

## **REGENERATION, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**7 JULY 2009**

### **ROCHESTER CASTLE CONSERVATION PLAN**

Report from: Robin Cooper, Director of Regeneration, Community and Culture

Author: Simon Curtis, Tourism and Heritage Manager

#### **Summary**

A detailed Conservation Plan for Rochester Castle has been produced and is due to be formally adopted by Cabinet on 25 August 2009. This is the first ever Conservation Plan for the castle and will act as a strategic conservation framework informing its future development and management of Rochester Castle as a scheduled monument and tourist site of international significance.

#### **1. Budget and Policy Framework**

- 1.1 The Conservation Plan, once adopted, will be a significant policy document which the Council will be required to adhere to and implement.
- 1.2 English Heritage are seeking simultaneous adoption of the Plan via their South East Territory Board in August.
- 1.3 The Plan does not impose any specific financial commitments on the Council, though it recommends a number of policy actions which may require significant financial outlay in the medium to long term.
- 1.4 A Conservation Plan is now considered to be a key requirement in order to unlock external funding opportunities for conserving and improving public access and understanding of monuments. Without a Conservation Plan, the likelihood of obtaining external funding support is low.

#### **2. Background**

- 2.1 Rochester Castle is a scheduled ancient monument of exceptional significance, considered to be one of the grandest and best preserved Norman castles in England. The castle is an iconic monument, perhaps symbolising Medway more than any other building. It is an important part of Medway's tourism destination offer and a key backdrop and venue for major events.

- 2.2 The Castle is owned by the Council but is the responsibility of English Heritage in their guardianship role. Since 1995, English Heritage has delegated the management of the castle to the Council under a “Local Management Agreement” or LMA. This is due for renewal in April 2011. Negotiation on a revised LMA will begin in early 2010 and a report will be brought to both Overview and Scrutiny and Cabinet in late 2010 as part of the decision making process.
- 2.3 The partnership between the Council and English Heritage has improved greatly in recent years and both parties can take credit for improving the quality of visitor interpretation at Rochester Castle and improving public safety as part of a programme of investment, which began in 2006. In addition, some modest but critical conservation has taken place to the mural galleries of the keep and to the north facing elevation.
- 2.4 The Conservation Plan was commissioned, and funded, jointly by the Council and English Heritage in 2006 and has been undertaken by the highly regarded conservation practice, The Paul Drury Partnership, under the supervision of a steering group.
- 2.5 The objective of the Conservation Plan is to create a strategic framework around which key decisions on the future of the castle can be taken over the next 20 to 30 years. In particular the Plan will allow us to more clearly understand the site (and the development of the site since Roman times), to assess the heritage and cultural significance of the site and to recommend a series of conservation and management policies to guide our actions. It will also mean that future development and investment proposals can be tested against the site’s significance rating.
- 2.6 The Plan is a multi-faceted and highly detailed set of documents composed of three key documents (“Understanding the Site”, “Issues and Policies” and a complete Gazetteer of all parts of the castle site) and an appendix of historic images. A number of drafts have been produced over the last two years as there was a delay while some of the more controversial elements were discussed and refined. The final version of the Plan is now ready for adoption by both stakeholders, following a period of public consultation (see Section 5).
- 2.7 Inevitably, a building erected almost 900 years ago will have some major structural and conservation issues. The Conservation Plan has analysed and brought together all the research and surveys related to the condition of the keep and the curtain walls and recommended priorities for future conservation of the monument.

### **3. Advice and analysis**

- 3.1 The executive summary of the Plan is attached to this report at Appendix A.
- 3.2 The Norman and medieval fabric and the architectural qualities of the castle keep are assessed to be of *exceptional significance*, the highest level of significance, and of international importance.

- 3.3 The buried archaeology, the curtain walls and the castle's contribution to local landscape are assessed to be of *considerable significance*, qualities which justify statutory protection at national level.
- 3.4 The castle's significance as a ruin symbolising its decline from active use since the mid seventeenth century with the result that it stands proud as a romantic ruin with a unique open interior, is assessed as being of *considerable significance*.
- 3.5 The castle gardens are assessed as being of *some significance*, primarily in a local context.
- 3.6 A total of 47 policies are detailed in the Plan. Many of these concern good management and conservation practice but there are several which should be highlighted.
- 3.7 Policies 23, 24 and 25 focus on the archaeology of the site. It is advised that a castle archaeologist should be appointed and that a geophysical survey of the castle site is undertaken in order to better understand the buried archaeology in the bailey, likely to be incredibly rich. In order to protect the archaeology, it is recommended that a process is put in place to limit the damage to the archaeology which is being inflicted by the heavy use of the site during major events, especially for marquees.
- 3.8 Policies 26 to 33 focus on the structural problems of the castle. The principal issue is the gradual deterioration of the keep, both structurally and in terms of the loss of stone carving detail. The practice of occasional descaling of the keep (for health and safety reasons) will cease, cement pointing will be removed when the opportunity presents itself and an improved regime of weatherproofing to the battlement wall-tops will be implemented. Priority for future conservation work will be given to the protection of the medieval decorative stone of the interior.
- 3.9 The obvious way to protect the internal detail of the keep would be to roof it. However, this would have an adverse affect on the considerable significance of the building as a ruin. Roofing the keep remains a very controversial action and is certainly an expensive one, which is unlikely to attract external funding at the present time. While roofing (and flooring) is not something that the partners wish to pursue at the present time, it is an option which will be reviewed and assessed again in the medium term.
- 3.10 As an immediate consequence of formulating the Conservation Plan, the Council and English Heritage intend to undertake an improved weatherproofing and drainage treatment to the wall-tops in the early part of 2010, from an existing capital funding pot, representing an immediate positive response to one of the key structural issues.
- 3.11 Policies 34 to 40 address the need to improve public access to the castle and to enhance the visitor experience. Subject to funding, recommended future policy actions include; the reinstatement of the

