

Development, growth and the historic environment – unholy trinity or happy necessity?

Monday 18 November 2013

Exeter - Historic Towns forum and ASHTAV joint event.

The pressure of growth and the continuing need for good development is a perennial issue for historic towns and settlements that is not only current, but also of great concern. How do we plan for growth in these times of austerity where the historic built environment no longer seems to be a priority?

These are challenging times for planning. The wide range of changes brought in by the Coalition Government, a commitment to Localism, simplification of the planning system and the importance of planning to promote economic prosperity may perhaps be seen to clash with the ethos of conservation in historic towns and settlements. But sensitive development is key to economic growth, and is necessary to provide good quality housing for our exploding population. The two can coexist.

Brown Belt and Green Belt building are some of, but not the only, issues to be considered. This seminar will explore these and other concerns and offer a chance to discuss and plan for the future.

After a brief introduction from **John Shaw (Director, ASHTAV)** and **Noël James (Director, ASHTAV)**, long-standing ASHTAV member, and one time City Planning Officer in Exeter, **Ray Green**, explained the reasoning behind this particular joint event in Exeter.

As in other historic towns, as Exeter has expanded it has taken over village and local town centres.

Exeter's hill setting had enabled a degree of protection [CHECK] but now development is creeping too far up the hills. The policy of controlling development east and west and instead developing north and south seems to have been successful. Development of Cranbrook – the new town to the east of the city has helped in terms of housing development and taking pressure off surrounding small towns and villages – they have benefited from development as it has kept their centres going. The growth of the University and the link with the College of London has been a good connection. Overall the growth and development in Exeter are an example of successful integration – 1500 well-maintained listed buildings are testimony to this.

Richard Morrice, *Better Heritage Protection: Government Advice Team, English Heritage* followed Ray with his presentation on **Growth and the National Planning Policy Guidance – the heritage perspective**. Richard started by detailing the long tradition of heritage protection reform within the UK – leading down to PPS5, Conservation Principles and the current reform process. Focus has been on how heritage significance should be read, and how to deal with a world that has several different protection systems. It is necessary to join up and understand the different systems (e.g. Listed buildings; Scheduled Ancient monuments; Parks/Gardens, etc) although to can be difficult to find a system that joins these up in a rigorous but generalised way approach which also includes heritage of undesignated significance.

1913 saw the first Act for buildings' protection, although this was limited.

PPS5 worked as a framework in terms of thinking about conservation – the follow up to this is in the theory of the NPPF and the general framework is intended to be much the same. PPS5 was accompanied by a practice guide. While this was never completely finished and has now been overtaken by the NPPF, the current NPPF guidance is not yet substantive and the PPS5 Practice guide is still in place until such time as the NPPF guidance becomes official.

The Government view on what guidance should entail is not always well-received. There is a very distinct difference between **policy** – what *must* happen, and **guidance** – suggestions as to *how* to achieve policy. The NPPF has introduced the idea of removing the amount of guidance and has cleared the decks considerably as a result – this has allowed Government and practitioners (through consultation) to consider long and hard what the issues should really be.

The NPPF is not guidance – it is policy. It is thought the guidance it should be in 3 layers:

- Government NPPG
- Sectoral guidance
- Technical guidance (case studies)

Guidance should add value to policy and should not include narrative nor good practice – Local Authorities should provide this. The NPPG will signpost only to websites/organisations with a statutory role.

The growth agenda has been at the heart of most British Government, and usually has been seen as problematic. At the time listing was introduced heritage protection was seen to be against development. Now there is some effort to see that heritage protection does not impose unnecessary burdens on development. It is intended that new statutory provisions will see that Conservation Area Consent is abolished, and will introduce:

- Listed Building Heritage Partnership Agreements
- National and Local Listed Building Consent Orders
- Certificate of Lawfulness of Proposed works
- Certificates of Immunity from Listing
- Definition of Extent of Special Interest of a Listed Building

It is generally felt in the sector that the contribution of heritage to growth is overlooked and that investment in heritage adds to the contribution of heritage to a vibrant and vital economy.

Conservation is integral to Sustainable Development and the sector has always been good at finding and sustaining viable uses for the historic environment, hence its survival. This is something that should be recognised in the NPPF.

