

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1.	Meeting:	Cabinet Member for Town Centres, Economic Growth and Prosperity
2.	Date:	28 November 2011
3.	Title:	The Designation of a new Conservation Area - Letwell
4.	Directorate:	Environment & Development Services

5. Summary

Within the Borough there are 26 existing Conservation Areas. The Local Planning Authority has a duty under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to review the exercise of its functions in respect of the designation of conservation areas and to consider the designation of further parts of its area as conservation areas. Additionally, ENV2.10 of the Unitary Development Plan identified a potential twelve further settlements for designation as Conservation Areas.

Public consultation on these twelve settlements has been carried out as part of this years draft Local Development Framework Core Strategy consultation that included public drop in sessions throughout the Borough.

This proposal will create a new Conservation Area to include the whole of the village of Letwell, commencing a rolling programme of Conservation Area designation which will consider all eleven settlements referred to above.

6. Recommendations

That the proposed Letwell Conservation Area be approved as shown on the attached map and as described in the Letwell Conservation Area Appraisal.

7. Proposals and Details

Background

Under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 every Local Planning Authority has a duty to consider designating Conservation Areas. Since 1967 over 8000 have been designated in England alone.

Within the Borough of Rotherham there are currently 26 Conservation Areas. The first, in the town centre, were designated soon after the passing of the Civic Amenities Act of 1967. However, the majority were designated by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council following local government reorganisation in 1974.

A Conservation Area is an area of special architectural interest, the character of which is desirable to preserve or enhance. Conservation Areas can be of many different kinds, from town centres to villages and even stretches of canals. They are often, but not exclusively centred on listed buildings. It is the character of the area, including its landscape qualities rather than the presence of individual buildings which justifies designation as a Conservation Area.

Our experience of historic areas depends on much more than the quality of individual buildings – on the historic layout of property boundaries and thoroughfares; on a particular mix of uses; on characteristic local materials; on appropriate scaling and detailing of contemporary buildings; on the quality of advertisements, shop fronts, street furniture and hard and soft surfaces; on vistas along streets and between buildings; and on the extent to which traffic intrudes and limits pedestrian use of spaces between buildings. Conservation area designation is seen as the means of recognising the importance of all these factors and of ensuring that conservation policy addresses the quality of townscape in its broadest sense as well as protecting individual buildings.

Character Appraisals are intended to recognise the conservation area's special historic, archaeological and architectural interest through maps, photographs and analysis of the area's development.

Within Conservation Areas the controls on development are more restrictive than elsewhere. Council must give special attention to the desirability of preserving and enhancing the character or appearance of the area via the following controls:-

- Apart from very small buildings, consent is required for the demolition of buildings.
- Trees within the area are protected and works cannot be carried out unless six weeks written notice is given to the Council
- Development which can be carried out without the need for planning permission is more limited.
- The Council must advertise any planning application which proposes development likely to affect the character and appearance of the area.

Rotherham Borough Conservation Area Review

In Rotherham the process of Conservation Area Review began in 1992 when the Report of Survey examined existing Conservation Areas and proposed new Conservation Areas. In the Unitary Development Plan the settlements listed below were identified as potential Conservation Areas:

- Maltby (Church)
- Letwell
- Stone
- Firbeck
- Ulley
- Thrybergh
- Upper Whiston
- Morthen
- Hooton Roberts
- Throapham
- Brookhouse
- Chesterfield Canal (Turnerwood)
- Chesterfield Canal (Norwood)

Appraisals have now been carried out on all the areas identified. With the exception of both of the areas of the Chesterfield Canal, it is considered that all have individual merit and therefore potential for designation as additional Conservation Areas. The Chesterfield Canal was discounted as the vast majority of the lock structures and bridges are adequately protected as listed buildings.

It is proposed to carry this out through a rolling programme of designation starting with those that are considered most meritorious and/or where there is perceived threats to the area through development.

Letwell

The village of Letwell lies to the east of Dinnington, in rolling farmland approximately 15km south east of Rotherham Town Centre. The village is washed over Green Belt and is designated as an area of High Landscape Value. The built up area of the village covers approximately 7 Hectares and is inhabited by approximately 42 households.

Within the settlement envelope there are no shops or public house, however, there is a church, St Peters, on the western edge of the village and also a village hall built in 1870 which has long been a focal point for social activities in the village.

Historically Letwell receives no mention in the Domesday Book. The first mention of Letwell in written records came during the early part of the 12th Century by which time the village was in the possession of landlords from Tickhill Castle. By 1379, the Poll Tax return for the village mentions 42 inhabitants. The area in the following centuries was extensively farmed, the surrounding field pattern determined by the medieval strip system of farming ended by the Enclosure Acts of the 19th Century

which saw the scattered strips amalgamated into compact blocks which farmers could cultivate more efficiently. In the last 60 years the landscape has changed yet again with smaller fields merged to create fields suitable for modern machinery and in response to government policy and EU subsidy.

Architecturally the village has developed around four roads, Gildingwells Road, church Road, Ramper Road and Barker Hades Road. A map of the village from 1615 shows the village developing around Barker Hades Road and unusually not around the Church of St Peter's which for centuries stood detached from the settlement. The majority of the buildings on Barker Hades Road were constructed during the Georgian period giving the village much of its impressive character today. This period of building also included the two farms, North and South Farm, which illustrate the link with the village's agricultural past. Of the two, only South farm is worked today, the North Farm complex having been converted to residential use in the 1990's.

Architecturally and historical, Letwell can be divided neatly in two. The area to the east of the junction with Ramper Road is old Letwell and has changed little since the first Ordnance Survey map of 1850. These buildings are almost exclusively built of course squared or rubble limestone with clay pantile roofs. This uniformity of building style is unusual in Rotherham and gives the buildings a significant group value which should be preserved.

To the west of Ramper Road, with a few notable exceptions, all buildings date from the 20th Century. Included within this part of the village are two pairs of Airey Houses, architectural curiosities built after the Second World War to provide temporary accommodation.

Within the village 14 of the properties are listed buildings. In the Borough as a whole, this is second only to Wentworth. As well as the listed buildings there are also a number of significant unlisted buildings that contribute to the character of the settlement.

Overall, Letwell is a remarkably well preserved agricultural village. Negative factors such as inappropriate window and door replacement are rare. Replacement and renovation works have generally been of a high standard. This has been achieved partly because of the high proportion of listed buildings but also because of the attitude of residents who tend to have a positive attitude towards the ideals of conservation.

In view of the above it is considered that Letwell clearly meets the criteria for Conservation Area designation. The proposed boundary covers a larger area than that proposed in the past. The area to the west of Ramper Road has been included to incorporate St Peter's church but also the 20th Century housing. It is felt that despite its more recent architecture this section of the village still manages to contribute to the "character" of the settlement.

By designating the village as a Conservation Area it will help ensure that the character of the settlement is retained and that future development is of a suitable quality that will enhance and not detract from its current appeal.

Consultation

There is no statutory requirement to consult prior to the designation of a conservation area, although consultation is seen as desirable to ascertain local opinion and generate local support for the designation and associated policy proposals. As regards Letwell, consultation has already been conducted via:-

- The 2011 Local Development Framework public consultation exercise into the Draft Core Strategy and Sites and Policies documents. This has taken place throughout the summer of 2011, including twenty public drop-in sessions throughout the Borough. All proposed Conservation Area boundaries and appraisals were made available on the Council's website
- Consultation with Letwell Parish Council. Discussions with the Clerk to the Parish have been extensive. To assist in the process, the Parish Council have recently included details of the proposal (including links to RMBC's website) in their Parish newsletter which is received by every household in the village.

Proposed Conservation Areas have been shown on the LDF's Proposal map. Consultation as part of the impending LDF was used as an ideal opportunity to test public opinion. In the case of Letwell, public opinion has been unanimously in favour of the proposal. In addition, Letwell Parish Council have consistently lobbied over the years in order to gain Conservation Area status for their village.

The only post designation requirement is to place a notice in a local paper and the London Gazette. English Heritage will also require notification of any future designations.

8. Finance

Carrying out public consultation as part of the Local Development Core Strategy and Sites and Policies process has involved a significant cost saving.

The designation of new conservation areas does not have any direct financial implications other than the required advertisement in both the London Gazette and the local press.

However, there are implications in relation to the slight increase of planning and advertisement applications for determination due to the more restrictive permitted development rights; for conservation area consents dealing with demolitions; and for tree works which will be met from existing resources. This will also be offset by the resulting increase in planning application fees and the greater certainty in the development control process which would introduce greater focus in negotiation and discussion of proposals.

Clear definition and explanation of the special architectural or historic interest an area possesses will also help in avoiding subsequent unnecessary and expensive planning appeals and/or legal challenges.

Section 77 of the 1990 Act provides for English Heritage to make grants or loans in respect of “any relevant expenditure which has made or will make a significant contribution towards the preservation or enhancement of the character or appearance of any Conservation Area or any part of any Conservation Area situated in England” Unfortunately, this is probably more theoretical than real given the shortage of English Heritage finance and other priorities. Such grant money as there is tends to go on large set-piece high grade listed buildings.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

Without Conservation Area status, the historic character of some of Rotherham’s more idyllic settlements could be further undermined by development which is currently acceptable as permitted development. Since the first designations of Conservation Areas in the late 1960’s and 1970’s, the criteria for designation has changed dramatically. The first designations tended to be of very obvious groups of buildings, often tightly formed around individual special, and often listed, buildings or small areas of strongly similar architectural design. Later it was seen that larger areas, where less obvious origins such as topography, routes and use had produced a special character, could and should benefit from designation. Under evolving criteria, villages such as Letwell are now worthy of consideration for designation.

Heritage resources within the Authority are limited and therefore the funding required to undertake the preparation of long term Conservation Area Management Plans that could promote further investment opportunities may be difficult to obtain. However, funding may become available from English Heritage or through neighbourhood/community planning enabling future preparation of management plans.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

The Borough’s Conservation Areas are a key component of its vibrant communities which offer opportunities for the future, such as tourism and job creation. The effective protection of Conservation Areas, through analysis and good management, enhances quality of life for all and safeguards the environment. Investment in Conservation Areas with a business/ retail function can support local businesses by creating a climate for inward investment.

11. Background Papers and Consultation

- Rotherham Unitary Development Plan (Adopted Version) (June 1999)
- English Heritage Guidance on Conservation Area Appraisals (2011)
- Planning Policy Statement 5 : Planning for the Historic Environment (2010)

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