



Chapter 6: Risks

'Risks' is the sixth chapter of Port Sunlight Village Trust's Conservation Management Plan. As a whole, the document describes the history and importance of the village, outlines the challenges facing stakeholders in the preservation of the internationally-significant landscape and buildings, and goes into some detail as to how those challenges will be met.

This chapter describes the main risks to the heritage in Port Sunlight. The risks have been identified through survey work, consultation with stakeholders, and interviews with past and present Port Sunlight Village Trust (PSVT) staff. The process gives PSVT the opportunity to improve or address issues, and also informs the heritage aims, objectives and action plan.

The key risks affecting Port Sunlight are:

- Erosion or loss of the village's heritage character.
- An incomplete understanding of the history, significance and integrity of Port Sunlight and all associated connections.
- Difficulty in maintaining a sustainable, ecological environment, balancing advances in green technology with the protection and care of heritage assets in Port Sunlight.
- A lack of understanding regarding the statutory policies and protections for heritage.
- The inconsistent management of boundaries.
- A lack of understanding regarding the role of Port Sunlight Village Trust (PSVT).
- A shortage of local tradespeople with heritage skills.
- Port Sunlight's suitability for 21st-century living, balancing the differing needs of an ageing population with those of families and young people.
- Gaps in knowledge over the condition of the heritage.
- Different resources available to and priorities of the village's stakeholders.
- The relatively high cost of maintaining historic properties.
- Balancing the development of Port Sunlight as a visitor destination whilst preserving the unique heritage of the village.

Erosion or loss of the village's heritage character

Inappropriate alterations and repairs: Modern alterations and additions to historic properties and the landscape such as inappropriate tree species, unsuitable street furniture, paving over cobbles and setts (granite paving blocks), inappropriately-designed conservatories, poorly-sited satellite dishes, uPVC windows, poorly-designed extensions and plastic rainwater goods - adversely impact on Port Sunlight's special architectural character and heritage features, and threaten the integrity of the conservation area. Poor maintenance and inappropriate repairs to the built heritage and registered landscapes, such as repointing traditional masonry walls with sand and cement mortar, also result in irreversible loss of heritage materials and features.

Natural weathering: The natural weathering of Port Sunlight's heritage assets, including damage caused by wind, water ingress and exposure to sunlight or harmful atmospheric deposits, erodes the heritage features of the village. In the worst instances, weathering has resulted in a total loss of detail and ornament.

Demolition: The loss of key historic buildings and landscape features, such as the bandstand, gymnasium, open-air swimming pool and auditorium, have an immediate impact on the story of Port Sunlight, as well as its significance as a heritage site.

Disaster management: Risks to the heritage due to natural disasters (such as flooding or storm damage), intentional damage (graffiti) or accidental damage (such as fire damage or a traffic accident) will require a co-ordinated response with various stakeholders including Wirral Borough Council. A lack of understanding around the role PSVT plays in this response could lead to delays in repair works which will ultimately affect the condition of the heritage involved.

An incomplete understanding of the history, significance and integrity of Port Sunlight and all associated connections.

Throughout Port Sunlight's history, decisions have been made on the maintenance and management of residential and public properties, the landscape, monuments and memorials without understanding the significance of the site or the impact of decisions and actions. This is a village-wide concern and affects all stakeholders. Port Sunlight has been treated as a typical housing estate and has suffered inappropriate repairs and alterations, and sometimes even heritage loss, as a result.

There is also the potential for a slow erosion of the landscape heritage and its cohesive, designed aesthetic through inappropriate alterations. A lack of understanding regarding the history and importance of the Port Sunlight landscape, if combined with a lack of enforcement from PSVT and Wirral Borough Council, could lead to a gradual reduction in significance.

It is essential that the full significance of Port Sunlight as a whole is understood should pressures mount to consider undertaking more new development. The village is a remarkable survivor in its completeness and cohesion, with many areas little altered since the time of the village's founder.

With the exception of the garden centre, which was developed in the 1970s and is not in keeping with the character of the conservation area, recent development in the village has been designed to replicate Port Sunlight's architectural character. This strategy for the design of new work has maintained the cohesive character, scale and material palette of the village. However, there are risks to this approach as revival-style designs for modern buildings can be misleading or devalue the original design concept. New work should be designed to complement the heritage character of the village, but should be of its age and time.

