

# Planning reform for retrofit of listed and conservation area homes

On Tuesday 18 June, four councils with different approaches to their prevalence of listed and conservation area buildings - Westminster, Islington, Kensington & Chelsea, and Bath & North East Somerset - discussed how to reform planning to facilitate and scale up the retrofit of such homes. They met at Islington town hall, at the initiative of [Green Conservation](#), a grassroots group campaigning for Islington council to reform local planning rules to help residents update their homes for the 21st century.

## Wanted: 'a centralising brain'

After the four panellists shared their pain points and examples of best practice, a consensus emerged from a lively but collaborative two-hour discussion chaired under Chatham House rules by Sara Edmonds, co-director of the National Retrofit Hub. The meeting, propelled by questions and comments from an audience representing residents, industry, and other sections of local government, agreed on the **need for some form of central knowledge-pooling to prevent locally-produced rules from lagging technological advances**. What one panellist described as 'a centralising brain' could be mandated by central government, promoted by the [National Retrofit Hub \(NRH\)](#), and updated in real time by Historic England, the body which councils already look to for guidance.

As one resident in the audience put it: *" I can't believe you're all doing so much work and repeating work... You should be at Historic England's doorstep saying you need to be very specific about all the things that can be done and keep it all updated, and then you can stop all this and get on with your jobs."*

Many councils, including Islington, have declared a climate emergency and their intention to become netzero boroughs by 2030. But their ability to act is limited not just by resource constraints and a shortage of knowledge and skills. Councils are also in many cases reinventing the wheel by producing their own rules, guides and plans, while being barely able to keep up with case-work amid high staff churn and, in some cases, conflicting responses by individual planning officers.

## The challenges

### Complex rules prevent retrofit scale up

Despite some instances of knowledge sharing between councils, the meeting also heard of big variations and complexity in rule setting, resulting in fragmentation of requirements for residents and retrofit professionals. While panelists talked about the need to dispel perceptions that retrofit measures are not allowed, residents and executives pointed out that complex rules and poor user experience put residents off retrofit and discourage businesses from developing the skills to retrofit older homes that account for the bulk of UK housing stock. As Cara Jenkinson,

who chairs the NRH's skills working group pointed out, this fragmentation also makes it harder for both council officials and contractors to work seamlessly across different parts of the country. David Leviser, CEO of Fornax, which does planning applications for heatpumps it leases to customers, added: *"It does not make a lot of sense for us to touch listed properties. We should drop them. They're not commercially viable. We get the same return but it takes months and months. But if that happens, owners of these homes will get left behind. You need people coming into industry getting experience of different kinds of homes. It's really important to see the commercial perspective."* He quoted the example of one officer who *'did not know there was a carbon benefit to installing heatpumps'*.

- One immediate action could be for councils to share with each other best practice guides such as Westminster's [how- to-retrofit interactive guides](#) for [heatpumps](#), [solar panels](#) and [windows](#). Another recommendation from panelists was for residents to refer poor experiences with individual planning applications to senior council officers. A third was to hire a **specialist retrofit conservation officer**, as Islington is endeavoring to do.

### **Council workload**

With the exception of Westminster which has created a taskforce solely dedicated to encouraging retrofit, again funded by a central government grant, most councils labour under a double burden of tackling case work in tandem with developing new policies. Policy work would be needed to simplify decision-making by making certain planning applications unnecessary or just by stating that certain planning applications will get automatic approval. But it will ultimately reduce case work which would otherwise be likely to crowd it out. There is also scope to explore AI tools to augment human capacity already stretched by spending constraints.

### **Dilution of national strategy**

The fact that many conservation-area and listed buildings - which account for an estimated five per cent of UK greenhouse gas emissions - are owned either by councils with netzero mandates or by homeowners in the able-to-pay category could in theory make them drivers of demand for green goods and services. But this potential for a virtuous cycle has been further undermined by recent governments' watering down of the UK's once-world leading environmental policies. In Bath and North East Somerset for instance, the council would appreciate *"a more nuanced view of energy and moving away from gas heating and a clearer vision of where we're going with electrifying our homes"*. Complicating the picture, as another resident noted, is the *high cost of electricity relative to gas in the UK although some utilities offer cheaper electricity tariffs to heat pump users*.

### **Best practice**

In Kensington & Chelsea (RBKC), which has pioneered the simplest approvals process, **the use of local listed building consent orders** spelling out upfront what will be approved for [solar panels](#) and [windows](#), take up was low. But factors specific to RBKC - including large numbers of vacant, buy-to-let and investment properties - suggest its disappointing experience may not

apply to other boroughs such as Islington where residents have been demanding such change from the council. What would be helpful would be to investigate why the take up in RBKC has been low, illustrating the importance of **learning the lessons of both successes and failures** as the Westminster taskforce, funded by a grant from Innovate UK, says it does as a matter of course.

Other forms of best practice discussed:

- While some place-based input was important, the meeting concurred on the benefits of **sharing archetypes** spelling out what kind of retrofit measures are possible on a particular building element depending on their condition (original/previously altered/in need of repair). Examples include the [Climate Emergency Conservation Area toolkit](#).
- Demonstrating retrofit's benefits in practice whether by creating **show homes - as Westminster has done in [Queens Park](#) - or promoting retrofit champions as in Bath's [Green Heritage Homes](#) programme which has completed nine Listed Building Energy Champion surveys so far. It is worth noting both Westminster and Bath's projects are supported by government grants; while not replicable in every council, their findings should at least be shared nationwide for the enlightenment of residents, council officers and contractors.**

## Community engagement

Westminster city council ran a **citizens' climate assembly**. Gathering a pool of typical residents and asking them about listed and conservation area homes *gave the council 'a mandate [to act] because it showed that people cared about the climate emergency'*.

Islington council engaged with the Green Conservation grassroots campaign group which in turn has provided impetus for change and offered constructive assistance with the council's work on a netzero supplementary planning document, now expected in early 2025, a year later than initially envisaged due to staffing difficulties. This support included organising the June 18 meeting to share councils' best practice on planning reform, at Islington town hall.

## Conclusion

The current patchwork-like planning framework could not cope with retrofit at scale even under a new government with a manifesto commitment to upgrade [five million homes](#) and cut their energy bills. This makes it all the more pressing for councils to simplify how they operate, supported by centralised guidance updated in real time, as a foundation stone to a national green energy transition, working with local communities and businesses.

Leyla Boulton and Anne-Marie Huby  
Co-chairs of [Green Conservation](#)  
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