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Local Authority Heritage Assets: Issues and Opportunities for BPTs

by Richard Bate, *Green Balance*

This paper outlines a recently published report *Local authority heritage assets: issues and opportunities* commissioned by English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), for which we were the lead authors (from www.helm.org.uk/server/show/nav.21790). The paper considers the implications for Building Preservation Trusts (BPTs), including reporting on the results of a short questionnaire sent by the UKAPT national office to the BPT membership on our behalf about properties BPTs had obtained from local authorities.

The paper outlines our findings on:

- how many heritage buildings local authorities own,
- how many of them are becoming surplus, and
- what types of property are most likely to be becoming available for BPTs.

Then it considers:

- who is taking them on when they are disposed of,
- what the capacity appears to be in the BPT sector,
- how that capacity might be increased, and
- what we recommended that is relevant to BPTs.

How many heritage buildings do local authorities own?

Heritage property in local authorities is almost always the responsibility of asset managers in property departments. The study asked them about how many heritage properties they owned and what they were doing with them. We approached over one third of all English district, county, unitary and metropolitan authorities with telephone questionnaires, and secured 58 reasonably full responses. We not only asked them about the buildings likely to be of interest to BPTs but also about a wide range of other heritage assets like parks, gardens, archaeology, monuments, memorials and other structures. This paper is restricted to buildings.

Questions on the number of heritage buildings local authorities own were divided into three groups:

- For listed buildings 6-20 is the most typical number owned. These were

Local authority ownership	North	South	Total
1 to 5	4	10	14
6 to 20	12	15	27
More than 20	5	5	10
None	1	1	2
Not disclosed	2	3	5
Total	24	34	58

disproportionately in the north of England (including the East and West Midlands) rather than the south. District councils generally had distinctly fewer than county, unitary and London authorities.

- For other purpose-built public buildings from before 1939, including town halls, swimming pools, park buildings and public libraries, most authorities owned between 1 and 3. Authorities owning more than 3 were predominantly in the north of England. Nearly half the authorities in the south have 3 or fewer. Over half of unitary authorities have more than 3.

Local authority ownership	North	South	Total
1 to 3	10	18	28
More than 3	11	4	15
None	1	10	11
Not disclosed	2	2	4
Total	24	34	58

- For unlisted pre-1914 industrial buildings, ownership was much less, usually none. There was very low ownership of such buildings in the south. Districts had noticeably lower ownerships compared with other authority types.

Local authority ownership	North	South	Total
1 to 3	9	6	15
More than 3	3	2	5
None	12	23	35
Not disclosed		3	3
Total	24	34	58

Taken together, the responses suggest that district councils own generally fewer heritage assets than other authority types, and authorities in the North tend to own discernibly more heritage assets than do authorities in the South.

Still more interesting is the “don’t knows”. The principal reason the study achieved only a modest response to our intensive efforts to obtain information from local authorities was that many of them could not cross this first hurdle of knowing what heritage they did own. Many had to enquire of colleagues in other departments, but conversely some conservation officers couldn’t help because the asset managers never told them! This is obviously worrying of itself, and also suggests that proper management of heritage assets must often be in doubt. That problem became even more apparent when the research found that 60% of local authority Asset Management Plans do not refer to heritage, and only one in 8 Asset Management Plans claims to have a heritage policy.

How many heritage buildings are becoming surplus?

We asked asset managers about heritage assets which were surplus to their requirements. This is not a black and white concept. Buildings can go through a period of redundancy,

difficulty in finding new uses (or full uses), and an increasing struggle to maintain them, before they are accepted as surplus.

