

**PLANNING CONSERVATION  
(Report by the Planning Conservation Working Group)**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 At its meeting held on 8th June 2010, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) decided to establish a working group to evaluate the performance of the Council's Planning Conservation Team and make recommendations where appropriate. The working group comprised Councillors M G Baker, P Godley, D Harty and R West and Messrs D Hopkins and M Phillips. Councillor West was co-opted onto the working group as the Member of the Development Management Panel with special interest in conservation. The working group has met on 10 occasions in the ensuing months with Councillor Baker acting as rapporteur.

**2. BACKGROUND**

2.1 The Panel's interest in the subject was prompted by public perception of the conservation service offered by the District Council as reported to Councillors. It quickly became apparent in the working group's investigations that planning conservation can be a very emotive subject which can generate strong feelings on the part of recipients of the service provided by the Council. The views of individuals therefore have to be tempered accordingly.

2.2 In addition to the relevant legislation, the work of the Planning Conservation Team is guided by Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment which sets out the Government's overarching aim of ensuring that the historic environment and its heritage assets should be conserved and enjoyed for the quality of life they bring to this and future generations.

2.3 In embarking on its study, the working group decided that the review of the service should consider and evaluate the role of the Council's Planning Conservation Team in the preservation of Huntingdonshire's built heritage with particular reference to conservation areas and listed buildings.

**3. EVIDENCE AND INVESTIGATIONS**

3.1 The working group carried out extensive consultation to ensure that any recommendations that it made would be evidence based as opposed to personal anecdotes or the views of parties aggrieved by a decision.

The following investigations and enquiries were therefore made:-

- A questionnaire to town and parish councils, the results of which are summarised at Appendix A.
- An interview with the Heritage and Conservation Team Leader on the work undertaken by the Conservation Team.

- An interview with a local architect to gauge his views on the Council's heritage and conservation service.
  - An interview with representatives of two local listed schools to obtain their perspective of the heritage and conservation service.
  - A visit to various listed building sites in Huntingdon town centre which was led by the Heritage and Conservation Team Leader and the Head of Planning Services.
  - An interview with the local Historic Areas Adviser from English Heritage to discuss the work of English Heritage.
  - Interviews with three individuals who own listed buildings or buildings in conservation areas as to their personal experience of dealing with the Council's Planning Services Team.
  - An interview with the Planning Services Manager (Policy) to discuss the working group's provisional findings.
- 3.2 The working group has found that the Council's conservation service compares favourably with those of other authorities and that there is no significant cause for concern in terms of performance. However, the decisions of the conservation team can have very far reaching consequences for the individuals and organisations affected by them, which can colour their perception of the process and the decisions themselves. The results can be detrimental to the Council's profile and can potentially lead to a distrust and suspicion of the process and those involved.

#### **4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 4.1 Huntingdonshire contains 2198 listed buildings, 59 of which are grade I, 126 are grade II\* and the remainder are grade II. There are 61 conservation areas. In 2009 the Conservation Team dealt with 122 listed building applications, which was more than any other District Council in Cambridgeshire.
- 4.2 The planning team responsible for those listed buildings and conservation areas is relatively small, consisting of 2 full time and 3 part time officers. As well as planning applications and enquiries, conservation officers deal with issues and enquiries relating to the contribution that the District's heritage makes to tourism and economic regeneration. The team compiles the conservation area character statements, Buildings at Risk register, advises on new listings and is involved with urban design issues, as well as promoting good practice and offering training and advice.
- 4.3 In view of the breadth of the subject, the working group had some difficulty in focusing on those aspects which were particularly salient to the study. Moreover, the working group was not in a position to question the professional competence of the members of the Planning Conservation Team, nor would it wish to do so. Instead, the working group concentrated on the public perception of the service and the impact on the owners of buildings that are listed or situated in conservation areas.

#### **5. ROLE OF THE PLANNING CONSERVATION TEAM**

- 5.1 It was clear, from the interviews undertaken, that the officers in the team are very committed and care passionately about the conservation of the District's heritage. They are well qualified and very experienced officers in conservation whose work is appreciated and applauded by English Heritage.

