

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE		
DATE:	24 NOVEMBER 2015	AGENDA ITEM:	9
TITLE:	CONSERVATION AREAS ENHANCEMENT PILOT PROJECT - UPDATE		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR PAGE	PORTFOLIO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT
SERVICE:	PLANNING	WARDS:	ALL
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 At its meeting in March 2015, this Committee considered a report on the enhancement of Conservation Areas in the Borough and agreed that a working group of relevant officers be set up to work with the Baker Street Area Neighbourhood Association and other groups to examine priorities for environmental action and improvement and ways to deal with priority matters within such areas within available budgets and resources. This report provides an update on matters considered by the working group and the progress that has been made to date.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That Committee note the progress to date in setting up a working group to develop a conservation areas enhancement pilot project; the submissions of the representatives of each of the pilot conservation areas on the issues affecting their conservation areas; and the Priorities for Action for protecting and enhancing Reading's Conservation Areas produced jointly by the representatives of each of the pilot conservation areas;
- 2.2 That Committee notes the various actions by Streetcare, Environmental Health, Community Safety and Neighbourhood Initiatives that are already taking place in conjunction with the community, in particular in relation to the Russell Street/ Castle Hill Conservation Area;

- 2.3 That Committee endorses further work on the proposed actions for the pilot conservation areas outlined in the report relating to: the undertaking of a review of the Russell Street/ Castle Hill Conservation Area Appraisal; consideration of whether the Council should declare a Conservation Area at Risk for the Castle Hill/ Russell Street Conservation Area; consideration of enhancement and improvement works and future applications for grant assistance; consideration of the use and development of the various tools outlined in paragraph 4.9;
- 2.4 That Committee notes that, recognising the current severe pressure on resources, the actions and works outlined above can only be undertaken where there is local community organisation and voluntary assistance, and will depend on the involvement of Historic England.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 In light of the resolution of this Committee following its meeting in March 2015, Councillor Page invited a number of parties to attend a meeting to look at possible approaches to the enhancement of conservation areas and to set up a limited pilot project to examine what might be pursued within the parameters of available budgets and resources. The first meeting of the working group highlighted a number of issues including the need to review some conservation area appraisals, waste collection and streetcare issues, and the expanding use of single dwelling houses for HMO uses. The meeting agreed that:
- officers should invite representatives of the newly formed Historic England to attend a future meeting of the group to provide advice on the enhancement of conservation areas;
 - the groups would prepare assessments of priorities for action in their areas.
- 3.2 The meeting also raised issues about the detrimental impacts arising from the increasing number of changes of use from single dwelling houses to Houses in Multiple Occupation occurring in Conservation Areas. Committee will recall it subsequently agreed, at its meeting in July 2015, to proceed with making an Article 4 Direction for Jesse Terrace and there is a separate report on the agenda for this committee seeking approval for the serving of such a direction.
- 3.3 Conservation Areas are areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character and appearance of which should be conserved or where appropriate enhanced. Unlike listed buildings, they are designated at a local level, by the local authority. Specific controls are exercised in

these areas, relating particularly to demolition and minor development, as well as protection of trees. Different permitted development rights exist for such areas. Reading has fifteen Conservation Areas. These areas are designated because they have a particular, distinctive character, and usually provide a strong link to the history of the area.

- 3.4 Local authorities have a duty to consider the designation of conservation areas within their areas. Good practice recommends that conservation area appraisals should be produced for all such areas. These can include management plans that will include recommendations for action. Conservation Area Appraisals exist for all fifteen conservation areas in Reading. Copies of appraisals can be found at: <http://beta.reading.gov.uk/media/2584/Conservation-Areas-Maps/pdf/Conservation-Areas-Merged.pdf>

4. THE PROPOSAL

(a) Current Position

- 4.1 A second meeting of the working group, chaired by Councillor Page, was held on 25th September 2015. The purpose was for groups representing the 3 pilot conservation areas to outline the issues that they saw in their areas. Invited representatives from Historic England who had been invited and attended as guests responded to the presentations providing useful information and advice on how they might be able to assist the process in the future.