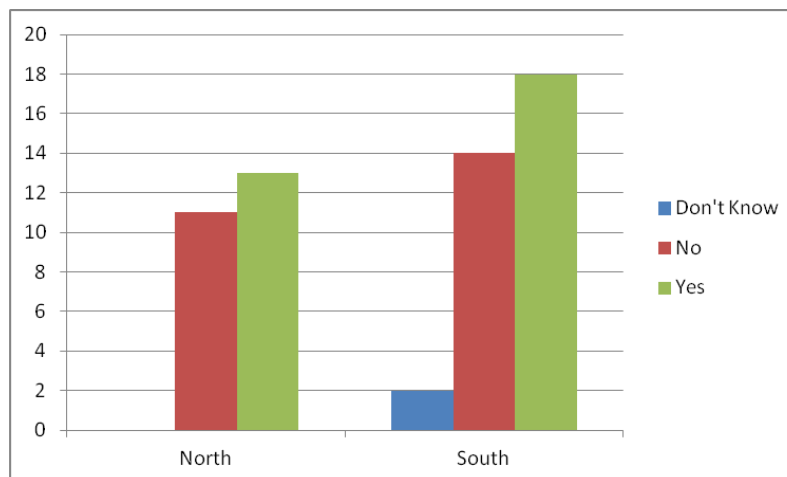
One distinctive category of surplus building we identified to which this applied is the former Town Hall. Following local government reorganisation in 1963 (London) and 1974 (elsewhere), large numbers of Town Halls were inherited by the new, larger authorities created. Many were kept on in their original use for a while, at least partially, but have gradually become ever more surplus to requirements. They often stand in pivotal locations within towns and contribute to civic pride. Some are unlisted, but even then demolition is often unthinkable.



Shoreditch Town Hall

Shoreditch Town Hall became redundant with the reorganisation of London local government and the creation of the London Borough of Hackney in 1965. The building was partially used by the Council for offices after this, but attempts at complete reuse between 1993 and 1995 failed. There was inadequate repair and maintenance. Shoreditch Town Hall Trust was established in 1999 to rescue the building for reuse as a community centre. The Trust was given an initial three year lease by Hackney Borough Council to test whether there was sufficient demand to make this reuse viable, and in 2002 a 99-year lease. The community centre opened in 2005.

The survey showed that in the last five years half of all local authorities had disposed of a heritage asset.



Also:

- two fifths of local authorities had closed a heritage asset (twice as prevalent in the north as in the south),
- a quarter had transferred the management of a heritage asset, and
- one tenth had demolished a heritage asset.

That last figure is not as bad as it sounds. From our 58 respondents we identified the demolition of one each of a cemetery chapel, a seafront shelter, a garage, a community centre, a pub and part of a mill.

An analysis of disposals in the last five years showed that their pattern was evenly distributed between the north and south of England. Almost all county, London and unitary authorities had disposed of heritage assets, but only a third of district councils had done so. The returns showed that even large urban authorities were usually transferring less than one heritage property annually. Figures for the last five years from these major authorities were:

No transfers	Barking & Dagenham LBC, Cambridge City, Middlesbrough
One transfer	Manchester City, Trafford MDC, Wandsworth LBC
Two transfers	Hillingdon LBC, Hull City, Lewisham LBC, Wolverhampton City
Three transfers	Plymouth City
Four transfers	Doncaster MDC, Newcastle-upon-Tyne City
Five transfers	Bristol City

What types of heritage building are becoming available?

Disposals in the last five years by heritage asset type

Houses	7	Fire station	1
Libraries	6	Public toilet	1
Schools	5	Public open space	1
Offices	5	Arts centre	1
Town Halls	3	Guildhall (Devonport)	1
Shop	2	Barn	1
Lido	1	Reservoir/park	1
Tram shelter	1	Cemetery Chapel	1
Rifle Hall	1	Museum	1
Mill (part)	1	Farm (buildings and land)	1
Burial ground	1	Swimming pool (indoor)	1
Park Lodge	1	Registry office	1
Theatre	1	Care home	1
Drill Hall	1	Clock tower	1

The primary finding from Asset Managers on heritage asset disposals is that there was a very wide range of assets affected, led by 7 houses, 6 libraries, 5 schools and 5 offices over a five year period. The overall finding is therefore that the scale of transfers is quite modest and there is little consistency in the asset types involved. This is not quite the full picture, though, because transfer was not necessarily happening with certain types of surplus heritage property for which finding new uses was often problematic. These included swimming pools, cemetery chapels and cemetery lodges.

Turning to the next five years, Asset Managers' responses were to some extent conjectural. What they showed overall was that the pattern of closures, disposals, management transfers and demolitions is expected to be fairly stable between the last five years and the next five. A slight reduction in these activities in the south is expected, closures should be down everywhere, and district councils foresee a decline from an already much lower disposal rate than in other types of authority. Unitary authorities in northern England may, if any category, be one to monitor for potential small increases in levels of heritage asset disposals (and demolitions). There is no indication in the information provided that Asset Managers are anticipating a flood of local authority buildings onto the market arising from budget cutbacks: the series of closures of libraries in many authorities is not being taken as a precursor for what might happen to other categories of local authority stock. Nonetheless, circumstances could change.

