

Oxton Society Strategic Framework 2022-2025

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to:

1. Outline how the Society's strategy has developed over the years, including major reviews in 2011 and 2019.
2. Formally agree the Strategic Objectives that emerged from the 2019 Review
3. Propose an updated framework for implementing our objectives that will guide our actions over the next 3/5 years.
4. Allow the Committee to consider and possibly agree the framework with a view to endorsement at the next AGM.

The basic structure of the Society's strategy was established in 2011. That year was the culmination of intensive work on describing the character of the Conservation Area. We had jointly funded with Wirral Council a character appraisal by Insalls (a nationally notable heritage consultancy). The publication of the appraisal was quickly followed by a Management Plan eventually approved by the Council. This set out the policy framework for the Conservation Area albeit significantly diluting the Society's attempts at achieving better planning protection to a large number of character properties, where limited planning controls applied. This left them potentially vulnerable to inappropriate incremental changes to their character which still applies.

Defining the character of the Conservation Area

The emphasis on defining the character of the Conservation Area at this time was in line with the Society's constitutional status as a Conservation Area Advisory Committee. This was a reflection of the designation in 1979 of the Conservation Area and the drafting of a constitution which has remained largely unchanged to this day. More of this anon.

The Society's formal status as a "Conservation Area Advisory Committee" is a way for members of the general public with an interest in heritage to help the council in managing and protecting the historic environment. This was operationalised through an Executive Committee whose most important role was to comment on applications for planning permission and tree work.

This reflects the importance of the Society's primary purpose which is to assist the local council in protecting the character of the Conservation Area. It needs to be understood that the Conservation Area is the "child" of the local council. They are the sponsor; we are the consultees.

The history of the Society illustrates that for its early period this was almost its only role from 1979 -2000. Post 2000 a wider set of actions started to appear in relation to developing links with the wider community, notably the advent of Secret Gardens and Xmas lights and increasing liaison with the business community.

Secret Gardens as a funding source for conservation action

What is not often recognised is that the Secret Gardens then provided substantial additional monies which meant in 2009 we could co fund the Character Appraisal (available on our website) which became the local council’s template for making decisions on planning applications and trees. In addition, it gave the Society ammunition to produce more relevant and stronger comments on both those topics.

Reshaping our objectives

So how should this history and experience shape our future strategy? We asked that question in our strategy review in 2019 when we invited trustees and strategic partners to join them in reviewing the Strategy, agreed in 2011. We had a wide-ranging discussion which recognised that the Society was working in a changing context. The main points agreed in 2019, together with an update of where we stand are:

We face a future with an Austerity Council with no overall control	This remains a major obstacle
Incremental degradation of buildings, especially windows and walls:	Still a lack of clarity around what you are allowed to do with walls without permission
Decline of the traditional high street from retail to bars/restaurants and closure of key services such as Village pharmacy and threats to post office:	trend has continued but post office functioning normally
Saga of HSBC site from 2007 to date; agree landscaping scheme	landscaping scheme has been agreed and implemented.
Continued parking issues:	problem remains in the streets surrounding the village centre, need for an overall traffic and parking plan that would not undermine the viability of the village businesses and meet the concerns of residents.

Possible Article 4 designation:	no sign that this is a viable option for the Council due to limited staff resources and Government opposition to removing permitted development rights.
Future of Ashton House site and Oxton Society input to development process and maintenance of sandstone wall	Ashton House scheme has been submitted and is awaiting a planning permission. The Society was generally supportive of the scheme
Poor quality of some planning applications and need for better heritage statements:	not been a major issue in last 2 years
Increasing dominance of social media for communicating with members	Society now has a battery of social media outlets including a website, a Twitter account, a members Facebook site and an open Only in Oxton site
Inability of other CAs to match Oxton's resources:	there is probably only two other CAAC societies that match our financial resources namely Caldby and Lower Heswall
Emergence of CAW in 2014 as legitimate voice of CAs and credibility with WBC	CAW is now the leading consultee on WBC conservation and heritage items and has submitted extensive and detailed comments on the emerging local plan
Difficulty of persuading younger people with children and demanding jobs to get involved	this remains an issue probably exacerbated by the pandemic
Culture and expectations in context of our older membership	difficult to assess this because we do not systematically seek the views of our members

Financial health

The 2019 review paid particular regard to our financial situation which was healthy with a balance of about £22k. This has been reduced by the pandemic

with the loss of 2 years Secret Gardens income of about £9,000 per annum. An update on finances is as follows:

- Membership income relatively low at £4,000 per annum with little appetite for any further increase and Membership numbers were stable.
- Some success with specific project fundraising and crowdfunding e.g. Blue Plaques and Xmas Lights
- Ongoing ad-hoc contributions from businesses for specific events e.g. Xmas Lights.
- Strategic projects constrained by uncertainty over future funding: this has limited our ability to develop new projects and made us more reliant on specific crowdfunding initiatives plus business contributions to sustain Xmas lights and hanging baskets

Strategic Objectives 2019

The 2019 review proposed four Strategic Objectives as follows:

Objective 1 – Promote and secure high standards of planning, landscape and architecture to preserve, improve and develop the area and its environs

Objective 2 – Engage and communicate with members and the wider community to raise awareness of Oxton's history, architecture and unique environment