- 5.2 It was also apparent that the officers' role is not easy. They see their responsibility as the protection of the District's built heritage as once unauthorised work has gone ahead to a listed structure, a part of that heritage can be lost forever. Such instances are not uncommon, a high profile case recently at Ramsey Almshouses having resulted in a substantial fine for the developers. In other cases that were drawn to the working group's attention, it was demonstrated that some owners of listed buildings refuse or ignore any attempts at help or assistance and permit buildings to deteriorate to the stage where they become dangerous or dilapidated.
- 5.3 The Panel also learnt that the Council's powers are fairly limited in terms of the action that can be taken to encourage or force owners to prevent buildings from neglect or falling into disrepair, even though evidence of deliberate neglect or damage to a heritage asset in the hope of obtaining consent should not be taken into account in any decision. In reality, the Council is able to step in only when a building is judged to be dangerous or is no longer weather-tight and, even then, the action is restricted to making the building safe or to protect it from the elements. The only other option is purchase, either by agreement or by compulsory purchase, with the aim of selling the property on, either before or after renovations have been undertaken. Such courses of action are extremely time consuming and expensive with no guarantee of the Council recovering its costs and are only likely to be embarked upon in the most extreme cases.
- 5.4 Against that background, it is easy to see why officers could be tempted to adopt a cautious approach when dealing with the owners of listed buildings or structures in conservation areas.

## **6. INTERVIEWS WITH OWNERS AND AGENTS**

- 6.1 The working group interviewed a local architect, the bursar/property manager of two of the large listed buildings in the District used as educational establishments and three owners of individual listed buildings or buildings in conservation areas. Members also met a representative of English Heritage who provided very helpful information on the role of the local authority.
- 6.2 The perceptions of the interviewees varied greatly but it was possible to detect a common theme which can be summarised as disillusionment with the process. Other interviewees had become sufficiently frustrated by their experience that they had submitted official complaints to the Council, although these were not subsequently upheld by the investigating officers.
- 6.3 While the number of interviews that the working group could undertake was of necessity limited, a picture emerged whereby the reaction of the interviewees could be effectively divided into three elements - those with a detailed knowledge of the system, the owners of listed educational establishments in Huntingdonshire and individual owners who had little previous knowledge of the system. It would have been useful to interview other owners or agents and to receive further evidence but time was limited after 10 meetings of the working group and there was a lack of response to a press release inviting owners and agents to submit their views and comments on the Council's planning conservation service. The limited depth of the evidence available therefore may not be truly

representative of public perception but the working group felt that sufficient information was available to extrapolate its findings.

#### *Those with Conservation Knowledge*

- 6.4 Those interviewed were the local Historic Areas Adviser of English Heritage, a local architect and the owner of several listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas in Huntingdonshire and elsewhere. Their general view was that the service offered by the Council in terms of planning conservation compared favourably with other authorities and that officers were helpful and co-operative.
- 6.5 The English Heritage officer offered a very useful insight into planning conservation which was independent of the District Council and much of what he said was reinforced in subsequent interviews. He drew attention to the fine balance between preserving the heritage of an area and allowing change, especially as the stock of listed buildings is finite and each building is unique. Change has to be judged against the harmful impact or the loss of significance of a heritage asset with the presumption being that consent should be refused unless it can be demonstrated that there are mitigating factors such as public benefit, no viable use of the asset can be found, conservation through grant funding or public ownership is not possible or the harm or loss of the asset is outweighed by the benefits of bringing a site back into use. The cost and the ability of an owner to fund such works is not a material consideration but it was suggested to the working group that there are usually alternatives that can be investigated and that problems are most often found when owners have preconceived ideas or ignore the advice of conservation officers, having purchased a listed building to renovate without having first undertaken sufficient research as to what this can entail.
- 6.6 However, the Historic Areas Adviser also made the point that listed buildings should not be preserved 'in aspic' and that part of the special interest for which structures have been listed is their special character and the story that they can tell. Change therefore is possible, provided the character of the listed building or impact on a conservation area is not harmed. Thus enhancements could be allowed to fund repairs that could not otherwise be achieved, with good design adding to a building's story. In the case of buildings of greater significance such as grade I and grade II\* particularly, owners had to have regard to their responsibilities as the custodians of heritage assets and were well advised to prepare a forward plan of future repairs and maintenance to allow sufficient time for discussions with conservation officers, arrange funding and determine timescales.
- 6.7 One particular explanation that the working group found useful was the difference between alteration and maintenance to listed buildings. Maintenance in the way of like for like repair does not require planning permission but is subject to VAT. Conversely alterations do require planning permission but don't attract VAT. It was suggested to the working group that a reversal of the liability for VAT would reduce the financial impact on owners and could be of great benefit in enabling owners to maintain an asset satisfactorily.
- 6.8 The local architect was complimentary in terms of his dealings with the Council's Planning Conservation Team and while it was accepted that

differences of opinion could occur from time to time, he indicated that these were resolved in an amicable and satisfactory manner.