In contrast we were also told by the national amenity societies that they did indeed expect a new wave of disposals by local authorities as a result of policy changes, releasing fire stations and police stations as well as libraries. They also expected financial pressures to cause authorities to vacate more museums, swimming pools, working men's clubs and various civic building types. Locality and the Asset Transfer Unit told us that even in 2011 there had been a dramatic increase in the rate at which local authorities offered property for transfer. So there are mixed messages about what will become available.

We tried to identify the effect of the localism agenda. Are authorities trying hard to pass their heritage properties into the hands of local people as a matter of principle? The answer is 'no' or at least 'not yet'. We only found one authority, Swale BC in Kent, which was actively trying to transfer properties, only one of which was of heritage interest, and in four other areas local people had expressed interest in acquiring heritage assets from their councils. Heritage asset transfer is undoubtedly driven by the supply from local authorities rather than by the demand from local groups to obtain them. Furthermore, the evidence particularly from councillors who are portfolio holders is that the large majority of local authorities want to hold on to most of their heritage buildings. A few authorities would prefer to mothball heritage buildings in the hope of better times, rather than transfer them. There is of course a straightforward shortage of money for bringing degraded buildings back into use, though this is largely concentrated in the poorer northern towns and cities.

Who is taking on heritage buildings when local authorities dispose of them?

A distinction should be made between heritage buildings which have a positive value and those which need so much work on them they have a negative value. The private sector will often take the former, but will have to be paid to take the latter. Inevitably, many heritage buildings which are liabilities are being taken on by the voluntary sector with the assistance of grant aid. There is a geographical dimension to this: in wealthier areas, heritage buildings have a higher value once they are in good condition, and so will see more properties pass to the private sector. The greater need for grant aid and third sector involvement is therefore in poorer areas rich in heritage.

The survey of asset managers showed that apart from sales to the private sector like any other asset, there had been a variety of recipients over the last five years:

- 7 transfers to BPTs
- 4 transfers to local civic societies
- 4 transfers to local community groups
- 2 transfers to Town Councils
- 2 transfers to religious groups
- 1 transfer to a theatre group

There were also half-way-house arrangements with some local authorities establishing their own BPTs. The most active we found was the Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust, described in another paper to this conference. We found too that various groups whose primary interest is not heritage are willing to take on heritage assets, hopefully with some sensitivity towards it. All these transfers would generally have been with some direct or indirect type of subsidy. One factor in the choice of recipient was that local authorities generally preferred the third sector to private buyers, because heritage buildings could then continue to give the feel of being publicly owned.

What is the capacity of Building Preservation Trusts?

The way many BPTs operate today, each taking on a small number of buildings over a long period, is not so conducive to the higher throughput of heritage buildings that was experienced 20 and more years ago when most BPTs operated a revolving fund. There are good reasons for this, of course. Even allowing for this, what we found from interviews and questionnaires was that the level of interest amongst BPTs in acquiring heritage buildings from local authorities was quite low, [though conference participants indicated that there was more interest than the survey had shown].



90 London Road, King's Lynn

Acquired by King's Lynn Preservation Trust from King's Lynn & West Norfolk BC in 2010 for £1, with anticipated restoration costs of at least £280,000 to create a single residence (blue door). The costs would be met from the Trust's own resources. The expectation by all parties was that the restored building would be sold on into the market.

From the enquiries we made, the clear view was that:

- 1) BPTs were unable to take on large heritage projects, other than a few larger bodies such as the Heritage Trust for the North West. That means that larger properties will need the attention of major organisations like the National Trust or Prince's Regeneration Trust, or that the private sector will have to be subsidised to take them.
- 2) When individual buildings needed saving, new bodies could spring into action to help, but these tended to be inexperienced and small scale, and so need lots of assistance (usually from precious local authority Conservation Officer staff time).
- 3) Established BPTs would not be able to cope if the volume of properties becoming available from local authorities were to increase.
- 4) Whether BPTs were Conservation Officers' first port of call when heritage buildings become surplus varied greatly from place to place.