- 4.3 The groups each provided a presentation on issues in their areas. Copies of each of the presentations are attached in Appendix 1. Some common themes emerged from these presentations:

- issues with car parking;
- the change of use of single dwelling houses to HMO uses;
- the loss and alteration of front walls and railings to provide for off street parking or waste bin storage areas and the continuing risk of such loss;
- poorly maintained pavement surfaces;
- inappropriate traffic signs and street furniture;
- poor quality new development within and adjoining conservation areas.

There was also a view that all conservation areas should be recognisable as such and that the special green coloured street name signs should be used to denote all conservation areas.

- 4.4 The Baker Street Area Neighbourhood Association identified other particular issues with the Castle Hill/ Russell Street Conservation Area:

- Poor waste bin storage, fly tipping, furniture and other waste dumped in the front of properties or in the street leading to associated problems with vermin;
- Poorly maintained properties with inappropriate cables, wires, drainage pipes, satellite dishes, etc., on front facades and poorly maintained front garden areas;
- Issues with wires and cables installed by statutory providers and cable companies in a way that blights the appearance of the conservation area;
- Use of PVC in replacement and double glazed windows;
- Unsympathetic replacement front doors;
- Multiple satellite dishes on front elevations;
- Unrestrained estate agents advertising;

The association also referred to various other issues affecting their area including anti-social behaviour, various crime, graffiti, dog fouling, etc.

4.5 A further issue in relation to the St Peter's Conservation Area was in relation to the need to protect important vistas particularly in relation to views of the areas adjoining the River Thames. It was noted that the Redlands Conservation Area was still affected by the same issues outlined in the Conservation Area Appraisal undertaken in 2008. A particular issue relating to the retention of front and dividing walls was raised.

4.6 A three groups have also jointly produced a single paper on Priorities for Action for protecting and enhancing Reading's Conservation Areas. This sets out the following priorities:

- Raising awareness of Conservation Areas and developing community involvement through better information and communication with stakeholders and residents;
- developing policies to protect and enhance such areas in relation to a range of matters and actions;
- Policy and action to deal with the increase in HMOs and other small units of accommodation;
- Protect character through action to protect and enhance garden walls/ railings/ front gardens/ bins/ streetscape;
- Protect character through action to protect and enhance buildings / architectural features and details;
- Improved, more responsive, enforcement action possibly using the community to report incidences.

The paper also raises the possibility of forming a Conservation Area Advisory Committee involving representatives from each of the subject conservation areas.

4.7 Representatives from the Historic Places Team from Historic England were invited to, and attended, the meeting. They responded to a

number of the issues raised, talking about initiatives to tackle similar issues in other areas such as Oxford. They supported the whole council approach involving a number of services besides planning, such as Street care. They indicated that the Council on behalf of the community could bid for grant funding that is available, indicating that the council would need to declare the area a Conservation Area at Risk and add it to Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register. They advised that the Council should undertake a review of existing Conservation Area Appraisals for areas being considered for such treatment. There was also discussion about setting up Conservation Area Advisory Committees which aim to involve all stakeholders including landowners and agents operating in an area working together to bring about enhancements. They also discussed a number of tools and mechanisms that might be available to use including character appraisals (such as undertaken for Oxford), Article 4 Directions to remove permitted development rights (which might be used to control the loss of walls on the frontage of properties).

