

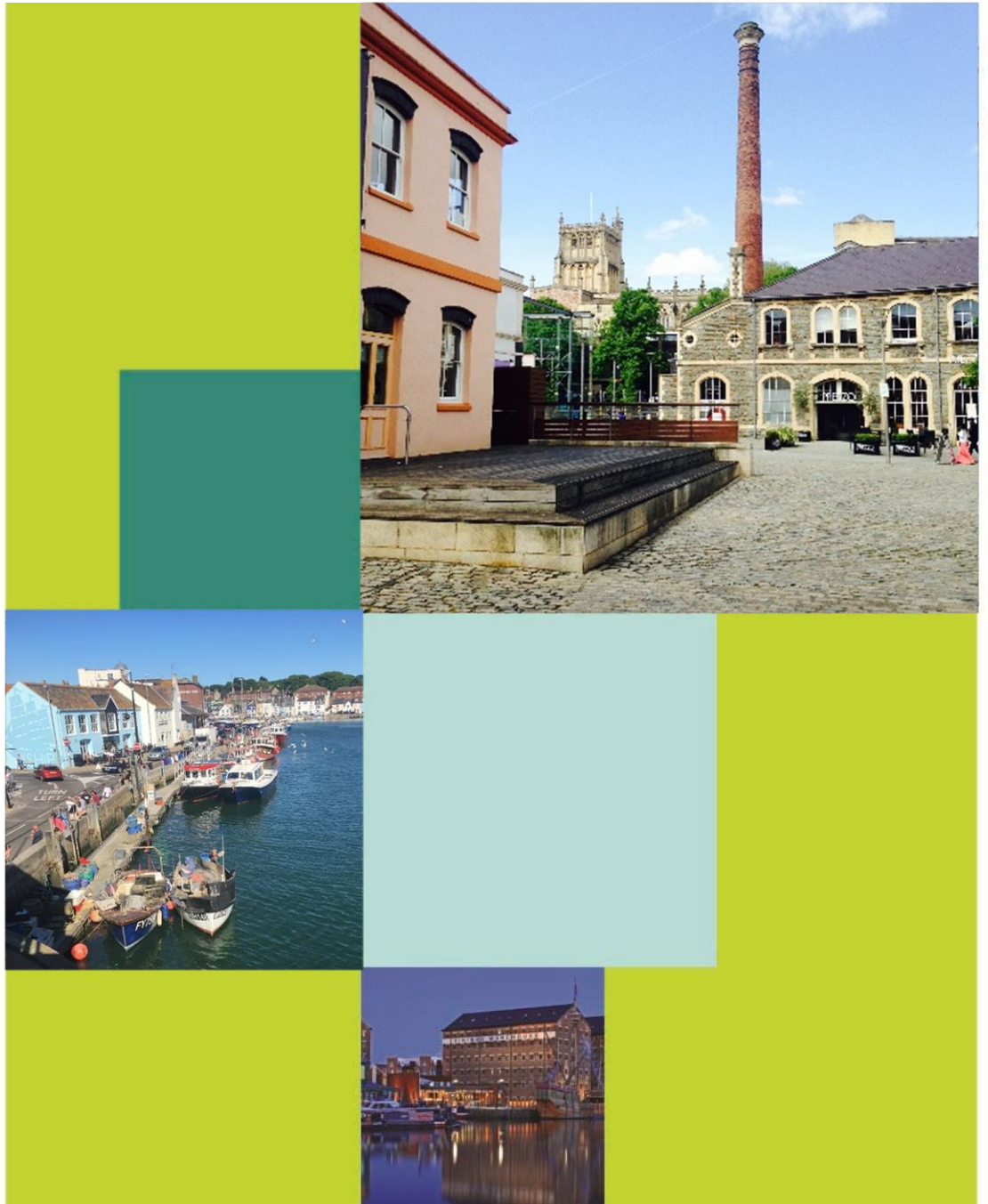


Impact of Heritage Sector Local Authority Funding Cuts in South West England

Final Report
June 2017



Historic England



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HEADLINE FINDINGS

In 2016, independent consultancy ERS was commissioned by Historic England to research the impacts of funding cuts on users of local authority historic environment services within the South West of England. Findings are based on a survey of service users' perceptions, which received 181 responses (156 after cleansing), covering 19 of the 24 local authorities in the South West. Survey responses were supplemented by five qualitative interviews.

Headline findings are presented below:

- Service users have positive views of historic environment services in the South West. Almost 60% of respondents rated the overall quality service as either "very good" or "good".
- In respect of knowledge, qualifications and skills, two thirds of users agreed/strongly agreed that local authority staff were suitably equipped.
- Services accessed had positive (and often very positive) impacts on the projects that formed the basis of users' enquiries. In **the absence of the service**, over a third of respondents indicated it would have been impossible to progress their project/enquiry (36%), with a further third stating a negative impact would have resulted (37%). In relation to the **impact of services**, users most commonly reported positive impacts on their project/enquiry (41%).
- Around 75% of respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that services represented good value for money.
- Those whose experience was generally positive referred to a responsive service, with timely access to relevant staff members and/or information. Two thirds of users reported getting an adequate response within a suitable timescale. Service users experiencing extended timescales and/or inability to contact suitably qualified staff often perceived this to be a direct result of departments being understaffed.
- The aspect scoring least positively was the extent to which the respondent had found the local authority's online and printed guidance helpful. Reasons cited included websites being down, difficult to navigate and failing to provide the information sought.
- A number of repeat users shared their perception that service levels had deteriorated over recent years (with no discernible differences between different types of services, service users or geographies).
- It is clear heritage services play a vital role in facilitating development in ways that add economic and social value without compromising heritage considerations (even enhancing them). **Simply put, in the absence of heritage services of sufficient quality and capacity, there is a risk that many development projects in the historic environment may proceed more slowly, at greater expense and to a lower standard than would otherwise be the case.**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. In March 2016, ERS was commissioned by Historic England to undertake a research project to investigate the impacts of funding cuts on service users within the South West of England. The research has been carried out on behalf of the South West Historic Environment Forum¹, with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund South West.
- 1.2. Essentially, the basis for the research was to explore what it is like to use local authority historic environment services at a time when those services are changing rapidly, largely in response to cuts in local government funding. In particular, one of the biggest issues for the heritage sector was thought to be the loss of local government historic environment specialist advice including Conservation Specialists and Archaeological Specialists (with a reduction of 35.8% and 33.2% between 2006-16, respectively²). In the South West, the problem is considered to be particularly acute, and the impact of such changes on service users needs to be better understood.
- 1.3. In that context, the study aimed to:
 - Assess current users' views of local historic environment services in the South West;
 - Where possible, to assess the views of repeat users of historic environment services in the South West and identify whether those users feel that the level of service has (a) improved; (b) got worse; or (c) stayed the same since 2010;
 - Analyse the impact of service delivery on proposed projects; and
 - Identify case study examples to illustrate the key impacts on customers and assets.
- 1.4. As this is the first time this type of study has been attempted, it has been a key objective to collect, analyse and present robust evidence, follow an objective/independent approach, and provide the basis of a replicable model.

