

CONSERVATION AREAS AT RISK

Frequently Asked Questions

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General questions about conservation areas

Q: How many conservation areas are there in England?

A: There are around 9,300 conservation areas. They are designated by local authorities. Information on what areas are designated is available from local authority websites. English Heritage is compiling a complete list and is requesting conservation area data from local authorities in an electronic form to include in its own internal GIS (Geographical Information System) to assist in the analysis of information. For copyright reasons public access to this data cannot be provided by English Heritage, so interested people should get in touch with individual authorities for the boundaries of their conservation areas.

Q: Are conservation areas unique to Britain?

A: No. Many other countries have recognised the value of designating areas as well as individual historic buildings or archaeological sites. However the legislation and therefore the parameters of area protection differ greatly.

For example:

- In Portugal there is a 50m “special protected zone” around listed buildings and in Lisbon alone there are some 2000 “special protected zones” that cover most of the centre of the city.
- In Sweden there are area regulations which are managed at the municipal level.
- In the Czech Republic there are “conservation zones” that are similar to buffer zones and “reserves” which are the closest to the conservation areas. These are managed by the municipal authorities.
- In Estonia they have “milieu” which has the same level of protection as their registered (listed) buildings.
- In Hungary they have 33 conservation areas and also “environment” (Curtilage) protection.
- In Italy they designate ancient town centres where no buildings can be demolished (20,000 of them).
- In the Netherlands they have 354 listed townscapes (2004 figure) where alterations require the consent of EH’s equivalent RDMZ.
- In Norway they have “cultural environment” designation which is very similar to our conservation areas.
- In France they have a national “secteur sauvegarde” designation for more important historic areas and a locally designated “zone de protection” for smaller settlements and the setting of protected buildings. Special permission is required to carry out building works both within these areas and within 500m of them.

Q: How much land do conservation areas cover in England?

A: We are currently asking local authorities to send us details of their conservation area boundaries so that we can map them and work this out. At present we only have responses from 70% of LAs, so cannot give a total.

However, we do know that among the smallest conservation areas are Bute Street, Stockton-on-Tees at 0.18ha and Haslemere Springhead in Waverley, Surrey, at 0.32ha. Among the largest are Sunk Island in the East Riding of Yorkshire at 2,484ha and Bath at 1,486ha.

Q: How many conservation areas might an individual local authority have?

A: There is no limit. We do not have results for the whole country, but we know that the LA with the most is Cotswold District Council which has 144. The Peak District National Park Authority has 109.

The Northumberland National Park Authority has just the one conservation area. All the islands in the Council of the Isles of Scilly are designated as a conservation area, the only local authority area covered entirely by a single designation.

Q: Which is the oldest conservation area in England?

A: Stamford Conservation Area in South Kesteven, Lincolnshire is the oldest conservation area in England and was designated in 1967.

Q: Which is the newest conservation area in England?

A: It is hard to say, as several conservation areas may have been designated recently, but one of the most recent is Wanstead Grove Conservation Area in Wanstead, East London, designated in March 2009.

Questions about the Conservation Area at Risk survey

Q: What is new about the survey/research work English Heritage has done?

A: It is the first attempt to capture details on the conditions of all the conservation areas in England to form a baseline of evidence of condition against which we can measure changes over the coming years.

Q: How have you decided what is at risk?

A: Areas that have either deteriorated in the last three years or are expected to in the next three are considered to be at risk of loss of historic significance. Issues such as development pressures, erosion of historic detail, insensitive highway schemes, empty buildings and lack of investment are types of factors which are considered when assessing whether an area is improving, stable or declining.

Q: How many councils have replied?

A: The survey was undertaken in the autumn of 2008, before the new local authority boundaries were established. At the end of December, 273 (75%) had replied with surveys for 5,479 conservation areas (approx 60%). The on-line questionnaire was re-opened from January until the end of April and a further 26 councils replied. We have been delighted with the response that shows the commitment of many local councils to their conservation areas and are aiming for 100% coverage.