(long collapsed) south west stair, improvements to access for disabled people and permanent uses for the two mural towers.

- 3.12 Finally, policies 41 to 47 address the setting of the castle and include; the long term goal of removing the small car park within the ditch, encouraging a more informal meadow-like appearance for the ditch, revealing the remains of the original bridge to the north-east gate (Epaul Lane), creating a more pedestrian friendly environment around the castle and encouraging the owners of nearby buildings to ensure that their properties contribute towards an improved setting for the castle.

#### 4. Risk Management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk
The Castle Conservation Plan is not adopted	Management of the castle continues to be short-term focused and not strategic, accentuating key conservation issues.	Adopt the Plan, review every three years and ensure that senior management adhere to it

#### 5. Consultation

- 5.1 Initial consultation was undertaken at the outset of the Plan draft process, in late 2006, as part of the consultant's work programme. Three seminars were held, mostly involving officers from the Council and English Heritage.
- 5.2 Once the Plan was completed to the satisfaction of the Council and English Heritage, in early 2009, a decision was made to enter into a formal consultation process with local residents and local amenity and historical interest groups. National amenity and specialist groups were also included in the consultation exercise.
- 5.3 The public consultation consisted primarily of two seminars in April 2009, one of which was aimed at local residents and businesses and the other at associations and organisations with a particular interest in the castle (e.g. the Fortress Study Group, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Castles Study Group and the Ancient Monuments Society). A total of around 40 people attended the two seminars and full notes of the sessions have been taken.
- 5.4 In addition, the summary of the Plan was placed on the Council's website between mid March and the end of May and a small exhibition-style panel display was installed in the Visitor Centre in Rochester for the same period.
- 5.5 14 separate written comments (some in great detail) were received as part of the consultation process. These included submissions from the Cathedral, the City of Rochester Society and from local residents
- 5.6 A summary report of consultation responses has been produced and listed below are key points that were raised: -.

- a) On the main issue of whether the keep should be re-roofed, opinion was very divided, both among the societies and the local residents
- b) There was much support for the protection of archaeology and for bringing the mural towers into use
- c) There was significant support for the re-instatement of the derelict bandstand amongst local residents, many of whom also suggested that the paths in the gardens were overdue a resurfacing
- d) The proposal to remove the car park in the ditch inevitably proved controversial with some local residents, though it had the support of others. Overall, the Plan is suggesting that this is still desirable
- e) Support was expressed for slowing down the traffic on Boley Hill, perhaps by imposing a 20mph speed limit

5.7 As a result of these comments, some minor amendments have been made to the Plan. All in all, the consultation process represented a full and thorough sounding for the Plan which was extremely well received.

## **6. Financial and legal implications**

- 6.1 The Council have a legal undertaking to manage and care for the Castle in an appropriate and strategic manner in keeping with the current Local Management Agreement.
- 6.2 The Conservation Plan does not require a capital injection from the Council in the short term. It recommends a long term approach to capital funding and will necessitate a managed approach to capital investment in the years to come.

## **7. Recommendations**

- 7.1 Members are asked to recommend that the Cabinet adopts this Conservation Plan for Rochester Castle.

### **Lead officer contact**

Simon Curtis, Tourism and Heritage Manager, Gun Wharf,  
Tel: (01634) 338111 Email: [Simon.curtis@medway.gov.uk](mailto:Simon.curtis@medway.gov.uk)

### **Background papers**

Rochester Castle Conservation Plan – Executive Summary – 17 pages  
Rochester Castle Conservation Plan – Understanding and Significance – 102 pages

Rochester Castle Conservation Plan – Issues and Policies – 81 pages

All can be viewed at:

<http://www.medway.gov.uk/tourism/44632/45143/castles/rochestercastle/88518.htm>

Gazetter – Volume 1 – 103 pages

Gazetteer – Volume 2 – 141 pages

Appendix 1 – Historic Images – 54 pages

Report on the Conservation Plan Consultation Process