(b) Option Proposed

- 4.7 As a first step, officers will undertake a review of the Castle Hill/ Russell Street Conservation Area Appraisal as a pilot project. The pilot will assist in developing a methodology for undertaking such reviews (Historic England advised that the simplest way is to produce an addendum to the existing appraisal) and help in assessing the resource implications of undertaking such reviews. There is currently no resource available for undertaking such reviews. The review will provide an up to date assessment of the Conservation Area heritage asset and point to priorities for future action to maintain and enhance the heritage of the area.
- 4.8 The review of the Conservation Area Appraisal will inform consideration of whether the Council should declare a Conservation Area at Risk for the Castle Hill/ Russell Street Conservation Area. This is a requirement for making any application for grant assistance for improvements to the conservation area (Note: any grant will only cover a proportion of any costs involved and a condition of any grant is that there is match funding - there is currently no budget for such match funding).
- 4.9 The preparation of such a review will involve local representatives and stakeholders (including landowner and estate/letting agent representatives) to help identify issues and opportunities for enhancement. It will consider appropriate management tools that might include:
- Article 4 Directions to control inappropriate changes (such as the loss of front walls, etc.) that would otherwise be permitted development;

- Focussed enforcement action to remove or prevent unacceptable unauthorised development that has a harmful effect on the conservation area;
- physical improvements to the public realm, e.g. planting in highway land) which has already been undertaken in several streets in the Castle Hill/ Russell Street Conservation Area);
- the development of planning advice in relation to development within or adjoin individual conservation areas;
- other potential tools and actions.

Careful consideration would need to be given to the, potentially, substantial resource implications of using and implementing these possible tools and actions. There are, currently, no resources and no budget for any work of this nature.

4.10 Streetcare has been represented at the meetings of the working group. It is clear that many of the issues being raised are not in themselves “planning” matters but relate to parking practices and, for the Castle Hill/ Russell Street Conservation Area, particularly matters around how waste is stored and collected. Streetcare has undertaken environmental visual audits of the Area with BSANA and cleared a number of areas of waste dumping, etc. Streetcare has also undertaken the following actions in the Conservation Area:

- It is accepted that utility works will over time gradually erode the quality of footway surfaces. Reports of dangerous surfaces are always investigated and actioned. In addition, annual inspections are carried out to pick up any defects;
- Work will be put in hand with the Neighbourhood Officers’ (NO’s) to carry out street furniture audits in the conservation areas in their patches with a view to reducing the amount of clutter. In view of the current budget availability, it is unlikely that all the changes will be capable of being implemented in the near future, but a programme of work can be established and some progress can be made;
- All street name plates in conservation areas should have a green background and have the name of the conservation area printed on them. Over time, plates will be changed where they are missing or have been put in with a white background.
- With the help of BSANA, an on-street communal bin trial has been introduced in Anstey Rd to address issues of bins blocking footways. A review of the scheme is due in late November and a decision on whether to make it permanent, amend the scheme or remove the bin will be made soon after;
- Issues with rats chewing plastic bungs in communal bins are being addressed by sourcing metal bungs. The NO’s and Waste Minimisation Officer will monitor contamination and excessive side waste and fly-tipping and take the appropriate educational or enforcement action.

- The Council clears graffiti from highways and RBC property and will advise land owners about the most appropriate means of removing it from private property. The Council also provides clean up kits and training to community associations for graffiti removal. Streetcare also works closely with Environmental Health to address persistent dog fouling incidents.
- 4.11 It should also be noted that a number of trees were planted in the highway in the Castle Hill/ Russell Street Conservation Area in line with requests from BSANA under the Council's Tree Planting Programme during 20014/15. There are current discussions between the Council and BSANA about providing further trees this winter, subject to the position of underground services.
- 4.11 Environmental Health and Community Safety and Neighbourhood Initiatives are also in close contact with BSANA in relation to issues around HMO licencing, environmental protection/nuisance, anti-social behaviour and other neighbourhood action matters. It is clear that there is already considerable Council action in the area.
- 4.11 There has been a call for the Council to set up conservation area advisory committees (CAAC). Historic England advise that local planning authorities may set up CAAC's which should consist mostly of non-local authority people who represent the interests of residents and businesses and who are able to bring expertise or understanding of the area's history and amenity. Membership of a CAAC will, therefore comprise of people with an interest in the built environment and its heritage, and be drawn from local amenity societies, residents' associations, independent historical, architectural and planning experts, and local residents and businesses. There is no statutory duty for the Council to operate or facilitate CAACs, nor is there national guidance on how these should be organised, operated or on the composition of their membership. CAACs are independent of the Council and anyone can stand for election to be members.
- 4.12 Officers need to investigate how CAAC's work elsewhere but it would appear that there is no reason why local groups cannot set up their own committee and invite appropriate persons to be members. The local planning authority would agree to notify / consult a CAAC on planning applications affecting their conservation area and any comments made would be taken into account. The CAAC might also lead on local initiatives to maintain and enhance their conservation area. A CAAC might cover more than one conservation area. It appears that a CAAC is very much locally organised and would involve little officer input to set up. It should be noted that there are no resources currently available to support any CAAC.

