

Report No: SSC/11/10

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ESSEX HERITAGE SCRUTINY (SSC-SCR-12)

FINAL REPORT FIRST DRAFT

Essex Heritage Scrutiny (SSC-SCR-12)

Foreword by Chairman

Text and photograph to be in the final version.

Introduction

In the second half of 2009, the Safer and Stronger Communities Policy and Scrutiny Committee agreed to include in its Forward Look a scrutiny of 'Essex Heritage'. It was agreed that the objective would be:-

“to suggest means to the Cabinet and other interested parties whereby the Essex Quality of Life vision, as exemplified in the historic environment, can be better met, with due regard to effectiveness and economy”.

The overall Quality of Life vision is to provide the best quality of life in Britain, through Essex County Council services and partnership working.

The Committee had other urgent work to do at that time, having scrutinies in hand on street lighting (SSC-SCR -11) and two wheeler road safety (SSC-SCR-08). It therefore agreed that this scrutiny would commence in the first half of 2010.

The scrutiny process

A scoping document was drawn up to clarify the purposes of the scrutiny and a copy of this is included as Annex A to this report.

It was clear from the outset that a mix of oral and written evidence would be crucial and the Committee was delighted that a number of individuals and organisations agreed to attend its meetings and contribute towards the debate. The standard of evidence given was uniformly high.

The notes of the evidence gathering sessions held in March and April 2010 are attached as Annexes B and C to this report.

The March meeting was also web cast live and is available to view via the County Council's archived web casting service.

The Committee choose to concentrate on the wider (county and regional) picture at its March meeting. For April it decided to visit a particular location in the county to look at issues 'on the ground'. As a number of Committee members knew Waltham Abbey, that town was chosen. It was also acknowledged that there were several Town Councils and historical associations in the area which had an interest and expertise in preserving the

built environment. Committee members were able to undertake a town walk prior to the meeting and the local press was included in the day's activities.

There proved to be a substantial amount of literature available. The committee considered the following publicly available documents during the course of its scrutiny:-

- (a) English Heritage publication "Making the most of your local heritage"
- (b) English Heritage publication "Refurbishing historic school buildings"
- (c) Department For Constitutional Affairs publication "War memorials in England and Wales – guidance for custodians"
- (d) DCLG/Ministry of Justice joint letter "War memorials – maintenance, repair and protection – penalties for vandalism".
- (e) DCLG consultation paper on a new Planning Policy Statement 15; planning for the historical environment.
- (f) DCLG publication "Taking forward the Government's response to Killian Pretty review."
- (g) Essex County Council Service Asset Management Plan for Environment, Sustainability and Highways Directorate (Historic Environment) 2009 to 2012.
- (h) English Heritage publication "Heritage at Risk – Conservation Areas".
- (i) Essex Brown and White Tourism Signs policy and guidance notes.
- (j) Report of the Specialist Planning and Conservation Services Best Value Review Group (November 2000).

In addition, a number of organisations contributed written submissions to the Committee. Town Councils proved to be a source of much interesting and thoughtful comment.

A full list of contributors is set out in Annex D to this report. Copies of all contributions are held on file by the County Council.

The Committee then adjourned its work for two months to consider other urgent issues and reflect on what it had heard. The Chairman and Vice Chairman took the opportunity to attend a *national event* and were able to add input from that event into the Committee's further deliberations.

Having prepared a draft report, the Committee then held a session with Councillor Jeremy Lucas, Cabinet Member for Heritage and Culture, before coming to its final conclusions.

Findings and recommendations

The Committee gathered a great deal of material during its scrutiny. Its findings and recommendations are set out below. The Committee has attempted to be realistic in putting forward achievable and affordable aims and commends its report to all appropriate parties.

This section to be added in the light of further discussions but Members may wish to look at the following issues in coming to any conclusions. It is not clear at present what impact the election of a new Government will have on policies and levels of funding.

Brown and white signs

Is current policy adequate?

How widely known is it and how is it publicised?

When was this version written?

Can concerns expressed in evidence by a witness be met?

Heritage signing

Should the Loughton blue plaque scheme be encouraged elsewhere?

Is this practicable beyond towns? And what criteria for inclusion should be approved?

Is it an issue for District Councils or more local councils to lead on?

Archives

Difficulty in determining what forms of technology are appropriate for retaining records. Systems can become out of date and themselves need replacement. Whether to seek to split up collections across county boundaries or retain all in one place?

Glossary of terms as used by Chichester is simple but useful.

War memorials

How widely known is the Guidance issued in the Joint Ministers Letter of 2009?

Current issue of sensitively given fighting in Afghanistan and number of 70th anniversaries of events in World War Two.

Costs of keeping in good order –Lawford PC example of good practice.

Should a particular body, such as parish council, be clearly delegated to accept ownership and management of site?

National issues

What status does the review of PPS15 now have?

Are 'heritage' funds fairly distributed between the public and private sectors?

Are there are comments on how funding of national and regional bodies is split?

Essex has a particular interest in wooden buildings (other counties will have preponderance of different building materials).

What can realistically be done to persuade private owners to take remedial action not currently legally required (i.e. on Grade 2 buildings).

National Trust activities still based on 1907 legislation – should this be updated? And how?

Locality issues

Shop frontages often rebuilt inappropriately to the remainder of the building or street.

District Councils can hold local registers but these have no legal status.

Problems where there is a building of national significance but all improvement costs have to be met locally.

Definitions of what the built heritage covers - may be walls, outbuildings, industrial, wartime, etc and not just residential premises.

How can/should local heritage publications be funded and/or supported?

Level of planning enforcement in conservation areas is variable.

Lack of consistency about level of priority given by District Councils to conservation areas/ levels of District and Town/Parish Council co-operation.

Level of expertise of Town Councils is often overlooked or disregarded.

Positive action is often dependent on the interests and enthusiasm of individual officers. Often the officer works alone and seems to have limited support available. There are limited career prospects in a small authority.

Internal County Council issues

Council needs to set an example by not allowing its own buildings/holdings to deteriorate and enter the At Risk Register.

County Council staff and support systems are well regarded in the county, but expertise seems to be spread around a number of Directorates. Could the teams be brought together?

Does the Historic Buildings Fund still exist and, if so, what is its role?

Highways holdings may be unused for some time if highway improvements are delayed or cancelled.

Could the Council act as a co-ordinator to bring together interested parties (either formally or informally) and to distribute examples of good practice?

Does the Committee support the findings of the 2000 Best Value Review?

Appendices (to be included in full in final document)

A - Scoping Document

B - Minutes of March 2010.

C - Minutes of April 2010.

D - List of contributors