¹ Full list of SWHEF Membership included in Appendix 1

² Historic England, Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers, and the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (2016): [An Eighth report on Local Authority Staff Resources](#)

2. STUDY CONTEXT

- 2.1 Since the introduction of austerity policies following the General Election of May 2010, there has been a reduction in the level of funding allocated towards local authority historic environment services. Evidence suggests that planning and environmental services have been disproportionately targeted as part of cuts by local authorities leading to the loss of specialist staff and in some cases services altogether³.
- 2.2 Furthermore, a reduction in the number of specialist staff has coincided with a national and regional increase in planning and listed building consents (LBCs) since 2009/10⁴. In the South West, 2015 figures show that LBCs represent 11% of all planning applications – a higher proportion than any other region- largely due to the high number of listed buildings⁵.
- 2.3 Indeed, the study has been undertaken at a critical time, having been commissioned following the Government’s announcement that it was to develop a Cultural White Paper and a Spending Review which indicated that further historic environment and heritage cuts were in the offing. Further government announcements during the period of this study, as well as the Autumn Statement (2016), suggest that concerns over future funding are likely to be borne out.
- 2.4 In order to give voice to the heritage sector, this study provides an evidence base to justify the need for and importance of existing historic environment services and identifies the threats that further changes to service levels could pose to existing historic environment assets, yet to be discovered sites, understanding of local heritage, sense of place, heritage tourism and the economy (both locally and nationally). Furthermore, as development activity increases, if Listed Building Consent applications continue to increase as an overall proportion of all planning applications in the South West as they have done in recent years⁶, so too would the demands placed on the remaining, reduced numbers of specialist staff in historic environment services.
- 2.5 Through the planning system, local authority historic environment services are responsible for protecting and managing England’s heritage. Relatively few of England’s archaeological sites are designated or protected by law, hence the protection of heritage sites relies on an effective and responsive planning system of which heritage specialists are a key part, as well as the significant contribution of building owners. The [National Planning Policy Framework](#) (2012) places obligations on planning authorities to: recognise that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and conserve them in a manner appropriate to their significance; to maintain access to archaeological information through an Historic Environment Record; and use expert advice when considering planning applications. The legislation encourages local authorities to give explicit consideration to protecting the historic environment and maximising the opportunities it offers for enjoyment and benefits. A failure to do so can lead to judicial review, Ombudsman’s criticism and/or the imposition of fines.

³ Net local authority revenue expenditure on planning and development services dropped by 51.8% between 2010/11 and 2016/17, compared to a 7.8% drop in total net expenditure across the same period: DCLG (2017), [Local authority revenue expenditure and financing](#)

⁴ Historic England (2016), [Heritage Counts](#). In 2016, planning applications increased by 4% nationally and 1% in the South West compared to 2014/16 figures. LBC applications increased by 1% on 2014/15 nationally, but decreased by 2% in the South West. The total applications for the South West has increased since 2012/13 and 2016’s decrease follows three years of steady growth.

⁵ Historic England (2015), [Heritage Counts](#)

⁶ Historic England (2016), [Heritage Counts South West](#)

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- 2.6 The South West is an area with significant heritage value, containing 24% of England’s listed buildings and 35% of its scheduled monuments, the largest concentrations of any region. These are major economic, social and environmental assets, with heritage directly contributing: over £1.2 billion in Gross Value Added (2013); £974 million in heritage-related construction output (2015); and over £1.8billion in visitor spend (2014)⁷. The region falls within the top three most popular heritage visitor locations in England, with historic gardens attracting 3.1m visitors in 2015 and historic houses attracting 3.07m visitors. Moreover, heritage is viewed positively by the general public (who volunteer in significant numbers in the South West) and is considered to improve quality of life, sense of place, and contribute to other social outcomes such as cohesion and wellbeing⁸.
- 2.7 Potential damage to heritage assets could therefore lead to wider social and cultural impacts, harming a key regional industry and consequently the wider economy.
- 2.8 However, according to Historic England, between 2006-2015 the South West saw a 44% decrease in the number of historic environment staff numbers (compared to a 35% loss across England). With most local authorities employing fewer than four staff to fulfil these roles, the savings made by cutting these positions would appear to be relatively modest. The importance of this study is to begin to capture the significance of the impacts of these cuts and therefore inform a judgement as to the net benefits/dis-benefits of service reduction.
- 2.9 In all respects, experience in the South West might prove instructive to those considering further changes to/reductions in specialist historic environment services in other parts of the country.

⁷ Historic England (2016), [Heritage Counts: South West Heritage Economy](#)

⁸ Historic England (2016), [Heritage and Society](#)

3. STUDY METHODOLOGY

Overall Approach

- 3.1 The study is based largely on a survey which collected quantitative and qualitative data from Service Users (rather than consultations with Service Providers), although there is some small overlap between these two groups. These findings are further illustrated by evidence gathered in a series of qualitative interviews.
- 3.2 It was understood that the impacts being explored would vary across communities, people and places and would come in a variety of formats, including impacts where:
- advice is not available in a timely fashion;
 - advice is available but is not of acceptable quality;
 - staff are still in place, but the seniority of position has reduced such that advice might be disregarded.
- 3.3 In seeking to measure impacts, there is a need to be clear that it is not possible to robustly explore perceptions of change over time within the survey (comparing a period before the cuts with what has happened since the cuts took effect) as timings are too great (a difference of 6+ years). To this end the survey should be considered as a baseline data gathering survey, not an impact survey. However, the qualitative interviews (and some survey responses) did consider impacts over time.
- 3.4 In gathering evidence, we have sought to act impartially, being open to positive as well negative impacts of cuts. Moreover, survey questions were asked based on respondents' **most recent service use** to avoid self-selection by participants of examples biased towards negative or positive extremes, and also to aid recollection of experience. Similarly, we have collected responses from both single and repeat users of services, in order to ensure that findings are not skewed by some of the more vocal respondents (positive or negative) representing less in-depth perceptions. In summary, findings are based on evidence, rather than shaping the evidence to fit any particular agendas.
- 3.5 Moreover, to add an additional layer of impartiality, the survey which was distributed did not include mention of "cuts" to funding or staff.

Survey

3.6 Based on the original research objectives presented in the ITT (and after discussion with Historic England) the following overarching research questions were explored:

1. What are service users' perceptions of the historic environment services they currently use in the South West?
2. What are the positive and negative experiences of historic environment services in relation to most recent service use?
3. What are the broader perceptions of recent trends in service delivery for customers and assets?
4. What is the qualitative impact on proposed projects of recent changes to service delivery?

3.7 Relevant questions were incorporated into a survey that was distributed proportionally to all types of service users. In designing the questionnaire, there was a need to focus on questions that were sufficiently high-level to be applicable to wide range of service user types, whilst also having some flexibility to incorporate questions on a particular topic (there was simply not the scope to have sub-sections of the survey for each user group). For ease of response, questions were mostly quantitative, with some opportunities to provide qualitative comments in relation to what worked well and less well.

3.8 The questionnaire was piloted and discussed with the client before being finalised. It was then distributed to service users via gatekeepers, whereby a link was provided to an e-survey. Those covered by the survey included those who own, manage, work on, give specialist advice on or volunteer in heritage projects- in short, anyone who had used a local authority service in connection with a historic environment matter in the South West in the previous three years.

3.9 For ease of response, the survey was routed to provide slightly different sets of questions to users depending on their use of services. This included: respondents whose most recent service use could be defined as a 'One-off Enquiry' (e.g. finding out if something is designated, researching in the Historic Environment Record, finding out if consent is needed, responding to a consultation etc.); and those whose most recent service use could be defined as an 'On-going Service' (e.g. continuing repair project, implementation of consent, research etc.). Some questions (such as key questions around perceptions of quality) were posed to all respondents to allow for a robust sample size.

3.10 A total of 181 responses were received, of which 156 were found to be usable after cleansing. Of these, 89% of respondents were repeat users (of the same historic environment service, since 2010) and 11% had used services once only within this timeframe. This would suggest that the vast majority of responses came from people with experience of using heritage services and, in some cases, capable of making informed comment about any changes in that experience over recent years.

3.11 Respondents engaged constructively with the survey, providing rich qualitative responses, and more than a third of participants agreed to participate in follow-up qualitative interviews. Broadly, questions posed related to: quality of services accessed; impacts of services accessed; and what worked well and less well.

Qualitative Interviews

- 3.12 Interviewees were selected on the basis of them being survey respondents interested in taking part and particular cases identified for further investigation by the study steering group. A total of five qualitative interviews were successfully completed. These represented a selection of participants who reflected some of the wider views contained within the survey, albeit not a wholly representative sample.
- 3.13 Interviews were based on a proforma that was agreed with Historic England in advance of being taken into the field. It was semi-structured to permit qualitative conversations guided by the particular case. This allowed for a range of situation types (e.g. a range of user groups, locations, asset types, positive and negative views etc.).
- 3.14 The themes covered are summarised in the table below. Questions around perceptions of quality of services accessed were structured around some of the 'key themes' emerging from the quantitative and qualitative survey responses, which these themes forming the basis of topics it might be beneficial to explore in further detail with interviewees.

