

The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee

Inquiry into the Covid-19 outbreak in Wales and its impact on heritage sites, museums and archives

A response from the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW)

The RCAHMW consists of a fieldwork section and an archival section, one creating new archaeological and architectural records and one making them available to the public as part of the publicly accessible National Monuments Record for Wales.

The impact of Covid-19 on our work has so far been minimal. The fieldwork team have not been able to undertake the work that they would normally expect to do at this time of year (especially aerial photographic work, recording buildings due for demolition (such as the Mold Civic Centre and Wrexham Police Station) and monitoring coastal erosion and recording newly exposed archaeology) but they have been busy writing up the results of past fieldwork (one result of which has been the extensive media coverage for our aerial photographic discoveries as a result of the 2018 drought, which have been featured in *The Times*, the Waitrose magazine, BBC Wales and Heno in the last two weeks).

Our archival section has if anything been busier than usual, partly because we have seen a large number of enquiries from academics using lockdown to write up their own research, from historians writing local and family histories and from planning consultants undertaking environmental impact surveys to support future development proposals. Because so much of the archive is now digitised or born-digital, we have been able to provide a 'business as usual' service with staff working from home. The only exception to this relates to archives that have yet to be digitised, such as a recently acquired aerial photographic collection.

Throughout the lockdown period, I have participated in fortnightly meetings in which the chief executives of arm's length bodies have reported on their response to the pandemic to the Welsh Government Minister for International Relations and the Welsh Language, the Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism and senior civil servants in the Culture, Sport and Tourism Division. They have sought to understand the problems we might be facing, have offered solutions and have provided the support for the difficult decisions that some bodies were facing, although fortunately not the Royal Commission.

Our major concern has been the continuity of funding for our work and especially for the salaries budget, and so far we have received the assurance that we needed in order to support and encourage our staff. Where cuts have been asked for, we have been consulted, and care has been taken to ensure that any in year budget cuts will not result in staff being made redundant. In the case of the Royal Commission, the 2 per cent cut we were asked to agree has been affordable through a combination of salary savings (a vacancy for a maritime heritage officer which we have yet to fill) and savings in travel and subsistence expenses.

On the question of when we will be able to open again to the public, we will be guided by the plans of the National Library, whose premises we share. The National Library is not planning to open to the public until January 2021, but staff will be permitted to return to work on a limited basis in September, and we will be giving priority to those staff who need access to the physical archives in order to answer public enquiries. Fieldwork is scheduled to begin again early in July, once the restrictions on travel and overnight stays are lifted.

The economic impact is very difficult to forecast at this stage. As far as the Royal Commission is concerned, we can foresee a busy period ahead if some of the predicted longer-term pandemic outcomes are confirmed. We anticipate an increased recording workload from the shrinking of the High Street as former retail premises are converted to residential accommodation. Equally, we expect to be kept busy recording historic places of worship that were struggling to stay open before the pandemic and that may now close for good and be converted to other uses.

Our major concern is that the cost of the pandemic to the economy and to Welsh Government could lead to cuts across the public sector. After seven years of cuts or budget freezes, the Royal Commission has managed to operate by freezing posts when staff move on or retire and by winning external funding in the form of research grants, especially from the European Union. Brexit will mean an end to the latter, and any further cuts to the Royal Commission budget would require us to consider which of our core activities we could no longer afford.