Q: What are the criteria for removing a conservation area off the register?

A: If a local authority can demonstrate that all the appropriate actions and plans are in place and there is demonstrable progress on the ground, we can take a conservation area off the register.

Q: How are you going to monitor risk in the longer term?

A: Local authorities have access to a database of their survey reports and can update them whenever they want to. We will prompt them to do so in advance of publishing the *Heritage at Risk Register* each year so that we know which conservation areas need to be added or removed.

The role of English Heritage in conservation areas

Q: What exactly is English Heritage's role re conservation areas? When do you get involved?

A: EH works with all Local Authorities in providing advice on the management of their conservation areas in many ways, including:

- Being a statutory consultee for planning applications affecting a conservation area where the site area exceeds 1000 sq m. or the development would exceed 20m. in height;
- In Greater London, being a statutory consultee for applications for conservation area consent to demolish buildings;
- Providing advice on planning policies in the each local authority's Local Development Framework, other planning documents such as development briefs, and character appraisals and management plans;
- Entering into partnership with Local Authorities to fund area grant schemes for the repair and refurbishment of historic buildings or streetscape within conservation areas;
- Working on regeneration schemes such as Housing Market Renewal areas where we have carried out research into the historical development of an area.
- Producing two documents for local authorities: *Guidance on the management of conservation areas* and *Guidance on conservation area appraisals*.

Q: How do you expect local authorities with lots of conservation areas to do Appraisals and Management Plans for them all?

A: There are strategic approaches that can be considered. In Aylesbury Vale District Council which has over 120 conservation areas, a District wide Conservation Management Plan Strategy has been developed which has identified issues that are common to all of the conservation areas and allows the council to produce more targeted action plans to address issues that are specific to individual areas. The intention is that the strategy itself will become a supplementary planning document (SPD) which simplifies the environmental appraisal issues that can be encountered if you have to produce many individual management plans.

Q: Can English Heritage fund councils to help them do Conservation Area Character Appraisals?

A: English Heritage expects local authorities to have Conservation Area Character Appraisals in place, which until recently were required as one of the Government's Best Value indicators. Where an authority has struggled with its conservation areas but is committed to their improvement and asks for English Heritage assistance, we will consider grant aiding work including area appraisals as part of our capacity building programme, prior to providing funding through an area grant scheme.

An example is the Community Heritage Initiative Project, or CHIP which the SE Region sponsored in partnership with Elmbridge Borough Council in Surrey. This two year project used EH funding to appoint a heritage consultant to facilitate and enable local communities to produce appraisals of their own conservation areas. As a direct result of the project, four conservation area appraisals were published and the local authority agreed to establish and fund a programme of appraisals for the remainder of its conservation areas. The project saw local communities developing research and recording projects inspired by their appraisal work and the CHIP project led to the council receiving recognition for its community engagement from the Audit Commission.

Q: What can English Heritage do as our council simply says it doesn't have enough conservation staff to cope with minor issues like managing its conservation areas?

A: English Heritage works with all local authorities to help them manage the historic environment in their area. If we are made aware of a local authority that says it has not got the resources to do what is a duty under the 1990 Town & Country Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act, we will work with them to see what can be done to alleviate the problem.

Q: How can English Heritage expect residents and local authorities to spend money on conservation areas in the current financial climate? Aren't there more pressing needs?

A: It need not be a question of spending more money but instead of thinking carefully about actively managing the area and what you do or don't do to your property. Spending a little money on regular maintenance and keeping the original features and character of your home will help it maintain its value where as spending more money on some major alterations may have the opposite effect. For local authorities, this campaign is about helping them to prioritise resources to protect and improve the places which make a difference to people's lives.

The role of local authorities/councils in managing conservation areas

Q: What are requirements on local authorities with respect to conservation areas?