Objective 3 – Foster community and business involvement

Objective 4 – Maintain the Society on a sound basis and sustainable financial footing, including working in partnership with others

Although these objectives emerged for the 2019 Review they were never formally agreed by the Committee. The explanation is fairly clear:

- Two years of the pandemic which has disrupted our ways of working and has challenged how we remain focused on our primary purposes.
- The major disruption of the mural in January 2020. This led to us trying to manage a process with accusations of entitlement and envy from both sides of something akin to a “culture war”! It consumed a considerable part of early 2020 and led to a restructuring of our social media outlets plus a mountain of for and against angst.
- A prolonged debate about closing Rose Mount to traffic to assist businesses,

What is clear from the above is the strategic emphasis that we agreed for our role in **protecting the character of the conservation area and raising awareness of its heritage**. This is the core business of the Society but needs to be bolstered by securing the support of the community and businesses and having sound financial management of the Society's affairs. In this sense we have a hierarchy of objectives with 1 and 2 being supported by 3 and 4.

Wirral's new Local Plan and our response

The Council is about to publish a new Draft Local Plan which, when approved, will provide a policy framework for the foreseeable future. The main part of the plan will be about defining land for new housing and any potential impact on Wirral's Green Belt. It will also contain important new policies on conservation and heritage and all these policies will be subject to public consultation.

Conservation Areas Wirral is the lead for consultation on the heritage and conservation aspects of the plan. The Society agreed a submission to CAW of a policy statement for the Oxton Conservation Area. This is attached as Appendix 1. The then Secretary was also Chair of CAW and in a strong position to influence its comments and propose a policy framework which properly reflected our concerns and aspirations.

A new element of the plan will be the need to address the Government's agenda to promote higher quality design through the medium of design guides and codes. This is all based around the of introducing the concept of "beauty" into the planning control system. This means we will almost certainly have to review our response to date and examine how we process the range of development and enforcement issues that we may be confronted with.

We now await the publication of the Draft Plan in the next few months which will require a further response from the Society and CAW. The plan will then be submitted to the Government who will appoint an inspector to conduct an Examination in Public and assess the "soundness" of the plan.

Education , Information and Communication

A particular important element of making as sure as possible that residents do the "right thing" is to start thinking about getting information to people and preparing Advice Notes on the range of development, walls and tree matters, both within and outside, the orbit of formal planning controls. This will mean updating and refreshing the current Advice Notes and adding ones where new policies or circumstances have changed. A particular challenge will face us in relation to any new design guides and codes included in the new local plan plus

various elements related to net zero type policies designed to ameliorate the impacts of climate change.

In addition, there is a key role for the History Group in raising the awareness of Oxton's history, architecture and unique environment. They have been very successful in this task through the production of booklets and the history supplement to the newsletter. An additional outlet for the Group's work would be using the Society's social media outlets to spread these insights to a wider local community.

There is an important role for how we use our different methods of communication to reach members and others. This should include the newsletters, the Facebook and Twitter sites to focus more clearly on our core business as well as general news items.

Other Strategic Objectives

We will also need to discuss the objectives 3 and 4 as supporting our core business in terms of interaction with the community and businesses. Much of the interaction occurs around the events and activities the Society organises notably Secret Gardens, Hanging Baskets and Xmas Lights. It may be worth reviewing how we organise our interaction particularly with the village businesses to be more than annual requests for prizes, donations etc. We have tried other formats in the past, including business breakfasts, but with minimal success. There seems little prospect of a business association being established and the more likely liaison is between businesses on specific issues and events e.g. parking restrictions, redesign of shopfronts and traffic circulation.

The Big Issues we face

We face a number of big issues but the most important is how we increase the emphasis on conservation as our core business. This includes the need to:

- Protect from degradation the 400+ heritage houses that make a positive contribution as defined by the Character Appraisal.
- Recognise that this protection via introducing Article 4 is unlikely in the foreseeable future.
- Accept that education and persuasion is the most realistic way of improving the stewardship of heritage houses in the absence of Article 4 directions.
- Emphasise the management and protection of walls helped by recent new legislation which requires planning permission for any demolition
- Look after the tree canopy by reinforcing the rules that require permission to undertake tree works
- Ensure high design quality of any new houses on garden sites

- Respond to consultation on the new Local Plan, especially in relation to design guides and codes

Other big issues are:

- How objectives 3 and 4 support our core business
- Traffic management and parking
- How we respond to climate change
- Succession planning for committee

The Next Steps

There have been extensive discussions between the officers and the outgoing Secretary on how we might reinforce existing activity by the Society and introduce a range of new initiatives and processes. This includes:

1. Restructuring of the committee agenda to give more prominence and time to our core business including a more effective tracking of our core business objectives
2. Revisions to the constitution to incorporate new ways of organising AGMs and committee meetings in the light of the pandemic
3. The addition of new policy items to our strategy embracing the other “big issues” outlined above including the greater emphasis on conservation and the impact of climate change/ net zero policies
4. The strengthening of the Planning Group and the widening of its remit to become the Conservation Group, including the possibility of recruiting external expertise to address issues beyond planning and other applications
5. A review the remit of the tree group and look to enlist additional members and create stronger links with the proposed Conservation Group
6. Embarking on an educational initiative to inform residents living in the Conservation Area of the planning policies which relate to their properties, the importance of adhering to them and guidance on what constitutes “doing the right thing”