Other Options Considered

- 4.21 Available budgets and resources are restricted and there is very little spare capacity to undertake the tasks and work discussed above in relation to other existing priorities. There is already a commitment to make an Article 4 Direction for Jesse Terrace which is having resource implications and there is now a commitment to produce a review of the Castle Hill/ Russell Street Conservation Area Appraisal. Further options related to this project are not considered appropriate given the current limited resources.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 5.1 Conservation Areas contribute to the conservation and enhancement of heritage assets in the town and to producing a sustainable environment and economy within the Borough. This report seeks meet the 2015 -18 Corporate Plan objective for "Keeping the town clean, safe, green and active." Under the heading, Neighbourhoods, the Corporate plan aims to improve the physical environment - the cleanliness of our streets, places for children to play, green spaces, how we feel about our neighbourhood and whether we feel safe, have a sense of community and get on with our neighbours. This will involve designing and joining up our services around the needs of neighbourhoods, engaging and enabling local residents and targeting resources so that we can improve outcomes for the most deprived areas.
- 5.2 However, other aims under the Corporate Plan seek to balance the budget and any environmental improvements and other actions must be capable of being undertaken within existing budgetary resources.

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 6.1 The Conservation Areas Enhancement Pilot Project is a response to concerns raised by community groups with an interest in their conservation areas. It is therefore responding to community concerns. The report recommends continued work with local community organisations.
- 6.2 The Working Group that has been set up has representatives from the communities with an interest in selected conservation areas. Any initiatives arising as part of the project will be responses to community engagement and their development and implementation will involve wider community engagement.

7. EQUALITY ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 The work of the Working Group is at an early stage and the specific proposals put forward in this report involve research and background with no immediate impacts. An Equality Impact Assessment scoping has not been carried out in relation to this report, but such an assessment may be required, along with, potentially, a full Equality Impact

Assessment, to support further initiatives that will be the subject of future reports.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 There are no direct legal implication arising from this report

9 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 As indicated in the report, various services of the Council are already responding to a number of the issues raised within their existing budgets. The resolution of SEPT Committee in its consideration of the original report on "Enhancement of Conservation Areas," was that,a working group be set up to examine priorities for action and improvementin selected conservation areas *within available budgets and resources*.

9.2 The matters being raised by the community representative members of the working group and the actions listed in the joint, "Priorities for Action," reported above would involve significantly greater resources and corresponding financial implications than is available in terms of existing staff resources or existing budgets.

Risk Assessment

9.3 Any increase in workload will need to be carefully monitored as there is no budgetary provision for undertaking this project. Any increase in workload will affect the Planning section's ability to deal with other priorities.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Conservation Area Appraisals;
- English Heritage advice 'Conservation Areas at Risk'

CONSERVATION AREAS ENHANCEMENT PILOT PROJECT - APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Russell Street/Castle Hill Conservation Area Issues and Options

Appendix 2: St Peters Conservation Area - Appraisal of Issues

Appendix 3: **Redlands Conservation Area** Issues and Problems

Appendix 4: Report produced by the Working Group community Group Members, Protecting and Enhancing Reading's Conservation areas/