A: Local authorities have duties to designate conservation areas where they have identified areas that are of special interest, and then to review them from time to time. They also have a duty to make proposals to preserve or enhance the conservation areas designated. When using their planning powers, they need to pay special attention to the "desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area". This is best achieved by carrying out an appraisal and producing a conservation area management plan or strategy.

Q: How should my local authority look after its conservation areas?

A: Local planning authorities are required to "formulate and publish proposals for the preservation or enhancement of their conservation areas". English Heritage believe this is best achieved by carrying out an appraisal of the conservation area to understand what gives it its character and appearance and which then influences the management plan. More on this can be found in our *Guidance on the management of conservation areas*. www.helm.org.uk

Q: How does my local authority control changes that detract from the character of the conservation area?

A: Local authorities are required to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a conservation area, in anything they do or have control over.

Q: Is it true that planning applications are free in conservation areas? Our council says they are reluctant to process them because they won't earn a fee.

A: The only exception to fees being required for planning applications is when the proposed works require specific planning permission because of an Article 4 direction. There is no fee requirement for listed building consent or conservation area consent applications either.

Local people and the performance of their council

Q: What can residents do about councils which give planning consent under delegated powers rather than taking the application to a Council Committee, even if objections are not resolved?

A: Councils will approve most planning applications under delegated powers, unless the application proves controversial, with the measure of controversy being the number of letters of objection received. Therefore if you are concerned about an application you should send in a letter objecting to the proposals and speak to your local councillor: As a general rule, the more objections they receive the more likely they are to refer the decision to the planning committee and even full council.

Q: What can residents do about councils which will not take enforcement action on any unauthorised development for which they think they might not be able to defeat a planning appeal?

A: Policy on the priorities of the enforcement section of any local planning authority will be determined by that council, and ultimately by the elected members. Residents should take up the issue with their local councillor/ elected member.

Q: What can residents do about councils which do not impose adequate and enforceable conditions with planning permissions in conservation areas and listed building consent to ensure use of appropriate materials and good detailing etc.?

A: If you feel that conditions should be applied to a planning permission it is always worth suggesting this to your council in making your written response to a consultation. Planning conditions often cover such issues as materials and architectural detailing. If consistently your council planning department does not do this you might consider pointing out to the Chair of the Planning Committee and your local councillor the effect that the lack of control over details on permissions is having. You might do this by offering to show them some recently completed developments where this is very apparent.

Q: Our council has given approval for a development in the conservation area despite huge opposition from local residents. Is there an appeals process?

A: The formal appeals process through the Planning Inspectorate is only open to applicants who have had their application refused. A judicial review of a decision on the grounds that it was legally flawed is a possibility but such challenges are expensive and the taking of specialist legal advice is strongly advised before embarking on such a course of action.

Q: Our council's decisions relating to alterations to buildings within conservation areas are inconsistent, despite their own planning policies – is there anything we can do?

A: It is usually best to seek a meeting with your local councillor and the chair of the planning committee and come armed with factual documentation to back up your concerns. You will need to prove that your council is actually contradicting its policies rather than interpreting them differently than you.

Q: What can we, as a parish council, do when the local planning authority consistently allows developments that contradict the Village Design Statement, even though the local planning authority itself adopted the VDS as a Local Design Statement. Can't English Heritage press for added weight to be given to Village Design Statements in the planning process?

A: You should seek a meeting with your local councillor and the chair of the planning committee and come armed with factual documentation to back up your concerns. You will need to prove that your council is actually contradicting its policies rather than interpreting them differently. English Heritage in our *Guidance on the management of conservation areas* encourages the use of local guidance on design as a way of helping to ensure that new development is in context with its area, and encouraging good design is a high government priority.

Q: How can we prevent the council demolishing or allowing demolition of a building in a conservation area but then doing nothing with the site?

