

Valuing the historic environment

THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT in Wales, and the ways it is managed, resourced and promoted, is of paramount importance to the National Trust in Wales. It is a core purpose of the National Trust to influence the development of public policy in order that the nation's unique historical assets are protected and promoted for current and future generations.

Drawing on that purpose, and its unique experience in Wales as a leading guardian of the nation's natural and historic environment, the National Trust Wales has carried out research into perceptions of the historic environment in Wales. In common with other groups, we want to raise the profile of the historic environment within government and its agencies, and amongst the public more generally. Our study looked both at attitudes amongst the general public and at the views of eighteen leading public officials.

We believe that this research is timely. The Assembly has promoted a debate about historic environment policy and the roles of organisations within and outside government; Cadw has been given a new home within an enlarged Culture ministry; and an Historic Environment Group has been formed to advise ministers.

The survey suggests that there is a strong consensus behind a historic environment that is broadly defined – on the lines suggested by the consultants who produced the review of historic environment policy for the Assembly.

But there is also a recognition that if we are to care properly for the heritage, and to maximise its potential contribution to economic and social



▲ Modern hydropower waterwheel at Aberdulais Falls tin works (Jenny Wragg/Morguefile)

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sustainability, there are some important steps to be taken.

We need an audit of the “state of the historic environment” – a stocktaking of our heritage assets and a measurement of the threats to these assets, as a key, not least, to a proper understanding of resource needs.

As the review consultants argue, the historic environment still needs its champion within government – but equally clearly, there needs to be a strong voice outside government that is able to advise and to lobby from a position of independence. In England, Heritage Link plays this kind of role – would Wales benefit from an analogous structure?

With robust structures in and beyond government there would be the basis for an effective partnership that could deliver on agreed objectives or strategic goals.

Public perceptions

Public attitudes were measured through telephone polling of 501 adults aged sixteen and over, sampled and re-weighted so as to be representative of the Welsh population.

The overwhelming majority – 99 per cent – agreed that it is important that children learn about their heritage.

There was also a clear public recognition of the contribution that the heritage could make to economic and social sustainability.

Nearly 90 per cent of those canvassed believed that the heritage is good for the economy and job creation. Nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) saw the historic environment as a potential catalyst for community regeneration. Two-thirds said there should be more funding for the heritage. ▶

Statements about heritage

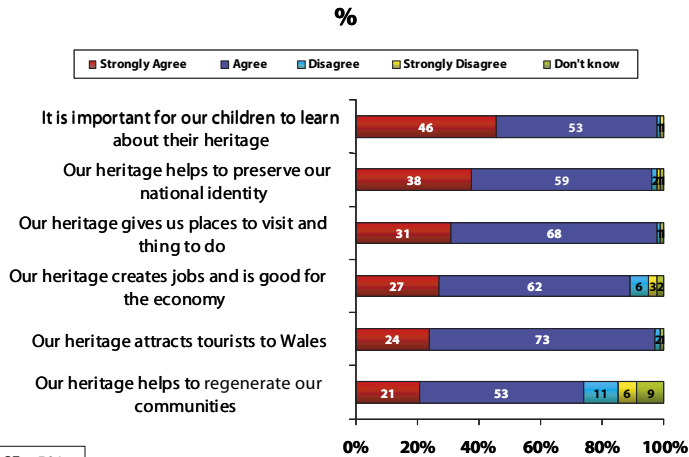


Chart © National Trust

Decision-makers and the historic environment

Alongside the public opinion survey we conducted interviews with eighteen public officials (including civil servants and Assembly Members, as well as leading non-governmental actors). Interviews took place on an anonymous basis and were structured around a standard set of questions. We wanted to understand how our interviewees defined and valued the historic environment, and to discover their attitudes towards protection and conservation. We also looked at the issues of resourcing, promotion and advocacy – as well as the broader theme of a strategy for the historic environment in Wales.

We were pleasantly surprised and greatly encouraged by the great measure of agreement around the need for better protection and promotion of the historic environment, more effective partnership working, and more efficient use of resources. There was also agreement on the need for a full audit of the Welsh historic environment as a basis for strategy setting, and resource prioritisation.

Next steps

This exercise has produced

some clear and common themes which could be addressed by a more extended and focused debate. Defining Wales' historic environment, and how its potential for economic, social and cultural regeneration and renewal can be measured and sensibly exploited, is something which, the interviewees broadly agreed needs to be examined in more depth by public policy makers.

The historic environment of Wales, however robust in the imagination of the hearts and minds of its people, nevertheless remains under constant threat. Several factors converge to ensure that the physical evidence of our past – the kingpin of our national and local identities – is disappearing.

There are mixed views on the roles and effectiveness of various agencies of the statutory and non-statutory sector. What indeed is the role of government? One view, drawing on the interviewees' experience and knowledge, appears to be that it is the Government's job to see that Wales has a coherent and meaningful national statement setting out our vision for Wales' historic environment.

Whether this is in a stand-alone strategy with the status of *A winning Wales*, or whether it is part of other strategies, such

as the Environment Strategy or Cultural Strategy, our study shows that there is a consensus for a substantial policy message which makes it clear that the Welsh heritage is important; explains why this is so; and sets out what is going to be done to protect, promote and utilise this heritage for the many benefits it can deliver.

Changing hearts and minds in this way requires a champion and the enthusiastic and persuasive advocacy of the value and importance of our heritage. The responsibility for this lies primarily with government, but must be inspired and supported by a coherent non-governmental sector.

A partnership approach is needed to deliver our priorities for the historic environment in Wales. Local government has a major role to play. Through its planning policies and strategic documents, it can deliver on the ground those practical measures which mean the success or failure of a national strategy.

There was broad agreement that there were resource and capacity issues at local authority level which needed to be addressed. Better incentives and opportunities for private and voluntary sector engagement are also essential.

Hand in hand with effective partnership must go an open and accountable process for the evaluation and monitoring of progress towards the stated objectives for the Welsh heritage.

In terms of resources, the starting point should be a full audit of current spending, an assessment of key priorities and gaps in current and prospective provision. In the present climate it is unrealistic to expect considerable increases in expenditure which could not be linked to the delivery of other key national priorities.

The challenge we face – government, people and the forces of industry and commerce – is to establish a new way for the

historic environment in Wales: a society that says that its historic environment is its force for social and cultural cohesion; a catalyst for economic regeneration; and something which cannot and must not be allowed to decay further.

The revolution in thinking that must happen is truly to value Wales' cultural heritage for its potential in the future. The shift needed is towards the view that the assets which need our care, attention and promotion are not simply the nationally or internationally significant or the most famous but also those which define local communities and identities: "things" or landscapes which – though perhaps considered of minor importance to the "experts" – are of immense significance for local people.

In winning this debate internally and in the hearts and minds of the public, the Welsh Assembly Government and its agencies and partners must devise, establish and maintain new ways of both halting the erosion and destruction of the assets, and discover innovative ways to utilise them as a force for the future renewal and development of our communities.

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