

The Minutes of the Berwick-upon-Tweed Conservation Area Advisory Group Meeting on 10th November 2009.

In attendance:

Margaret Shaw	Castlegate Area Resident's Association
Margaret Thomas	St Bartholemew and St Boisil's Residents' Assoc
John Robertson	West End Residents' Association
Annette Reeves	NCC Conservation Officer (North)
Philip Miller	Berwick Community Development Trust
Alison Cowe	Berwick Civic Society
Peter Watts	The Greenses Residents' Association
Tim Kirton	Regeneration Team (North)
Chris Burgess	NCC Conservation Team Manager (North) Chair
Mike Greener	Spittal Improvement Trust
Peter Rutherford	NCC Development Management (North)
John Robertson	Town Council

1. Apologies:

Cllr Jim Smith.

2. Minutes of the meeting held on 13th October and matters arising.

The minutes were agreed. No formal matters arising.

3. Regeneration Strategy – Protecting and enhancing the heritage asset (Update on THI and Area Partnership Scheme bids).

AR reported that NCC still waiting for formal confirmation of match funding. No progress with the appointment of the project officer and delivery of the schemes. Although partners are confident the money will be forthcoming; officers are concerned it will be impossible to deliver anything credible in year one (effectively the last quarter of the financial year). The THI stage II bid needs to be written and two Area Partnership Schemes launched within a 3 month time frame (January-March 2010). This is impossible even if funding is confirmed in December and the project officer appointed. CB/AR to discuss review of the delivery plans and timetable with partners and main project funders if/when the match funding is confirmed.

The CAAG request that their concern and disappointment be minuted and conveyed in discussions with partners and funders, particularly as community expectation has been raised.

CB/AR to continue to pursue the bids through the partnership.

4. Heritage Protection Reform – A new planning policy statement for the historic environment (PPS15 & PPS16).

AR reported on the conclusion of the consultation and the government's decision **not** to publish the revised policy statement following widespread concern from all sectors of the conservation field. Numerous professional bodies representing town planners, conservation officers and archaeologist had submitted particularly scathing comments on content.

The policy statement was considered to be “fundamentally flawed”, “unfit for purpose” and a charter for people who “wanted to knock buildings down”. It contained terminology and policies based on a Bill not yet enacted (Draft Heritage Protection Bill) and promoted the ethos that heritage stood in the way of regeneration and economic recovery. Over 500 responses had been received and the government had confirmed there would be re-draft.

5. Design Guides in Conservation Area (consideration of AC paper and continuation of discussion).

The discussion centred on the following issues;

1. Does CAAG want to promote a Design Guide?
2. How could it be resourced/financed and produced?
3. Who is it for and how does it help the Development Management process?

It was clear that the CAAG is **not** resistant to seeking or promoting “good design” in the three conservation areas but there was not a consensus view as to the value of producing a Design Guide. Experience/knowledge and understanding of design guidance in practice varied considerably. The opinions and comments conveyed during the discussion are summarised under each issue as follows;

1. Does CAAG want to promote a Design Guide?
 - Design guidance should be used to “raise the bar” – the Conservation Area Management Strategies recommend them.
 - They should be used to inspire modern architecture to fit in with local vernacular.
 - They provide the detail that is so often absent.
 - There is no better time to produce one. There is a “need”.
 - DGs used elsewhere are extensions of design policies. They are only as good as the interpretation of the guidance; that is where training/input needs to be provided – for people rather than a booklet.