Table 3.1: Qualitative Interview Topic Guide	
Question Theme	Areas for Exploration
Service use background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Role, asset, location of service use ▪ Reason for accessing service
Perceptions of quality of services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Knowledge and expertise of service providers ▪ Resources and capacity of staff ▪ Availability of and ease of access to services ▪ Timescales of service delivery ▪ Value for Money ▪ Quality of advice and outcomes ▪ Consistency of service delivery (where applicable)
Impacts of accessing the service on project / asset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Project costs and timescales ▪ Project scope ▪ Deterioration / improvement of asset ▪ Future planning
Perceptions of change over time (where possible)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Deterioration / improvement in quality of advice; timescales; access to services etc.
Wider impacts (where possible)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Intangible e.g. sense of place, status of heritage, morale, confidence, value of the historic environment ▪ Impacts on behaviours / attitudes ▪ Sector cohesion, efficiency, engagement ▪ Impacts on the historic environment
Counterfactual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What would have happened if it had not been possible to access the service?

4. STUDY FINDINGS

Survey Respondent Profile

- 4.1 Responses were received in relation to the majority of local authorities in the South West, with only five authorities for which there were no responses (East Dorset District Council, North Somerset Council, Purbeck District Council, Stroud District Council & West Somerset District Council). The highest number of responses were received in relation to Cornwall Council (26), meaning it is slightly overrepresented in the survey; however, with respondents' views broadly reflective of the overall dataset this has not skewed the results. Other authorities received between 1 and 13 responses. Due to the small sample sizes, responses have not been used to infer trends within specific authorities.

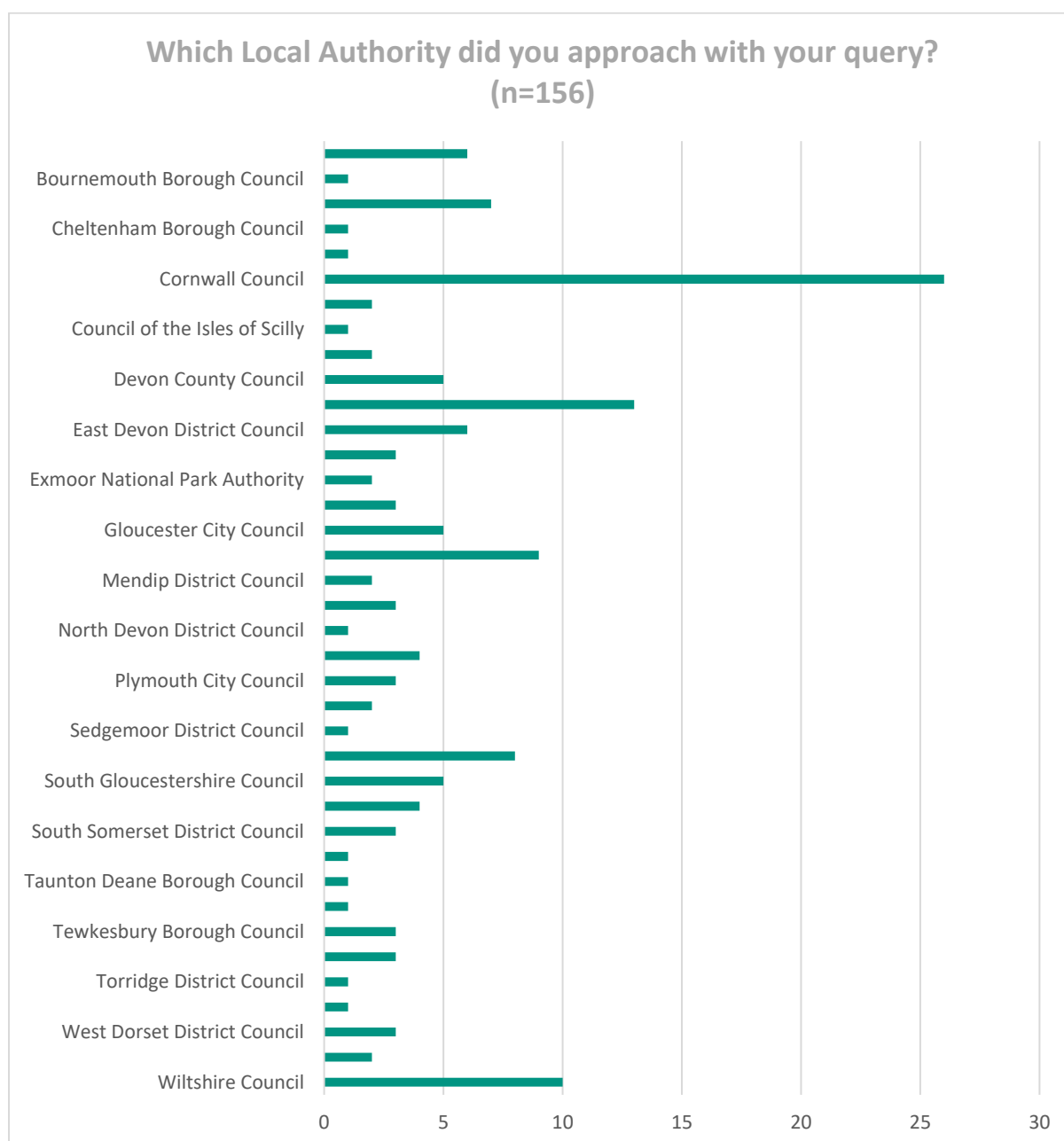


Figure 1: Which Local Authority did you approach with your query?

- 4.2 Three quarters (74%) of respondents had most recently accessed a historic environment service within the past 6 months. This adds to the robustness of findings as respondents were speaking in relation to recent experience.
- 4.3 A higher proportion of responses was received from the category of respondents ‘professional or specialist advisers’ (e.g. architects and conservation specialists); however, it is noted this category comprises a wide range of roles and that this group can be considered most likely to require access to services (therefore should not be considered over-represented). No responses were received by respondents belonging to the following categories: occupier/tenant, prospective owner and funder.



Figure 2: What is your role?

Services Used

4.4 In respect of the type (or types) of historic asset about which respondents were enquiring, the most common responses were: “Listed Building Grade II”, “Listed Building II*” and “Conservation Area”.

