

Heritage Conservation Strategy

Planning for the Conservation of West Lancashire District's Built Heritage.

Introduction

The District of West Lancashire has a wealth of historic buildings and places which contribute greatly to the character and appearance of the local environment and form part of a distinctive and cherished local scene.

The historic fabric of these buildings and their character is, however, a fragile resource and one which is an irreplaceable and unique record of our cultural heritage. The preservation of our built heritage is important not only as it provides a link with the past, but because the buildings themselves enhance the appearance of our towns, villages and countryside, give us a sense of local pride and provide a valuable leisure and recreation resource.

Local authorities are 'managers' of the historic environment and have a statutory duty to ensure that the best architectural and historic buildings and historic areas are preserved and wherever possible enhanced. However, the responsibility of stewardship of our heritage is shared by everyone and it is recognised that there needs to be broad public support and understanding of the issues relating to the preservation of historic buildings and places.

In order to carry out its function effectively and efficiently it is important that the Council develops a co-ordinated strategy to set out its long term goals for preserving the District's built heritage.

Good conservation practice is crucial to the long-term well being of the area's historic buildings and places. Heritage in this sense can also act as a catalyst for the regeneration of Ormskirk Town and the surrounding villages and play a key part in promoting economic prosperity and tourism.

This strategy is proposed to complement the work done and policies already in place within the West Lancashire Local Plan, Lancashire Structure Plan and Lancashire County Council's 'Heritage Conservation in Lancashire' report published in 1999. The document sets down the Council's aims and objectives with regard to conservation and establishes a framework on which conserving and enhancing the historic environment can be realistically achieved.

The National Position

It is fundamental to the Government's policies on environmental stewardship that there should be effective protection of the historic environment. Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 (PPG-15) entitled 'Planning and the Historic Environment' requires that Local Authorities should strengthen their commitment on heritage matters and that this should be reflected in their Development Plan policies and in the allocation of resources.

The Government's vision published in December 2001 in the document 'The Historic Environment: A Force for Our Future' sets down 5 key aspects for sustaining our built heritage, which are:

- *Matching the public's interest by providing firm leadership, effective partnerships and the development of sound knowledge.*
- *To realise the potential of the historic environment as an education resource.*
- *To ensure the historic environment is accessible to everybody.*
- *That the historic environment is adequately protected for future generations to enjoy.*
- *That its importance as an economic asset is fully appreciated*

The Local Perspective

The District contains a wealth of historic buildings and places, some of which are recognised as being of national importance. West Lancashire currently has 605 statutory Listed Buildings, 28 Conservation Areas, 11 Scheduled Ancient Monuments and 1 park included on the national Register of Historic Parks and Gardens.

The Strategy's Aims and Objectives

The principal aims of the strategy can be outlined as:

- *To preserve and enhance the District's built heritage, archaeology and historic landscapes.*
- *To promote and increase public awareness, knowledge and the enjoyment of the historic environment*
- *To establish a sustainable approach to managing changes in our historic environment.*

These broad aims will be achieved through the actions outlined in this strategy, the principal objectives of which are:

- *To develop and maintain a comprehensive information base relating to all elements of the historic environment*
- *To provide proper protection for the historic environment to ensure it is safeguarded for future generations*
- *To provide sound 'conservation' advice and promote good practice and understanding of the historic environment*
- *To encourage partnership working with other Local Authorities, national, regional and local heritage bodies, Parish Councils and the public on heritage issues*
- *To identify and secure funding opportunities and initiatives which will help achieve the aims of the strategy.*

Proposed Action Plan

Information Base

Work on identifying and recording the District's heritage is important. It provides an information base which helps in the understanding of our built heritage and historic landscapes and also importantly provides a record of the changes which have occurred. The activity plays a key role in conserving our heritage and underpins much of the work within the Conservation Unit

The Council has a statutory duty to ensure the proper preservation of all listed buildings within the District. Records exist in relation to the condition of listed buildings in the District through regular inspection and monitoring of the buildings. The survey mechanism provides a standardised approach for the assessment of the physical condition and use of each building following the guidelines from English Heritage. The work currently runs on a 5 year cycle. Buildings identified as being 'at risk' through the survey work are included on the Buildings at Risk Register.

