

5 A national vision?

As one of the respondents to this survey remarked, conservation areas are at the heart of our communities and their successful management is integral both to the protection of local and national character and identity, and to economic and social sustainability. Conservation should be an inherent consideration in any area regeneration strategy or urban design initiative. It cannot simply be reduced to reactive development control, but needs to be pursued proactively within the wider context of urban and rural quality and vitality, and the aspiration that together we can build sustainable communities and quality environments. How far can we make this happen, however, when so many perceive a lack of national vision for the built heritage?

This report contains a wide range of specific conclusions and suggestions that will be found in the executive summary. In this final section an attempt is made to put forward a handful of general recommendations that appear to the authors to be relevant to this goal.

The activities of local authorities have been analysed and the difficulties under which they labour have been examined. While there is room within authorities for self-scrutiny and a consideration of how far they prioritise and manage conservation area work, the critical role is that of national government - not just as funding provider and (secondary) legislator, but as a champion of the built heritage, of design quality, and of environmental education. The National Assembly has the potential to adopt an exciting and innovative role, in which the promotion and support of built environment education and conservation contribute to the higher goal of environmental and social sustainability. It has the capacity to take on an exciting mission, introducing procedures, policies and practices that are suited to the Welsh context, with aspects of need as well as best value being addressed. In the following ten overall recommendations, five are directed explicitly at the National Assembly of Wales.

5.1 Recommendations

General

1. The preservation and enhancement of conservation areas should be regarded as central to the issue of quality in town and country alike. Local and national government need to consider jointly how this aspiration can become a reality, the task properly resourced, and public support engaged through an appropriate public consultation process

Conservation and urban design

2. Conservation and urban design are symbiotic activities. The good practice of some authorities needs to be adopted more widely. Appraisal should take account not only of physical features, but also of social and economic infrastructure, adopting management strategies that are keyed in to sustainability objectives.



Fig 6 National Westminster Bank extension, Cardiff

A successful modern infill development in a traditional setting
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Staffing and training

3. Within local authorities, conservation needs to be seen as a corporate rather than a sectional or specialist activity. It requires multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary working — planners working with urban designers and conservation architects; built environment teams working closely with colleagues responsible for housing, highways and economic development.
4. There is a need to expand training for professionals engaged in conservation area work and related activities. This is relevant to the design of initial training for generalist planners; but above all there is a case for focused continuing professional development for planners learning conservation on the job.

Investment

5. The preservation and enhancement of conservation areas is randomly resourced, and LPAs experience considerable constraint in resourcing and

staffing this area of their responsibility. At the local level this implies that a methodology should be adopted that enables inputs into conservation work to be measured more effectively against outputs, and assessed in physical terms, and in relation to social and economic sustainability criteria. Conservation, in this sense, needs to be appreciated as central to broader urban design and urban regeneration strategies.

The Assembly

6. The Assembly should consider the form and content of the guidance available to LPAs in order to offer more effective guidance to practitioners and to ensure higher standards and greater consistency in quality. It should develop a format for the content and use of character appraisals and the design and management of mixed land uses within historic contexts, including the use of statements for sustainability, environmental impact, and design, and the use of planning and development briefs. It should also consider whether there should be formal pressure on LPAs to prepare enhancement strategies.
7. The Assembly should consider how far there is a role for a national design commission or similar body to promote high standards of conservation and design in Wales and to support and assist LPAs *inter alia* in shaping and controlling the development of conservation areas, and in building public understanding of the significance of the historic built environment in Wales.
8. The Assembly should consider whether it has a role to play in addressing the skills gap within LPAs through support for an enhanced system of training, both for planning professionals and for necessary skills in arts and crafts.
9. The Assembly should review the allocation of central government funds for conservation activities; consider how far there should be greater involvement for local authorities in determining the deployment of such resources; and examine how far such central funding can be allocated to area-based strategies rather than single site projects. It should consider whether there are also means to identify additional income streams to meet the short fall in resource within local authorities in relation to individual buildings as well as the public realm.
10. There is potential for the Assembly to evolve as a champion for the built environment in Wales, with support for environmental education and promotion of the built heritage as key components of vibrant and sustainable future communities.

Conservation areas in Wales



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Figure 7 Medieval street pattern leading to Cardiff Castle