How can the capacity of BPTs be increased?

We asked Conservation Officers and others about this. They were generally keen that more money should be provided to stimulating the Building Preservation Trust sector. BPTs seem to be an underused resource. There was, though, complete agreement that this would need a well-funded and sustained programme of professional and technical investment in capacity. However, some Conservation Officers worried that the local authority as vendor might find itself advising the Building Preservation Trust as purchaser if local authorities became too actively engaged in providing assistance to the BPT sector.

We addressed capacity building in our recommendations. In particular we wanted BPTs to be able to achieve more, spread expertise to more people, and pass on the lessons learnt on individual buildings to many subsequent buildings.

Recommendation 8 **English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund should develop funding packages which provide longer term commitment to third sector bodies which restore heritage properties so that benefits and experience can be spread to multiple projects, including special guidance and assistance for non-heritage new owners of heritage property.**

A few Conservation Officers wanted to see more training for those involved in all stages of historic building rescue, from craft restoration techniques to historic architecture, funding and especially project management. The most active support we found for training in restoration techniques came from our hosts for this conference, Great Yarmouth BC. We also made a recommendation on this.

Recommendation 10 **English Heritage should establish a long-term training programme specifically targeted to the needs of Building Preservation Trusts and other third sector bodies engaged in building restoration.**



Local authority-led craft training courses

Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust, Great Yarmouth Borough Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund, Great Yarmouth College and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings have worked in partnership to provide training workshops and opportunities for young people and others in traditional building skills: stone masonry, lime mortars, lime

plastering, thatching, timber framing, pargetting, joinery repairs and window repairs.

Other recommendations relevant to BPTs

As well as helping BPTs step up in response to the opportunities available to acquire and restore local authority heritage buildings, we also made two recommendations to local authorities to make transfers more sympathetic to the real needs of BPTs.

The first concerned transferring larger properties to BPTs in parcels that BPTs could cope with. Local authorities should be prepared to allow longer periods for larger schemes (or properties in a group) to be fully restored, so that BPTs can deliver restoration in phases within their capabilities. Wiltshire Council for one is apparently addressing this.

Where phasing is not practicable, there would be merit in establishing intermediary bodies which could acquire and maintain large assets without fragmenting them, and pass them on in parcels in line with BPTs' capacities: the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors' *Land and Society Commission* recommended working with existing community networks to develop the concept of "pause agents" designed to expedite the disposal of assets to community groups where the scale and speed of disposal would otherwise prevent their transfer.

Recommendation 9 Local authorities should be required to take a longer term view of heritage asset transfer, enabling large schemes to be phased so that established historic buildings restoration organisations can rescue buildings within their financial and organisational capacities.

Our other recommendation aimed to address the risk of considerable up-front expenditure on surveys and appraisals before BPTs are in a position to make a firm proposal to a local authority. Funding bodies may be able to assist with grants, but this is still money at risk. The Architectural Heritage Fund will require a 'letter of comfort' from the local authority, but this is not an enforceable contract and the local authority can still change its mind about proceeding with a transfer. The research heard of cases when the local authority withdrew from negotiations after the third sector body had incurred substantial costs: in one case a local Trust lost £150,000 when the authority sold the property to a private buyer instead, and on another occasion the authority simply pulled out for financial

reasons. There is a need for local authorities to adopt the approach used by Wolverhampton City Council, which is to enter into an Exclusivity Agreement with the prospective acquiring body to provide both reassurance on this issue, and the time that groups need to undertake the necessary investigations and to secure funding. Additionally, Locality has issued an 'Asset transfer protocol' to help secure partnerships of mutual respect and commitment before too much time and expense is committed early in the transfer process. It is encouraging that the HLF has indicated to this conference that it will be putting more effort into these start-up grants.

Recommendation 11 In order to avoid the wastage of scarce risk funding, local authorities prepared to transfer a heritage asset to a third sector recipient should be required to enter into a time-limited binding agreement which commits them to the transfer if the recipient wishes to proceed following all necessary investigations and consultations (equivalent to an option agreement in the private sector).

Green Balance
Providence Cottage
Upper Green Road
Shipbourne
Kent TN11 9PL
T/F: 01732 811456
E: info@greenbalance.co.uk
W: www.greenbalance.co.uk