Steven Bee Principle, *Steven Bee Urban Counsel / HTF Executive*, followed with his focus on **the human element in our historic settlements**. Steven thought the refreshment of guidance was a useful

opportunity and hoped that the historic evidence of growth decline and stasis meant that we were learning our lessons from the past. Growth could be divided into different categories: scale; value; worth; realisation; and spirituality. At the community level this was important in defining growth within individual communities.

It was also important to realise the effect of growth over time, in terms of planning and opportunism it was a case of thinking of the long term, or the 'long now' view. Government's attempts to promote growth – arguably at any cost – could be damaging.

In terms of heritage there has always been growth, and some of the strengths of heritage in this include: identity; continuity; adaptability, diversity; and transformation.

A good example of growth in the historic built environment is Oxford – finding a way to promote and accommodate the increased desire for growth and activity (because of the attractors of the place) without destroying the very things that encourage the growth. It is important to understand heritage in terms of appreciating it as part of the future. Indeed, there are some aspects of our heritage that we need to let go of and move on from – if it has no real value and has served its purpose then it is time to let it go. Growth encompasses this and is not always a negative thing when considered in this light. Much change happens because we have allowed it to because of our human habits and behaviour – for example, retail and high streets – high streets come down to timescale – over what time scale are we expecting them to regenerate? The fact is that the nature of retail reflects what we seem to want – it has changed because we have changed it – we need a longer timescale and to take a different view on what retail actually is – shopping as we know it is a relatively recent activity. The historic buildings in the high street were not always shops. The high street is an opportunity for people to influence the vitality of places.

Because technology allows us to do things quickly we shorten our expectations. While we should be taking advantage of this technology we should not stop thinking about the long term.

Dave Chetwyn, Director, *Urban Vision, CIC* / Chair, *Historic Towns Forum*, was up next with his presentation **on Development – a positive force for local growth in the historic environment** – which looked at how to maximize the positives of growth for heritage and vice versa. He began by voicing that heritage is a powerful driver for growth – that it should not be seen by Government, or anyone, as a barrier. Heritage contributes to economic and social value. There is a direct relationship between an area's environment and its ability to attract investment – the quality of a place is very important as an economic indicator.

Quality of environment is a vital factor in attracting companies/people/tourism/development to an area and this in turn affects an area's ability to attract investment. Most existing heritage buildings in the environment are in use, and this is because of their adaptability and utility factor – for it to remain in productive use we need to prove that it is capable of this. If you want to demolish then it needs to be proved that it isn't capable of this. Heritage has always been part of the economic strategy and an important part of regenerating town and city centres. The refurbishment of heritage buildings can be part of a way of putting an area on the map – e.g. the Baltic Flour Mill in Gateshead.

It is important to address market failure and understand this in underperforming areas. Market failure is a threat to built heritage.

The third sector and social enterprises are often involved here in terms of turning old buildings into community facilities. Innovative reuse of the historic built environment can help to avoid clone towns.

When considering regeneration and the sustainability in the historic built environment for community facilities in this way other positive factors to consider are the effect it has on human resources, skilled employment, better paid jobs, mixed use and sustainability. Heritage involves more sustainable and inclusive ways of involving the community in terms of regeneration than is often considered. Conservation in actual practice helps to reconcile values and aid understanding of the overall contribution heritage makes to the economy.

Finally, **Fiona Barker** of *Burgess Salmon* spoke on **The Government perspective – what you need to know**. She began by covering the legislation regarding growth and the Green Belt. Green Belt policy delineates:

- Where it is appropriate and inappropriate to develop
- Provision for developing land
- Release of land from the Green Belt that would be safeguarded for a limited period of time
- Permitted development

Government intends to bring these changes into force in 2014. In terms of the housing deficit it is better to reuse what already exists than to create afresh. Development of more out of town retail sites and so on is in danger of eventually impacting on the Green Belt. Recent relaxations don't appear to make a great deal of difference to those made in 2008. Legislation at the moment is still in flux and this causes concern. The status of special landscape areas is very significant in terms of places where there isn't any protective Green Belt, but only Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Areas of Natural Beauty are generally included in Local Plans.

After the talks delegates participated in a lovely question and answer session, and then had a delicious lunch at Bill's, in Exeter town centre.

For more details on the presentations, please see either the Historic Towns Forum or ASHTAV websites, where they are uploaded.