- 6.9 Similarly the owner of several listed buildings in the District and elsewhere spoke in very fulsome terms of his dealings with planning conservation team officers in Huntingdonshire with whom good working relationships had been established. It was clear that the owner had the relative luxury of being able to take a long term view of the maintenance of the properties that he owned and to discuss and bring forward plans in a structured and timely way. It was also apparent, if not mentioned explicitly, that affordability was not a particular concern.

#### *Owners of Educational Establishments*

- 6.10 The working group interviewed the Bursar from Kimbolton School and Property Manager from Hinchingsbrooke School. Both schools are situated in grade I listed buildings which, in many ways, are two of the most important heritage assets in Huntingdonshire. In interviewing representatives of the schools, the working group was aware of a number of recent applications made by both establishments for listed building consent and they were chosen in comparison to Abbey College at Ramsey even though that is another equally important listed building.
- 6.11 Both of the officers interviewed (who the working group met together rather than separately) expressed some apprehension that their comments might affect their working relationship with the Council's conservation officers and their views are therefore couched in general terms. Both officers mentioned the difficulty in maintaining such important and large listed structures on limited budgets, one publicly funded and the other privately financed from fees. In both cases, their primary function is the education of the pupils in their care and the cost of maintaining listed buildings has to compete against the expense of offering high quality education in a competitive environment. The use of the establishments for education also means that they are subject to more wear and tear than if the buildings had continued in private occupation which had been their original purpose. With the dynamics of schools subject to constant change and the time when certain works could be carried out being limited to school vacations, both stressed the necessity for timely decisions and advice to enable work to be scheduled and achieved successfully. While they accepted their position as custodians of important heritage assets, both made the point that they were effectively doing so for the benefit of the community as a whole as opposed to any specific benefit that they derived from an educational or aesthetic perspective.
- 6.12 It was apparent from the information presented to the working group, that both establishments felt that the Council could be more supportive and helpful in its approach. They felt that there was little recognition of the practical and financial difficulties which are faced by working schools in grade I listed buildings and that conservation officers tended to be reactive rather than positive, thereby sometimes resulting in abortive costs and delays in having to redraw and resubmit amended plans. Similarly, there was a feeling that conservation officers were reluctant to offer advice and preferred to respond to the submission of detailed schemes or formal applications for permission which, if refused, again resulted in costs and delays in resubmissions.

6.13 Whatever the merits or otherwise of the comments of the schools' representatives, it was clear to the working group that there was a need for an improvement in communication between the schools and the conservation officers. The schools hoped for greater flexibility, co-operation and support and a greater appreciation of the practicalities of maintaining valuable listed buildings against a background of financial constraint and a need to enable the structures to continue to evolve with time. There was an appreciation that conservation officers at both the District Council and English Heritage would prefer a planned maintenance schedule of future works but the schools felt that the cost of professional help in producing such plans could not be afforded.

#### *Owners of Individual Properties*

6.14 In addition to the owner mentioned in paragraph 6.9, the working group interviewed the owners of two properties, one of which was listed and the other situated in the heart of a conservation area. One had recently renovated a listed building and the other was in the process of seeking pre-planning advice on the renovation of a semi-derelict building in a conservation area. Both owners had come to the attention of the working group as a result of approaches to ward councillors about their experience with planning and conservation officers which had resulted in the submission of formal complaints to the Council. Because their frustration had resulted in formal complaints, both owners were extremely frank with the working group about their experiences and opinions.

6.15 Both owners had purchased buildings in need of substantial repair and which in one case was described as derelict; in the case of the listed building this had been included in the Council's buildings at risk register and the other was virtually uninhabitable. Both claimed to have been aware of the challenges of renovating old buildings that they intended to subsequently live in and both had been enthusiastic at the outset of the process. Both were operating on budgets that they had estimated would be sufficient for the work and had anticipated the support of conservation officers in rescuing buildings that were in a poor state of repair and restoring them to a habitable condition.