A: Conservation Area Consent is required to demolish a conservation area building in its entirety. Guidance in the Government's *Planning Policy Note 15: Planning and the Historic Environment* (PPG 15) Annex B advises that conservation area consent should not be given for demolition of a conservation area building unless there are appropriate proposals for the redevelopment of the site in order to avoid an unsightly, cleared site. In determining an application for conservation area consent, the Council should take into account the guidance in PPG15.

Concern about unlisted buildings in conservation areas

Q: The Council owns a number of derelict historic buildings within a conservation area but nothing has been done to address the issue – is there anything we can do to make the Council refurbish the buildings?

A: You need to gain the support of your local councillor who can find out for you what part of the council owns the buildings and the reasons for them remaining empty and derelict. Under the *Making Assets Work* initiative, the government is encouraging all public bodies to consider disposing of their unused buildings to the voluntary/charitable sector. If you think you can develop sustainable proposals for the buildings then you could consider approaching the council to ask them to pass the buildings over to you. The government has delegated this role to the Development Trusts Association who will give advice to local groups on taking on buildings (see www.dta.org.uk/activities/campaigns/community/assets/). You should bear in mind that the reasons why the buildings are derelict, for example because they are contaminated or are very far from being economically viable, may be equally hard for voluntary bodies to overcome, so you are advised to take good professional advice before taking on such buildings.

Q: We are concerned about the Victorian school and hospital in our conservation area. The council says that the only way to provide adequate education and health facilities is to build new ones. This means these much-loved buildings at the heart of our community will be demolished.

A: Over the past 10 years there has been major investment in health and education services, most being spent on the construction of new facilities, but there has also been investment in refurbishing and upgrading historic buildings so that they can carry on in health and education uses in the 21st century. English Heritage has produced publications on the reuse and adaptation of historic buildings which have featured buildings in health and education uses. If the buildings concerned are of any significant historic interest, then the EH regional office will probably have been in discussion with the local council and the local health or education authorities about their continued use. If it has been decided that new facilities on another site will be constructed then the issue of disposal of the buildings will need to be addressed, in which case see the answer above. There are many examples of old school and health buildings being very successfully converted into new uses such as dwellings, offices and community buildings, and so every encouragement should be given to exploring all possible new uses.

Q: Our council doesn't seem to value any of its old buildings such as our 1930s cinema, the old post office and the pubs.

A: See the answer above.

Concern about the public realm in conservation areas

Q: Our council does not follow English Heritage's Streets for All guidance in the conservation area. What can we do to persuade them to?

A: You will need to gain the support of your local councillor and your authority's Design and Heritage Champions (an elected member who promotes the importance of the historic environment to their authority). You will need to ask them to arrange a meeting with the local highways authority (which will sometimes be the council itself and sometimes the County Council) and jointly present the case for the benefits of adopting the *Streets for All* approach. We find that using examples for neighbouring authorities can help. See www.english-heritage.org.uk/saveourstreets

Q: The streets and pavements in our conservation area are a disgrace. The local highways authority doesn't consult the community and doesn't seem to be accountable to anyone. What do we do?

A: The answer is to find out who the highways authority is responsible for the streets in question and encourage them to meet with your local planning authority for a discussion on how both planning and highways can fulfil their duty to "preserve or enhance the character or appearance" of the conservation area. You should come armed with pictures to demonstrate your claim that the streets are in a poor state and this is detracting from the conservation area's appearance.

Q: What can we do when the council wants to remove Victorian lampposts because they don't comply with the PFI specification because they are over 25 years old? They say they are a public safety hazard.

A: This is always a difficult area to challenge, normally because the first time you are aware of it as an issue your highway authority has already signed a PFI contract and the retention and refurbishment of the existing lampposts is not covered by the contract, so to retain them would require the contractor to price for these works outside the contract which may mean that the cost per lamp will be in well in excess of the standard replacement option. There are examples where traditional lampposts have been retained and it may strengthen your case for their conservation if you can point to sensitive local schemes that might be emulated.

Q: How can you reconcile disabled access with heritage conservation in the public realm?