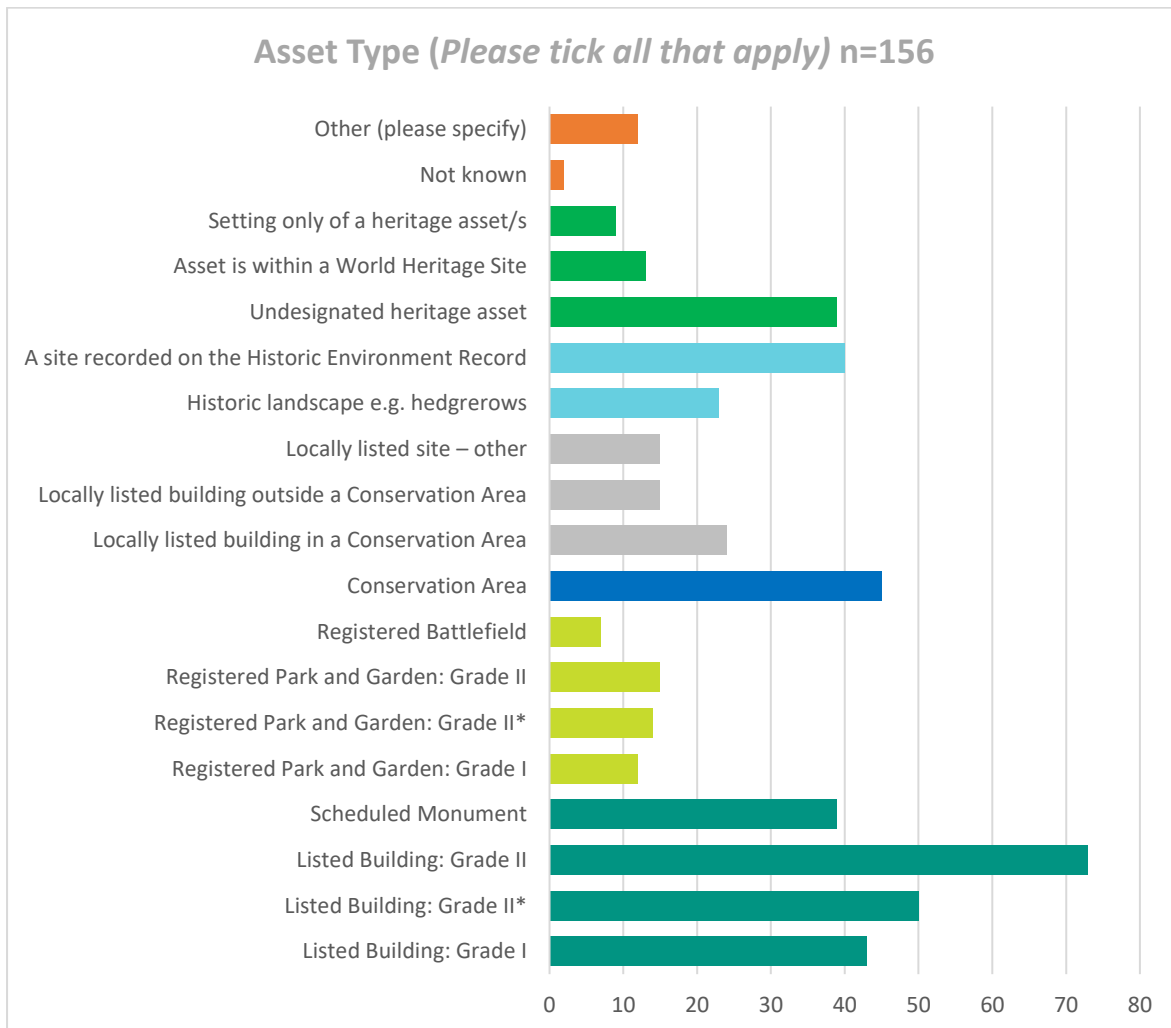


Figure 3: Asset Type

One-off Enquiries

4.5 The most common method of respondents’ making contact in relation to a one-off enquiry was e-mail, followed by website and telephone. In more than half of cases (55%), the query was in connection to the Historic Environment Record or Archive.

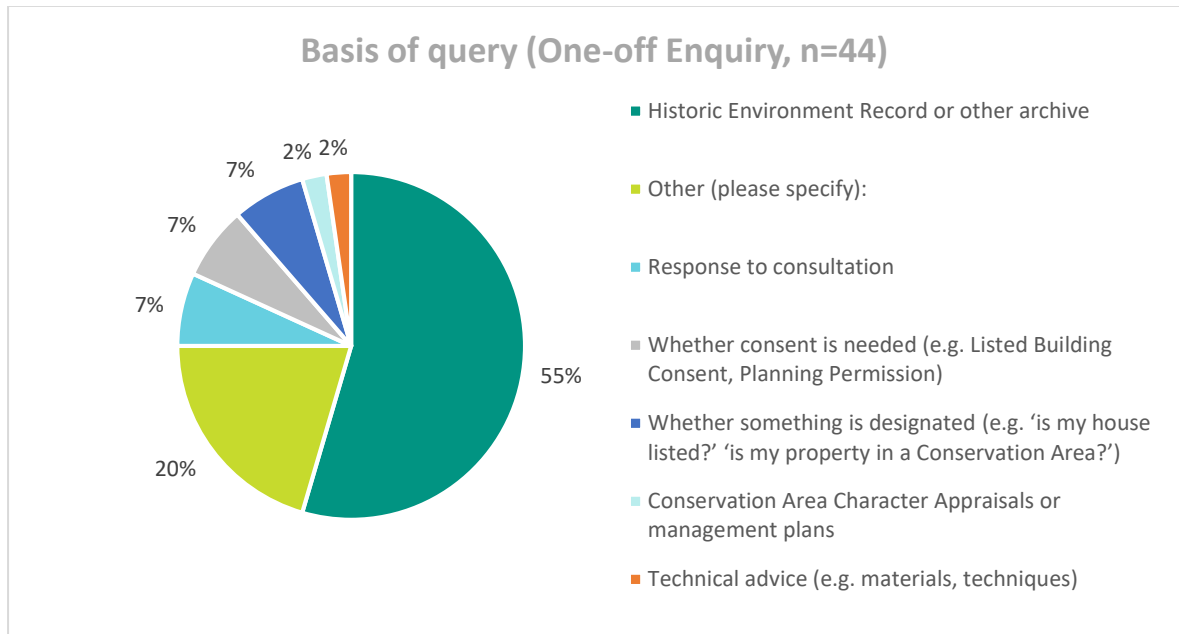


Figure 4: Basis of Query

4.6 Most one-off enquiries were addressed to an archaeologist (31%) or conservation specialist (26%). It is recognised that some overlap may exist between the categories below, for example, between 'archaeologist' and 'HER staff' and noting that website enquiries could not be categorised by specialism.

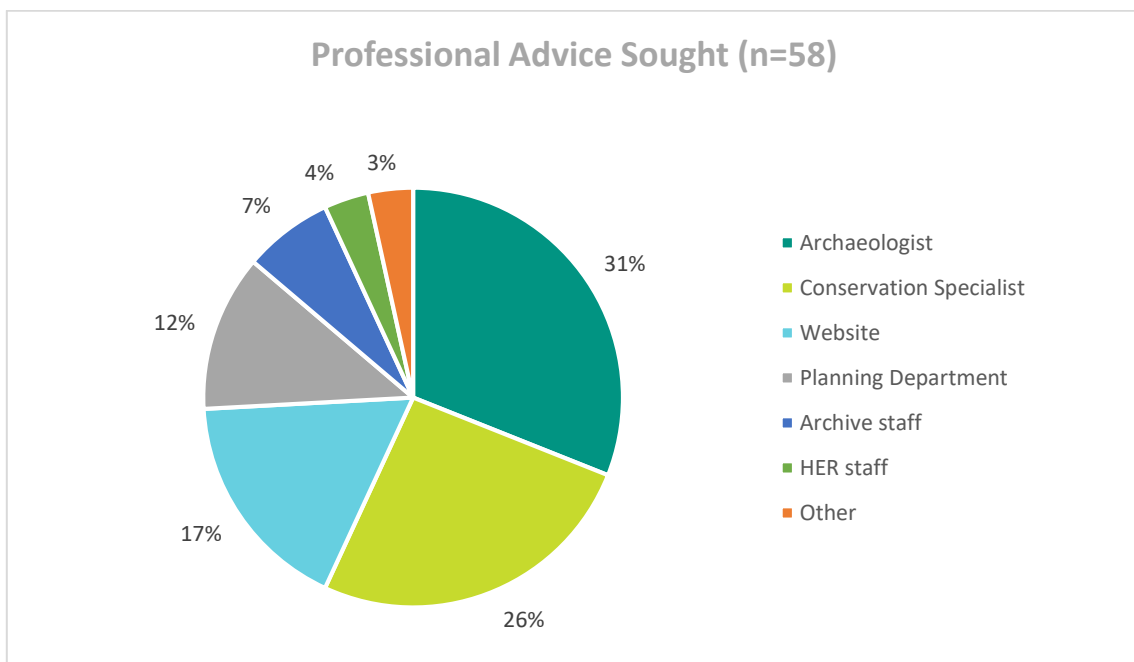


Figure 5: Professional Advice Sought

On-going Service Use

- 4.7 The most common recent uses of an 'On-going service by respondents were pre-and post-application advice (23 and 19 respectively).