West Lancashire has 28 conservation areas defined as 'areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance'. Part of our statutory duty, after designation, is to review the areas to consider whether designation is still fully justified, whether to amend the boundaries, to consider what defines their special character and importantly to consider proposals to enhance their character and appearance. Work on this appraisal process, of our historic areas, is ongoing and should be seen as a continual process.

The Council will continue to support the role of the Lancashire County Council Archaeology Service, or other body, in providing information relating to the Sites and Monuments record and the identification of historic landscapes.

Much of the District's built heritage is not protected and yet many of these buildings provide an important and cherished backdrop for our villages and communities. The identification of local buildings which contribute to the distinctive character and appearance of the District is important.

Proposed Action:

- 1. To survey, monitor and review the condition of all statutory listed buildings on a 5 years cycle.*
- 2. To maintain an up to date Buildings at Risk register highlighting those listed buildings which are at risk from neglect and disuse.*
- 3. To review and publish appraisal and proposal documents for all the District's conservation areas.*
- 4. To identify and appraise any new areas, of the District's historic environment, for designation as conservation areas.*
- 5. To publish, monitor and review a list of Buildings of Local Architectural or Historic Interest.*
- 6. To put forward for statutory recognition, as a listed building, any presently unlisted buildings identified as having special architectural or historic merit.*
- 7. To work in partnership with other bodies in identifying sites and landscapes of historic importance.*

Preservation of Our Heritage

The fragile nature of our heritage should not be underplayed. Once a historic building is demolished or unsympathetically altered it cannot be replaced. It is lost forever. The effective preservation of historic buildings, places and landscapes and their stewardship is fundamental to the Council's role.

The Council is committed to ensuring that all listed buildings are properly preserved and that their character is not adversely affected because of neglect, unnecessary demolition, works which affect their setting and/or alterations and extensions.

The Council has, as part of this role, at its disposal a wide range of powers, under the existing 1990 Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas Act to require owners to provide adequate repair for listed buildings. Under such powers the Council can require urgent works to the building to be carried out to make it wind and weather proof or can require more extensive repair works to be undertaken. In extreme cases the Council can compulsorily purchase the property or seek to prosecute those responsible for causing damage to listed buildings.

In relation to conservation areas, whilst controls exist over the demolition of buildings in these historic places, many physical changes can still take place which do not require planning permission. As part of the appraisal process, areas which have been identified as being sensitive to changes to their character and appearance have been afforded additional protection by the designation of Article 4(2) Directions which control unwarranted alterations on the front of buildings in conservation areas. This process will continue to be applied, where necessary, to preserve the character and appearance of the District's historic areas.

Proposed Action:

- 1. To monitor those buildings included on the 'Buildings at Risk' register and raise awareness to encourage owners to carry out regular repairs and maintenance.*
- 2. To provide assistance, in partnership with other heritage bodies, in securing the proper repair of buildings on the 'Buildings at Risk' register.*
- 3. To use the appropriate statutory powers by serving Urgent Works Notices, Repairs Notices and where necessary compulsorily purchasing buildings which have been neglected, to secure their proper preservation.*
- 4. To recover, from the owner, any costs incurred whilst carrying out works urgently required to safeguard a listed building.*
- 5. To use, where necessary, Listed Building Enforcement Notices to resolve conflicts which may arise from unauthorised works to historic properties.*
- 6. To make, where necessary, Article 4(2) Directions, to control permitted development, as part of conservation area appraisal work, where the character and appearance of the area is being harmed.*
- 7. To prevent harm, from development, to sites of known archaeological importance or landscapes of historic importance.*

Advice and the Promotion of 'Good' Practice

The provision of specialist conservation advice is an essential service for the preservation of our built heritage. Heritage advice is currently provided to owners and occupiers of listed buildings and to those living in conservation areas on a whole range of issues, ranging from whether planning permission or listed building consent is required, to how to sensitively repair buildings and/or help on the design of extensions and alterations to historic properties.