A: We don't believe this ever needs to be a problem. Our *Streets for All* approach has always recognised that every public space has to be accessible and that an accessible route laid with appropriate material needs to be constructed on some part of the space.

House owner questions about being in a conservation area

Q: What can I do to my house in a conservation area? What is the effect of the newly introduced changes to the General Planning Development Order and what does EH think of this?

A: This will depend on whether there are additional controls in your conservation area. Generally, "permitted development", that is building work that does not require planning permission is more restricted in conservation areas, and can be further restricted by your council if they have brought in an Article 4 Direction. The rules on permitted development changed twice in 2008, so you should approach your local council to get advice on what you could do without needing planning permission, and what you might need planning permission for but would probably be granted.

Q: Can I build a loft extension if I live in a conservation area?

A: Roof extensions in conservation areas require planning permission. Your local planning authority/council can advise you on whether permission for a loft extension is likely to be given. If other, similar buildings in your street have loft extensions then there is more likelihood that your application will be approved. Your council may have published design guidance on loft extensions. See www.planningportal.gov.uk

Q: Can I recover VAT on repairs to properties in conservation areas?

A: No, although you may pay VAT at a lower rate on works that improve the energy performance of your building, such as draught and loft insulation.

Q: Can I get grants for repairs in a conservation area? Are any grants available for any projects in conservation areas?

A: In most conservation areas there are no grants available for the repairs to the historic fabric of the buildings because the evidence shows that owners generally recognise that carrying out repairs is a wise investment of their own resources. EH runs a grant programme in which we enter into a partnership with the Local Authority and create a conservation area grant scheme for repairs to historic buildings for areas where there are very significant problems. We currently have over 100 of these partnerships. Councils apply to EH for match funding for the scheme to run in a deprived conservation area; they develop an implementation programme where they select the buildings that need repair; and they encourage the building owners to apply for a grant towards the cost of repairs. The Heritage Lottery Fund run a similar programme called Townscape Heritage Initiative, which is aimed at conservation areas with larger problems.

Windows and doors

Introduction

Windows and doors that are original or of historic interest make a major contribution to the character of traditional houses. They should not generally be altered in their proportions or details as they are conspicuous elements of the design.

Windows

Energy is lost through windows in two ways: by heat passing through the glass and by warm air escaping through gaps in and around the frames. They are equally important and both can be tackled in four main ways without detracting from the appearance or heritage value of the windows:

The windows can be repaired and their mechanisms overhauled

The benefits of simple repairs should not be underestimated. Freeing windows to open and shut properly, repairing broken glass panes, and closing gaps around casements and sashes are the best place to start with any window improvement.

The windows can be draught-stripped

Much of the heat lost through windows is actually through leaks, and the resulting draughts are a disproportionately large source of discomfort. Providing old windows with effective draught stripping therefore yields great benefits. However, it is not a DIY job: contact a local carpenter or use one of the regional or national chains of draught-proofing specialists.

Secondary glazing can be added

Secondary glazing is usually more expensive than overhauling and draught stripping so may not be cost effective on grounds of energy efficiency alone. It can also be visually intrusive, both internally and externally, and if poorly specified can impede the operation of shutters and the use of window ledges. However, secondary glazing does improve sound-proofing (is more effective than double glazing) and is often chosen for the front of houses facing onto busy roads.

Secondary protection, such as shutters, curtains and insulated blinds can be used at night or during the day when the building or room is unoccupied

The benefit of shutters and curtains is often forgotten. During the the 20th century the increasing availability of cheap heating meant that people did not feel the need to close internal window shutters at night to keep the warmth in. As a result, the shutters were often painted over or removed altogether. Working shutters can even match the performance of modern double-glazing. They are attractive features which add to the value of the home. Similarly heavy curtains, if drawn at dusk, will also reduce heat loss.

