

IFRCS40 Christopher Catling, The Secretary (CEO), Royal Commission on the ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, Cyfathrebu, y Gymraeg, Chwaraeon, a Chysylltiadau Rhyngwladol | Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee

Effaith Gostyngiadau Cyllid ar Ddiwylliant a Chwaraeon | Impact of Funding Reductions for Culture and Sport

Ymateb gan: Christopher Catling, Yr Ysgrifennydd (Prif Weithredwr), , Comisiwn Brenhinol Henebion Cymru | Evidence from: Christopher Catling, The Secretary (CEO), Royal Commission on the ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales

On 17 December 2023, Dawn Bowden, then the Deputy Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism Culture, and Tourism, announced that Cadw and the Royal Commission were to have their budgets cut for the 2024-25 financial year by 22 per cent. We are very grateful indeed to the members of this Committee and to several Plaid Cymru Senedd members for helping us to secure a reduction in this cut to 10.5 per cent.

Even so, a cut of 10.5 per cent meant that we had to institute a voluntary redundancy programme during the period December 2023 to March 2024, which led to the loss of five staff, including two senior managers. In addition, two members of staff with transferable skills (our Finance and HR managers) left us as a direct result of the uncertainties caused by continuous budget cuts. In all, we lost 23 per cent of our total staff complement.

As a result of these cuts, we now have 27 staff (24 FTE), which will reduce to 24 (21 FTE) at the end of December 2024 when the contracts come to an end of the staff taken on to deliver our Welsh Asian Heritage project. By comparison, we had 45 FTE staff in 2014.

Through voluntary redundancy and by freezing posts, we have been able to stay within budget this year, but we know that we will lose a further £110,000 next year when the co-operation agreement funding agreed between Plaid and Welsh Labour comes to an end.

It should be noted that this reduction in capacity is not a one-year event. The last decade has seen a slow attrition of our budgets, starting with the substantial in-

year cut of in 2014-15, which led to the loss of 14 posts, and continuing with flat budgets every year until this year's deeper cut of 10.5 per cent.

Flat budgets are cuts, in effect, because our salary and IT costs (in particular) have continued to rise: Cyber Security certification, for example, now costs c. £10,000 p.a. compared with just £1,000 p.a. five years ago, and the rises in pay and pension contributions for staff also mean that 90 per cent of our annual budget is dedicated to salary and pensions, leaving little for essential fieldwork activity, aerial photography, training and community engagement. In addition, pressures on our capital budget mean that we have not been able to update essential survey equipment.

Reductions in service delivery

The effect of this nearly 50 per cent reduction in staff over ten years is that we have had to make substantial reductions in service delivery. For example, we are required under the terms of our Royal Warrant and the Historic Environment (Wales) Act to make a photographic and written record for posterity of the many significant buildings that are subject to wholesale or partial demolition in Wales, but we are only able in reality to record a fraction of these.

Our annual reports give details of the many well-known buildings across Wales that we have recorded in recent years, including the BBC Studios in Llandaff, the Rhyl Sun Centre, Wrexham Civic Centre, Colleg Harlech and numerous historic schools, churches and chapels. We anticipate a large increase in the number of buildings that should be recorded over the next decade as a result of the forthcoming closure of up to a third of the places of worship in Wales, but we lack the capacity to record these buildings before their interiors are stripped, the buildings converted to other uses and their archives lost.

Equally we struggle to meet the demand from planning officers, consultants and such bodies as Natural Resources Wales for information about upland archaeological sites in Wales to underpin decisions about afforestation as a carbon offset measure, or the location of windfarms and solar arrays, and we are some way behind where we should be in work to record sites in the slate World Heritage landscape prior to conservation.

Our much-valued Library and Enquiries service, which handles scores of enquiries each week from planners, consultants, researchers, teachers, publishers and journalists and members of the public, now has just two staff remaining out of five who were previously employed in handling enquiries. This has resulted in longer waiting times for a response to user enquires (recently, 91.4 per cent of our

enquirers received an initial response within our target time of fifteen working days, down from 99 per cent in 2022–23 and 100 per cent in 2021–22). We have also had to suspend our paid-for priority services, much to the dismay of the planning consultants who are regular users of this service,

We have had to reduce to three days a week the number of days when the search room is open to the public, enabling the other two days to be used for responding to online, telephone and written enquiries. When one member of staff has to retrieve records from our archive store, the other must invigilate the search room. This becomes impossible if one of the two Search Room staff is on leave, or is absent through sickness or simply taking a lunch break.