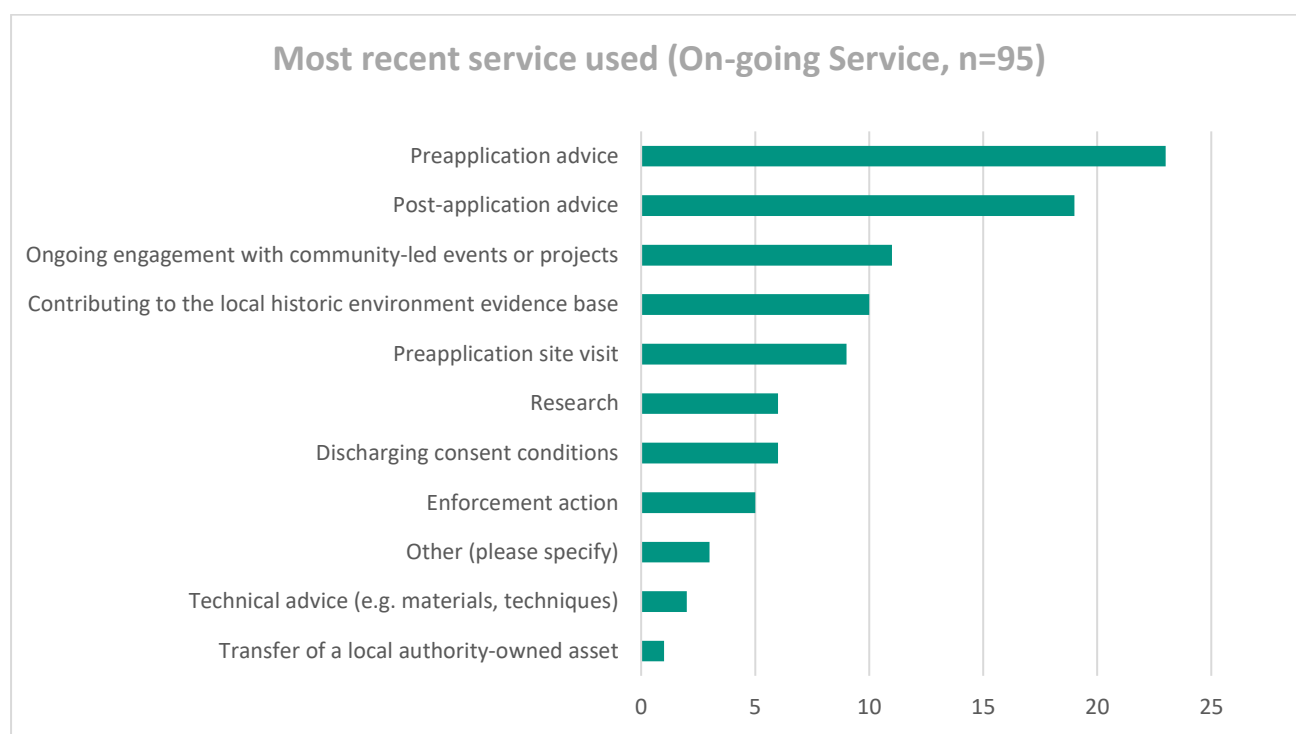


Figure 6: Most recent service use

Service Experiences

Quality of Service

- 4.8 All respondents were asked to rate their most recent experience across various aspects of service delivery, on a scale of 1 to 5 (where "1" is "strongly disagree" and "5" is "strongly agree"). This included questions relating to satisfaction with the timescales for service delivery, the knowledge and expertise of the service provider, access to services, and value for money.
- 4.9 The responses demonstrate a broadly positive picture, though with a variance in views and in relation to different aspects of the service. Value for money of services scored the most positively, with around 75% of respondents indicating they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that services represented good value for money. The aspect scoring least positively was the extent to which the respondent had found the local authority's online and printed guidance helpful; this was the only area across which fewer than half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. It is worth noting that, in these instances, any clarifications necessary would rely on a suitable member of staff being available for users to speak with. It is also interesting to note that the second lowest quality rating related to the amount of contact time with local authority staff, which suggests, alongside qualitative comments supplied, that capacity constraints are impacting on user experiences.

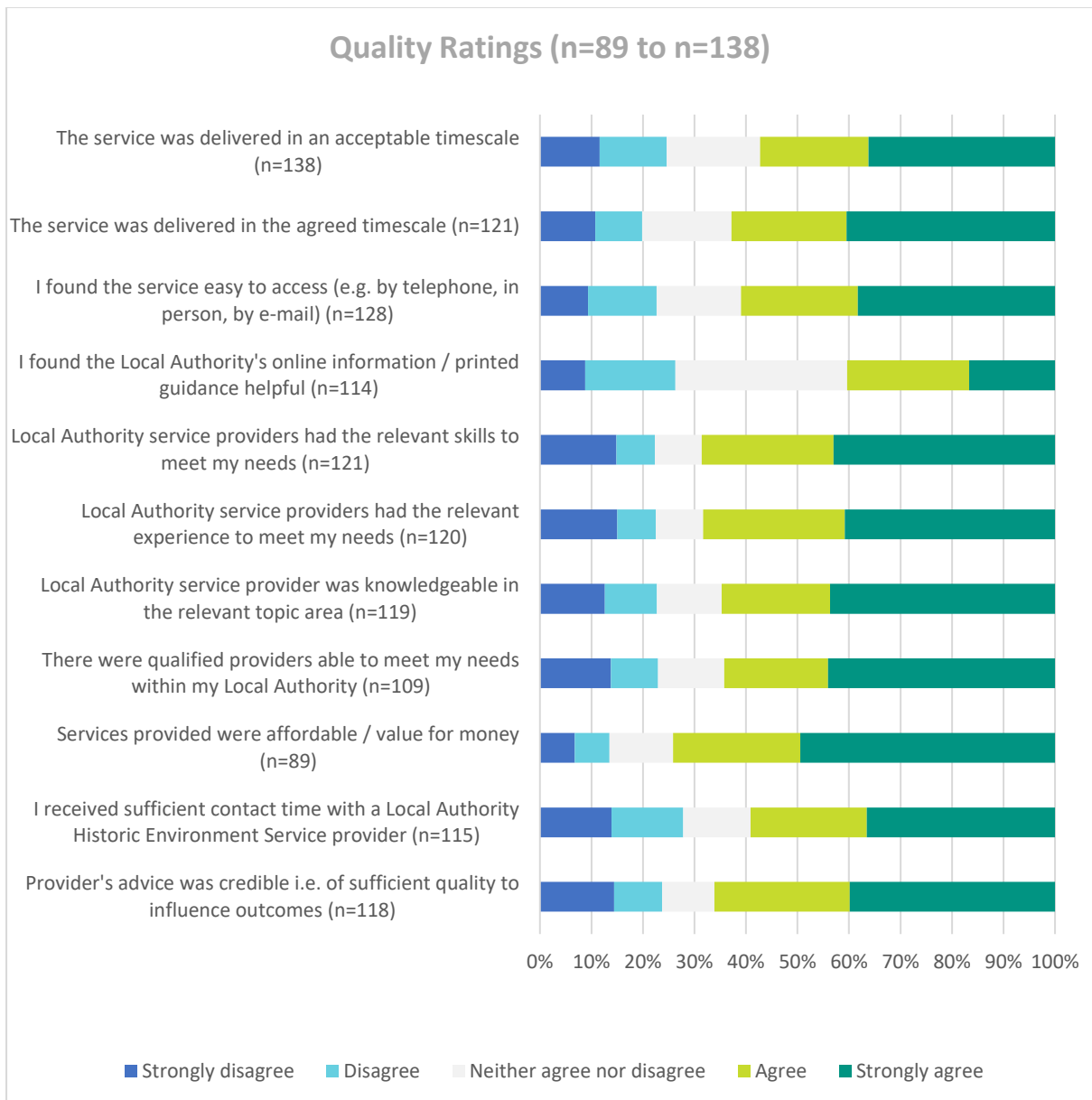


Figure 7: Quality Ratings

4.10 All respondents were asked to rate the quality of service received overall, and almost 60% of respondents rated it either “very good” or “good”.

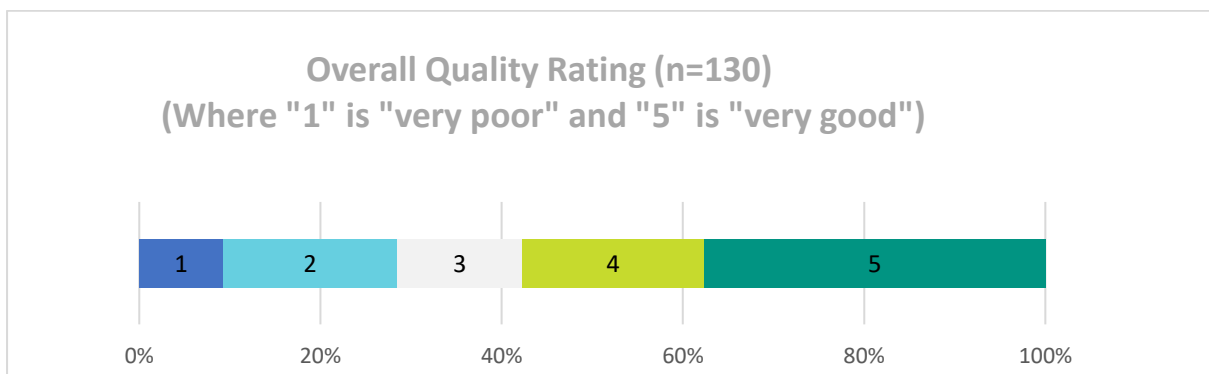
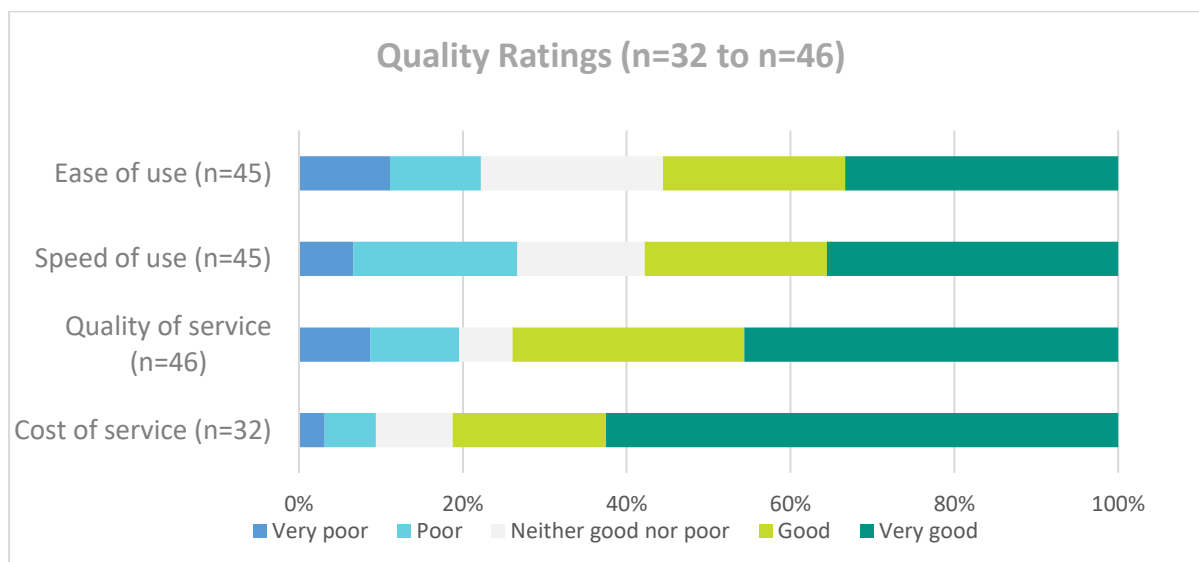


Figure 8: Overall Quality Rating

4.11 For users who accessed a “One-off Enquiry” service, in respect of respondents’ most recent service use, the ‘cost of service’ was rated most highly, with more than 80% of those responding rating this aspect either ‘very good’ or ‘good’ (we are aware that some views may be based on accessing free services). The overall quality of service scored highly, with approximately 75% of respondents rating this positively. More than half of respondents rated both ‘ease of use’ and ‘speed of use’ as either ‘good’ or ‘very good’.



4.12 However, 1 in 4 “One-off Enquiry” respondents were unable to access their desired service at the first time of asking.

Impact of Services

4.13 All users were asked to respond to questions in relation to the impacts of services accessed. The Heritage Services provided have clearly had positive (and often very positive) impacts on the projects that formed the basis of users' enquiries. In particular, the quality of work subsequently undertaken by the service user, their knowledge and skills in relation to the heritage asset and project design.

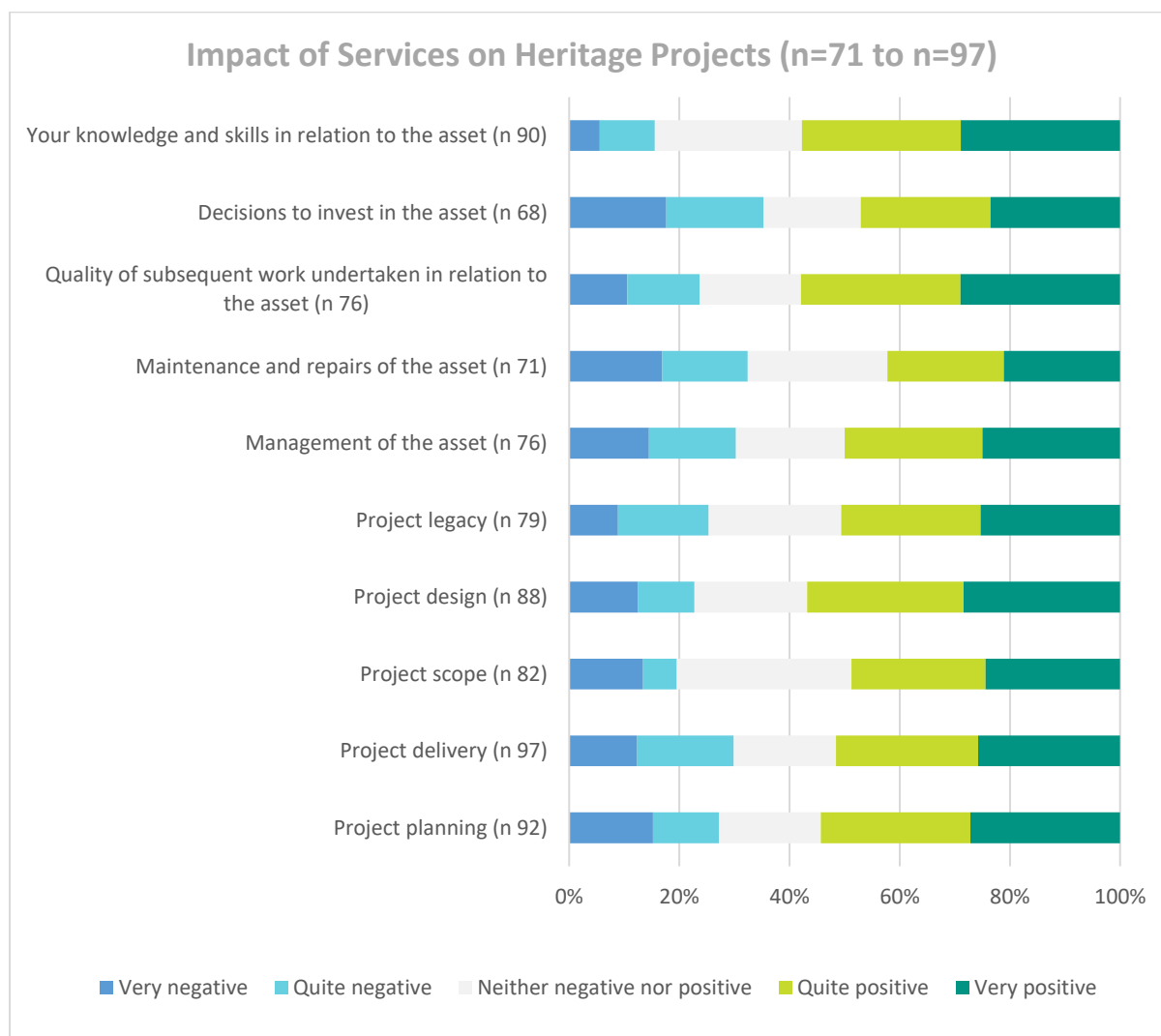


Figure 9: Impact of Services on Heritage Projects

4.14 All respondents were asked to rate the overall impact of services accessed, as well as what might have happened in the absence of being able to access the service. Whilst in most cases the heritage services provided had impacted positively on projects, a minority of service users reported a negative impact. However, this may well reflect advice being given that, for example, frustrated development rather than the quality of the advice per se.

Overall Impact of Services on Heritage Project (n=126)

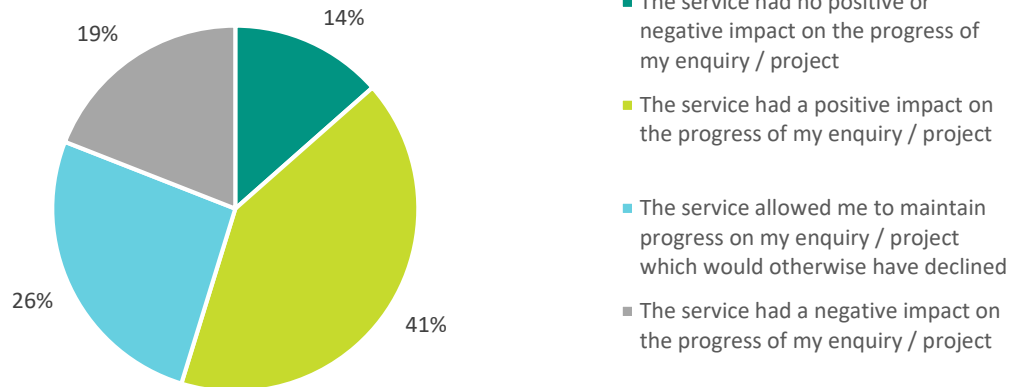


Figure 10: Overall Impact of Services on Heritage Project

4.15 An attempt to explore the counterfactual (what would have happened to projects had users not accessed heritage services), might be similarly explained. This shows that more than 1 in 3 service users would have found it impossible to have progressed their enquiry/project had they not been able to access heritage services from the local authority.

Likely Outcome of not Accessing Services (n=123)

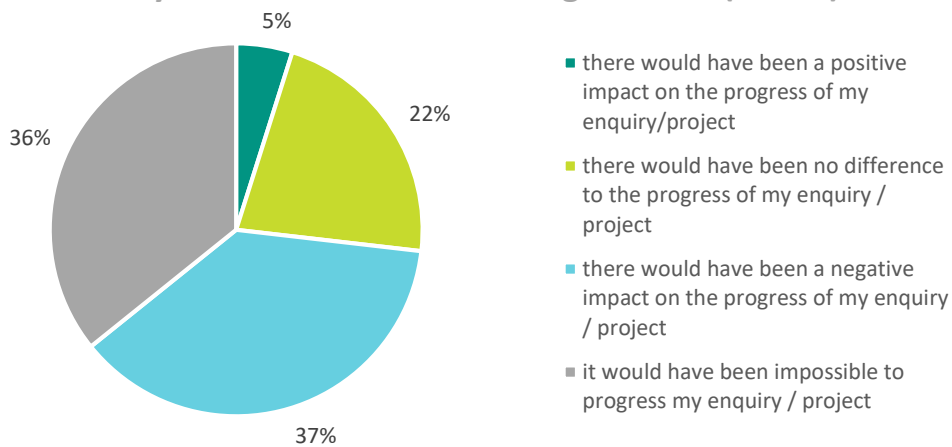


Figure 11: Likely Outcome of not Accessing Services

Qualitative Responses

4.16 Survey respondents were given the option to provide further comments and explain their perceptions in more detail at specific points throughout the survey. Two questions, relating to what had worked well and what could be improved in relation to their most recent survey use, received 109 responses, respectively. A question posed on whether respondents had any further experiences they would like to share on historic environment services in the South West more broadly received 75 responses. All qualitative comments have been analysed and coded to reveal the 'key themes' of importance to respondents. These issues were explored in greater depth through five follow-up interviews. The findings from the qualitative comments (considered alongside quantitative survey data) as well as from the follow-up interviews have been used as the basis for the following section.

Satisfaction with Service Timescales

4.17 Those whose experience was generally positive referred to a responsive service and an ability to quickly access relevant staff members and/or information required. However, other comments indicated that users experienced inconsistent timescales for accessing the same type of service, varying from "immediate response", to "impossible to contact".

4.18 In a number of cases, it was the perception of respondents that extended timescales and/or inability to contact staff was a direct result of reduced resources within the local authority having a detrimental effect on delivery timescales i.e. that departments were understaffed:

"Service provision was slow at the beginning and seriously delayed us. Delays demoralise everyone. Even when it doesn't increase the cost at that initial stage it feels like more time has been spent on a project as it drags on."

4.19 When they work well, websites were seen to offer a valuable resource for efficiently accessing information. However, a number of respondents felt that online resources were not sufficiently comprehensive, up-to-date or 'interactive', which may account for the comparatively lower rating across this theme.

Knowledge, Expertise and Capacity of the Service Provider

4.20 Although rated positively overall, comments illustrate a range of views. For example, one respondent commented that *"the team provided exceptional, knowledgeable service"*, whereas another cited a *"concerning lack of understanding"* and *"absence of specific skills"*, with a third commenting that *"quality/credibility of advice can vary significantly between individual enquiries and Local Authorities"*. Some respondents connected a lack of appropriate knowledge and skills to financial and resource constraints, reducing availability of appropriately qualified staff: *"I think where the service is less likely to be given the best score is where the fiscal restraints and time restraints of the small team have an impact on the service they want to and are able to give"*.

4.21 In addition, there were reports of staff whose expertise lies in one area having to offer advice outside of their specialism due to staff shortages. For example, there were several reports of buildings specialists having to advise/comment on landscapes, with their lack of specialist knowledge potentially having detrimental outcomes, not through any wilful action but simply by lack of understanding of relevant issues.

4.22 There were also numerous comments about users being unable to access staff of sufficient experience/seniority:

"We got someone very junior. I don't object to employment of junior people, but I think they need to be teamed with someone older."

"Got someone very junior. I don't think that they did have sufficient knowledge and experience."

"During the building process, the junior staff member assigned wasn't able to answer the questions."

"20 years ago there were a number of very skilled people. Now, it's cheaper to employ less skilled people."

"Delays are a result of staff workload. This is felt across the service, even more so for Conservation Officers as there are not many with that specialist knowledge."

4.23 It was also apparent that in some cases, the ability to approach the local authority for informal advice was no longer an option, as staff were simply not available, having to prioritise formal applications for advice:

"You now have to have a semi-worked up scheme (before this first contact). This uses a lot of time and energy from the client's perspective before you can make a way forward."

"The main challenge is getting access to speak to conservation staff. A 5-minute conversation is often all that's needed to discount some things or check they're appropriate."

4.24 Another comment makes clear the positive outcomes which can be achieved through timely access to skilled personnel, as well as the detrimental effects of a lack of access to such expertise:

"One key element where the service adds value is when you have a client who is not in tune with the requirements when dealing with an historic structure or building, and they don't want to take advice from me. Working in tandem with the Conservation Officer we can get a better outcome for listed buildings. Availability of and getting that service is the frustration. It affects my own cash flow too, as well as the cost and timescale of project completion."