6.16 The experience of both owners was very similar. Both spoke to the working group about the problems that they had encountered in dealing with planning and conservation officers throughout the process which they had found to be extremely time consuming and expensive with implications for the budgets that they had set aside for the work. They complained of a lack of help and advice, inconsistencies, inflexibility and an adversarial attitude. In both cases, the owners had become disillusioned at an early stage and the situation had deteriorated rapidly thereafter to feelings of frustration and suspicion which had culminated in formal complaints to the Council. One aspect of the complaint related to an allegation that unauthorised access had been gained to the interior of a property that was being refurbished which, if true, the working group found to be wholly unacceptable. As an aside and as mentioned earlier, those complaints had not been upheld by the investigating officers.

## **7. INTERVIEWS WITH PLANNING AND CONSERVATION OFFICERS**

7.1 The working group held a number of meetings with officers from the Planning Division. At the outset of the working group's investigations, the Heritage and Conservation Team Leader provided a very helpful insight

into the work of the section that she manages, the legislative background and Government guidance. She drew attention to some of the many success stories that the team could point to in working with owners to restore and improve buildings at risk and protect the built heritage of the District. Conversely, she also provided examples of the disastrous effects of some unauthorised works which had severely affected the merit of some of the listed buildings in the District.

- 7.2 The Team Leader kindly arranged for a tour of Huntingdon town centre by the working group at which Members were also accompanied by the Head of Planning Services. Attention was drawn to several examples of listed buildings or structures where owners had allowed the buildings to deteriorate to the stage where they had become dangerous and others where owners had undertaken work without permission or had ignored advice that had been given. Other examples were pointed out where development had taken place in sympathy with the historic surroundings and where imaginative design had allowed new build to blend in with listed buildings.
- 7.3 It was clear to the working group that the conservation team have a difficult role to play. Owners often have preconceived ideas and limited budgets and while enthusiastic, may lack sufficient knowledge and experience to fully appreciate what is involved in owning, maintaining or restoring listed buildings or important buildings in conservation areas. In other cases, conservation officers may be met with intransigence and resistance on the part of owners and builders which can lead to protracted negotiations and investigations to try to encourage necessary maintenance to be carried out or to ensure that renovations do not affect the character and heritage of individual buildings and structures.
- 7.3 Finally, the working group met the Planning Services Manager to discuss some of its preliminary findings and was encouraged by his receptive and positive response to the suggestions made.

## **8. PUBLIC AND PARISH COUNCIL PERSPECTIVE**

- 8.1 The working group issued a press release explaining the extent of the study that was being undertaken and inviting members of the public to come forward with any information that they felt would be useful. On this occasion no responses were received.
- 8.2 The working group also wrote to town and parish councils with a questionnaire to ascertain the extent of their knowledge of the situation locally in terms of the buildings that were listed, those that may be at risk and their relationship with the conservation team. The results are analysed in the following paragraphs.
- 8.3 The results demonstrate that although 83% of councils are aware of the conservation area boundaries within their parish, only 61% are aware of the conservation area character statements that the District Council publishes and updates from time to time. The statements are a source of valuable information about the special characteristics of the buildings and environment that comprise each conservation area which can assist local councils in formulating their comments on individual applications for planning permission and help those councils to alert the District Council where unauthorised works are taking place. An improved awareness on

the part of local councils of the conservation area character statements was thought by the working group to be useful.

- 8.4 The District Council's website represents a readily available source of information and advice but 59% of local councils that responded to the questionnaire have never used the website. Of those councils that have used it, 71% found the information to be fairly or very useful. In light of this, the working group suggests that the District Council should explore ways of raising the Conservation Team's profile on the website.
- 8.5 Having regard to training, only 22% of the questionnaire respondents felt that the District Council offers sufficient training on heritage and conservation issues which suggests that there is a need for the District Council to explore the value and feasibility of offering town and parish councils more training in heritage and conservation issues. In addition, 72% of questionnaire respondents consider that a visit from an officer from the Conservation Team would be of value to their council.
- 8.6 With the current Government's emphasis on localism and the financial pressures on public bodies, the District Council being no exception, the working party was conscious of the increasingly important role that town and parish councils can play locally in supporting the work of the conservation team. The Localism Bill was published towards the end of the working group's study and there was therefore insufficient time to investigate its planning proposals and the impact on local communities. However, the working group is of the opinion that improved communication between the Conservation Team and town and parish councils would be beneficial for both parties in terms of helping local councils in their own communities and assisting the team in their role.

