

## **WIRRAL COUNCIL**

### **PLANNING COMMITTEE – 21<sup>ST</sup> MAY 2009 ECONOMY AND REGENERATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 15<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2009**

## **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF TECHNICAL SERVICES**

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### **CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL AND MANAGEMENT PLAN BIRKENHEAD PARK CONSERVATION AREA.**

#### **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 Donald Insall and Associates were appointed in March 2007 to carry out appraisals and management plans for sixteen Conservation Areas in the Wirral. This report covers Birkenhead Park. The Appraisal and Management Plan are attached.

#### **2. THE APPRAISAL AND MANAGEMENT PLAN**

- 2.1 Conservation Area Appraisals have been promoted by English Heritage as useful documents for the understanding of the significance, character and appearance of such areas. Management Plans are intended to follow on from appraisals to provide a focus for action and management of conservation areas.
- 2.2 Conservation Areas were included in the BVPI indicators (219a, b, and c) when the work was commissioned. For the current year BVPI 219c (the percentage of conservation areas with management plans) has been dispensed with, and in future years the indicators 219a and b (number of conservation areas and percentage with character appraisals), will no longer be used as assessments of Local Authority performance. Notwithstanding this, the Council is committed to conserving the Borough's natural and built heritage; and increasing civic pride and public participation, through its Corporate Objectives.
- 2.3 The Conservation Area Appraisals have been carried out in accordance with the advice published by English Heritage (Guidance on Conservation Area Appraisals - February 2006). In accordance with the guidelines, the following framework has been generally used as the basis of the analysis:-
- Location and population
  - Origins and development of the settlement
  - Prevailing or former uses and their influence on plan form or building type
  - Archaeological significance
  - Architectural and historic qualities of buildings
  - Contribution made by key unlisted buildings
  - Character and relationship of spaces
  - Prevalent and traditional building materials
  - Local details
  - Contribution made by green spaces, trees, hedges, etc
  - Setting of the Conservation Area and its relationship with the surrounding landscape
  - Extent of loss, intrusion or damage
  - Existence of any neutral areas

- 2.4 The Appraisal will act as an audit of the area and give residents, applicants, and others an understanding of the special qualities of the conservation area and any negative factors. The Appraisal, as an audit of the Conservation Area, should be adopted by the Council and used as a material consideration in determining any planning applications within or affecting the setting of the conservation area.
- 2.5 Management Plans, on the other hand, are relatively rare and English Heritage advice more amorphous. (Guidance on the Management of Conservation Areas – February 2006) The management plan has required some thought to give it structure. At this stage of the process the Management Plan is an agenda for future action and consideration. This part of the document relies on the analysis contained in the appraisal to set out the issues and negative factors affecting both the private and public realm. As such it is the first stage in a management plan process which will refine the plan through further consultation, joint officer working and budgetary request.
- 2.6 Most of the Appraisals have been discussed with the local Conservation Area Advisory Committees in order for local residents and others to give their perspectives on the areas and contribute to the analysis. To have real weight, Management Plans need to be discussed not only with local groups but also corporately in terms of policy and enhancement action having regard to the resources available. These first essays will act as an agenda for detailed policy development for DC purposes; a yardstick for members of the public to comment on planning applications; a stimulus to corporate working in regard to the management of the public realm; and a “wish list” for its enhancement.

### **3. BIRKENHEAD PARK**

- 3.1 The following is a list of features and information that are part of the Conservation Area’s special character:
- Landscape, structures and buildings by highly influential / well respected designers Paxton, Kemp, Hornblower and Scott.
  - Revolutionary concept – the first park to be built by public money for the benefit of all.
  - Design subsequently had a worldwide influence – for instance, having a direct impact on the design of Central Park, New York.
  - Design of park to encourage ‘perambulations’ and an escape from the surrounding built-up areas, with trees screening most buildings.
  - Sense of intrigue and suspense created by sweeping curve of paths and driveways.
  - Higher intensity of planting around man-made lakes.
  - Original buildings within generous plots, allowing plenty of space for trees and planting.
  - Grand scale of original buildings, but height limited so that they are not unduly visible from the park.
  - High quality cast iron railings and sandstone walls around much of perimeter.
  - Areas of stone setts to driveways and hard landscaped areas.
  - Mixture of architectural styles.
  - Earliest buildings generally built of buff sandstone with slate roofs.
  - Other and later buildings of red or buff brick. Mixture of slate and plain clay tile roofs.
  - Mixture of sash and casement windows, depending on style of parent building.
  - Elaborate porches and door / window surrounds and decoration – mostly of carved stone but some of polychromatic brickwork.
  - Elegant chimneys.
  - Decorative eaves, gables and verge details.

## Management Issues

- 3.2 Birkenhead Park is the only Grade I public park on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens. Its status was recognised in recent years through the expenditure of over £11M in its restoration with funding from Heritage Lottery (HLF), ERDF, Wirral Council and SRB. The management of the Park is carried out by the Birkenhead Park Manager in accordance with a plan approved by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Under the approval annual funding for management of the park is guaranteed for 10 years from completion of the restoration works. Such maintenance will cover amongst other matters the maintenance of trees, shrubbery and flower beds including opening of views around the Lower Lake; maintenance of the health of the lakes and their use for angling, security etc.
- 3.3 Because there is a properly funded management plan for the Park itself, the management of the Conservation Area will relate more to the surrounding development, vacant sites around the Park and the public realm of the surrounding roads. These are relatively separate strands but their interrelationships will be crucial for the management of the entity and for the agenda, decisions and representations of the Birkenhead Park Advisory Committee which is composed of local members, specialist representatives and some stakeholders. The Friends of Birkenhead Park established in 1976, are concerned with the whole of the Conservation Area and the interrelationship of the Park to its surroundings. They will continue to perform a valuable role in promoting the quality of the Park. A grant obtained from HLF to employ two staff to study usage (with Liverpool University), foster community involvement through volunteers and through schools, the setting up of community allotments should impact positively on the health and education of its users and on the park landscape.
- 3.4 Although over £11M was spent on park restoration, the very quality of that restoration has highlighted issues of management of surrounding parts of the Park and Conservation Area beyond the Park Drive. Originally, it was intended that there would be a visual connection between the bedded gardens of surrounding properties and the wider park landscape beyond. Some hidden low original railings remain in position to attest to this. However, the relationship of the two types of open space can be best appreciated by the more modern railings at Cannon Hill and Cannon Mount. This is now the exception and changing social mores, privacy and security concerns have led to the erection of high fences of varying design quality. Part of the park restoration has involved the planting of holly to form hedges which in the fullness of time will obscure these fences and provide a degree of “green” unity to the Park Drive boundaries.
- 3.5 Appendix H - Gazetteer of Boundary Treatments indicates the range of original and modern boundaries, identifies issues arising and makes suggestions for response. These suggestions include:-
- A partnership scheme to assist owners to have high quality replica railings made. Such a scheme would depend on willingness of potential funding sources and private individuals to contribute. It should be noted that costs for the railings and plinths in the park were in the order of £1,000 per metre for those parts restored on Park Drive and towards the Grand Entrance.
  - Alternatively, existing plain metal railings could be integrated into the park through encouraging residents to paint in the “Birkenhead Park Green” and using hedging to grow through the railings thus providing a “green” boundary.
  - Protection of original sandstone gateposts of unlisted properties through Article 4 directions
  - Presumption of repair for existing original gateposts (including removal of ferrous cramps) and natural stone plinths with matching natural sandstone and lime mortar before considering replacement in artificial stone.

In current circumstances the setting up of a partnership scheme as indicated above seems unlikely in the short term. However, a survey to identify the most detrimental boundaries and agreement with the Friends on priorities for action may be supplemented with schemes for education, persuasion, and negotiation with private owners that may secure improvements at modest cost. For instance, the impact of concrete post and panel fences may be ameliorated by staining of wooden panels and painting of light grey concrete uprights in colour and tone to match their surroundings where hedge planting is not possible.

- 3.6 The demolition of the Great Western Social Club and its replacement with flats is hopefully the first and last instance of the loss of an original building surrounding the park since the creation of the Friends in 1976. The combination of a small building in a large plot, inappropriate facing and rendering, vacancy and rapid deterioration due to vandalism led to its loss. The lessons learnt from that case should lead to rapid identification of vacancy and any deterioration to the extent that any such building is identified as a building at risk. The Friends could act as early monitors of such a situation arising. Urgent works and/or wasteland notices at an early stage should prevent deterioration when costs are containable.
- 3.7 Vacant sites around the Park may be subject to development though the Interim Planning Policy and the RSS have reduced pressure for residential development. Some changes of use have the potential to be beneficial to the Park and its users. Proposals by the Friends for community allotments near the junction of Ashville Road and Park Road West recently granted approval can help foster community spirit and education whilst retaining the essential openness of the land behind a screen of hedging. Such a use could reinforce the significance of the Park to the local community.
- 3.8 The public realm has been adversely affected by standard street signage, safety measures such as railings at crossings, bus stops and shelters. Schemes close to the Grand Entrance and at the junctions of Park Road North and Park Road West have had the most impact. Concern was also expressed about the character of the paving surfaces on roads surrounding the park and these matters are identified in the management plan.

### **Boundary Changes and Article 4 Directions**

- 3.9 The current boundary follows the extent of the original park development and still covers the vast majority of buildings of a high level of interest within the immediate area. The boundary is clearly defined by Park Road, North, East, South and West. It is therefore recommended that the boundary does not change.
- 3.10 In the case of Birkenhead Park, the following items have been identified within the Conservation Area Appraisal part of this document as being important to the character of the area and therefore it is suggested that Article 4 directions are assigned to all category A and B buildings to protect them from loss or change without consent:
- Windows
  - Doors
  - Roof coverings
  - Front boundary walls and railings to all public roads and paths.
  - Solar Panels and microgeneration equipment
- 3.11 It is considered that the making of Article 4 directions could have considerable implications for staff resources in the conservation section. As planning applications arising from the withdrawal of permitted development rights attract no processing fee there would be a further case load on development control staff without compensatory funding.

3.12 Whilst Insall's recommendations represent a professional assessment, it is considered that, as such recommendations are made for all the Conservation Areas except Flaybrick Cemetery, further consideration needs to be given to this issue after all the 16 Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans are reported to Committee.

#### **4.0 COMMENTS OF THE BIRKENHEAD PARK CONSERVATION AREA ADVISORY COMMITTEE (CAAC)**

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#### **5.0 FINANCIAL AND STAFFING IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 There are no direct financial or staffing implications arising out of this appraisal. However, the management plan has potential implications for finance and staffing resources if the recommendation of making an article 4 direction were to be implemented. Maintenance of historic lamp standards and conservation grade paving and kerbing may require additional Council investment.

#### **6.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 None.

#### **7.0 HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 None.

#### **8.0 LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 Birkenhead Park Conservation Area is wholly within Claughton Ward but adjoins Bidston and St James Ward along Park Road North (until Norman Street) and Birkenhead and Tranmere Ward along Park Road East.

#### **9.0 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are positive benefits in conservation areas in retaining heritage assets and the embodied energy contained in them, thereby reducing the Borough's carbon emissions.

#### **10.0 PLANNING IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 The Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan can be used to inform the evidence base for the preparation of future planning policy in the forthcoming Local Development Framework and can be used as a material consideration in determining future applications for planning permission, listed building and conservation area consent.

#### **11.0 CRIME AND DISORDER STRATEGY / COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

11.1 None.

#### **12.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

12.1 English Heritage - Conservation Area Appraisals – February 2006  
English Heritage – Management Plans – February 2006

### **13.0 RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended to Cabinet that:-

- (1) The Birkenhead Park Appraisal, as an audit of the Conservation Area, is adopted by the Council and used to inform the evidence base for the preparation of future planning policy in the forthcoming Local Development Framework and used as a material consideration in determining future applications for planning permission, listed building and conservation area consent.
- (2) The Management Plan acts as an agenda for further consultation both locally and within the Council to identify priorities for action and the resources necessary for their implementation.
- (3) A further report is prepared for Committee after all 16 Appraisals and Management Plans have been reported to Cabinet regarding the need for and relative priorities for boundary changes and Article 4 directions between areas, and the financial and staffing implications arising.

**DAVID GREEN,  
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