To complement this service the availability of written guidance aimed at the promotion of good conservation practice, has the benefit of fostering owner responsibility and stewardship.

A substantial proportion of the work of the Conservation Unit (approximately 30-37%) is spent supporting Development Control and the Planning function of the Council. All applications relating to listed buildings and their settings, scheduled ancient monuments and development in conservation areas are considered and comments made to ensure proper consideration is made of the need to preserve or enhance our built heritage.

To support the Planning function the Conservation Unit also operates the West Lancashire Conservation Areas Advisory Panel. The Panel, which has members from professional bodies as well as representatives from local amenity groups, provides advice on applications relating to development in the historic environment in the District.

The Council recognises that good design is important in all aspects of development, especially when related to historic buildings and places, which are sensitive to change. The Council is seeking to promote the need for building design to be of the highest quality and the need to place an emphasis on new development which contributes to the local distinctiveness of the historic environment of West Lancashire.

Proposed Action:

- 1. To ensure the appropriate professional and specialist 'conservation' advice is always provided to owners/occupiers of historic buildings, members of the public, Council members, Parish Councils and other organisations.*
- 2. To continue to provide specialist conservation and design advice to support the Council's Planning function and promote good design..*
- 3. To ensure that owners of all historic properties are aware of their responsibilities and to provide written advice and guidance aimed at promoting 'good' conservation practice.*

Partnership Working

The preservation and management of the historic, built environment is a complex subject which is intertwined with the needs and wishes of many other agencies and bodies all of which have a stake in the environment which we regard as precious. Work on buildings and places in our historic environment is therefore very rarely undertaken in isolation and involves the need to work in partnership with others. It is essential that in such circumstances everybody concerned is aware of the need to preserve our heritage.

It is also important that the views and issues affecting conservation, within the District, are put forward in a whole range of forums to ensure that influence can be made on the decisions taken especially where they may affect the implementation of the strategy's key objectives.

At the simplest level the Conservation Unit will enter into partnerships with individual owners and occupiers of listed buildings within the District, offering advice and help to secure the proper preservation of our common heritage.

Within the region the Council will promote and participate in partnerships with the District's Parish Councils, other Local Authorities including the County Council and English Heritage. Lancashire Conservation Officers Group (LCOG) meets to discuss particular issues affecting conservation and the delivery of the service, at regular intervals. Other partnerships which benefit the historic environment will be encouraged.

Proposed Action:

- 1. The Council will continue to foster partnerships with other Local Authorities, English Heritage, Parish Councils, amenity groups and other outside bodies to secure the proper preservation and enhancement of the historic environment.*
- 2. The Council will ensure that appropriate conservation views are put forward in a range of forums at local, regional and national levels.*

Funding Opportunities

Partnerships with English Heritage, other amenity bodies and the Heritage Trust for the North West have enabled the repair and renovation of listed buildings considered at risk from decay and dereliction as well as helped in the regeneration of the older properties in the Town Centre. Other similar funding partnerships will be investigated and encouraged.

Proposed Action:

- 1. To continue to put forward proposals and bids to outside bodies to secure funding opportunities for identified heritage works and projects for the preservation or enhancement of the District's built heritage.*

TimeTable

Many of the actions outlined in the above strategy relate to ongoing work in which the Council is already involved. It is important that work continues in these subject areas and that improvements in the delivery of the service are achieved wherever possible, to realise the principal aims of the strategy.

Some aspects rely on others and their implementation is not directly under the control of the Local Authority.

It is nevertheless important to provide a timetable to measure progress in meeting the aims and objectives of the strategy and in this respect a 5 year period will provide a benchmark on which progress can be judged. Given the above time-scale, it is also proposed to provide annual reviews of the strategy in order to be able to monitor progress and allow for work priorities to be set or new projects/initiatives to be started.

Ian Bond
Conservation Unit

May 2003