## **9. BUILDINGS AT RISK**

- 9.1 An important function for the Conservation Team is the compilation of a 'buildings at risk' register that contains information on those listed buildings that are considered to be in danger or in need of repair. The list is currently in the process of being revised but the list approved in 2007 contains 276 buildings regarded as being at risk within 6 categories of severity. Although this was an improvement on the 318 included in 2004, it does illustrate the scale of the problem faced by the conservation team in trying to protect the District's heritage assets. An example of a structure that had been successfully removed from the register as a result of the interventions of the conservation team was pointed out during the working group's visit to Huntingdon town centre, as was an example of a grade II listed building in a prominent location on the High Street dating from the 18th Century which has been on the at risk register since 1998 and, despite numerous efforts by conservation officers to engage with the owners, has deteriorated to the extent where a dangerous structures notice has had to be served in respect of the property. The working group has been made aware of the options now open to the Council in circumstances such as this and has been left in little doubt as to the time consuming nature of both the abortive approaches to the owners and the possible solutions and the potentially high cost to the Council of the latter.
- 9.2 In view of the size of the at risk register, the time available to the conservation team to try to tackle individual properties and owners must, of necessity, be limited but it seemed likely to the working group that properties would continue to deteriorate unless solutions could be found



or owners addressed their responsibilities to upkeep buildings satisfactorily. In that regard, the working group considered that it might be helpful if problems could be brought to the attention of the team at an early stage where early interventions could prevent more costly repairs at a later date and it was suggested that there might be a role here for ward councillors and town and parish councils to help by acting as the 'eyes and ears' in their localities.

- 9.3 In a similar vein, the questionnaire responses highlighted that although only a small proportion of parish councils (18% of respondents) have a local conservation group or civic society, where they do exist 33% of respondents find them fairly effective and 67% of respondents find them to be very effective. The working group felt that occasional meetings between these groups and the conservation team would be beneficial and that it would be helpful for the conservation team to consider how town and parish councils might encourage the formation of conservation groups or civic societies where they don't currently exist.

## **10. LISTED BUILDING GRANTS**

- 10.1 The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 enables the District Council to make discretionary grants towards the cost of repairs to historic buildings which, by the very nature of the need to use traditional methods and materials, will usually result in greater costs than more modern buildings. The working group has been informed that the current grants budget of £30,000 per annum, although small in the context of the money spent on listed buildings repairs and renovation in Huntingdonshire in any year, is a valuable resource which helps the conservation team to offer some financial support to owners to encourage them to carry out important repairs, especially where this involves buildings at risk. Individual grants can vary between 20% of the cost of repair up to £2,000 to a maximum of 40% of the cost of repair up to £10,000.

- 10.2 Grant aid can be made available through English Heritage to charities and churches to offset up to 80% of the cost of works but the body has limited funds available which means that requests for assistance are assessed on a needs basis. Due to the number of requests received, funding is always directed towards buildings which are grade I or grade II\* listed. With public funding under pressure at the District Council and elsewhere, the working group has concerns that one of few tools available to the conservation team may be under pressure which could affect their ability to encourage owners to undertake necessary repairs.

- 10.3 The Historic Areas Adviser of English Heritage informed the working group that alterations to listed buildings are zero rated for VAT purposes whereas expenditure on maintenance incurs the full VAT rating. English Heritage have campaigned for some time for this to be reversed to encourage expenditure on maintenance and it seems to the working group that this should be the desired approach.

- 10.4 The responses to the parish councils questionnaire indicate that a significant number of those authorities are unaware of the grants that are available to assist the owners of listed buildings on the 'buildings at risk' register to help with the cost of repairs. Depending upon any final decision on the allocation of funding for grant purposes, the working group considers that the District Council makes more information available on the funding available to the owners of listed buildings.

## **11. TERMINOLOGY**

11.1 The working group saw a number of examples of the correspondence from the authority concerning conservation issues which members of the public claim to have difficulty in understanding. The terminology involved in planning and conservation can be complicated and there will no doubt be occasions when formal language will be required. However members of the working group did find that the terminology used in some of the correspondence that they saw was not easy for a lay person to understand. An example is attached at Appendix B to one of the private owners that the working party met which, without exception, the members of the working group found difficult to interpret. When communicating on complex issues such as conservation, the working group felt that it would be helpful for all concerned if 'plain English' could be used to help explain the position of the authority and what is required.

