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# Delivering Social Housing Retrofit in a Conservation Area

Case study

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# Summary

Broxtowe Borough Council, located in Nottingham, owns and manages a stock of 4,300 social homes. Many of these are in need of energy efficiency improvements and as some of them are in conservation areas, the housing team has to take steps to comply with PAS 2035 and heritage planning constraints simultaneously. This case study sets out their approach and the solutions achieved in a specific project. It should be useful to anyone thinking about delivering retrofit in an area or to a building affected by heritage planning constraints.

This publication aims to share insights, good practices, and lessons learned from relevant retrofit, sustainability and warm homes projects. It is intended for informational purposes only and does not constitute recommendations or endorsements of specific suppliers, products, or services within the sector.

## Introduction to Broxtowe Borough Council and the Eastwood Conservation Area

Broxtowe Borough Council is a relatively small local authority area to the West of Nottingham. As one of the more built-up areas within Nottinghamshire, it encompasses modest-sized towns like Beeston and Stapleford. Its boundaries include 16 conservation areas (as shown on figure 1), which together cover around 4% of the local authority's urban area.



Figure 1: A map of Broxtowe Council with conservation areas highlighted in green. Source: Broxtowe Borough Council

When the local authority successfully applied for Social Housing Decarbonisation Funding (SHDF) under wave 2.1, it aimed to improve a total of 88 homes. Of these, 70 were located in the Eastwood conservation area. The conservation area itself is described as having three distinct character areas, and these homes lie in an area of housing known as 'The Buildings'. It was originally housing provided for industrial workers in the mid-nineteenth century and has a special character derived from the uniformity of the high density, two storey, brick terraces with stone detailing (see figure 3 for an example). As part of the terraces, the homes were considered to make a positive contribution to the conservation area.

## How big a challenge was the conservation area designation?

The asset management team initially wanted to install internal wall insulation (IWI) in the buildings in the conservation area, as this would have little impact on their external character and appearance. However, the team recognised early on that this would be challenging for several reasons:

- Structural integrity. The team were concerned that there would be an increased risk of thermal bridges and cold spots if IWI was installed in these properties. This is because several structural timbers and the staircases are embedded within the walls, and it would be difficult to ventilate these areas
- Because the homes are quite modestly sized, the housing team were also concerned that they would be difficult to ventilate to the necessary levels
- The size of the properties was also a deterrent to residents, who did not want to reduce their living space through the installation of IWI
- It was also felt that the disruption of installing IWI in these properties could be challenging for the residents, many of whom were considered vulnerable

The asset management team at Broxtowe Borough Council analysed alternative solutions, such as a hybrid of IWI and external wall insulation (EWI). However, these were too costly within the parameters of the SHDF scheme. This ultimately led them to propose EWI for the buildings. The team had previous experience of delivering EWI on conservation area buildings within the local authority area, and this precedent was useful even though the buildings in question had not been thought to make a particularly positive contribution to the conservation area.

In addition to the EWI, the housing team proposed installing ventilation, top-up loft insulation, and new windows to the properties. The windows were intended to replace uPVC windows that were around 30-years old, with double-glazed windows that were designed to be sympathetic to the original design.

# How was planning permission negotiated?

As the proposed changes were going to alter the external appearance of the buildings, they would require planning permission. The housing team knew that, in making the decision, the planning team would have to aim to prevent harm to the character of the conservation area. They therefore engaged in pre-application discussions, where two main potential areas of harm were raised:

- Any change in materials that led to a loss of original brick and stone detailing
- Harm to the terrace's uniformity through the inconsistent installation of EWI was raised.

This meant that when the housing team formally applied for planning permission, they applied to use a sympathetic 'artbrick' finish EWI, which would have three layers of render in different colors and retain simple architectural details such as stone sills, lintels, dentil courses, and window reveal depths. The contractor engaged for the project, Westdale Ltd, brought valuable experience to the project, which helped in designing, communicating and negotiating these technical solutions (figure 2a and b).



