

Portable Antiquities Scheme funding crisis

In January 2007 David Lammy, then Minister for Culture, said that ‘metal-detectorists are the unsung heroes of the UK’s heritage’. But how things have changed. Now the new Minister, Margaret Hodge, seems quite happy that the only mechanism to record archaeological finds found by the public – the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) – should have its funding dramatically cut. A year is certainly a long-time in politics!

Since the PAS was established - an idea of the last Conservative Government - in 1997, we have seen more than 314,000 archaeological finds found by the public (many by detectorists) recorded for public benefit. Liaison between archaeologists and metal-detectorists has improved beyond all recognition over the last 10 years: most archaeologists recognise the benefits of co-operation with metal-detectorists and I believe the majority of detectorists think likewise. It is certainly my view that metal-detecting, if done responsibly, can make an enormous contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the past.

In fact everyone seems to agree that the PAS is such a great success, including the Minister herself, the head of the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council (through which the Scheme is currently funded), 171 MPs (from all parties) who have signed my colleague Tim Loughton's Early Day Motion (number 566), and the many detectorists, archaeologists and other people who have written to their MPs and the Minister expressing support for PAS and concerns about its long-term future.

So why are we in a position where a Scheme, recognised by all as one of the great successes of recent years, with a multitude of benefits for all and such enormous potential for advancing our understanding of this country’s past, faces having its funding cut so dramatically?

The answer is simple, the Government has made a huge mess up. In the Comprehensive Spending Review at the end of last year, the Government imposed 25% cuts on the MLA. Whilst the British Museum manages the PAS, its funding comes through the MLA. Although the Government ring-fenced funding for big MLA projects such as Renaissance in the Regions (which delivers funding to large regional museums), it seems it forgot about the PAS and some other smaller projects that MLA ‘looks after’. What makes it more incredible that such an oversight could happen is that in the last Spending Review the PAS’s funding was ring-fenced. So why not this time?

Perhaps the Government intentionally wanted to cut funding for the PAS. I don’t think so. The Government has consistently praised the Scheme. So the only logical answer is that the Government forgot about PAS, the hard work of its Finds Liaison Officers, the dedication of detectorists (like you) who go out in all weathers to find such amazing objects and then (most importantly) ensure they are properly recorded with the PAS, so they can add to our knowledge of the past.

So what can be done now? MLA has announced that it intends to freeze the PAS budget at £1.3M, so there will be cuts in jobs and the service offered by PAS. Ideally PAS needs £1.49M to carry on at the existing level, though I am sure the Scheme would say it would make use of more.

There is no doubt that the head of the MLA is stuck between a rock and a hard place. His organisation faces massive cuts, so he is unable to fund properly the projects he is responsible for – including the PAS. In the light of the Spending Review, we in Parliament have been asking whether the MLA offers the best home for the PAS? I think the PAS would be better housed within the British Museum, where the staff that manage it are already based. I also think that from now on the PAS is set up as a separate organisation funded through the British Museum with a separately identifiable grant. This would ensure the integrity of the PAS is maintained, that it is properly funded, and that it is based within an organisation that has a long term future.

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