## **12. CONCLUSION**

12.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel embarked upon the review of the planning conservation service as a consequence of approaches to ward councillors by their constituents about the performance of the service, in a similar vein to the recent study on the development control service. The working group encountered similar experiences in investigating heritage and conservation when compared with development control. Although the contrast between 'winners and losers' is less marked in conservation terms than between development control applicants and objectors, the working group still encountered strong feelings and emotions on the part of recipients of the service. Perhaps this is an inevitable consequence of the Council's regulatory function and the controls that are exercised to protect the District's heritage but the working group did find that improvements could be made in terms of communication and the image of the service.

12.2 It became apparent to the working group that views were polarised by the knowledge and experience of the recipients of the service. While the view is necessarily a generalisation because of the limited number of interviews that were carried out, those with prior knowledge or those working in planning conservation had a good working relationship and appreciative opinion of the Council's conservation service and the individuals involved in it. They spoke highly of the officers and the service they provided. Conversely, others that the working group interviewed had a different perspective, where the twin pressures of the cost of maintaining or altering listed buildings and the time required for consultation and dialogue had led to frustration and a feeling that the service was being overly prescriptive and unsympathetic to the practical and financial problems faced by the owners of such structures.

12.3 The working group was also conscious of the perspective offered by the English Heritage representative who was interviewed. There is a case for listed buildings and conservation areas to change and age over time which has to be balanced against the criteria set out in PPS 5. Where buildings have deteriorated or there is no viable alternative use, the working group's view is that a more sympathetic approach could be adopted by the Council and that owners should be offered assistance and support as to what may be acceptable and achievable.

12.3 The working group concluded that in general terms the planning conservation service works well and that conservation officers are dedicated individuals who are to be commended for the service that they provide in an often pressurised and difficult environment. Nevertheless there are improvements that the working group suggests should be implemented as a result of its investigations which have been highlighted in the report and are listed in the recommendations below. Primarily these concentrate on the area of communication, proactive support and, with the advent of the localism agenda, the potential roles that Members themselves and town and parish councils can play in mediation and alerting the District Council as to what is happening in their wards and parishes. The preliminary findings have already been discussed with the Planning Services Manager who appears receptive to the suggestions that have been made.

12.4 Members of the working group wish to extend their appreciation to all those who were interviewed and responded to the questionnaire. They were particularly grateful for the help and assistance provided to them by the Heritage and Conservation Team Leader, Planning Services Manager (Policy), and Head of Planning Services.

### **13. RECOMMENDATIONS**

13.1 The working group therefore

#### **RECOMMENDS**

- (a) that, because of the particular importance of the listed buildings and the practicalities of their use as educational establishments, the Planning Division hold regular meetings with a representative of Hinchingsbrooke and Kimbolton Schools (and Ramsey Abbey College if similar experiences are found there) with the aim of developing a good working relationship on conservation issues and planning future maintenance requirements and that a Member of the Council be nominated as an intermediary between the Division and each of the schools to attend (and potentially) chair those meetings;
- (b) that the Council offers specific training to town and parish councils in heritage and conservation issues to raise awareness locally on the subject and on the value of conservation character statements, buildings at risk register, etc.;
- (c) that town and parish councils be encouraged to work with the District Council on heritage and conservation issues by alerting the Council of any deterioration in the condition of listed buildings and unauthorised works to listed buildings or in conservation areas in their parishes;
- (d) that consideration be given to regular meetings between conservation officers and parish councils with a view to refreshing the training provided and in pursuance of recommendation (c) above;
- (e) that the District Council encourages town and parish councils where conservation groups or civic societies

currently do not exist to seek the establishment of such bodies to promote an interest in the local heritage;

- (f) that the District Council explores ways of improving its website to provide additional information on conservation issues and procedures;
- (g) that the Conservation Team publicise the availability of grants from potential sources to help owners of listed buildings fund the cost of maintenance and repairs;
- (h) that representations be made through the Local Government Association to alter the present arrangements for value added tax so that repairs and maintenance of listed buildings become zero rated, thereby reducing the cost of maintaining heritage assets; and
- (i) that officers be encouraged to use 'plain English' in their communications with the public to help in an understanding of complex conservation issues and explain what is required.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Notes of the Planning Conservation Working Group

[www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk](http://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk)

Making the Most of Your Local Heritage: A Guide for Overview and Scrutiny Committees

Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment