

REPORT OF THE INTERIM DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE SERVICES

**PROPOSED ADOPTION OF THE PORT SUNLIGHT VILLAGE
CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT PLAN 2007.**

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 Wirral Council has a statutory duty to protect and enhance the character of the conservation areas and to preserve its listed buildings in accordance with national guidance. In order to meet those obligations that first step is to understand those character areas and significant buildings. To that end, the government has introduced the concept of conservation area appraisals and management plans, and has undertaken these in several designated areas in recent years.
- 1.2 The Port Sunlight Village Trust commissioned Byrom Clark Roberts to undertake an appraisal and management plan for the buildings of the village, with Bureau Veritas completing the corresponding volume for the landscape component. The volumes are accompanied by Survey Notes and a Condition Database.
- 1.3 There was input from various bodies, including the local authority and the Port Sunlight Residents and Conservation Society. Both reports were completed in 2007, and the local authority considers it appropriate that they are formally adopted as Council policy and guidance also. Wirral Council had not been able to adopt the documents at the time due to the large volume of development related work that was then underway.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The village itself needs little introduction, and is notable internationally for being a pioneering example of philanthropic urban planning and social engineering. It has two main characteristics: on the one hand it is composed of terraces of worker housing in different architectural styles, interspersed with sizeable civic buildings. On the other it is a valuable landscape in its own right, a character suburb with generous green spaces and two areas listed on the government's register of parks and gardens.
- 2.2 It is the accomplished nature of Lever's project and the fact that it is as impressive now as it was when it was first built that is its most enduring legacy. Despite its irregular and somewhat unresolved layout across reclaimed marsh land, Lever employed the foremost

traditionalist architects of the land to create buildings of unrivalled quality and charm, creating well-lit, healthy dwellings that were in stark contrast to the miserable and insanitary tenements that housed the vast majority of Britain's working classes.

- 2.3 More and more tourists are visiting Port Sunlight from outside the area, including notable contingents of architectural students from abroad that fly in via Liverpool Airport, to the extent that there is now sufficient demand to allow the establishment of overnighting and refreshment facilities in the village. There has been mention of the village attaining World Heritage Site status, although so far it has not appeared on the reserve list for Britain.
- 2.4 The maintenance of the village and its buildings is a growing challenge for the Trust. The Trust has many responsibilities in terms of landscape maintenance and the ongoing repair and improvement of the domestic properties in its ownership. It is not a Registered Social Landlord, and cannot therefore benefit from government funding streams for housing. It is also responsible for all the principal civic buildings in the village (apart from The Lady Lever Art gallery, the Leverhulme Hotel and the Bridge Inn) which it leases out to a variety of operators.
- 2.5 All the privately owned houses in the village are subject to restrictive covenants that require owners to keep the properties in good repair and to seek permission from the Trust in advance for any alterations they intend to make. Virtually all the buildings in the village are listed grade II, and it contains roughly 900 houses.

3.0 Purpose of the appraisal

- 3.1 In view of the Trust's role as guardian of the village, it was this organisation that commissioned the appraisal and management plan. This appraisal explains the development and significance of Port Sunlight in a national context, assesses its state of preservation, whilst the management plan section looks forward to the priorities for maintenance and enhancement in the future.
- 3.2 The Trust's offices are located within the Port Sunlight Museum in the heart of the village, and all the Trust's activities are administered by the trustees and staff. Notable recent projects undertaken by the trust in partnership with other bodies are:
 - The restoration of the Port Sunlight War Memorial, and accompanying symposium.
 - The restoration of the Hillsborough Garden in the wake of a serious vandalism incident in 2009.
 - Landscape projects such as the creation of the mosaic adjacent

at the southern end of The Diamond.

- The development of project proposals such as the creation of a Biomass heating system for commercial and domestic buildings.
- The ongoing refurbishment of the properties in the Trust's care, in particular their external envelope.

4.0 Structure of the appraisal and management plan.

- 4.1 The report does not follow the standard template for these documents as set out by English Heritage, having a more open and discursive format, but corresponds roughly in terms of its content.

5.0 Development

- 5.1 The main developer in the village is likely to be the Trust itself. Its largest development in recent years has been the completion of Woodhead Row in Water Street – a three storey terrace of new-build apartments intended to offer residents an alternative to the dwelling houses that make up the majority of the village. This has been well received by both the public and professionals alike, employing traditional materials and details within a single block that caters for the needs of today.
- 5.2 Possible future developments include a new set of town houses on the vacant plot opposite Woodside Cottages. The Trust has recently indicated that it does not intend to undertake any more new-build residential projects on the other remaining undeveloped plots, other than those that relate to live proposals. The appraisal has already proven influential in terms of new development with its statement that all new residential development should ideally be of one or two stories, with any dormers in attic stories. The need for larger family units of 3-4 bedrooms may mean an increase in double-fronted properties. The appraisal has also made reference to the need to provide affordable housing for those unable to get on the housing ladder on the open market – this is in accordance with council housing policy.

6.0 Combating decline

- 6.1 Port Sunlight has a selection of large civic buildings, and there are questions as to whether the economy in this part of Wirral can sustain all of them. With the conversion of the Leverhulme Hotel now complete, the only remaining vacant building is Hesketh Hall: the British Legion has been unable to sustain its tenure of the hall. There are other buildings in similar uses with an uncertain future, and these will remain challenges for the Trust.

6.2 Although the village appears well preserved from a distance, a closer look betrays a degree of incipient neglect in some properties. Whilst it is close to the leafy suburbs of Bebington and Spital, the conservation area is hard up against the metropolitan areas of Rock Ferry and New Ferry. In spite of their high architectural value, their geographical location means that the houses in the village command only modest values and rental returns. This has implications for maintenance and ongoing investment. The Trust is able to pressurise owners into undertaking necessary repairs where neglect has become apparent, whereas the Council's enforcement staff are only able to become involved in the most urgent cases.

6.3 Several of the materials used by the architects originally, in particular in relation to roofs and exterior surfaces, had a design life of roughly 100 years, and cyclical renewal of many of these components is now due.

7.0 Enhancement and improvement

Future planned improvements relate mainly to the landscaping of the village, and include the creation of a piazza around the War Memorial, (which presently acts as a traffic circulation island to the detriment of both itself, those visiting it and the safety of the roads that converge on it), and the space in front of the Lady Lever Art Gallery - an un-landscaped area of arbitrary parking.

8.0 Community involvement

8.1 The Trust communicates to all village residents through its regular newsletter, and some trustees are village residents. Representatives of the Trust and the Council occasionally attend meetings of the Port Sunlight Residents and Conservation Society and the Friends of Port Sunlight hold events to raise funds for a variety of village-based initiatives.

8.2 In light of the fact that listed buildings can be costly to heat and maintain, a Council-led consortium of bodies entitled "Green Village" held a public event in September 2010. This gave advice to residents on energy efficiency and improving the comfort of their homes, without recourse to alien and harmful technologies like pvc double glazing.

8.3 An open day in which local residents were invited to contribute to the development of the appraisal was held on 28th October 2006. No further public consultation is likely to be required until new policy documents are prepared in the future.

9.0 Enforcement

9.1 The Council is committed to enforcing against serious breaches of

listed building control, including unauthorised windows and satellite dishes. However, under current budgetary and manpower constraints, it may be several years before the backlog of enforcement cases can be addressed.

- 9.2 The largest case load in terms of enforcement is the problem of unauthorised pvc windows. Whilst secondary glazing remains the accepted thermal upgrade for the villages many leaded light windows, the recent advent of slimline double glazed units in both steel and hardwood frames is allowing the installation of double-glazed units that are virtually indistinguishable from the single glazed originals.
- 9.3 There have been some examples of loft conversions in the village, but these are prohibited to an extent by legislation, and would create undesirable effects on the roofscape of the village if allowed. The small size of many properties is partly to blame.

