

4 Looking to the future

It is encouraging to see that there are some good prospects for the future if the current options are consolidated and appropriate procedures adopted. These vary from procedures to be adopted by the National Assembly, to the introduction of Unitary Development Plans as well as the adoption of an integrated approach to regeneration, conservation and urban design.

4.1 Summary of recent developments

This survey has looked at a number of key issues; it has not, however, engaged closely with the mundane problems of development control in conservation areas. This is not, therefore, the place for a re-appraisal of the conservation area concept as such. There seems to be an increasing view amongst professionals, especially in the aftermath of the Urban Task Force report, that current guidance needs revision and should be tailored to the context of the new century. The forthcoming review of strategy for the historic environment in England by central government, however, seems to place PPG 15 on the historic environment and PPG 16 on archaeology off limits.¹ Meanwhile, the conclusions of the 1992-3 RTPI survey continue to resonate. It was suggested then that conservation areas could continue to make a significant contribution to the protection of the built environment. There was a need to tidy up the legislation, to adopt good practices in terms of assessment, management and policy making, and to broaden public understanding of the aims and objectives of conservation area designation.²

In this context one should note the report's emphasis on

- Character as a major strength of the British conservation system, with conservation areas drawing strength from their recognition of local character and historic heritage
- The importance of a rolling programme of dynamic management that is linked to the development plan and integrates conservation area policies with other relevant policies, on, for example, redundant buildings
- Regular review of designations, boundaries and policies

- The role of character appraisals and management statements (which the RTPI thought should be integral to the plan), as a source of information for residents, landowners and potential developers
- The utility of guidelines and site development briefs that bind policy to practical enhancement opportunities
- The need to promote the importance of conservation to other departments within local authorities, and the need for conservation teams to have access to budgets which can pump-prime enhancement
- The need for an adequate level of funding and staffing to ensure that a range of activities can be introduced beyond development control and local plan activities in a proactive role
- The promotion of education and information programmes as an essential basis to win public support.

Some of the problems that the RTPI diagnosed in 1993 seem as valid in the context of this survey as they were seven years ago. The report expressed a fear that local government reorganisation would impose a squeeze on funds for conservation activities. It regarded the law as fragmented and incomplete; it queried the potency of what was then draft PPG 15, and suggested revisions to the GDO and Article 4 procedures. Also, as Martin Bradshaw (then RTPI President, but also Director of the Civic Trust) noted, perhaps the bottom-line issue was one of resources. Many of the authorities surveyed lacked a conservation officer.³

Ten years after the Civic Trust for Wales survey of conservation areas under the former districts, the same concerns were expressed in the course of this study — lack of in-house expertise, lack of staff time and limited resources for enhancement schemes. Then, as now, authorities fought shy of conservation area advisory groups. The overall perception was a lot of good will towards conservation areas, but a frequent inability to put positive schemes for preservation and enhancement into place, however sensitively conservation area issues were treated in the course of plan preparation. Yet at the same time it was clear that conservation areas, for all the difficulties in the system, had enabled protection to be given to the cherished and the familiar natural and built environment, and had acted as an essential defence against blandness and anonymity in the local scene, and the uncontrolled demolition of buildings that contribute to the character and identity of communities.⁴

A number of conclusions have been identified in the discussion of the findings of this study.

- The current position with regard to the strategic management of conservation areas is mixed and patchy, with some authorities having more success than others in undertaking regular appraisal, but not so much with tackling enhancement work.

- There has been a contraction in regular resources for proactive conservation activity, and this contraction is not redressed by occasional investments secured through other strategies.
- Some authorities lack specialists; others find it difficult to integrate the work of their conservation professionals within a corporate approach to the built environment.
- Professionals remain dissatisfied with the framework of legislation and guidance, and compare the range of advice available from official bodies in Wales unfavourably with the English Heritage product.
- Professionals remain dissatisfied with the Article 4 regulations.
- While some authorities are issuing guidance (in greater or lesser detail) to communities and interested parties, and are making use of site development studies and area briefs, other authorities have been unable to adopt these practices systematically.
- Resource constraint affects not simply management activity, but, crucially, it also impacts on the engagement of public understanding and support.

