



ENGLISH HERITAGE

I want to tell you about an initiative that we have taken this year which I hope will be of some interest.

In England, like most European countries, we have individually protected sites and monuments and protected areas. In total we have about 500,000 individual sites and monuments divided into grades of importance. The largest group is the grade 2 buildings, but there are higher ranks - grade 2* of which there are about 20,000 and grade 1, of which there are fewer than 10,000.

Over the last ten years English Heritage has been maintaining a register of the grade 2* and grade 1 buildings that we consider to be at risk. We define risk in two ways. First if a listed building is in a poor state of repair, whatever it is used for it goes on the register; second if the building is empty with no foreseeable economically viable use it qualifies too. So last year, in England, there were 1,300 buildings at risk and we published a register listing them. This register is circulated to local government and to heritage bodies. It brings to people's attention where the problems are and helps people prioritise action. For us it helps us prioritise our repair grants and our efforts with owners.

But, as I say, we also have area protection. Since 1967 local government (and, under special circumstances, English Heritage) have the power to designate a conservation area. This means that the area, be it urban or rural, has a special historic character and for that to change special permission has to be granted.

This is a bit technical but an additional level of protection can be declared by local government known as 'article 4 direction'. What this does is remove what are known as permitted development rights and require residents to get permission for small alterations like changing the colour of their houses, altering windows, gardens, fences and building minor extensions.

Since 1967 around 9,300 conservation areas have been designated. We actually don't know how many, as local government is not obliged to notify English Heritage: this means that we do not have a map of where conservation areas are and certainly we have no idea how many have article 4 directions.

This is a problem as it is conservation areas which really define our best historic places. We did a sample survey in the south of England in an attempt to calculate how many buildings were actually in conservation areas. We found that on average there were 250 buildings 200 of which were domestic and 50 of which were commercial. Multiplying that up across England gives a figure of about 2m buildings in conservation areas the majority of which are people's houses.

Obviously this is three times the number of individually protected sites, and while they may not be the most important buildings individually these places define people's sense of cultural identity and community, they are the places which more than anything else define regional distinctiveness and character.

So for a few years now we have had the ambition to try and find out what the condition of these areas is really like. We know that local government often does not



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take enforcement seriously and English Heritage is only consulted when more than 1,000 sqm of a conservation area is demolished, or a development of more than 10 stories is proposed. And that only rarely happens. So we can't really monitor what is happening: but we have known from non-scientific observation that some conservation areas have been so altered by minor changes that they should really be de-designated.

So last autumn we wrote to every local authority in England – that's over 700 of them, and asked them to fill in a survey of their conservation areas. This task was generally undertaken by their conservation officer, the person in charge of conservation locally. For some conservation officers with perhaps as many as twenty conservation areas in their patch this was a major task. In the end 70% of local authorities returned completed forms.

The forms assess whether they thought the conservation area was getting better or worse and the reasons why. It asked them to identify what changes had made areas worse and which had improved them, it asked what local government was doing and what residents wanted.

So what did we find?

The headline is that one in seven English conservation areas is at risk – by which I mean has suffered changes which are undermining its special character. So what were these changes?

1. Plastic windows. 83% of all conservation areas have large numbers of plastic window and door replacements. These are increasingly being aggressively sold by salesmen persuading people that they are saving the planet by cutting carbon emissions. This is not helped by recent EU energy regulations. We are fighting back. Next month we will be launching a campaign which explains that because of the amount of energy it takes to manufacture a typical plastic double glazed window it will take 60-100 years to save the equivalent amount of energy. By that time the window will need replacing anyway. We are campaigning on environmental grounds that it is more friendly to repair rather than replace. Arguing that lined curtains, draft-proofing and new boilers are more sustainable ways of being green.
2. Then we found that 60% had poorly maintained roads or pavements
3. 45% of conservation areas are marred by street clutter; either signage, safety barriers or traffic calming. In some areas this is so dominant that it almost hides the historic buildings. This is the target of another campaign which we are running with the department of transport trying to visually educate road engineers and show them that much of what they want to achieve can be done without ruining historic areas.
4. The loss of boundary walls, fences and hedges is happening in 43% of areas. Usually to create a parking space in front of the house: this often means concreting over the garden too.
5. 38% of conservation areas are overwhelmed with unsightly satellite dishes. Because many larger houses are now subdivide into flats some buildings can have three or four dishes on their outside.



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6. 34% of houses have made alterations to their front facades. This picture shows a common and revolting addition which is fake stone cladding. This can be bought from DIY shops and stuck on by owners – obviously it ruins streets.
7. Almost as bad is what happens to historic shops. In 23% of conservation areas shop fascias have been altered with big colourful and ugly sign boards.

All this means that we estimate that only 15% of all conservation areas have improved in recent years. Much of this is due to the lax attitude of local government. All conservation areas are meant, by law, to have a conservation area appraisal which sets out why the area is special what that needs protecting and what needs managing. We found that 46% of conservation areas do not have an appraisal. We also found that only 13% of areas had the all important article 4 direction which give local authorities power to control things like replacement windows and satellite dishes.

So we have campaigns for windows and road clutter, but what is our strategy to get local authorities to ensure they have an appraisal and issue article 4 directions to clean up the mess?

Well, we commissioned a survey of estate agents to ask them whether being in a conservation area affected the value of a house. The results were startling.

First they all agreed that replacement or PVC windows significantly reduced the value of houses in conservation areas.

82% said that original features tended to add value to a house and 78% said that they helped to sell houses faster: but more importantly they said that residential properties in conservation areas sell for more than properties outside the area. And crucially 75% said that a well maintained conservation area will add to value.

This is dynamite. English people, who tend to own their houses rather than rent them, regard their house as their single greatest lifetime investment. With volatile property prices at the moment, maintaining house price value is of the utmost importance.

What our research has done is make a link between maintaining and protecting a conservation areas and the value of the houses within it. Our estate agents told us that they thought only a minority of their clients understood that they could get local government to control alterations to conservation areas better.

So our task is to get this information out to homeowners in conservation areas and persuade them that if they get proper enforcement and control from local government their houses will be worth more!

This, then, is our plan. Next month we launch these results and with them a booklet and web site which explains to people how to improve their conservation area and safeguard the value of their property. Perhaps next year I'll come back and tell you whether our cunning plan worked!