10.0 The Management Plan

- 10.1 The management plan component of the appraisal is an agenda for positive change in the future, and encompasses a broad range of undertakings, many of which fall to the Trust. It is hoped that the scope for improvements in road lighting (several back alleys still have no lighting at all) can be addressed purposefully in the future. The prevention of vandalism requires not just technical measures such as the installation of cctv equipment, but demands positive engagement with local schools and other outreach work. The Trust has already made several steps in this direction, culminating in a youth theatre performance at the war memorial.
- 10.2 Some considerations such as the preservation of vistas are not as material here as in other settlements due to the fact that much of the village is already developed, and guidance is provided in terms of preserving character.
- 10.3 One further issue is traffic management. Because of its flat and open nature, the village is something of a target for fast aggressive drivers to indulge in high speed rallying, mostly at night. Measures to slow drivers down, perhaps utilising traditional paving, may be contemplated. On-street parking does detract from the appearance of streets somewhat, whilst the broad nature of some streets may allow for alternative parking arrangements to be developed.
- 10.4 Again, due to the fact that the village is mostly developed, the need for Article 4 directions is not pressing, although an argument could be made for a limited direction.
- 10.5 The priorities for action remain: the refurbishment and reuse of Hesketh Hall, the enhancement of the village's landscaping, improved

national and international recognition of its seminal role in urban planning and the ongoing repair and maintenance of its housing stock. New developments in energy conservation and the demand for more garaging could aid the reuse of the village's many under-utilised internal courts.

- 10.6 It is hoped that the local authority can develop a Design Guide for Port Sunlight, in co-operation with other bodies. This document will indicate standard details for building elements like: windows, conservatories and French doors, satellite dishes, roof-lights and solar panels, as well as specifications for repair and maintenance. Until that time, reference may be made to the guide produced by Donald Insall Associates some time ago.

11.0 Revisiting the appraisal

- 11.1 There are few recent developments that will impact upon the appraisal and management plan. However, the advent of PPS5 means that the appraisal will have to be considered in the light of this policy. The emphasis on "significance" is unlikely to have any impact, however, since the village's significance remains unquestioned, and is highlighted in the appraisal document several times.

- 11.2 The Council undertook a building survey in 2001-2, which looked at the condition of buildings and any breaches of control – this has proven useful both in terms of land charge requests and in demonstrating the scale of unauthorised changes in general. The Council is responding by holding awareness events to advise residents on energy efficiency. The enforcement and dilapidation schedule appended to the appraisal complements this survey, and both may be used in conjunction with each other.

- 11.3 It remains to be seen how the village manages to adapt to changing lifestyles and fashions in the future. One outcome of the public consultation was the issue of young people in the village – many older people felt threatened by their presence – and whether more facilities provided for them would help to channel their energies into more rational pursuits.

- 11.4 There are only one or two comments in the text of the management document which have the potential to be misinterpreted. The statement on p. 27 of the Buildings Report, in relation to new development, "... windows should be in painted softwood" ignores the fact that several of the later terraces in the village contain steel "Crittall" style units. In my opinion double-glazed steel w20 units have the potential to be used more extensively in new development, being sustainable, recyclable and traditional in appearance. In the main, however, painted softwood is indeed the preferred solution.

- 11.5 Port Sunlight is a beacon of socially responsible development and

industrial planning – it shows the contribution of enlightened paternalism, and has a positive and civilising influence on the whole of the Wirral. In terms of its green spaces and gardens attached to every residence, it contributes also to biodiversity and wildlife.

12.0 Implications for Voluntary, Community and Faith Groups

12.1 There are no direct implications for the above arising from this report

13.0 Resource Implications: Financial; IT; Staffing and Assets

13.1 There are few direct staffing or financial implications arising directly from the adoption of this document, although the adoption of the landscaping plan may have implications for the maintenance and improvement of thoroughfares and lighting.

14.0 Legal Implications

14.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

15.0 Equalities Implications

15.1 There are no Equalities implications arising from this report.

15.0 Carbon Reduction Implications

15.1 There are no Carbon Reduction implications arising from this report.

16.0 Planning and Community Safety Implications

16.1 The protection and enhancement of the built environment through the retention of local distinctiveness and character and the retention of the embodied energy of existing buildings underlies the principles of Agenda 21.

16.2 The preservation and enhancement of the built environment can aid community cohesion through the conservation of the cherished local scene. Opportunities to promote collective ownership of the local environment help to prevent vandalism and social dislocation.

17.0 Background Papers

17.1 The Port Sunlight Village Conservation Management Plan, 2007.

18.0 Recommendations

18.1 That the Committee adopts the above document as a material guidance in planning and conservation matters, and that this report is

referred to Cabinet for approval.

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