4.25 There were also many comments on budget cuts affecting access:

“My local authority is facing a whole raft of cuts which will have an impact upon the heritage services. They are facing the loss of a Conservation Officer and other members of staff.”

“There used to be two or three listed buildings officers. Now there’s one full-time and 2 part-time”.

“We have a shared service council. Where there were once five or six staff there is now one. Accessing the services has become harder. Drop-in sessions are run weekly but split between the two local authorities, so effectively you can only access them once a fortnight.”

“A lot of people are working part-time. If they phone in the middle of the week and you miss them, you get back to them another day and they’re not there. You can spend an entire fortnight just trying to get hold of someone on the phone.”

“Many LPAs have lost staff numbers or members now work part-time or over a large geographical area. Increasingly difficult to contact staff directly for basic advice resulting in long delays and costs, often to the detriment of projects.”

4.26 A number of those trying to gain access to information online reported difficulties that included websites down, difficult to navigate and failing to provide the information they were seeking for their specific query. Similarly, there were reports of emails going unanswered and telephone calls not being returned.

4.27 Nevertheless, through persistence, in the vast majority of cases service users were finally able to get a response to their query.

Value for Money and Impacts

4.28 Services provided were considered affordable/good value for money. Several respondents suggested they would be happy to pay more if this would result in shorter timescale for accessing the service:

“I’d say it’s definitely value for money in terms of the level of expertise that comes back once you get it.”

“Without the service, it would have cost us a lot more as we would have had to seek advice elsewhere and there would have been delays to the project. I think a heritage asset would have been lost.”

4.29 Indeed, there is little doubt as to the value placed on services:

“Without the service the negative impact would be phenomenal. Can’t imagine not having the service. It would be fairly disastrous.”

“Without the pre-application advice, I would have had to submit application and kept fingers crossed, then may have had to withdraw and resubmit... It’s about getting the right advice early on.”

“If I had been unable to access the services, this would have resulted in a lower standard of conversion.”

4.30 Where expert, timely advice is provided, comments suggest this is valuable and influences positive outcomes in terms of project delivery in line with national policy. As one respondent stated:

“The authority's response made me very aware of how essential its heritage service is”.

“I work on tight deadlines and it is very helpful for me to receive confirmation from a human being that I know and trust that my information request is being dealt with.”

“When locally-based and knowledgeable conservation officers and archaeologists are available, who also consistently and proportionately apply the national policy in the NPPF using the constructive conservation approach developed by Historic England the effect of local services can be very positive.”

4.31 There were also suggestions that cuts to services were having a detrimental impact on projects and on the fabric of historic assets themselves:

“There has been a negative trend in historic environment services. Over the last 3 years this has got particularly bad. So much so that if a project gets offered to me (within that particular local authority) I seriously consider whether I should take it on or not.”

“There's not the funding there once was (and as a result) people are getting away with a lot more. Someone nearby gutted a Grade two building without consents.”

“Some people think, rather than waiting for permissions, do we carry on regardless and wait for enforcement action instead. They sometimes opt to plough on in cases where they are struggling to get determinations- they will take a risk and do things.”

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 The level and nature of cuts to Heritage Services have been well documented. The intention of this report was to gain insights into users' perceptions of current levels of service, as well as to understand the impacts of a reduction in resources directed towards historic environment services.

5.2 In general terms, service providers are well regarded, with the majority of users having had a positive experience accessing services in the South West.

- Almost 60% of respondents rated the overall service as either "very good" or "good".
- In respect of knowledge, qualifications and skills, two thirds of users agreed or strongly agreed that local authority staff were suitably equipped.

5.3 Further, a clear message underlining the value and importance of historic environment services is apparent:

- In **the absence of the service**, over a third of respondents indicated it would have been impossible to progress their project/enquiry (36%), with a further third stating a negative impact would have resulted (37%).
- In relation to the **impact of services**, users most commonly reported positive impacts on their project/enquiry (41%).

5.4 The aspect scoring least positively related to online resources. Only 1 in 6 "One-off Queries" were via a website and fewer than half of those that were known to have used websites found them helpful. Although this area was not explored in full with all respondents (this could be something for further investigation within subsequent studies), this may point to a need to capture specialist advice more fully online and/or to ensure that online support supplements rather than replaces face-to-face support for more complex queries.

- The aspect scoring least positively was the extent to which the respondent had found the Local Authority's online and printed guidance helpful. Reasons cited included websites being down, difficult to navigate and failing to provide the information sought.

5.5 There is a strong consensus that services represent good value for money, although this is offset to some extent by the time taken for those services to be delivered or indeed for an enquiry to be successfully lodged with an appropriate individual.

- Around 75% of respondents indicated they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that services represented good value for money.

5.6 In terms of what is considered to work well, the majority of users reported a timely response, with timely access to relevant staff members and/or information.

- Twice as many users reported getting responses to their queries within an acceptable timescale as reported delays.

5.7 Whilst positive overall, feedback reveals inconsistent service delivery, with some users reporting significant delays in accessing the same service. In cases where users have experienced extended timescales and/or inability to contact suitably qualified staff, this is perceived by respondents to be as a direct result of departments being understaffed.

5.8 Furthermore, as reported anecdotally within the qualitative interviews, reductions in capacity and lack of access to suitably qualified staff has, in some cases, led to delays and increased project costs. This, in turn, is anecdotally reported to have led to certain developers proceeding at their own risk and disregarding planning procedures, sometimes to the detriment of the historic environment. This could represent a future 'watchpoint' given that price rises in the development sector are reported to be increasing at a rate well above the average level of inflation⁹, and any delay in accessing particular services could prove increasingly expensive in the future.

- The perceptions of service users is that cuts to Heritage Services have had a negative impact, causing delays and hampering access to more experienced and more specialist staff, with specific issues in respect of the lack of staff time available to service users.

5.9 Resource pressures are reported in many users' responses, and there is a sense in which service providers are just about managing and users are just about coping, but that cracks are beginning to show. A small number of repeat users suggested a decline in the quality of and access to services over recent years (with no discernible differences between different types of services, service users or geographies)¹⁰.

5.10 Users are broadly satisfied with the quality of services provided, whilst many simultaneously recognise challenges faced in the delivery of quality services under resource constraints. Having said this, in some cases, opportunities to improve service provision may be possible through greater understanding of user priorities in order to direct limited resources effectively; for example, in relation to websites, staff skills and training, and the types of services most often required.

5.11 It is very clear that Heritage Services play a vital role in facilitating development in ways that add economic and social value without compromising heritage considerations (even enhancing them). As such, any further erosion of capacity and/or downgrading of expertise/experience could have a seriously detrimental effect on economic activity and the preservation and conservation of heritage assets.

- Simply put, in the absence of heritage services of sufficient quality and capacity, there is a risk that many development projects in the historic environment may proceed more slowly, at greater expense and to a lower standard than would otherwise be the case.

⁹ <http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/news/article-4191564/Building-costs-rocket-brick-timber-prices-soaring.html>

¹⁰ Qualitative interviewees were directly questioned in relation to service trends over time and e-survey respondents were not, although a minority from the latter raised this within open-ended responses. Due to the small numbers involved, this should be considered an area for future investigation rather than a firm indication of change over time.

APPENDIX 1: SOUTH WEST HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT FORUM MEMBERSHIP

Organisation
Historic England South West
Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers South West
Institute of Historic Building Conservation South West
Heritage Trust Network
National Trust South West
Churches Conservation Trust
Heritage Lottery Fund South West
Historic Houses Association Wessex Region
Country Land and Business Association South West
University of the West of England Department of Planning and Architecture
RIBA
English Heritage
Campaign to Protect Rural England
RTPI
Architectural Heritage Fund
Contact: Liz Clare (Elizabeth.Clare@HistoricEngland.org.uk)