Bloomsbury Conservation Area Advisory Committee

Response to “English Heritage New Model Consultation”

We are glad to for this opportunity to comment formally on the running of English Heritage. Our recent experience of English Heritage in Camden, in particular the way it executes its statutory and advisory duties, is that it is insufficiently accountable: it is entirely cutting across local democracy and failing to reflect that the source of its own power is democratic government. In short, it has acted in a high-handed manner, which does nothing to inspire confidence in its decision making process.

The position taken by EH in relation to proposed developments too often undermines the position of local groups, including the various long-standing Conservation Area Advisory Committees in Camden (BCAAC was established by Camden Council in 1968) and eventually also Camden’s Development Control Committee. All these bodies in reality have had in recent years a much better record in protecting Camden’s historic buildings and historic environment than does EH.

To cite a particular area of concern, the matter of statutory listing of buildings is a crucial part of the conservation of the historic heritage and should be protected from political intervention, either local or national. It is essential that the future listing of buildings is considered purely on their intrinsic merit. It is vital that interested and informed local people and organisations, who may well have local knowledge and commitment to our heritage, are more fully involved in the process.

The absence of any mention of local residents and local voluntary groups in the text of the consultation paper illustrates how far English Heritage has removed itself from the people it is actually supposed to serve – the voters themselves. What about getting English Heritage to work better for the public?

In recent years, EH has apparently favoured Government Agencies in the face of local opinion, expressed through local organisations and through our elected local representatives, such as those sitting on the Development Control Committee. Its advice has been faulty because of lack of understanding of local context and failure to liaise with and listen to local organisations. For example when advising on major building developments in Bloomsbury, an historic townscape of international renown, it has not taken the character of the relevant conservation area into account, or the need for buildings to be in context. The new northern extension to the British Museum and the current development in Cartwright Gardens are cases in point.

This has served to severely undermine the efforts of local communities to preserve and enhance their amenity. It needs to work with, not against the community.

BCAAC 6.2.14