

Protecting and Enhancing Reading's Conservation areas

Introduction

On March 26th 2015 Reading Borough Council's Strategic Environment, Planning and Transport Committee considered a paper on the 'Enhancement of Conservation Areas' in Reading. This was partly in response to concerns raised by the Baker Street Area Neighbourhood Association (BSANA) over the deterioration of the Russell Street/Castle Hill Conservation Area and the suggestion that this Conservation Area should be considered for designation under the English Heritage "Conservation Areas at Risk".

The Committee agreed "that a working group of relevant officers should be set up under the Head of Transportation and Streetcare, working in consultation with interested community groups to examine priorities for action and improvement and ways to deal with priority matters in selected conservation areas within available budgets and resources". This was initially to include those Community groups which had shown an active interest including Baker Street Area Neighbourhood Association (BSANA), Caversham and District Residents Association (CADRA), Reading Civic Society, and Redlands representatives and to focus initially on areas considered most at risk.

The first meeting of this Working group with the Community groups listed above took place on 17 June 2015 and Councillor Tony Page suggested that it would be helpful if the representatives of the Community Groups could set out some priorities for action prior to the next meeting with RBC. RBC are requesting someone from English Heritage to speak to the next meeting.

The Community Groups present at the 17 June meeting have now sounded out all who attended and held a further joint meeting to establish and agree priorities. These are set out below.

Priorities

1. Raising awareness of Conservation Areas/ Community Involvement

Do local people know where Conservation Areas are, what they are, and their value? There is a need to demonstrate issues to the general public, Councillors, relevant Council Officers and Press and particularly to owners and residents in

Conservation Areas. Some areas of rented housing within CAs have absentee landlords and high residential churn with a resulting lack of community interest and 'buy in' by people on short tenancies and their landlords. This situation is exacerbated in areas where there is a high density of such properties. How can communication with these tenants and their landlords be improved so that information about CAs is better distributed and understood?

There is a need for clear policies and procedures for Conservation Areas including street furniture, Environmental Visual Audits (EVAs), street trees, satellite dishes, external cables, front gardens and more. Guidance needs to be developed to allow Community Groups play an effective part?

Points for consideration:

- Letter / electronic communication by RBC with a standard explanation of rights and responsibilities within the Conservation Area to householders/ property owners/managing agents/ residents in CAs.
- Contact/ communication with local estate agents and letting agents by Community Groups.
- Do the newly appointed Neighbourhood Officers (Public realm) have summary information and advice on the Conservation Areas in their patch to utilise and quote in management and correspondence? Are they briefed to use the Anti -Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act – 2014 where it appropriate to apply pressure to landlords/owners and residents within CAs?
- Are there/ should there be specific higher standards for Conservation areas, viz more frequent EVAs in parts of CAs known to be under pressure.
- Are EVA programmes drawn up to allow community groups with an interest in CAs to take part in them?
- Does the policy on street furniture include specific standards for Conservation areas and are the Officers who purchase aware of CA boundaries.

2. Policy and the increase in HMOs and other small units of accommodation.

CAs cover some 3% of the area of Reading, however in a number of CAs, the increase in the number of HMOs, bedsits and small flats is severely damaging the physical character of historic buildings and streets. The proposal for an Article 4 Direction in respect of Jesse Terrace in the Castle Hill / Russell St CA is welcomed. Community Groups would like to explore with RBC the following:

- Further Article 4 directions in CAs under pressure where frequent irreversible damage is occurring.
- Input into the proposed review by RBC of 'Residential Conversions-Supplementary Planning Document'.
- Confirmation of the current state of progress of the Draft Heritage strategy of March 2014.

3. Character - Garden walls/railings/front gardens/ bins/streetscape

Existing garden walls, railings and front gardens are a fundamental part of the character of CAs. In a number of CAs these features are being destroyed or are at risk and have less protection than formerly. This is a general source of concern. Bins and their visual impact, particularly in large numbers where houses are converted to small units, are a visual blight. High level street wires and poles, many redundant, are an issue in some areas.

- What further protection can be given to historic garden walls and railings? Should further Article 4 directions be considered for these features?
- RBC are piloting some communal bin schemes, should some of these pilots be carried out in selected areas in CAs?

4. Character - Buildings / architectural features and details

In some CAs, the architectural details and features of buildings are being eroded and in many cases irreversible damage has occurred. Issues include multiple satellite dishes, unsympathetic UPVC window replacements, loss of original doors, loss of chimneys, front gardens wholly taken up with multiple bins (see above). Additional waste pipes and redundant wires festoon many building facades.

- What further actions can be taken to prevent further erosion of architectural detail and subsequently what steps might help the reversal of existing damage?

5. Enforcement Action

It is recognized that Community Groups can be the 'eyes and ears' of the Enforcement team and that Enforcement is key to protecting Reading CAs. There is substantial evidence of non-compliance with aims stated in 'Conservation Areas in Reading.' Action is happening too late, retrospectively or not at all, even when incidents are reported. It is recognized that the Enforcement Team of three people is small and under pressure. A separate aspect of Enforcement is the Anti-

Social, Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014 and the issue of Community Protection Notices.

- How can Community Groups better assist the Planning Enforcement team?
- What further action can be taken by the Enforcement team to ensure compliance with existing policies?
- How can community Groups better assist with Community Protection Notices?

The potential of a CAAC

In addition to shortlisting the priorities set out above, the Community groups who have met together have discussed the possibility of forming a Conservation Area Advisory Committee (CAAC). These have been set up in many other cities and towns by Community Groups to work in conjunction with Councils in protecting and enhancing CAs. Many are specifically listed on Council websites.

The concept of this would be an umbrella group to co-ordinate, share information and expertise between local groups involved with CAs and to cooperate with RBC on improvement, enhancement and enforcement. It would be the intention to seek out representation from other CAs not yet represented. We would like to discuss further the merits of this idea with RBC.

This paper has been put together by representatives of BSANA, CADRA, Reading Civic Society and individual representatives of Redlands Conservation area.

25 August 2015