The overall impression is that while there is a desire to promote good practice amongst the professionals engaged in conservation area work, there is growing pessimism about the context within which they are working and the resources which they are able to utilise. There is a shared sense that conservation is something to which lip service is too often paid, rather than prioritised. It is under heavy pressure from competing needs within the new authorities, yet there is a clear desire that conservation should be central rather than peripheral to the thinking of government in London and Cardiff.

Discussions with staff involved in conservation area management and consideration of current practice also prompt thoughts on the relationship between conservation area management, enhancement, and wider urban design issues.

4.2 Conservation areas and urban design

The foregoing section paints a rather depressing picture. However, a more positive perspective also emerges when the work that a number of authorities are undertaking in relation to conservation area appraisal is considered. Clearly, in some authorities, and not necessarily just in those that are best resourced and boast multidisciplinary teams, the appraisal of conservation areas goes beyond a simple identification of historic buildings, and takes on the analytical approach to environments that involve the skills of the urban designer alongside that of the conservation architect and regeneration specialist. Table 6 for instance, shows that review often takes account of landmark features and key buildings, and in some authorities there has been a



Fig 3 Haverfordwest

An enhanced historic central area, but is it sustainable?

consideration of pedestrian movement and traffic issues. Tables 15 and 16 (Appendix 1) indicate the use of urban design studies and permeability and legibility studies as part of the process of conservation area appraisal and planning.

It is suggested that this integrated approach points to the way ahead; that conservation and urban design techniques should go hand in hand. As Alan Stones has pointed out, both modern conservation(ism) and urban design had common roots a generation ago in concerns on the one hand about the impact of development on historic environments and on the other about the failure of fragmented development to produce coherent places.⁵ The skills and approaches are surely symbiotic, and it is easy to agree with his suggestion that urban design, applied to existing townscapes and spaces, becomes an instrument of conservation policy. Likewise, good urban design surely requires an historical understanding as a foundation for both preservation and innovation.⁶ Bold and Guillery go on to point out that the conventional conservation process has been geared to site-specific recording, protection and regulation, rather than the overall assessment of an urban area. This has meant that however well a site is interpreted, contextual understanding is often absent. The ability to integrate, through urban design techniques, analysis of physical fabric with consideration of use, scale, quality and appearance of the spaces between and around buildings, together with the wider context of setting, provides the means to place historic buildings and sites in context, and in relationship also to the more ephemeral features such as signage or street furniture.

Perhaps one should consider urban design in an even broader sense. PPG 1 identifies urban design as concerned also with the relationship of one part of a settlement with another, and with patterns of movement and activity. This points to the relevance, on the one hand of seeing a particular, designated historic environment as a significant part of a wider whole, and on the other hand of considering, within the appraisal of conservation areas, issues of movement, land use, activity and economic function. These latter points are relevant both to understanding the area one is trying to manage and enhance, as well as to pursuing this from the point of view of sustainable development. Economic vitality, the sustainable use of resources (buildings, spaces, natural features, land), achieving quality in the public realm, controlling traffic and making life easier for the pedestrian, all contribute to the process of

preserving and enhancing character and appearance, and, thereby, give a sense of place and identity.

As Nahoum Cohen points out:

All aspects of a single building, structural or architectural, dealing with its use, age or fitness are beyond the scope of planning for urban conservation. Urban issues begin where building and architectural considerations end. Urban issues deal with questions of ownership, land division, private and public property, as well as arrangement of urban space as a result of changes over time including changes of use ... the above aspects are the concern of the urban designer.⁷

Eleanor Morris refers to the Royal Town Planning Institute's "ten commandments" for urban design, inspired by Francis Tibbalds when he was the Institute's President. Tibbalds proclaimed the need to consider places before buildings, and to concentrate on spaces; and he suggested that we need to have the humility to learn from the past and respect context. Morris concludes, however, that despite the forthright quality of these commandments, the planning profession in Britain has had difficulty in supporting urban design.⁸