Doors

Most external doors will be made of wood, often incorporating a glass pane. Though not up to modern standards the heat lost through the fabric of the door will not be substantial and would certainly not justify replacement of the door. Old doors can, however, be very draughty. Again the first solution will be to repair the door, the frame and any threshold. Draught-proofing can often be added more easily to doors than to windows. Heavy curtains are particularly effective for doors, as are humble sausage shaped draught excluders!

Frequently asked questions

Q. Surely my old Victorian windows are not historically important?

A. Undoubtedly they are! Not just because they are original. They are also likely to be made from very high quality imported timber that just cannot be sourced today.

Q. I have been told that my windows are beyond repair & need to be replaced. What should I do?

A. Ask an experienced carpenter/joiner who repairs timber windows. It may well be possible to repair them. There are several advice leaflets on ways of repairing timber windows.

English Heritage's Framing Opinions leaflets are available on the English Heritage website.

http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/door_window.pdf?1244803655

http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/metal_windows.pdf?1244803418

http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/timber_sash.pdf?1244803418

Q. My wooden windows have a lot of rot in the frames: should I replace them?

A. The first course of action for windows in poor condition should be repair by an experienced joiner. Repair will not only improve the appearance of the window, it will extend its life and improve its thermal performance. A second option is to consider one of the two-part epoxy resin repair systems that can extend the life of historic windows.

If the carpenter/joiner confirms that the window is beyond economic repair then replacement must be considered. In this case reproductions of historic windows can be made that are identical in appearance to those being replaced. Historic glass from the old windows can be reused in the new frames.

Q. Some of the old windows in my house were replaced about 20 years ago with plastic units. Should I take the opportunity to install new wooden replicas of the originals but with double-glazed panes?

A. Be very cautious. Modern double-glazed replacement sash windows cannot replicate the fine detailing and proportions of many traditional windows, as the window frames and glazing bars have to be thicker to house the glass. This may not be important if the windows being replaced are on a separate elevation, but if they are mixed in with originals they could be obvious and visually glaring.

Q. Should I replace the old panes in my windows with thicker glass or slim double-glazing units?

A. Old glass is of interest and is becoming increasingly rare. It is of value not just for its age, but because it has more richness and sparkle than today's flat sheets with their uniform reflections. Where it survives, it should be retained and alternative means of thermal improvement considered. Thicker glass will not make much difference in heat loss. Slim double-glazing units are much heavier than the old panes and this extra weight could distort the old frames.

Q. I know that ventilation is important in old buildings – isn't draught-proofing dangerous?

A. Ventilation is essential to the sound working of historic and traditional buildings. Their fabric often needs to 'breathe' – releasing and absorbing moisture. Moisture from rising damp, driving rain, defects and condensation can move through traditional permeable building materials until it eventually evaporates both internally and externally through traditional surface finishes. Ventilation is critical to this mechanism.

While draught-proofing reduces the air getting in, most old buildings will still have adequate ventilation from other areas of the building for the fabric to continue to breathe satisfactorily. Draught-proofing will not totally exclude all ventilation.

Q. Are there any windows that should not be draught-proofed?

A. Generally it is not advisable to draught-proof windows in bathrooms, kitchens, and utility rooms where lots of water vapour is produced and high levels of ventilation are required. It is wasteful to draught-strip a window and then leave it open!

Q. Will secondary glazing prevent me from closing my shutters?

A. Not usually. New secondary glazing systems are available with very thin profiles.

Q. Should I draught-strip and secondary glaze for extra benefit?

A. No, good quality secondary glazing will be tight fitting and stop draughts, so draught-proofing the original window will have little additional benefit. It is also good practice to have a little ventilation of the space between the original and secondary windows.

Q. I am fitting new windows to my house to replace some inappropriate plastic double glazed units. Do the new Building Regulations mean that I have to use double- glazed units?

A. Not if your house is listed or in a conservation area, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), National Park or near a World Heritage Site or an ancient monument. The Building Regulations allow single-glazing to be used in those circumstances if double-glazing would harm the appearance or character of the building or area.

