



Communities and Customer Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee

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Title:	Westminster City Council's role in conserving heritage
Report of:	Julia Corkey, Executive Director of Policy, Performance and Communications
Cabinet Member Portfolio	Cabinet Member for Sports, Culture and Community
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1. Executive Summary

This paper provides an overview of some of the council's roles and functions for conserving heritage in Westminster.

2. The importance of Westminster's heritage

Westminster has a rich heritage that has been centuries in the making. This heritage is enshrined in both intangible things like Westminster's history and traditions and tangible things like Westminster's buildings, archives, and museum collections.

Westminster's unique character derives in large part from both the concentration and importance of its heritage assets. We have one of the highest concentrations of listed buildings of any local authority in the country and our designated conservation areas cover around 77% of the city. This includes many of central London and the UK's best known and most cherished areas of historic townscape, famous areas of the historic West End such as Soho and Covent Garden, the area of 'constitutional London' around the World Heritage Site with its concentration of uses associated with government

and the monarchy, 250 hectares of historic Royal Parks and a large section of historic river frontage. It also includes many buildings, spaces and cultural attractions of local historic interest which contribute to the attractiveness and mix of local residential neighbourhoods and are highly valued by local communities. Our heritage assets date from all eras of Westminster's development and, alongside more recent development, help tell the story of the how the city has developed and provide the rich texture that make Westminster such an attractive place to live, work, visit, study and do business in.

3. The Council's role in conserving heritage

The council has a number of roles in conserving heritage. One of these is its planning functions in relation to heritage assets (heritage assets include listed buildings, conservation areas, archaeological priority areas, the Westminster world heritage site, scheduled ancient monuments registered parks and gardens and other local buildings and spaces of interest). This involves dealing with planning applications which affect heritage assets and listed building consent applications, designating and managing conservation areas, enforcement where there are unauthorised works to heritage assets, drafting planning policy as it relates to heritage and incorporating heritage within wider place shaping and public realm schemes.

There are also quite a large number of council owned buildings which are listed buildings or heritage assets. These include listed buildings like Council House, Marshall Street Baths and other small structures the Council maintains, such as street furniture, statues and monuments. It also includes a lot of the council owned housing, for example on estates like Churchill Gardens. The Council has a significant role as custodians of these buildings and structures.

Lastly the Council has a role in 'promoting' and celebrating heritage given its value to Westminster as a cultural asset and as an attraction for both national and international visitors. Visitor studies show that the UK's most visited tourist attractions include historic buildings within Westminster, and our historic environment has been cited as a key reason business chooses to locate here. For Westminster's residents, the distinctive character of each neighbourhood contributes greatly to a sense of place, and community belonging. The Council promotes and celebrates Westminster's heritage through things like the Westminster City Archives, whose mission is to preserve and share the unique written and visual heritage of Westminster. It also manages and runs schemes and initiatives like the Green Plaques Scheme and Black History Month. The Green Plaque scheme was launched in 1991 to commemorate the diverse cultural heritage of Westminster and the people who have lived or worked here. It highlights buildings associated with people of renown who have made lasting contributions to society. These schemes and initiatives help to recognise the importance of local heritage and celebrate the stories of what Westminster's heritage means to different communities in the city.

4. The Council's planning functions and duties in relation to heritage assets

The City Plan 2019-40 sets out the council's strategic framework and ambitious vision for growth. This has required a re-evaluation of and amendments to adopted policies where necessary. Westminster's current heritage policy framework is set out in the adopted Westminster City Plan (November 2016) and Unitary Development Plan (UDP). This has provided a long standing and well-understood framework for the conservation of Westminster's historic environment. However, the detailed UDP policy is also significantly out of date, with its conservation and design policies in use since 2004(although the plan not formally adopted until 2007). The new City Plan looks to create a more user-friendly approach to policy; in line with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

5. National Policy and Legislative Context

Government advice on planning for the historic environment is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The NPPF recognises that conserving and enhancing the built and historic environment is fundamental to achieving sustainable development. Section 16 of the NPPF, Conserving and Enhancing the Historic Environment, includes the key requirements for Local Plans in relation to the historic environment. This sets the expectation that plans should *include a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment, including heritage assets most at risk*. This should take into account:

- a) *the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets, and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;*
- b) *the wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits that conservation of the historic environment can bring;*
- c) *the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness; and*
- d) *opportunities to draw on the contribution made by the historic environment to the character of a place.*

The council has a number of statutory duties in relation to heritage assets. Decisions relating to listed buildings and their settings and conservation areas must address the statutory considerations of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (in particular sections 16, 66 and 72) and we are required to keep conservation areas under review and publish proposals for their enhancement.

5. Policy challenges for conserving heritage

There are number of policy challenges the Council faces in its role in conserving heritage. This paper highlights three of these challenges.

Conserving and enhancing Westminster World Heritage Site and setting:

The Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey, including St Margaret's Church was inscribed as a cultural World Heritage site in 1987. The Site is of outstanding architectural, symbolic and historic significance and has enormous cultural, social, environmental and economic value as a focal point

for UK government, democracy and national ceremony, as well as being one of the most visited tourist attractions in the country. It is considered to be a site of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). The NPPF makes clear that, as designated heritage assets of international importance, World Heritage Sites should be afforded the highest levels of protection. However, over the past 10 years, the World Heritage Committee has raised concerns about the care and conservation of the Westminster World Heritage Site and has threatened the site with inclusion on the World Heritage in Danger list. There has been significant pressure for large scale development in proximity to the site with the potential to impact on and harm its setting. There have been three UNESCO sponsored monitoring missions to Westminster (in 2007, 2011 and 2017). The report of the last monitoring mission in 2017²⁰ provided a series of recommendations. Part of meeting this challenge will involve having Draft City Plan policy address the UNESCO recommendations and have OUV as its central focus.

Balancing heritage conservation and growth: A key issue for Westminster is the high pressure for development and reconciling our economic and other objectives, including challenging targets for commercial growth and housing delivery, with the conservation and enhancement of the historic environment. A central theme in the draft New London Plan is the importance of planning not just for growth but for ‘good growth’ which will contribute to sustainable development. The West End Growth Study has adopted this terminology—this study notes that part of good growth will involve maintaining historic buildings and the unique character of the area in order to retain the attractiveness of the West End for visitors and business.

Improving the environmental performance of Historic Buildings while retaining their significance: The challenges associated with addressing climate change are increasingly high on both central government’s and the council’s agendas. Historic buildings have a role to play in meeting these challenges. This has led to increasing pressure for upgrading and changes to the historic environment to increase energy efficiency and adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change. It is vital such changes are proactively and positively managed and consistent with the aims of heritage conservation.

Furthering people’s understanding of Westminster’s heritage and ensuring that local communities are able to access the various aspects of it: Some of the challenges faced in conserving the historic built environment relate to a lack of understanding or value placed on our heritage assets. However, this also extends to other more intangible parts of Westminster’s heritage. It is important that people understand the value of conserving and promoting heritage, through things like the Green Plaque Scheme. Part of this involves making Westminster’s heritage accessible to the city’s diverse communities.

If you have any queries about this Report or wish to inspect any of the Background Papers, please contact Lizzie Barrett
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