

West Devon BC Consultation on Tavistock Conservation Area

Response from Transition Tavistock, Oct 2020



Introduction

We welcome the Review of the Conservation Area, and appreciate the work that has gone into preparing the document and plan. As a volunteer run community group working for a sustainable future we recognise the value of the qualities highlighted on the cover – historical continuity and a sense of place and identity – in helping people adapt to future changes.

As local residents we appreciate the improvements which have been made to some of the key buildings listed in the report. For example, we are glad to see the Butchers Hall and Church House back in use. These are examples of conservation enhancing the viability of the local economy and enabling new initiatives. We agree that it is important to find good uses for the various empty buildings cited in the report, in particular the “old people’s building” (2.9.3) which is well placed for something community focused.

Our comments below are made within the context of all our Councils having recognised the climate emergency as something which should affect all their plans and policies, for example by energy efficiency and enabling active travel.

Traffic Management

The 2009 Assessment and Management Plan have significant content on traffic and transport. It is therefore disappointing that the updated documents make virtually no mention of this. There is no assessment of progress on the recommendation from 2009 “The Borough Council, Town Council and County Council will consider ways of improving pedestrian safety and reducing traffic through the centre of Tavistock” other than mention of paving at crossing points (2.1.5).

The question of how people arrive at and move around the Conservation Area should still be fundamental to effective management of it. We hope this can be included in future development of the Management Plan, preferably within a wider sustainable transport section of the Neighbourhood Plan. We offer some specific comments on walking and cycling below, and would also like to see bus routes and stops considered.

Walkability

We commend the way the town centre has been opened up through pedestrianisation of the Pannier Market area, and look forward to seeing the further extension of this through the remodelled Guildhall Square. These changes are not only visually attractive but they have encouraged people to shop on foot, sit and rest, stop and talk to friends without obstructing others. The contrast with parts of the Conservation Area where cars still dominate (eg the West Street / Russell Street junction) is marked.

We like the idea of enhancing the pedestrian link from Bedford Car Park (2.6.5) with artwork and interpretation boards. If boards are erected there, we would like them to include information about walking routes around the town. This could encourage visitors to explore further, and residents to find walking routes from their homes. With some adjustment to markings within the car park to show a safe pedestrian route across, this link could also be seen as one from Plymouth Road to the riverside, enhancing the overall connectivity and permeability of the town for those on foot.

We support additional riverside seating (2.7). Again, the riverside walk should be seen not just as attractive in itself but as part of a connected network of traffic free paths, which could be better signed and mapped.

The Review does not mention some other routes within the Conservation Area which are at present unattractive to pedestrians and could be easily improved. These include Garden Lane (a natural short cut but full of potholes), the blind corner by the Guide Hall, and the path from West Street above the Methodist Church, which would benefit from a better handrail and signing.

Shop signage

We strongly agree with the observation (2.9.5) that “Some businesses have again resorted to A boards and other street clutter which in most cases is both unsightly and often an obstacle to pedestrians. This is a negative trend that fails to follow the guidance in ‘Streets For All’ and demands management.” Some of our members use wheelchairs or guide dogs and have real problems with obstructions (not just A boards) - covering more than half the pavement in a few places.

People who are already vulnerable cannot be expected to add to their stress by trying to get into the shop concerned to complain. Others interceding on their behalf too often get brushed off. There are rules on where A boards are allowed, where they should be positioned and how big they can be, but they are obscure and do not appear to be known to many businesses. At times of economic stress businesses seem to resort to competition to have the biggest and most prominent board. While understandable, this is counterproductive, both directly (people cross the street to avoid the clutter) and indirectly (through degrading the attraction of Tavistock as a heritage town). During COVID restrictions it is also dangerous, as it prevents socially distanced passing.

We think the action proposed should be even stronger. Given that (Plan 2.2.2) there is clear evidence of breach of planning conditions which “Over time has been increasingly ignored”, we are not convinced that (an unspecified officer) “urging” will be sufficient. The proposal that businesses consult local authorities is insufficient – what is agreed needs take account of the experience of people with disabilities and be made public so there is accountability.

A protocol is definitely needed, and we would be happy to assist in devising one. It should be, or include, a simple guidance sheet that can be pinned behind the counter of every business, and should have wide support from business, disability groups and shoppers so that it is enforced by peer pressure. It should also allow breaches to be reported by a simple means which protects privacy, and the Council should be prepared to use enforcement powers if warnings are ignored.

Welcoming cyclists

We were surprised to find no mention of cycling in Review or Management Plan, other than an illustration (2.9.3). Both Devon CC and West Devon BC have policies supporting cycling, and new Government policy (Gear Change) provides an additional spur for this.

We have observed a marked increase in the number of people arriving in the town centre by cycle over the summer – part of a measurable national trend. This seems to be continuing into the autumn. Use of the cycle stands within the Conservation Area has therefore increased, and while there is still spare capacity, there are also indications of demand at more convenient points. (It does not help that none of the printed map boards show cycle parking.)

In the proposed review of street furniture, we suggest that additional cycle parking is considered – for example in conjunction with new seats. (We have observed cyclists trying to stop and enjoy a

past in Bedford Square, and finding no suitable “park and sit” point.) For inclusivity, there should be some provision for “non-standard” cycles (eg those with child-trailers or adapted for disability).

Any enhancement of Bank Square (2.2.4) should also include replacement of the poorly designed cycle parking point there with something more attractive and usable. There is a potential need for secure cycle parking – ie under cover and locked – for people visiting or working in the town centre (or living there with insufficient space at home). Demand is likely to increase with the take up of e-bikes. Perhaps this could be an option within any redevelopment of the “negative buildings” in that area?

Energy efficiency

We welcome the commitment to continued work with Tamar Energy Community on Bedford Cottages (2.8.2). We encourage further initiatives of this type to help residents of other properties within the Conservation Area stay warm and reduce energy use within heritage buildings.

We appreciate the installation of LED lighting in the Pannier Market and Butchers Hall. This not only has direct benefits but is a helpful modelling to other businesses of what can be done.

Boundary review

In general terms we favour extension of the Conservation Area as a means of protecting land that would be vulnerable to unsuitable development if national planning controls are loosened. In particular we think it important to protect the allotments, due to the benefits of people growing their own food, and the canal as a walking route and green infrastructure (provided that the designation does prevent enhancements such as connecting it to other traffic free routes in future).

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