings conservation specialists. Furthermore, models of employing advice on an ad-hoc basis through external contractors are proportionately much more expensive and fail to provide a level of consistency of approach which is necessary to prevent failures in oversight which lead to the loss of significance in the historic environment.

The CBA is also concerned that the long term economic and social contribution of archaeology, heritage and the wider built environment to the future of Gateshead as a vibrant place to live and work is not being valued as a factor which could help in the borough’s future development. The historic environment can help to attract business and tourism to the city, providing economic benefits which, nationally, amount to £20.6 billion annually (Heritage Lottery Fund 2013) in contribution to the UK economy. Similarly important are social benefits which are proven to result from the wider use of local authority historic environment services to engage with the public, for example in schools and with local societies. These benefits include social inclusion, increased pride in one’s local environment, and more effective local planning. For this reason, historic environment services should not be simply seen as a cost, but as an overall potential contributor to the local area’s social and economic development. It will not be realistically possible to target these benefits in Gateshead if the proposed cuts are enacted.

The CBA believes that there are alternate ways to look at creating a more sustainable service which should be exhausted before the proposed steps are considered. Some options include charging for specialist services such as pre-application advice, the further brigading of specialist units with neighbouring authorities (including expanding upon the existing former county level services within Tyne and Wear, currently delivered by Newcastle City Council), or the use of partnerships with other bodies such as local societies and volunteer groups who may be capable of providing additional value to baseline services in many innovative ways. Whilst no one model is necessarily a silver bullet for financial pressures, these options provide potentials for cost savings which do not damage the ability of the services to deliver benefits in the ways described above to such a catastrophic effect.

Careful management of the historic environment is key to the future of the area and we urge the council not to forget the potential of these services to contribute to the area’s culture, economy and society, as stated in the emerging Local Plan, and in projects such as the Gateshead Regeneration Partnership and Creative Gateshead. We hope that whatever is decided upon will deliver a service which is resourced to a level which is proportionate to the importance to the historic environment and does not abandon the Council’s stated responsibilities to preserve and enhance it for the benefit of all the people of Gateshead.

The CBA would be happy to provide detailed advice on any of the above points if to do so would be useful. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,