Other staff are helping to resolve this problem by volunteering to invigilate and we have greatly benefited from the flexibility and goodwill of staff who have added the Finance and HR manager roles to their existing jobs, but these are not sustainable long-term solutions. Everyone's workload has increased and this is imposing a considerable amount of stress on all staff, including those members of staff who perform unique functions in Wales and who are shouldering heavy burdens of work – for example, in the areas of maritime and aerial archaeology, the historic placenames register, community engagement and maintaining the Coflein digital platform that is the online access point for heritage information in Wales.

External funding

To compensate for the loss of core funding we have worked hard to win external funding, and it is only because of our successes in this area that we are able to fulfil our Government remit. In the last five years, for example, the Royal Commission has led the high-profile CHERISH climate change project, with €6m of EU funding (shared with various partner institutions in Wales and Ireland), studying the impacts of climate change on coastal heritage.

With National Lottery Heritage Fund grants we have delivered the U-boats War project, which included the recording of U-boats and ships sunk off the Welsh coast during World War I; and the Unloved Heritage project, engaging young people in heritage activities. We have just completed a project to work with the community in Penparcau to excavate and improve access to the Pendinas hillfort that rises between that village and the coast, a project that has engaged schools in the area with creative arts projects and that is being nominated for an Archaeological Achievement Award at the ceremony to be held in Cardiff in November.

We have also delivered several smaller projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, including Unpath'd Waters, bringing maritime heritage records into line with those of Historic England, and Deep Mapping, which led us to develop an award-winning method of showing how the historic environment has changed over the last 500 years.

Finally, we have secured a two-year grant from Welsh Government's Anti-racist Wales Action Plan for our Welsh Asian Heritage project, which concludes in November and December 2024 with a Senedd exhibition showcasing the results of our work – the only heritage project in Wales to be funded by the ArWAP scheme, and a further example of the Royal Commission's creativity in responding to Welsh Government priorities.

It needs to be emphasised that we have demanding KPIs from Welsh Government that relate to the climate emergency, community engagement, social justice, education, health and wellbeing, engaging with young people and more but our core funding is not sufficient to enable us to deliver any of these. We are not funded adequately for the work that Welsh Government expects us to undertake on its behalf, and to meet our KPIs and respond positively to our remit, we are reliant on these non-Government grants, which are increasingly hard to obtain, especially now that we are no longer eligible for EU funding.

The future

In sum, the Commission's work is not just a 'nice to have' luxury: we are striving to deliver against our Government remit, the requirements of our Royal Warrant and our statutory duties under the Public Records Act, the Historic Environment Act, Planning legislation and international treaty obligations (World Heritage Site conservation, for example), as well as the Future Generations Act and Welsh Language commitments. We have been delivering our services to the best of our capacity during a period of managed decline in which we have only been able to stay within our very small budget by not renewing posts as they have become vacant, a process that has now led to a serious capacity crisis.

It is against this background that we have been encouraged to work more closely with our sectoral partners. For many years there have been discussions about how the sector could work together more effectively, and frequent reference has been made to theoretical efficiencies to be made by sharing 'back-office' functions. Our recent attempts to engage with Welsh Government, Cadw, the National Library and Amgueddfa Cymru over shared HR and financial services has shown that this is not feasible in practice and that there are no savings to be made – we are all

operating very lean operations that are barely adequate to meet the needs of our individual institutions, without spare capacity to share with others.

We are now about to enter formal discussion with Cadw to explore areas of common interest, potential synergies and better ways of delivering our services, from more closely aligning our work programmes to full merger. If Cadw and the Commission are to amalgamate, it should not be because we are forced to do so as a result of the burning platform of budget cuts. It should be because this would be in the best interests of the people and the historic environment of Wales.

And whatever new arrangements for delivering the nation's historic environment services are agreed as a result of such a review, there will still be the need a more sustainable level of funding.

We hope that this inquiry on the part of the Senedd Culture Committee will result in a decisive shift of focus: for too long the sector has been trying to manage the impacts of cuts and we need now to focus on growth, so as to realise the enormous potential of the heritage sector to contribute to the economy, health, wellbeing, community cohesion and educational opportunities for the people of Wales.