- Berwick is very diverse; design guidance would have to be very specific to be relevant – concern about what would happen to the local vernacular.
 - Berwick would need 3 separate Design Guides – an addendum to the Character Appraisals and Management Strategies?
 - DGs need to be different to the Character Appraisals – do these not adequately convey the basic principles of historical development; spatial analysis and ‘character’ (e.g. form, height, scale; features, detailing and materials as well as windows and doors etc.,) What additional information would a DG contain?
 - Would a DG be a hindrance rather than a help?
 - Concern that DG could be too prescriptive; stifle good design.
2. How could it be resourced/financed and produced?
- Usually local authority led/produced but not exclusively so.
 - NCC conservation team under resourced; has experience in the team but no capacity to produce 3 separate Design Guides.
 - Could it be bought in? No NCC funds to do this.
 - Is external funding an option? (There is no capacity with the existing THI or Area Partnership Scheme grant funds).
 - Could new money be sought from somewhere else? Is CAAG a credible group to bid for external resources?
3. Who is it for and how does it help the Development Management process?
- How does it add value or provide greater assistance to what we are already doing as part of the Development Management process? Is design guidance necessary in addition to the Character Appraisals and Design and Access statements required?
 - DM is about front loading the system – there are exemplary examples (76 Ravensdowne) where understanding of context and character has produced a credible scheme. This philosophy of approach is being embedded in the north development management team.
 - Any design guidance should be part of the Core Strategy and LDF process but should not be a template. Would want to avoid “design by manual”. Any guidance still requires interpretation by professional officers/architects and designers as part of the development management process. That is what they do.
 - Design Guides need to be aimed at the agent/designer – the CAD drawn schemes; the smaller seemingly indifferent schemes that appear to “slip through” the DM process. Concern that DM not always consistent.
 - How would it help with continuity – is development management under so much pressure?

- Are there examples of where a Design Guide has produced/influenced good design?

There was varied officer and architect experience around the table as to the merits/value of Design Guides in practice. Northumberland National Park has a DG produced by NCC but there is limited development in the NP to measure its success/show tangible outcomes of where it has been used. AONB DG more like a character appraisal/landscape context than specific design guidance for new development.

It was proposed to re-visit the topic and to look at other Design Guides; preferably how they had been applied in practice. AC offered to undertake this research for discussion at the January meeting to allow sufficient time.

Agreed. AC to bring examples for continued discussion at the January meeting.

6. Current Planning Applications.

AR reported that CAAG comments on Spittal Point had been passed to Development Management. AR and Peter Biggars (Head of Development Management) were due to meet the architects and agent to discuss the Ignite Design Review Panel comments; English Heritage's written response as well as CAAG and other statutory consultations received.

PR reported that a planning application seeking the removal of conditions (relating to the demolition of buildings in advance of the commencement of development) on Governor's Garden and Blackburn and Price had been refused by the North Area Planning Committee. PR also recently been contacted to discuss discharge of conditions for these approved schemes.

7. Any Other Business.

- i) Shopfront (Woolworths old store) – MS enquired about progress. AR confirmed that signage/fascia still being negotiated.
- ii) Planters – MS confirmed that planters to stay in current locations and will be planted with winter bedding. Town Council/Chamber of Trade given support for additional planters.
- iii) History in the view – PM doing a talk/presentation at the Civic Society meeting in the Parish Centre (11th Nov) followed by a Page & Park presentation on Spittal Point.
- iv) Chapel (CEF building) – JR expressed concern at deteriorating condition and in particular tree roots at the base of the building. CB/AR to investigate as could be part of the highway or within the red lined area of the approved scheme.

- v) Royal Border Bridge – TK reported that the lighting project was going before Senior Management Team for approval. AR reported progress on the listed building application. TK advised that 2010 is a year for commemorating bridges over the Tweed, so hopeful that project will receive support and funding.
- vi) Principal Planner Berwick office – PR confirmed that a new principal had been appointed (Asif Khan). He should be in post before Christmas. The Berwick office still under resourced but PR currently recruiting a planning officer for the north team (to be based in Berwick but also covering parts of Alnwick).
- vii) Conservation Team – CB reported that conservation service under resourced as down to 3 conservation officers for whole of the county. Current vacancy likely to be lost. Need to review conservation service delivery; particularly if Berwick project post is filled by AR.

8. Date of Next 2 Meetings.

15th December 2009	9.00 a.m.
12th January 2010	9.00 a.m.

Venue to be confirmed but likely to be the Officer's Mess in the Barracks.