

Joint CIfA / CBA / ALGAO:England statement on recent government policy reform announcements

In the past fortnight there has been a marked period of activity across the archaeological community particularly related to the announcement of a new Neighbourhood Planning and Infrastructure Bill, made in the Queen's speech. From paid archaeologists, to volunteers, students, county societies, community groups, and generally interested individuals, people who value archaeology recognised a potential threat and made their voices heard in their thousands.

The Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA), the Council for British Archaeology (CBA), and the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers: England (ALGAO) take these issues very seriously. Each organisation is engaged in advocating for archaeology as part of its daily business. We work collectively to inform decision-makers, and generally raise the profile of archaeological issues.

The announcement of the Neighbourhood Planning and Infrastructure Bill was one which had been anticipated by CIfA, CBA, and ALGAO, although there had been no prior indication what measures the Bill would contain. Since the announcement we have been collectively pursuing more detailed information about the Bill, have written to Ministers, and produced briefings for wider stakeholders.

Last week CIfA, CBA, and ALGAO – facilitated by Historic England – met with officials from the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG), and Culture, Media and Sport (CMS). The meeting discussed the proposals outlined in the Bill, specifically, the nature and intent of plans to change the way in which pre-commencement conditions are used in the planning process. At the meeting it was stressed by CLG officials that archaeology was not a target of the reforms on pre-commencement conditions.

The meeting allowed for the government's actual intentions to be explored and potential unintended impacts to be probed. Of course, despite these positive assurances, we remain cautious about the direction of the Bill and its potential to affect archaeology and will continue to closely monitor developments and advise government, as the Bill progresses.

Wider threats and continued need for action

The Bill, however, is only one aspect of a wider planning reform agenda which is having a clear negative effect on the protection of archaeology through the planning system. Recent government reforms have made changes to the planning system in a variety of ways which have, are, or will make it harder for archaeological protections to be maintained. For example;

- 1) By expanding permitted development, and introducing 'permission in principle' more developments are being enabled which could be granted without adequate archaeological assessment, leading to fascinating sites and finds being lost to the public.
- 2) By putting greater pressure on local authority performance, and cutting resources, there is a greater likelihood that corners will be cut, or standards not met – despite the hard work and dedication of archaeological staff supporting the planning system.
- 3) By promoting the outsourcing of planning applications, early consultation with developers by local archaeology specialists is likely to be restricted.

In this context, the reaction to the Neighbourhood Planning and Infrastructure Bill would appear to us to be a symptom of decreasing trust in the Government's ongoing growth agenda and its ability to streamline regulation and stimulate growth without harming the historic and natural environment.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the planning system is no longer working in the interests of archaeology, and that current reforms are – whether intentionally or not – contributing to a weaker and poorer set of protections for the historic environment, which in turn is leading to unsustainable development – achieved at too high an environmental cost.

CIfA, CBA, ALGAO:England and wider colleagues in the historic environment sector will continue to advocate for archaeology on behalf of the archaeological community and wider public and will continue to press these issues with all available effort. We welcome communication, and continued action from individuals to help promote these issues to politicians, and the media.



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A note on the signatory organisations:

The Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers: England (ALGAO: England)

The Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers: England (ALGAO) is the national body representing local government archaeology services in England at County, District, Metropolitan, Unitary and National Park authority level. These provide advice to nearly all the District, Unitary and other local government bodies in the country.

ALGAO: England co-ordinates the views of its member authorities (currently 97 in total) and presents them to government and to other national organisations. It also supports the work of the Local Government Association (LGA) on archaeological matters. The range of interests of its members embraces all aspects of the historic environment, including archaeology, buildings and the historic landscape.

The Council for British Archaeology (CBA)

CBA is the national amenity society concerned with protection of the archaeological interest in heritage assets. CBA has a membership of 500 heritage organisations who, together with our thousands of individual members, represent national and local bodies encompassing state, local government, professional, academic, museum and voluntary sectors.

The Chartered Institute for Archaeologists (CIfA)

CIfA is the leading professional body representing archaeologists working in the UK and overseas. CIfA promotes high professional standards and strong ethics in archaeological practice, to maximise the benefits that archaeologists bring to society, and provides a self-regulatory quality assurance framework for the sector and those it serves.

CIfA has over 3,200 members and nearly 80 registered practices across the United Kingdom. Its members work in all branches of the discipline: heritage management, planning advice, excavation, finds and environmental study, buildings recording, underwater and aerial archaeology, museums, conservation, survey, research and development, teaching and liaison with the community, industry and the commercial and financial sectors.