The rear elevations and superblock inner spaces are important to the planning and design of the village, and the simple, dignified and well-considered rear elevations of cottages can easily be compromised or adversely impacted by ill-considered surface-run piping, extractor fans, cables etc and inappropriate rear extensions. Similarly, the landscaping and garage blocks which have taken the place of the former allotments and provide a new focus for these inner landscapes will need to be well maintained and be of a design and quality consistent with that of the rest of the village. If they are not they will negatively impact on the special character and appearance of the Port Sunlight Conservation Area.

Difficulty in maintaining a sustainable, ecological environment, balancing advances in green technology with the protection and care of heritage assets in Port Sunlight

Technological advances present more opportunities to retrofit a property and incorporate green technologies such as solar panels, double glazing and insulation. Although these can improve the thermal efficiency of a property and lessen its impact on the environment, at the same time a balance needs to be struck to preserve the special character and appearance of heritage assets in Port Sunlight. Key risks to the Port Sunlight Conservation Area and the wider environment include:

Installation of renewable energy sources: The installation of on-site, renewable energy sources, such as solar panels, could adversely impact on the heritage character of Port Sunlight if not designed sympathetically.

Impact on the natural environment: By doing ‘too little, too late’ in order to preserve the heritage we run the risk of impacting negatively on the natural environment through the use of non-renewable energy, wasteful watering strategies, inefficient recycling and waste disposal and few strategies to promote biodiversity.

Failure to promote benefits of embodied energy and original design intent: Port Sunlight’s housing was designed and built with features to address thermal movement, to control condensation and to take advantage of natural lighting/heating. Many residents are not aware of these inherent features and alter them, little realising their negative impact on both the sustainability and heritage character of Port Sunlight.

Whole house thermal retrofit: Partial or inappropriate thermal retrofit of Port Sunlight houses could adversely impact on the health of residents and the heritage character of the village. Inappropriate thermal retrofit strategies could increase damp and condensation in houses, leading to health issues for residents and destroying or irreversibly altering period features.

Climate change: Dramatic changes in weather conditions could pose a big threat to the planting scheme currently adopted in Port Sunlight. If temperatures rise or fall dramatically the current planting scheme will deteriorate and die, and will need to be replaced with more suitable species. The rising water table and storms or high winds as a result of climate change would also cause damage to historic building materials and landscapes throughout Port Sunlight.

Use of pesticides and herbicides: Although efforts have been made to reduce the use of pesticides, they have not been eliminated completely from the landscape maintenance programme. Changes in legislation in the next ten years could prove a risk to future weed and pest control if pesticides become illegal.

A lack of understanding regarding the statutory policies and protections for heritage
There is some confusion over the restrictions in place for alterations to listed buildings, registered landscapes and listed monuments and memorials. Incorrect information has been shared through estate agents and conveyance solicitors on the responsibilities of owning a listed property in Port Sunlight. Although results from the 2016 Residents’ Survey suggest that 94% of residents are aware that consent is required from PSVT and Wirral Borough Council before making alterations to a listed building, 44% of works specified in the External Conditions Survey (Houses) were to replace inappropriate additions which negatively impact on properties’ historic and aesthetic significance. Furthermore, the misconception that the interiors of listed properties (residential and commercial or community buildings) are not protected by planning law has resulted in the loss of original internal features such as decorative fireplaces, cornices, interior doors, layouts and parquet flooring. This is a village-wide risk and affects all stakeholders.

There is also confusion over the nature of the restrictive covenant and how widely this can and should be used as an enforcement tool, both within the village and for properties outside the conservation area boundaries that are still covered by covenants.

The inconsistent management of village boundaries

The setting of the Port Sunlight Conservation Area can be as important as the heritage assets within its boundaries. Developments just outside the boundaries of the conservation area which do not support its architectural, historic and aesthetic merit impact on Port Sunlight's heritage character. Furthermore, properties, gardens and green spaces located along the periphery of the village do not receive the same priority as internal superblocks which attract greater visitor numbers.

New developments in New Ferry: The after-effects of the explosion in March 2017 pose a threat to the setting of the conservation area. Some of the properties in New Ferry have been demolished, and Wirral Borough Council is working to develop a regeneration plan for the area. While this could provide social and economic opportunities for Port Sunlight, replacement developments and new uses could negatively impact on the character of the village if not sensitive in scale, materials and design. Failure to redevelop the site for an extended period of time could also affect Port Sunlight as long-term dereliction and vacancy could attract anti-social behaviour and lower property values.

