



INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

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Dear Maria Reader

Local Government Association Inquiry into 'Rural Revival'

Thank you for consulting the Institute of Historic Building Conservation on the LGA inquiry into Rural Revival.

The Institute of Historic Building Conservation is the professional institute, which represents conservation professionals in the public and private sectors in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. It has around fourteen hundred members divided between fourteen branches. The Institute exists to establish the highest standards of conservation practice and to support the effective protection and enhancement of the historic environment.

The IHBC welcomes the Rural Revival discussion paper and would make the following comments.

Agriculture and Landscape Character

The landscape character of many rural areas is derived from traditional small scale farming practices. New income streams need to be found to keep small farms going as viable concerns. Diversification initiatives are required.

South Shropshire's *Middle Marches Partnership* is a good model for Local Authority involvement in rural regeneration in an area of small farming practices. This aims:

- To provide diversification opportunities for farmers to supplement farming income;
- To provide appropriate new uses for traditional buildings in rural areas;
- To provide a source of traditional building materials appropriate to the area;
- To provide a local supply of sustainable building materials.

The general presumption against the continued existence of small farms, implicit in current DEFRA policies, needs to be challenged. Existing agri-environmental grant schemes seem to be aimed at medium sized or large farms. Application procedures are complex and competitive and discouraging for smaller businesses.

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Traditional farm buildings are an integral part of the rural historic environment. Grant aid for the repair of historic farm buildings should be made more widely available (not just in ESAs) and should not be tied to them being taken out of agricultural use.

Urban grant schemes have demonstrated the ability of local authorities to successfully promote conservation-led regeneration and manage partnership funding. DEFRA and other government agencies concerned with rural issues could also use the expertise within local authorities to implement grant schemes on their behalf in accordance with agreed targets.

The Economic and Social Importance of Historic Buildings

The historic environment is a fundamentally important aspect of the rural economy. It provides a basis for job creating commercial activities, social and community facilities, and a range of residential accommodation. The distinctive identity of many villages, settlements and areas is based on their historic environment. Historic buildings also contribute considerably to visitor-related business. Tourism is a significant element of the nation's economy, and it relies heavily on a well-preserved and maintained historic environment and rural landscape.

Whilst there are clusters of historic buildings in villages and small towns, much of the rural environment is (by definition) fragmented, based around isolated individual buildings. Many of these are small in scale. Nonetheless, their collective contribution is considerable, in providing housing, accommodation for commercial enterprise, helping to define the character of rural areas, and as a basis for regeneration and economic development.

Heritage Funding Issues

Historic buildings require proper funding, especially in areas with more marginal economies. In such areas, funding for the historic environment can trigger considerable benefits for regeneration and the creation of jobs. Public funding can lever in considerable levels of private investment, which would otherwise not be viable.

Historic buildings can provide access to funding from heritage sources such as English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund and other more general regeneration sources. However, rural areas are especially disadvantaged in terms of access to funding. The HLF's Townscape Heritage Initiatives and English Heritage's Heritage Economic Regeneration schemes provide funds for area based regeneration. Whilst these may be applicable for small towns, villages and clusters of buildings, they can not provide funding for isolated buildings. The Heritage Lottery Fund's main grant fund deals mainly with publicly owned buildings. English Heritage's main grant fund deals with Grade I and II* buildings only (through necessity given the limited funding available). Thus, most Grade II listed buildings fall outside of the scope of the main heritage funders, especially if they are privately owned. Ownership by trading companies can also introduce barriers to obtaining funding due to European State aid rules. Yet Grade II buildings form the majority of listed buildings. Thus, the rural environment, with its more fragmented historic environment, and emphasis on grade II vernacular buildings, is seriously disadvantaged. Local authority grant schemes can play a very important role in helping small businesses and improving properties. However, such schemes often receive low priority and many local authorities have no grant fund, nor the resources to establish one.

The lack of support for Grade II listed buildings explains why so many non-residential buildings are getting into a very poor state of disrepair.

Britain (and Europe's) current fiscal policies act directly against sustainable development. There are fiscal incentives for certain kinds of new-build development, whilst the refurbishment of existing buildings invokes the full VAT rate. Thus, developers are penalised for choosing the more sustainable option! Sustainability is not only afforded low priority, but firmly rejected by current VAT provisions. VAT needs to be reduced to the minimum possible rate in respect of works to repair, maintain, and refurbish existing buildings, especially listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas. There should also be fiscal incentives for the use of 'green' construction techniques and materials.

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Many rural districts have severe problems with buildings at risk. For example, North Shropshire has more than a third of its 1,400 listed buildings at risk (categories 1-3) or vulnerable (category 4). More than 70% of these are in rural areas.

These buildings are an important social and economic resource, and an essential part of the rural landscape character. This resource is currently being neglected and this prevents rural areas from achieving their full potential.

Sustainability

The retention and re-use of historic buildings can massively contribute to targets and aims for sustainable development. There is still often a lack of awareness of the vast amount of energy required to manufacture materials and construct new buildings (often more energy than is used in the lifetime of the building!). The fabric of historic buildings contain vast amounts of *embodied energy*. Stone vernacular buildings in particular represent a sustainable form of construction.

Skilled Employment

The historic environment also contributes to skilled and specialist employment in rural and urban areas in the construction industry. The repair and refurbishment of historic buildings requires a wide range of skills from chemical analysis and materials science to craft skills involving natural and sustainable materials. Thus, the conservation sector contributes to more opportunities for skilled work; better paid jobs; a better-trained and motivated workforce; higher levels of job satisfaction; and a better-educated population.

Building Character

In retaining and finding new uses for historic rural buildings, the important contribution of their (often simple) vernacular appearance, detailing and traditional materials of construction to the rural scene must be appreciated. It is essential that any alterations to these buildings be properly designed in a way which would avoid damage to the cherished rural scene.

The nature (and condition) of many redundant listed buildings can rule out continued agricultural use. Conversion to domestic use is thus often the only opportunity. Unfortunately, few people seem able to adopt the unconventional residential design parameters a sensitive approach to conservation of historic character dictates. Publication of more 'best practice' examples and education of design practitioners is needed.

Conclusion

There are numerous barriers to economic and community renewal in rural areas, especially in areas of funding. The skills of local authorities need to be utilised by funders and Government departments, and the grant programmes need to be modified to address the needs of rural areas.

I trust that this information is of use to you.

Yours sincerely

Dave Chetwyn
IHBC Consultations Secretary