

Modern planning system to conserve and enhance the historic environment

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Communities and Local Government (National)

Housing and Planning Minister John Healey today announced new guidelines for councils and developers to make the most of the nation's historic assets like Victorian stations or our network of canal sides for imaginative new developments across the country.

This first integrated planning policy for protecting the historic environment, affecting archaeology, historic areas, buildings and landscapes, sends a clear message that the historic environment should be seen as an asset, not an obstacle to development.

The new policy, which is accompanied by detailed guidance from English Heritage, sets out that councils and developers should use the historic environment to stimulate and inspire new buildings and development of imaginative and high quality design.

Councils need to monitor all their historic assets, from listed buildings, conservation areas, scheduled monuments and archaeological sites and landscapes. Some historic buildings from theatres to churches are decaying with age and require quick decisions to secure their future instead of being left in place unmaintained.

The policy also sets out that the historic environment should be viewed in the context of climate change by encouraging the reduction of CO2 emissions when decisions are taken about modifying heritage assets.

John Healey said:

"Our historic assets are hugely important for local people and for the tourist industry and we need to conserve and protect them for future generations.

"This means making these assets part of our plans for regenerating our towns and cities. If you're redeveloping your town centre you should be making the most of existing streetscapes, canal side sites or former breweries. A prime example is St Pancras where the old station was transformed into a high standard railway whilst retaining Gilbert Scott's original design.

"We need to be protecting what is significant about a place while making the most of its potential and this means quick and imaginative planning decisions. Our new policy sets out that the historic environment is an asset not an obstacle to development."

The new Planning Policy Statement 15: Planning for the Historic Environment replaces Planning Policy Guidance notes PPG15 and 16. It is accompanied by a Historic Environment Planning Practice Guide.

Culture Minister Barbara Follett said:

"Historic places are a vital part of living communities. They inspire and delight those that live and work in them, and they attract visitors that boost local economies. This statement matters because it confirms the Government's commitment to preserving and protecting our heritage, and ensuring that it is passed on to future generations.

"Its publication marks a milestone in our programme of reforms to create a heritage protection system fit for the 21st Century. In setting out how our objectives for heritage should be delivered through the planning system, it paves the way for publication later this year of the Government's vision for the historic environment."

Simon Thurley, Chief Executive of English Heritage, said:

"This is a major milestone in the Government's Heritage Protection Reform. I am delighted that this key element is now available for discussion and I welcome the policy's succinct but comprehensive re-statement of the Government's commitment to the management and protection our heritage through the planning system.

"A key shift in the Planning Policy Statement is that it encourages everyone to first understand what is significant about a particular building and site before implementing change. This should cut the number of poorly thought-through applications and ensure that our heritage can be made fit for a wide range of purposes without damaging what makes it special.

"Fundamentally, it will help owners of heritage sites and buildings to make better applications, assist local authorities in making robust decisions and ensure that future generations are handed on a heritage that is attractive, useful and relevant.

"I look forward to the discussions that English Heritage will be facilitating during the consultation period so that we can help make sure the Government's policy is fairly balanced and is as clear and helpful as it can be."

The new PPS:

- Ensures there is a focus on understanding what is significant about a building, site or landscape so that it becomes easier to determine the impact of the proposed change. It uses the 'values' approach of English Heritage's Conservation Principles as an underlying philosophy to inform decision-making.
- Urges councils to monitor all their historic assets. For example, local authorities will be urged to create publicly-accessible Historic Environment Records which developers will be expected to consult so that they can take into account the historic environment impacts of their applications.
- Supports constructive conservation. It encourages active exploitation of the heritage as an asset rather than seeing it as a potential barrier to development.
- Introduces new clearer policies on setting and design, issues which are frequently the source of the most contentious cases involving the historic environment.
- Puts the historic environment in the context of the challenge of climate change. Councils weigh carefully any loss of enhancement of the asset and its setting against the benefits of the application such as increased production of energy from low or zero-carbon sources. The greater the negative impact on the significance of the asset, the greater the benefits that will be needed to justify approval.
- Deals with all types of heritage in a single document. It brings in a new, integrated approach to the historic environment and 'heritage assets', moving beyond the outdated distinction between buildings and archaeology.
- Greater emphasis on pre-application planning and discussion. Councils and developers should learn about the significance of affected heritage assets before designs are drawn up – the more they understand the asset, the greater the chances of a successful application.
- Maintains the same level of protection for the historic environment as the current PPGs 15 and 16 but expresses the policy much more succinctly making it easier for councils to use (number of pages has been cut from over 100 to around 13).
- Provides greater clarity on key topics e.g. archaeological interest, conservation areas and their preservation and enhancement, World Heritage Sites, conflicts with other planning priorities and recording
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We have also published today a new planning circular which emphasises the importance of protecting our World Heritage Sites and reflects the same message with the need to conserve what is significant about a site and what gives it its universal value.

Notes to editors

1. The new Planning Policy Statement (PPS) will replace Planning Policy Guidance Notes 15 (Planning and the Historic Environment, published in September 1994) and 16 (Archaeology and Planning, published in November 1990). The consultation Paper can be viewed online:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/consultationhistoricpps>

2. The PPS will be supported by guidance prepared by English Heritage. A draft of the guidance is on the English Heritage website at www.english-heritage.org.uk/pps

3. The White Paper 'Planning for a Sustainable Future', published in May 2007, underlined the Government's aim to achieve a significant streamlining of existing planning policy guidance and statements by separating out policy from guidance.

4. The planning circular on World Heritage Sites fulfils a commitment in the White Paper 'Heritage Protection for the 21st Century', published in March 2007, to 'further recognise in national policy the need to protect World Heritage Sites as sites of Outstanding Universal Value'. It is also supported by English Heritage guidance (see www.english-heritage.org.uk/whcircular)

Contacts

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