Boundary treatments: From the 1960's, when allotments fell out of favour, UML allocated individual back gardens to many of the village houses. Simple fences or low walls were introduced to define garden boundaries. Over time, these boundary treatments have been replaced or repaired in a haphazard way. Today they are inconsistent and often unsightly.

Unfilled gap strips: Unsightly strips of bare earth in the lawns in front of public and residential properties, which have appeared as a result of removal of boundary railings (during the Second World War), affect the aesthetic character of the site and cause maintenance issues for the Trust's landscape team.

Rear gardens: The subdivision of central allotments to create individual rear gardens for houses during the UML modernisation programme (1960s-80s) has itself become a risk. Because they were created in modern times, and indeed most were created after the houses were nationally listed, the extended gardens are not within the curtilage of the listed houses. The boundary for the listed houses ends at the boundary wall for the yard. However, these gardens are still subject to conservation area controls. This has created some confusion, and an additional burden for property owners over permitted and non-permitted developments. Inappropriate sheds and outbuildings have been built which negatively impact on the character and appearance of the Port Sunlight Conservation Area.

Commuters: Frequently the village boundaries of Port Sunlight are crowded with cars parked by commuters using trains from Bebington and Port Sunlight stations. Greendale Road, Park Road, Wood Street and Bebington Road are particularly affected. Not only is overcrowding an issue for traffic management but it also creates a risk for Port Sunlight as a visitor destination and a residential community as it limits parking availability for nearby village businesses and properties.

A lack of understanding regarding the role of Port Sunlight Village Trust (PSVT)

There is confusion over the responsibilities and capacity of PSVT which could lead to tensions in the local community if not addressed. Traditionally, PSVT is seen as a solution to all problems, when responsibility lies with Wirral Borough Council, individual property owners or other key stakeholders.

Port Sunlight stakeholders also have failed to engage with the PSVT heritage and operations teams outside required statutory consultation. By not taking advantage of local knowledge and specialist heritage management skills, inappropriate works have been done which negatively impact on our historic landscape, treescape, outdoor art and historic buildings.

A shortage of local tradespeople with heritage skills

There is an over-reliance on a very small pool of conservation-accredited contractors or those with expertise in heritage skills. This shortage leads to delays in starting work, reduces competition and is not sustainable. It should be recognised this is a national issue, not particular to Port Sunlight.

Port Sunlight's suitability for 21st-century living, balancing the differing needs of an ageing population with those of families and young people

The conflict between 21st-century living and the restrictions of living in a conservation area is ever present and not always appropriately addressed. Residents expect modern conveniences and standards in a late Victorian and Edwardian infrastructure. While this is possible, strategies to meet these expectations have not been appropriate to the listed buildings or the conservation area. Examples include inappropriate installation of satellite dishes and ill-considered attempts (eg blocking air bricks) to stop draughts in homes.

The 2016 Residents' Survey estimated that more than 38% of residents living in Port Sunlight were 65 years or older, and 21% live with a health condition that limits day-to-day activities. An ageing demographic could potentially pose risks, especially in later life when the means and motivation to deal with repair and maintenance work can be significantly reduced. Access requirements mean the introduction of modern additions, both externally and internally, which may adversely impact on the historic character of Port Sunlight.

The survey also highlighted that fewer than 3% of Port Sunlight's residents are under the age of 25. It is clear that there are currently not enough facilities to encourage young people and families to move into the village, which could affect the long-term sustainability of Port Sunlight.

On a positive note, the residential community is fairly stable. 14% of residents have lived in the village for 16-25 years, 10% have lived in the village for 26-40 years and 13% of residents have lived in the village for more than 40 years. In terms of stakeholder engagement, this presents a great opportunity.

Gaps in knowledge over the condition of the heritage

There are gaps in knowledge surrounding the condition of Port Sunlight's heritage. We do not currently know the liability of our housing and commercial or community stock, either internally or externally. Survey work has been done externally at street level for the houses but without any diagnostics or sampling. No recent surveying of commercial or community buildings has been carried out.

Hydrological study: Draining and flooding is a big issue in the village, particularly surrounding The Dell, at the far end of Greendale Road (near Bebington Station), the museum green and in the open fields behind Christ Church. An even bigger issue is that there has been no hydrological survey conducted in the village to determine the impact of a steadily rising water table on the culverts and drains. This gap in knowledge currently affects the usability of these public spaces by

residents and visitors, creates concerns over property value, and could prevent any future use if not addressed.