Q. I'm building an extension to my house: can I have single glazing to match the windows to the original house?

A. Quite possibly if your house is listed or in a conservation area. You may need to discuss this with the local authority's conservation officer and building control Officer. They may recommend that secondary glazing is provided as well. The key issue is whether new double- glazed units would detract from the appearance or character of the building or area. Sometimes this is the case on a formal front façade, but may not be the case if the extension is otherwise of an obviously modern design.

Q. Is double glazing allowed in Listed Buildings?

A. It is very rare for a local planning authority to give listed building consent for the replacement of original windows if they are beyond economic repair with copies that do not exactly match the originals. The Secretary of State has dismissed over 90 per cent of appeals against the refusal of listed building consent for replacing traditional single-glazed sash windows with double- glazed plastic (PVCu) windows because of the loss of important features and the fact that the replacements proposed would detrimentally affect the special character and appearance of the building.

Q. I live in a conservation area; do I need permission to change my windows?

A. Check with your local planning authority's conservation officer as rules vary from area to area. You will need Building Regulations approval.

For more detailed information on windows and doors click on guidance documents from our Energy Efficiency series on the English Heritage Climate Change website: www.climatechangeandyourhome.org.uk .

You should always check with the local council before carrying out any works to your property. In a conservation area, some works (alterations or extensions) may not require consent as they will be permitted, however other works may require planning permission due to their size, or because there is an Article 4 direction in place.

Q What is wrong with plastic windows?

A. They seldom look the same as the original windows and many look totally different. Indeed they can mar the appearance of a whole street. They will need maintenance and unlike with timber windows, it can be difficult and sometimes impossible to buy spares.

Q. Isn't it just a matter of taste as to what looks right?

A. Most old windows are deliberately designed to be of similar proportions to the house. Most people find this attractive. If the house is part of a terrace with identical windows then plastic replacements will ruin the appearance of the street.

Q. Plastic windows are more energy-efficient aren't they?

A. No. A lot of energy is used in their production and they are no more efficient than timber windows which have been improved by either closing shutters, using insulated blinds or secondary glazing.

Q. Why are timber windows better for the environment?

A. Old timber windows last much longer....many have lasted two hundred years plus and are capable of being repaired. Plastic windows are only expected to last for around 20 years and at present most go to land-fill. Incineration can lead to the production of harmful pollutants and only small amounts of plastic are currently recycled.

Q. Plastic windows will save me money on my heating bills? I'll recoup the cost of installation?

A. Existing timber windows can be improved to match and even better plastic windows in reducing heating bills. It will take between 50 and 100 years to recoup expenditure on plastic windows which makes little sense as most are expected to be replaced within 20 years. On average people move house every 7 years, so it makes even less sense.

Q. How do I find a reputable tradesman to do repairs?

A. The best way is often by word of mouth. Speak to someone who is pleased with their repairs. Many local tradesmen do not advertise although it is still worth checking the Yellow Pages and adverts placed in local papers, builders merchants etc. Your local conservation officer or if you know any; local architects or surveyors may know reliable and experienced tradesmen. Once you find one, ask where he or she have done similar work and ask if they would mind you talking to that client.

Q. Can I get a grant?

A: Repair is always preferable to renewal and usually involves far less cost. Most window repairs can be carried out as part of routine maintenance and repairs, so additional grants are not necessary.

Q. If I have to replace sash windows, what should I use instead of plastic?

A. The usual answer is to use good softwood timber and it would be sensible to include draught proofing when the window is installed. This will look virtually identical to the original and will also minimise possible heat loss.

Q. What is wrong with wooden double-glazed windows of the same pattern as the originals?

A. It is virtually impossible to replicate wooden windows in double glazing. This is because two pains of glass set 12 mm apart need much thicker timber supports to deal with the heavier weight. Details such as glazing bars are correspondingly bigger. Some of the new slim-line double glazing gets much closer in design to the originals but is quite obvious because of the double reflection caused by two pains of glass close together.