Understanding these relationships helps to enlarge the objectives of urban conservation, which are so often misunderstood, just as the listing of buildings has been misconstrued as a means to preserve a structure intact. The built environment needs to accommodate growth and change, provided that this process is respectful of context and the end product is an enhancement of the environment and the enjoyment people find in their surroundings. The more enterprising authorities thus see conservation as integral to good urban design, and urban design tools as relevant to conservation area planning. This is in the spirit of the 1967 Act, which emphasised the importance of the character of conservation areas, which is a product of historic fabric and of views and vistas, rights of way, green spaces, glimpses of countryside or waterfront. At the strategic level, conservation areas should be perceived as integral to the fabric of a town or city, and equally so to that of a rural neighbourhood. They should be contexts where basic urban design principles are applied.

This approach is in harmony with the perception that conservation areas should evolve according to circumstances and that sensitively conceived, environmentally enhancing change should be seen as not just acceptable but desirable. It is consistent with the view that new buildings should be acceptable in conservation areas, providing that they are respectful of context, as argued recently by the English Historic Towns Forum. Also it is essential to help robust buildings gain enrichment and enhancement from new uses, enabling them to survive to exhibit the features of their history and uses. This approach is also consistent with the need to undertake appraisals on a cyclical basis. One systematic assessment of an area's character is not



Fig 5 Rural context

Conservation area status is just as necessary as in urban areas

enough, however broad the spectrum of features it takes into account. A cycle of appraisals is central to the objective of maintaining sustainable local environments, and provides the context for development and planning briefs that can shape and guide major changes to an area or its components.

An urban design approach to the management of conservation areas suggests that part of the appraisal process should be the capacity to analyse and plan for the contributions to the historic environment not only of listed buildings and unlisted structures of obvious character, but of two other categories which are less generally recognised: “neutral” and “negative” buildings. These are just as essential for the urban fabric as landmarks and listed buildings for both aesthetic and functional reasons.

Of course, planning for listed buildings is not a simple process, and the interpretation of the guidelines for granting listed building consent varies from authority to authority. In the case of listed buildings, however, the law implies that change that alters the features that led to listing should be resisted as much as is consistent with maintaining or identifying an economically viable use for a property. In the case of unlisted buildings in a conservation area context, matters can often be more complex still, since the legislation gives a form of protection to unlisted buildings that bears comparison with listed status. Article 4 directions can help to pre-empt difficult decisions and ensure the protection of historically accurate building detail; they remain a useful tool provided that they are not used indiscriminately — if only the process of declaration could be simplified. In other cases a detailed appraisal and character statement, linked to clear planning objectives is the means to prevent haphazard decision-making, and give guidance in problematic situations. Should one retain a façade in order to maintain the look of a street? (Jonathan Richards defends the use of façadism on two fronts — it represents a green approach in the use of finite natural resources as well as good design principles.¹⁰) Should demolition be allowed and a pastiche replacement supersede the original? What about an innovative modern building, or a post-modern building, instead? The right answer is often hard to assess, but judging what is best can be a lot easier if a building, or group, or streetscape has been identified as being important for historic or contextual reasons.

Neutral buildings, on the other hand, may have no special historic or architectural quality in their own right, but nonetheless provide a setting for landmark buildings, listed buildings, and unlisted buildings of special character and interest. The late Alfie Woods, speaking of his work in Birmingham, remarked that there were plenty of buildings of interest and character around, but not enough mundane or neutral buildings to provide an appropriate back-cloth for them. This back-cloth, it is submitted, is important and needs careful management as a setting for the special. In such a case local character and appearance are inherent.

Negative buildings in conservation areas are dealt with differently. They should either be upgraded or removed given the chance, depending on their economic viability.

One concludes that conservation policies need to go beyond a focus on listed buildings, and must be sensitive to the role unlisted buildings can play in creating townscape value. An approach that interprets negative, neutral, or “key” unlisted buildings/groups and listed structures within the analysis of a conservation area has a lot to commend it as a means of preserving the historic built environment, with “key” buildings perhaps having the potential to become listed in the future, meanwhile gaining some interim special consideration and protection.

In this context it is suggested that, as has been argued by respondents to the survey, there is a need for formal guidance to steer authorities in the right direction in appraising and maintaining conservation areas. Such guidance could take specific account of distinctive features within the Welsh historic built environment, and relate factors such as setting, landscape, and architectural and building detail to the wider issues inherent in an urban design approach. The Assembly needs to consider how such guidance can be drawn up and promulgated, and whether this might be a role for Cadw. The analogy is with the contribution English Heritage has made in this field.

Guidance need not be overly prescriptive, but it should be concerned in large measure with process and procedures, enabling LPAs to develop and adopt supplementary planning guidance that is suited to local contexts, and helps them to protect, enhance and produce attractive environments based on local character and culture.

In addition it would be helpful to have supplementary design guidance from the Assembly, probably in the form of a Technical Advice Note, that addresses urban design and suggests how LPAs can strike the right balance between conservation of a rich built heritage and the advantage to be gained from opportunities to be flexible in accommodating the dynamic nature of a healthy, diverse, and economically successful environment.

It would also make sense in this context to give some thought to the development of a typology of conservation areas, one that could perhaps be offered within the framework of national guidance, that assists in the process of appraisal, management and design, and takes account of the inherent differences in rural, suburban and urban contexts. It would be far better, perhaps, to adopt this approach, than to attempt to grade conservation areas as one does listed buildings.

Finally, it is suggested that the limited resources of Welsh local authorities hinder their ability to draw on appropriate expert advice in handling conservation related issues. This situation is discussed in the following section in relation to training, but, however training is developed and the skills gap addressed, there is a case for authorities being enabled to seek assistance in handling major proposals with conservation/design implications. This could be a role for a national design commission backed by the Assembly, or for a consultancy whose role the Assembly could endorse.

4.3 Training and specialisation

The thoughts that follow may be somewhat aspirational in view of the staffing issues that the survey has revealed. The designation of a conservation officer by a local authority is regarded as desirable but has often proved to be an unaffordable luxury. A conservation team seems to be something only a few authorities can sustain. At the same time generalist planners assigned to a conservation role are unable to call on the specialist guidance that would help them make a sound planning decision or develop an appropriate strategy. In fact the survey shows that in many cases authorities lack the staff to do the job. Respondents clearly felt themselves to be under pressure and to have insufficient resources of time and money to be other than reactive.

The preceding discussion suggests that for sound methodological reasons as much as from the point of view of practical organisation within a local authority, managing conservation areas strategically is an agenda for multidisciplinary working not narrow specialisation. It may also be an arena where one should recognise that planners engaged in conservation often acquire high levels of knowledge and skill on the job, rather than through formal training in conservation or urban design, and that may be there is something that can be done to strengthen this aspect of their professional development. Moreover, since it is likely that financial restraints will continue to limit the range of expertise available to individual local authorities, there may well be a case for smaller authorities in particular to be enabled to seek assistance in the handling of major proposals with conservation implications. This could be a role for a national design commission or consultancy backed by the Assembly for Wales, as has been put forward above.

It is generally accepted that practical experience in the field of urban conservation, as with development control, is best gained on the job, a training which is invaluable. An interest in heritage and architecture is perceived to be useful. In-post experience may then be supplemented by participation in conservation-oriented conferences organised by such bodies as the Society of Conservation Officers or the Historic Towns Forum.

The prevalent scarcity of adequate and appropriate training can partly be explained by the fact that urban conservation is not given the priority it deserves. Moreover, it is clear both from this study and from wider experience that with some notable exceptions (especially where the historic built environment is essential to the tourism industry) many local authorities do not see the appointment of a conservation officer as a priority when weighed against other pressures on limited resources. The survey evidence indicates that currently there are twelve authorities within the 23 studied to date that have conservation-trained staff.

Looking after the historic built environment should be a priority, sometimes even in the case of New Towns. This task requires specially trained staff who have adequate understanding of urban design and regeneration issues as well as of conservation. Formal professional training is essential if conservation is to be addressed properly. The form of this training deserves some thought, as does the nature of the delivery vehicle.

