



# The Birmingham Civic Society

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Mr A. Fuller  
Planning and Regeneration  
Birmingham City Council  
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BY EMAIL

19.10.17

Dear Mr Fuller,

Thank you for consulting Birmingham Civic Society on the Conservation Area Review and recommendations.

Our Planning Committee, which is formed from architects, conservation architects, planners, surveyors, urban designers and transport consultants, have reviewed Appendix 1: Conservation Areas Review Recommendations Report and have the following comments to make.

## 1. General Comments

We welcome the work that has been done reviewing the 30 conservation areas of our city. They are all valuable assets to the city and demonstrate the rich built heritage that we have.

The Report highlights the significant issues that the city faces in terms of how Birmingham City Council can ensure that these areas of special architectural and historic interest can be preserved and enhanced. It is unfortunate that the Report recommends two of these areas, Austin Village and Ideal Village, are cancelled (de-designated). We believe that this is an indication on how Birmingham City Council has failed, over a number of decades, to provide sufficient and appropriate resources and guidance/support as well as enforcements to stop unlawful development.

For too long, our city's built heritage has been under-resourced and under-valued. It is time for Birmingham City Council to provide a full restatement of its commitment to preserving and enhancing our city's built heritage through our conservation areas.

Our Planning Committee felt that Birmingham City Council should prepare and share a full assessment on the overall condition of all 30 conservation areas in the city. This would form the basis of a Conservation Area Risk Assessment - the purpose of this would be to identify conservation areas that are potentially at risk in the coming years. This Conservation Area Risk Assessment should be reviewed regularly to ensure sufficient/appropriate resources and guidance/support are provided alongside any enforcements as soon as possible to avoid any potential future cancellations (de-designations).

We recommend that Birmingham City Council provides clear guidance for owners of properties within conservation areas on how to develop and improve their properties whilst preserving and enhancing the area. This guidance should be an intrinsic element of the Birmingham Design Guide which is currently out for consultation, which we will comment on accordingly.

The Report indicates that there are broader issues regarding lack of resourcing, lack of enforcement against unlawful development and lack guidance/support for successful development within conservation areas. These three issues need to be addressed in order to prevent many of our conservation areas being lost.

## **2. New Designations**

We support the the recommendation of the possible designation of a conservation area in Acocks Green and Weoley Hill, along with the associated Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plans and Article 4 Directions.

## **3. Cancellation (de-designation) of Conservation Areas**

### **a) Austin Village**

Austin Village was designated a conservation area in 1997 due to it being considered an *“area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance”* (Austin Village Conservation Area Designation Report).

We believe that Austin Village, twenty years on from it’s designation, still retains the special architectural, historic interest, character and appearance on which it was designated.

In terms of historic interest, this has not changed since designation of the area in 1997. The unique history of the development of Austin Village by Herbert Austin in 1917 to meet the demands of housing his production workers is just as important and relevant today. It demonstrates how Birmingham was at the forefront of prefabrication and system building during this period.

The Austin Village Conservation Area Designation Report notes the geometric layout as an important characteristic of the area. The geometric layout is still clearly evident today and signifies the area as being of special architectural interest, especially within the broader urban context which is more typical of this period (two-storey masonry dwellings).

The 250 bungalows are of special architectural interest with their single storey, double pitched forms, projecting porches and regular spacing/geometric layout. Whilst the physical materials have been changed, we would argue that the overall character, appearance and architectural interest has not.

We accept, as noted within the Conservation Areas Review, that a significant proportion of the historic fabric (cladding, windows, doors and roofing) have been altered. However, conservation areas are not solely defined by their historic fabric. As clearly noted above, there area a significant number of other aspects which provide an area with special architectural, historic interest or character.

The alterations that have been carried out have not been of detriment to the special architectural, historic interest or the character of the conservation area. In time and with the support and guidance of the Birmingham City Council, it would be feasible for properties to be refurbished with materials that are more sympathetic to the original materials. Birmingham City Council should advise owners of suitable methods for improving the energy efficiency and material quality of the buildings that will preserve and enhance the conservation area.

We do not believe that sufficient guidance/support has been provided to owners to ensure that they are fully aware of the processes involved.

We are seriously concerned that if the Austin Village Conservation Area is cancelled (de-designated), then over a period of time, properties could be significantly altered including works such as side extensions between dwellings which would affect the geometric layout or roof extensions/dormers that would alter the single/storey, double pitched scale and rhythm of the

area. Dwellings could also be completely demolished and replaced with buildings that are of detriment to the area. Alterations such as these would have a significant impact upon the special architectural, historic interest and character of Austin Village Conservation Area.