Different resources available to and priorities of the village's stakeholders

There is a large number of stakeholders who have influence on the management and development of Port Sunlight. Not all stakeholders share the same vision for the village or have the same level of resources. This poses a risk to the conservation of built heritage and landscapes within the conservation area, and has created inconsistencies in the management and maintenance of houses, trees, community and commercial buildings and public realm features.

Deferred maintenance: Many heritage features require regular maintenance to ensure their longevity and performance, including painting and decorating and clearing gutters and downpipes. However, when heritage features are not properly maintained they will deteriorate beyond repair and require replacement. Examples of deferred maintenance were identified in the conditions survey as both high and medium priority issues, and if not prioritised and addressed heritage features will be lost.

Dereliction: Although PSVT maintains waiting lists for tenancies in the village, some privately-owned houses in the village stand derelict and empty. These vacant homes have become a nuisance for neighbours due to deferred or inappropriate maintenance, fly-tipping in rear gardens and yards, and rodent or other pest infestations.

Landscape: The historic maintenance of the village landscape has been labour and resource-intensive compared to a similar area of a normal, suburban development. The significance of the landscape is vulnerable to erosion as available resources and stakeholder priorities (including those of PSVT) change over time.

Trees: Before the spread of Dutch elm disease in the 1970s, the majority tree species in the village was elm. They were subsequently replaced with lime trees which are inappropriate for areas of the village as their wide canopies have altered key, original views and vistas along The Diamond, The Causeway and Windy Bank. These wide canopies also pose a risk to the safety and significance of listed properties. Examples of damaged window frames, slipped roof tiles, fallen branches on nearby parked vehicles and severe shading and overhang on to roofs have all been noted in the landscape and built heritage condition surveys.

Furthermore, a disease outbreak affecting lime trees would decimate the treescape in Port Sunlight.

Street furniture: The lack of a site master plan means that the design of public realm features is inconsistent and their maintenance is unplanned. Both factors have an adverse impact on the historic character of the conservation area.

Paving: The widespread use of non-permeable paving up to the façade of residential and public buildings in the village has had a detrimental effect on the performance of properties, exacerbating damp problems.

Paving ownership and responsibility in Port Sunlight is shared between Wirral Borough Council, which owns public footpaths and access roads, and PSVT which owns paving located on property

frontages and any paths which have not been adopted. This shared ownership has created inconsistencies in paving materials used and in appropriate replacement and repair techniques, especially concerning paving surrounding trees.

The relatively high cost of maintaining historic properties

Some owner-occupiers cannot afford to maintain and repair their properties which could result in dilapidation and eventual heritage loss.

Council resources: Cuts to local authority budgets mean there is less capacity within Wirral Borough Council to act on enforcement issues. Wirral Borough Council's failure to enforce heritage laws not only erodes heritage but also creates tensions within the village community.

End of Unilever's covenant: The end of the Unilever covenant, which has helped to finance PSVT's work since its formation in 1999, will potentially affect its ability to discharge the mission.

Minimum wage: The rise in the national minimum wage could see a reduction in staffing and skills at PSVT if current staff numbers become unaffordable.

Government: There are currently no local or national government incentives to support the maintenance and repair of listed properties. This, coupled with the possible impact of Brexit on funding from the European Union, could contribute to there being fewer, more competitive funding streams and therefore less opportunity for financial support in the preservation of Port Sunlight's heritage.

Balancing the development of Port Sunlight as a visitor destination whilst preserving the unique heritage of the village

If the development of the village as a tourist destination is not managed successfully it could have harmful effects on the fabric which forms Port Sunlight's unique heritage, as well as on residents themselves.

Additional footfall: Increasing visitor numbers to the village will impact on public realm items such as paving, road surfacing, benches and bins as all will be used more frequently.

Pressure on facilities: Increasing visitor numbers could see a requirement for extra facilities such as toilets and eateries. If not designed to be in-keeping with the village aesthetic, these developments could harm the setting and character of the Port Sunlight Conservation Area.

Traffic management: More visitors will require better traffic management in the village, including more designated parking spaces. If located or designed poorly these could negatively impact on the aesthetic of the village.

Residents: The quality of life of residents could be negatively affected by greater visitor numbers to Port Sunlight, which in turn could impact on their relationship with PSVT.