

## **EALING CIVIC SOCIETY**



**[www.ealingcivicsociety.org](http://www.ealingcivicsociety.org)**

### **EALING CIVIC SOCIETY CONDEMNS COUNCIL FOR PROPOSAL TO ABOLISH CONSERVATION OFFICER POST**

Ealing Civic Society condemns Ealing Council for proposing to abolish the Conservation Officer post as part of its budget cuts. Despite efforts to dissuade the Cabinet from agreeing the proposal put forward by officers at its meeting on Tuesday 10 July, it agreed to take the proposal forward to the next stage of consultation with the trade unions.

This comes despite strong criticism from Historic England, the national heritage body, which expressed its serious disappointment with the proposal. They said that conservation officers are qualified heritage professionals who have developed expertise in their area of work. They also said that the Council's suggestion that applications relating to heritage issues could be delegated to generic planning officers devalued the role of the Conservation Officer and the importance of heritage within the borough. They added that the remit of Historic England is different from that of the local authority's Conservation Officer and explained that Historic England is often not consulted on proposals affecting Grade II listed buildings or on many developments affecting conservation areas or the setting of heritage assets as this is a proper function of the local Conservation Officer. Many of these heritage issues require specialist local knowledge and resourcing: it is not the role of Historic England to 'cover' for local authorities if, contrary to national heritage advice and guidance, they do not have the relevant specialist heritage expertise.

Ealing Council's proposal was also criticised by Sir Donald Insall, the eminent conservation architect, who said that it would be a very great shame for so distinguished a London Borough to lose the specialist awareness and abilities which an in-team qualified Conservation Officer appointment so beneficially makes available. He said that while the financial constraints which increasingly embarrass our Local Authorities are well appreciated, there are very real economic advantages too in maintaining and enhancing high environmental and architectural standards.

Robert Gurd, Chairman of Ealing Civic Society, said that it was very disappointing that the Council sets so little store by its heritage and that the Society's fight to overturn the decision would continue. He said: "Ealing should cherish its heritage, not regard it as a hindrance which gets in the way of building new homes. Instead, any regeneration should be heritage-led, building on the best of what is there already rather than sweeping away existing buildings or structures which could be refurbished or re-purposed for modern uses." He added: "We were very surprised that Cabinet did not take seriously the warnings of Historic England and of other distinguished experts in their field of the consequences of their decision to abolish the Conservation Officer post. We will be mounting a campaign to encourage local and national conservation bodies to lobby the Council to see the error of its ways so that the decision can be reversed."

## Notes for editors

The proposal to abolish the Conservation Officer post was included in the Regeneration and Planning paper submitted to Ealing Council's Cabinet for consideration on 10 July 2018. In a briefing note to the Cabinet, the Society objected strongly to this proposal which was put forward without prior consultation. The note indicated that the arguments presented in the paper supporting abolition of the Conservation Officer post were specious for the following reasons:

1. Experience has shown that planning officers do not have the necessary training or skills to deal with design and heritage matters. In practice, there is a high turnover of often temporary staff which leads to a lack of familiarity with the general planning environment in Ealing. In addition, they certainly do not have the specialist knowledge required for determining planning applications in conservation areas let alone the expertise required for dealing with nationally listed buildings.
2. Historic England do not have the resources to become involved with planning applications for Grade II listed buildings which they regard as being the responsibility of local authority conservation officers to advise on. Buying in heritage expertise from an external consultancy is unlikely to provide advice comparable to the local knowledge of a conservation officer who has been steeped in the history of the area and with deep knowledge of its historic buildings, even if that external advice is supposedly independent.
3. The current Conservation Officer post is only filled for 2 days a week (i.e. just 40% of a single full-time post) compared with 2 full-time posts as recently as 4 years ago. The Society considers there is enough work dealing with 29 conservation areas and 460 listed buildings in the Borough to justify at least one full-time post. Many local authorities employ several conservation officers despite having to make similar cuts to those required of LB Ealing. It is not clear whether Historic England was consulted on this proposal before it was put forward.

For all these reasons, the Society said that the proposal was a thoroughly bad idea and hoped that the Cabinet would drop it. However, if the Council persists in abolishing the Conservation Officer post, the Society will have no option but to mount a public campaign to oppose the decision given the serious implications it would have for heritage in Ealing.

## About the Society

Ealing Civic Society was established in 1967 when many of our founding members were closely involved with local residents' associations in opposing the Council's radical plans to re-develop the centre of Ealing. We are not connected with any political party or the Council. We are a member of Civic Voice. For more details see our website.

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