Figure 2a: Two example drawings submitted as part of the asset management team's application. Source: Broxtowe Council website ([Broxtowe Council planning application](#))



Figure 2b: Two example drawings submitted as part of the asset management team's application. Source: Broxtowe Council website ([Broxtowe Council planning application](#))

The housing team also submitted two planning applications: one that covered a row of terraces all in local authority ownership, and a second that also included neighbouring homes owned by others. This was on the understanding that the housing team would seek funding to improve these homes at a later date.

However, because the local authority did not employ its own conservation officer, the planning team asked a neighbouring local authority to provide heritage conservation advice to support their decision<sup>1</sup>. The conservation officer recommended refusal.

The conservation officer recommended that the application is refused, as there would be less than substantial harm to the character and appearance of the conservation area, that is not sufficiently counterbalanced by public benefits, in accordance with Para 202 of the NPPF and Section 72 of the Listed Building and Conservation Areas Act (1990)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is quite typical for several local authorities to share conservation advice like this.

The conservation officer had searched the planning appeal register for relevant decisions. These are cited in the committee report referenced at the end of this case study and would be useful for anyone navigating this context.

## Planning committee approval

The asset management team's application for planning permission was reviewed by the local authority's planning committee in early 2023. The planning officer had recommended refusal, which was largely based on the conservation officer's advice. At the committee meeting, the asset management team gave a speech in support of the application that emphasised the importance of improving the homes for the benefit of the residents' fuel security, health and wellbeing. They also highlighted the steps being taken to conserve the area's special character through the works. As a result, most of the councillors voted to support the project. There were some abstentions but no refusals. This meant that the project was permitted.

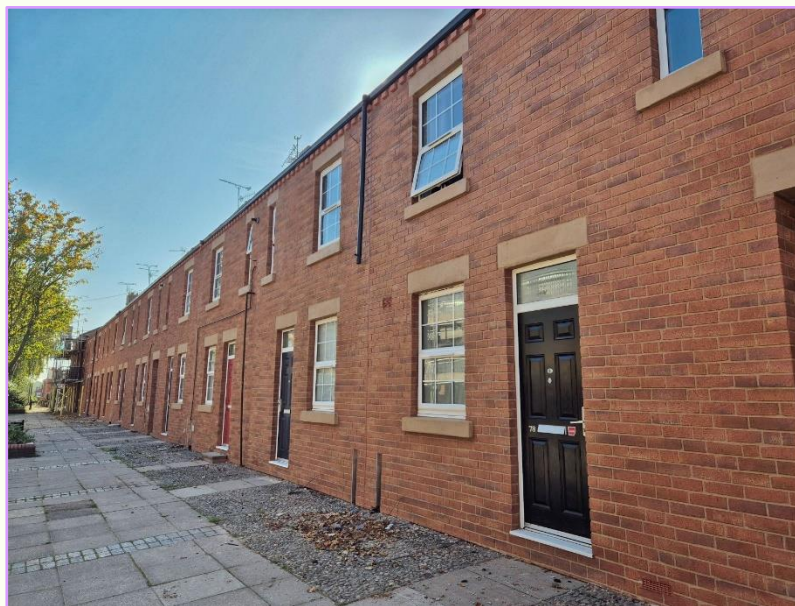
Since permission was granted, the project has been delivered on-site. Weekly meetings with the Clerk of Works ensured that detailing to comply with PAS 2035 and the planning approval have been achieved. These meetings focus on critical aspects such as capping on insulation, ground level detailing, and maintaining the historic brick finish. This meticulous approach ensured that the project adheres to both modern standards and historical preservation requirements, as seen by the before and after photos in Figures 3 and 4.

During the project, the housing team also identified a gap in any research around the interface between historic brickwork and EWI. They are therefore working with Nottingham Trent University to monitor the installations for moisture and temperature levels and analyse the findings for future reference.



*Figure 3: Before image of Princess New Street showing some degradation. Source: Broxtowe Council*

Figure 4: After image of Princess New Street showing the retrofitted buildings. Source: Broxtowe Council



## References

- Broxtowe Borough Council (2008). *Eastwood Conservation Area Character Appraisal.*
- Broxtowe Borough Council (2023). *Planning Application Documents – 23/00606/REG3.*