Generally “urban” conservation relates to architecture and urban design; specialism in this area is often regarded as requiring a certain artistic aptitude. However, a conservation officer does not produce the design of a development. She or he needs to evaluate and comment on projects, to react to submitted proposals, and to be proactive in preparing appraisals and planning and development briefs. This role requires training in observation, analysis and synthesis. In this process the trainee may need to become familiar with computer aided design (for example to assess the impact of proposals on skylines, views, vistas, and so forth). The training requires the development of critical/analytical rather than creative design skills.

It is suggested that the above needs should be the focus of continuing professional development for conservation officers and should be reflected in the design of modular courses offered to planning students, and, indeed, to local authority members, with an interest in and commitment to conservation.

At present most planning officers dealing with conservation matters are generalists who acquire their skills in post. There is often a skills gap within Welsh local authorities which is likely to affect the quality of the work undertaken in conservation area management. It is proposed that to address this gap relevant training institutions should consider whether they can meet this need with development of courses for generalist planners caught up in conservation issues. It would be possible for training to be offered by lead local authorities which possess the appropriate specialisms. Given the constraint in local authority resources, there may be a role for the NAW to be proactive in encouraging and supporting the provision of such training, at least on a pilot basis. Such professionally recognised formal training could be offered on an evening or day-release basis and attendance at a training institution to develop observational and analytical skills. This could be supplemented by a distance learning component.

Support of this kind would enable every authority in Wales to retain the services of an officer with appropriate conservation skills, but with responsibilities varying according to circumstances.

4.4 Public involvement in conservation

The survey data reviewed above suggests that public understanding of conservation objectives and engagement in conservation area management and strategy-setting is much valued by local authority officers, but is seen to be hindered, for example, by lack of resources and the time and money needed for proper public consultation and education. Given the competing pressures on unitary authorities it is not going to be easy in the short term for councils to address this problem. However, it appears that more could be achieved if the system of conservation area advisory committees recommended by the circulars and PPG 15 were to be adopted by more authorities. Clearly some councils have found it difficult to cope when they have tried to co-opt and service a dozen or more advisory groups. It is suggested that the method of

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involving a cross-section of relevant individuals and organisations on an authority-wide basis may be one way of implementing this system realistically.

There is obviously a role for the Assembly in considering appropriate financial support for local authorities in the future. Money would certainly help — not just to support advisory committees but to support the development of guidance material for the public in local communities, and to make consultation exercises more worthwhile. It is possible that it would be helpful also if the Assembly were to place additional weight on the role of conservation area advisory committees in its formal guidance, perhaps using computer aided design analysis to interpret development proposals. In the longer term, there is a wider need for a champion for the historic built environment in Wales. The Assembly, through the encouragement of design education could readily take on this role. Most people agree on the value of the historic landscape of the Welsh countryside, and arguably Welsh towns require as much loving care and attention, and this could be a target for public education in the wider sense.

¹ Hickling, *op.cit.*; Tom de Castella, “Putting the past into perspective,” *Planning*, 18 February 2000.

² RTPI, *The Character of Conservation Areas* (1993); cf. comments in *Planning*, 30 October 1992, and *Planning week*, 4 November 1992.

³ Quoted in *Planning Week*, 4 November 1992.

⁴ The Civic Trust for Wales, *Conservation Areas* (1991), 6–7.

⁵ Alan Stones, “Conservation — an inspiration,” *Urban Design Quarterly*, 66 (April 1998).

⁶ John Bold and Peter Guillery, “The historical assessment of suburbs,” *ibid.*

⁷ Nahoum Cohen, *Urban Conservation* (1999), 34.

⁸ Eleanor Smith Morris, *British Town Planning and Urban Design* (1997), 218.

⁹ English Historic Towns Forum, *Townscape in trouble. Conservation areas — the Case for Change* (Oxford, 1992).

¹⁰ Jonathan Richards, *Façadism* (1994). Richards notes how after 1972, when the demolition of listed buildings in conservation areas was brought under planning control and the Secretary of State was empowered to make grants or loans with a view to preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of areas of townscape value, the notion of preserving or rebuilding façades emerged as part of conservation initiatives (*ibid.*, 92).