Dear Mr McNaughton

Historic Environment Scotland Bill – Call for evidence

Thank you for the invitation to submit written evidence in relation to the Historic Environment Scotland Bill. I am writing on behalf of Aberdeen City Council. My response has a particular focus on our areas of responsibility in Museums and Galleries and in providing information and advice on the historic environment to the planning authority, other colleagues and the public. I include responses to the questions within the framework of the call for evidence as well as general comments on behalf of colleagues in the planning authority.

General

Schedule 1, Status 1 (1-4) presents what Historic Environment Scotland is not. It would be beneficial to be explicit about what the status and remit of the organisation is intended to be. Similarly under Membership 2 (1-9), it would be beneficial to understand what the role of the members is and how that board will be constituted. Specifically it would be useful to know what range of skills members are expected to have, what the board will be expected to achieve, how it will be expected to operate and what relationship it will have with staff and other organisations, including local authorities.

Responses to Questions

1. There is certainly some confusion at present over the respective roles of Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. Creation of a single national body may indeed go some way to clarify roles and responsibilities within the public mind.

However, the Commission in particular has very long-standing status, authority and scholarship in matters relating to the historic environment of Scotland.
is to be hoped that those qualities will be transferred to and flourish within the new body.

2. As stated above, a single organisation can provide clarity of purpose. The functions proposed for Historic Environment Scotland appear to mirror those that currently exist and make sense. It would be beneficial to be clear on how these functions will be delivered, particularly in relation to diminishing resources in the public sector. The collective responsibility for the care of the historic environment is clear, but it would be useful to understand how specifically Historic Environment Scotland would propose to co-ordinate appropriate skills to ensure delivery of key objectives.

3. Care of the historic environment and of objects and archives from the past should be a partnership between both national and local bodies. It is not entirely clear from the Bill what is foreseen as the future relationship between, for example, the new body and local authority archaeology services and the expertise and historic and environment records which are so fundamental to management, interpretation and public interaction with Scotland’s past. The relationship between local authority historic environment records and RCAHMS has been carefully honed and cherished over many years. Every effort should be made to build on and foster that co-operation in the future to maximise the resources available to the public. It would be helpful to understand who the new body considers to be their direct partners and how it proposes to engage with them, given the limit to resources that may be available. It is important that Historic Environment Scotland is clear about the level of support it is able to provide to local authorities, applicants, agents and the general public with the prospective partners and how they will ensure efficient delivery.

4. The Bill would help our organisation better manage and promote Scotland’s historic environment by being explicit about roles and responsibilities Historic Environment Scotland will have in encouraging leadership, partnership and collaborative working and importantly how skills and capacity will be developed. Mainstreaming the historic environment is an admirable ambition, but this must be backed up with a demonstrable co-ordination of resources and clear understanding of deliverable outcomes. Defining specific outcomes expected as a result of the Bill would be helpful.

5. We welcome the emphasis that the Bill places upon public enjoyment of Scotland’s historic environment, and the promotion of the past across the generations. However, we are concerned that a greater balance of funding might be directed to those ends. In a climate of restricted resources, that might have a detrimental effect on the core knowledge-related functions of recording, discovering, storing, understanding and researching Scotland’s past, upon which the aspiration ‘to make Scotland’s historic environment more attractive to communities, families and tourists’ so fundamentally rests. More generally the strategy has stated many challenges and could be more explicit about how Historic Environment Scotland will expect to address those challenges.
6. It is recognised that the Bill allows for a degree of flexibility which will enable the board to prioritise and co-ordinate Historic Environment Scotland’s resources within the scope of the published strategy.

7. In terms of roles and responsibilities, we note the paragraphs which relate to acquisition, deposit and disposal of objects (Part 1, Section 5), in particular the statement that ‘Historic Environment Scotland may acquire any object which it considers it is desirable to add to its collections’. We could not see any qualification of that statement taking account of the parallel collecting interests of other organisations, both public and private, throughout Scotland. We would hope that that will be made clear, if not in the Bill itself, then in a forthcoming Acquisition Policy for the new body.

We wish the Committee well in securing passage of this important Bill and to working together with partners in the altered environment which it will create.

Yours Sincerely

Judith Stones
Lead Curator