Q. Won't I enhance the value of my house by putting in plastic windows?

A. Evidence shows the reverse is often the case. Estate agents generally make a great play of advertising 'original features' and most confirm that these sell homes much more quickly.

Q. What difference does living in a conservation area make to what I can and cannot do with my windows?

A. Some local authorities may be using an Article 4 Direction to control changes to important features like windows. If so, planning permission is then needed to change them. All local authorities and many residents try to encourage their neighbours to keep features like original windows which are so important to the appearance of conservation areas and which make them special.

Q. English Heritage says I need special permission from the council to replace my windows and that plastic ones won't be allowed. But lots of my neighbours in the conservation area have put plastic windows in and they haven't been fined or gone to prison?

A. Where there are Article 4 Directions controlling changes to windows in a conservation area, the local authority will often take enforcement action against unauthorised changes, so replacing timber windows with PVCu can be an expensive mistake which the owner may have to pay to reverse.

Q. It's my house! Why shouldn't I do what I want with it?

A. True, but it is others who have to look at it, possibly more than you. People often like living in an area because it is distinctive and has special character and this is what distinguishes conservation areas. This special character rapidly disappears if residents destroy the very features that are important. All residents of course, are merely temporary custodians of their buildings! The Council have recognised the importance of the area by designating it as a conservation area.

Q. Instead of having a go at the poor consumer, why don't you complain to the double-glazing companies and try to get them banned from selling plastic windows to people in conservation areas?

A. We do talk to bodies that represent the companies but there are hundreds of firms in England, most of whom are not part of any trade body. More importantly, the law of the land would not allow an outright ban of anything other than illegal products. All cases have to be decided on their own merits.

Q. How can you say I should not get plastic windows when the cost of new wooden ones is simply unaffordable? I am told my original windows are rotten and beyond repair and cannot afford new timber ones. Plastic is my only option!

A. Like all products there are high quality windows and poor quality ones. Timber or plastic. I would start by finding a reputable and experienced tradesmen to tell you if your windows are beyond repair. If not, then they may be capable of being substantially improved. Alternatively ask for a quote to make a facsimile replacement. You might be pleasantly surprised.

Topical and technical questions

Q: What are the regulations on micro-renewables?

A: In conservation areas planning permission is needed for solar panels on principal or side elevations and stand alone solar panels, for other micro-generation equipment on the principal or side wall or roof slope if visible from the public highway, and for all boiler flues including for combined heat and power (CHP) plants.

Q: How can conservation area status help retain life in the high street which is in danger of serious decline and suffers competition from out-of-town superstores?

A: To have been designated a conservation area the high street must have some historic or architectural interest, and it must potentially be an attractive area that both local people and visitors would want to visit. The conservation area's character can be thought of as the "Unique Selling Point", a marketing term, for the area. Your council should be considering how the Conservation Area Management Plan or Strategy can enhance this character, and how it can as part of its tourism strategy promote it. In historic high streets the buildings are often of differing sizes of shop unit and these should be able to accommodate a variety of businesses. Further advice is available in the English Heritage publication 'Retail Development in Historic Areas'

Q: What effect will the Government's initiatives to make it easier to reuse vacant shops and for communities to take over public buildings have on conservation areas?

A: See the question above. Councils are being encouraged to look at the small things they can do to improve high streets. Landlords are also being asked to consider letting empty shops on short term low rents to artists and crafts people who can use the spaces both for exhibition of their products and their production. The government is also encouraging public bodies to transfer their unused buildings to community groups who can use them for activities and uses that the community needs under the *Making Assets Work* programme.

Other questions

Q: With the recent demise of the Civic Trust, who will act as a national voice and umbrella group for local civic societies?

A: A new initiative has taken over this function and hoping, if it can raise sufficient funds, to become permanent. See www.civicsocietyinitiative.org.uk