The Conservation Areas Review recommends that Austin Village Conservation Area is cancelled (de-designated) however we do not support this recommendation. We believe that with appropriate and clear guidance/support from Birmingham City Council, over time the material quality of Austin Village Conservation Area could be restored so that it preserves and enhances the special architectural, historic interest and character of the area that is clearly evident today.

We recommend that the existing dwellings are assessed with a view to the best examples of the original buildings being locally listed. This will assist in promoting best practice in preserving and enhancing the conservation area.

In summary, we do not support the cancellation (de-designation) of Austin Village Conservation Area on the grounds that the special architectural, historic interest and character of the area is clearly evident today. Whilst we accept that there has been a number of alterations to the historic fabric of the dwellings, these alterations are not of detriment to the overall appearance of the conservation area. We recommend that Birmingham City Council provide sufficient guidance/support for owners within the area to assist them in ensuring any proposed development to improve their properties ensures that the special architectural, historic interest and character of the area is preserved and enhanced. We recommend that the Article 4 directive is retained.

## **b) Ideal Village Bordesley Green**

The Ideal Village Bordesley Green was designated an Conservation Area in 1990 and the Designation Report noted:

*"Although The Ideal Village may not constitute the most attractive Conservation Area in Birmingham, it is none-the-less, important both historically and architecturally."* Ideal Village Bordesley Green Conservation Area Designation Report, 1990.

This demonstrates that the reason for the designation of the Ideal Village as a Conservation Area is not primarily due to the historic fabric of the area, which is the main reason noted in the the Conservation Area Review for its cancelation (de-designation).

It is accepted, as identified within the Conservation Area Review, that a number of buildings have been unsympathetically altered/extended. This was an issue noted within the Ideal Village Bordesley Green Conservation Area Designation Report which recommended an Article 4 was established to ensure that the area is preserved and enhanced.

However, despite the Article 4 directive being in place, Birmingham City Council failed to control development under the directive which ultimately led to the lifting of the directive in 1998 - accepting that it was 'almost meaningless'. It is only 'meaningless' if it is not used to guide development or enforced. As a result of the Article 4 being lifted, significant deterioration of the special architectural, historic interest and character of the area has occurred despite being a Conservation Area. This further demonstrates Birmingham City Council's failure to preserve and enhance this conservation area over successive decades.

Whilst a number of properties in the Conservation Area have been altered/extended to the point where the overall special architectural, historic interest and character of the conservation area has been eroded, there are a number of pockets within the conservation area where clusters of properties have not been significantly altered and they retain the historic fabric. These demonstrate the original intent of the overall design of the Ideal Village and we recommend that Birmingham City Council carries out further detailed analysis to identify these clusters.

Following further assessment, the Ideal Village Conservation Area could be varied (reduced) and a number of the properties could be Locally Listed. The latter would serve as exemplars within the potential reduced conservation area as to how properties can be maintained whilst preserving and enhancing the conservation area.

One of the key characteristics of the Ideal Village is the importance of the public realm. Many of the streets are lined with trees which are protected from felling without the necessary approvals being sought. The cancellation (de-designation) of conservation area would mean that many of these trees could be felled - either as part of ongoing highway maintenance or to provide vehicular access/parking to residential properties. The result will be the dominance of the car and loss of our green heritage - which in a conservation area is just as important as the built heritage. This would be a serious detriment to the character of the area and original vision of the Ideal Benefit Society for the area. The conservation area not only protects our built heritage but also our green heritage.

In summary, we do not support the cancellation (de-designation) of Ideal Village Bordesley Green on the grounds that there are some areas within the conservation area that retain the special architectural, historic interest and character of the original development. We recommend that further detailed analysis is carried out of the area and Birmingham City Council considers varying (reducing) the area to preserve and enhance the special architectural, historic interest and character of the Ideal Village. It is recommended that an Article 4 directive is placed upon the varied (reduced) conservation area to further preserve and enhance the area. Consideration should also be made regarding Locally Listing a number of the properties to serve as exemplar properties within the area.

We hope that our comments and recommendations are helpful in ensuring that our conservation areas can be preserved and enhanced. We feel the recommendations are achievable but only with commitment from Birmingham City Council to ensure that there is sufficient resourcing, specific support/guidance for development with conservation areas and enforcement on unlawful development.

If you have any queries or comments on the above, we would be very pleased to meet and discuss with you further.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'GA', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Gavin Orton, Chairman  
The Birmingham Civic Society.