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Removing needless red tape

Did you know that our beautiful district has more listed buildings than York?

In fact, Babergh has one of the largest number of buildings of exceptional architectural, historic, or environmental quality in the UK. They give our area its unique character and are one of our greatest assets.

But maintaining them is a challenge and, faced with the twin threats of high energy costs and a changing climate, owners often feel they can't improve energy efficiency because building regulations are so restrictive and onerous.

Not only does this mean higher energy bills, it is also bad for the environment. The UK has the oldest housing stock in Europe, and it is a huge contributor to carbon emissions. Historic England says retrofitting historic buildings will be fundamental in achieving net zero.

At Babergh District Council, we are helping owners tackle this issue, recently agreeing the most comprehensive package of measures for listed buildings in the country.

Put simply, we're making it quicker and easier for Grade II-listed building owners to make sensitive energy efficiency upgrades without having to make a planning application.

We are proud to be leading the way in this area; it could provide a template for councils everywhere and be of national significance.

First, we're introducing a local listed building consent order, which will allow Grade II-listed property owners to upgrade or replace windows without having to make individual applications, subject to

conditions.

Separately, we are also implementing a local development order, allowing solar panels and other renewable technologies to be installed on unlisted buildings within the curtilage of a Grade II-listed property, also subject to conditions.

Currently, owners must apply to the councils for listed building consent – and this will continue until the new measures are in place. But when they are finalised, they will remove needless barriers to sensible, sensitive upgrades.

A consultation held at the end of last year, involving homeowners and conservation groups, found 88 per cent in support of our plans, showing an appetite for such measures.

While energy improvement measures have often felt to be at odds with the protection of historic buildings, this is changing, as both awareness and knowledge increases of sustainable building practices.

Recent high-profile examples include the approved installation of solar panels on the roof of King's College Chapel, and the installation of double-glazed windows at the Grade I Ledston Hall in Yorkshire.

This action also reflects the rapid advancements in double-glazing technology. Slimline double-glazing is now available as thin as 11mm, which can be used within heritage-appropriate timber frames.

Details of our new orders will now be drawn up in dialogue with Historic England, and subject to further public consultation, before they are officially adopted.

This gives an indication of the council's wider commitment to sustainability, and the desire to

produce solutions which both meet the needs of residents and protect what is special about the historic built environment of the district.

There could be economic benefits, too. According to a report commissioned by the National Trust, Historic England, the Crown Estate and property companies Peabody and Grosvenor, retrofitting the UK's historic buildings would support 290,000 jobs and boost the UK economy by £35 billion, while slashing Britain's carbon emissions.

It is estimated that improving the energy efficiency of historic buildings – those built before 1919 – would reduce the carbon emissions from all the UK's buildings by five per cent per year.

Of course, it will be important that owners get the information they need about these changes, and we will ensure detailed guidance and advice is available.

Making listed buildings more energy efficient will transform the lives of the people who live and work in them. Not everyone who lives in a listed building is wealthy.

As a council, we have a responsibility to ensure the continued viability of these heritage assets which add so much to our landscape.

These changes are an indication of our approach to "rethink, repair and rebuild." We want to work with communities to help them develop community energy plans and a key element of that is improving energy efficiency of existing homes, but we also want to see developers seize the opportunity of designing and building homes with the best energy performance.