

Towards a better Balance between Heritage and Growth

Issues and Opportunities

September 2022

Detailed analysis





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1 Introduction

The key findings from the research on *Towards a Better Balance between Heritage and Growth* are set out in the Main Report. However, the wealth of data collected meant that many interesting topics could not be fully discussed in a report intended for a wide readership. This Issues and Opportunities Report expands on the issues raised in the Main Report and presents some opportunities for protecting heritage which deserve further discussion.

Several themes emerged from the interviews and background research:

- Politics and democracy
- Resourcing in Local Councils
- Policies and the evidence base
- Approaches to managing growth
- Key sites and design
- Stakeholder engagement and relationships
- Addressing climate change
- Town and city centres (including impact of Covid)

Under each theme, good practice and lessons learned are highlighted, alongside the opportunities, identified through the interviews.



The research is based on 12 case study towns and cities

2 Politics, Councillors And Local Democracy

1.0.1 Local authorities have a pivotal role in managing the built environment. As well as their planning functions, they also operate as land owners and developers, often in partnership with others.

Councillors are the decision-makers and the representatives of their communities.

1.0.2 Local authority officers and civic societies were asked about the role of elected members in balancing heritage and growth. Several councillors participated and shared their experience too.


Training and awareness

1.0.3 All the places in this study are renowned for their heritage, their distinctive history, architecture, and settings. Most councillors (i.e. elected members) are well aware of their role in safeguarding these qualities, but some are uninterested in heritage matters. This is especially so for those councillors who represent other parts of the district rather than the historic city. However, civic societies explained that some members seem to be unaware of this responsibility and should undertake more

“Councillors must be encouraged to take up training available.” Civic Society

training around these areas. In addition, newly elected members can be less familiar with the legal duties for conservation or wider policy. There may be a heavy reliance on staff advice and in turn, the resources for recruitment, investment and training. This emphasises the need for member training.

1.0.4 In general, Local authority Officers thought that their elected members grasped the importance of heritage and the need to manage change sensitively. However, two thirds of civic societies commented that elected members prioritised growth at the expense of heritage. Despite this, the general picture, interviewees explained that the level of awareness and knowledge often depended on the individuals involved, or their interests. Some councillors already had a professional background in the built environment, whilst others were keen to



deepen their knowledge. This was often the case for those councillors nominated as Heritage Champions.

1.0.5 All new councillors receive training as part of their induction. To be truly effective, councillors need regular training in design principles, place-making and achieving local distinctiveness to assist them with their responsibilities for heritage management. Thus equipped, members would be well positioned to lead a Heritage Strategy and participate in programmes of public engagement.

1.0.6 Councillors are expected to see heritage within the bigger picture of environmental management. This includes the widespread commitments in response to the climate emergency. There was a general feeling that councillors would benefit from further training in relation to the implications for heritage of extreme weather events, and the arguments for whole-life assessments, embodied carbon and retrofitting. There was also a need for evidence of further advocacy and training

in relation to appreciation of the role of active travel in reducing traffic. A good example was in Lancaster, where the recent ascendance of the Green Party has put the emphasis on climate change and a growing understanding of the relevance of heritage.

1.0.7 Councillors need to be equipped with arguments for showing that economic performance and heritage guardianship can go hand in hand. At the heart of this thinking are the concepts and techniques of “smart growth.” Members also have to be able to recognise the cost to heritage of growth in the wrong place – the risk of the doughnut effect of competing development on the edge of town, hollowing out economic activity and vitality from the centre, rather than providing a complementary role.

“The council has lots of long-standing members. These members are all generally on the same page and it is rare they would disagree on heritage aspects. But there’s a challenge as new members come in – upskilling and training will be needed.”

Local authority Officer



Lichfield

Good example – Lichfield

Elected members in Lichfield receive training from the Principal Conservation and Design Officer. These are undertaken regularly, including two sessions very recently for members which were well received. These covered the legislation and the policy on which members make decisions and explained some of the jargon. These sessions are part of the planning training provided by the wider Development Service at the Council – available to both planning committee and non-committee members.



Heritage as a political priority

2.0.1 The research indicated that in broad terms, most councillors are well aware of the heritage value of their leading towns, not least in terms of branding and tourism. Genuine civic pride seems widespread, even if it may not be high up the electorate's agenda.

2.0.2 In the past, most towns and cities were more independently governed than today, with town or city councils covering much smaller areas, and the ability to raise their own local taxes (equivalent to the parish council precept). Several of the case study towns are small in relation to their districts and in such places there can be tension between the needs of the old city and that of its much larger hinterland.

2.0.3 As one civic society put it, the historic core of the city is vulnerable to "a local government system in which decisions about the city are taken by a council dominated by councillors who live elsewhere." It may also restrain a willingness to act radically, such as

measures to limit cars in the centre. In many of the case studies, the council was dominated by councillors from the wider district in contrast to the small number of members representing the city itself, and frequently from a different party. For example, in one location the city population elects councillors who all vote either Labour, Lib Dem or Independent. However, the council is dominated by the Conservative councillors voted for in the towns and villages.

2.0.4 There was no evidence that heritage matters were given greater priority by one political party or another, nor was there a distinction between those 'hung' councils with no overall control (such as Lancaster City Council or Malvern Hills District Council) or those with longstanding majorities, like Wakefield.

2.0.5 Despite overall political cross-party support, there was a suggestion that party agendas could still come into play. Pedestrianisation and restricted parking plans were opposed by Conservative

councillors in one council. In another Liberal Democrat Council, emphasis on achieving zero carbon by 2030 is shaping the agenda. There were also different attitudes between parties in the use of council land or property, the exercise of Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) powers or the balance between economic growth versus environmental priorities.

- 2.0.6 Overall however, this may be more a reflection of an urban and rural contrast rather than a product of party allegiances.
- 2.0.7 Parish councils provide another tier. In some locations, parish councils felt that they were unable to influence decisions as much as they would like.
- 2.0.8 A stark finding of the interviews with civic societies was that two-thirds feel there is strong or some support for growth at the expense of heritage. This is a theme which runs through much of the discussions held with civic societies. There is a real fear that when push comes to shove, growth trumps heritage - whether

“It is not evident that there are significant policy differences in relation to heritage matters between the political parties. Broadly there appears to be cross-party support for heritage issues although there is little evidence of a strong and proactive policies by the political parties to promote conservation and heritage issues. There has been a long-standing principle that planning decisions are not party political. There is no evidence or suspicion that heritage issues are being made on party political lines.”

Civic Society

it be political decisions, apportioning council budgets, the evidence base work undertaken or individual planning decisions. This theme is returned to in the later chapters.



Heritage Champions

- 2.0.9 There is value in having one member as a portfolio holder for the historic environment, able to build knowledge and devote time to promote the council's work. Champions in local authorities are often part of informal networks with for example Historic England, neighbouring authorities or other historic towns. Historic England provides support and advice to all appointed Heritage Champions and they have access to resources such as Historic England's *Heritage Champions' Handbook*. The nominated councillor is able to receive extra training, covering matters such as familiarity with the fast-moving world of heritage grants, or the ability to take on an enhanced advocacy role.
- 2.0.10 There may however be a risk that by assigning heritage to a sole councillor, other members come to regard heritage as a niche activity and not a core corporate responsibility, at the heart of the council's work. Only five of the twelve Councils in this study appeared to have appointed

Heritage Champions, and those in place were not necessarily senior, experienced or very visible.

"The briefly elevated Heritage Champion turned with remarkable rapidity into a puff of political smoke" Civic Society

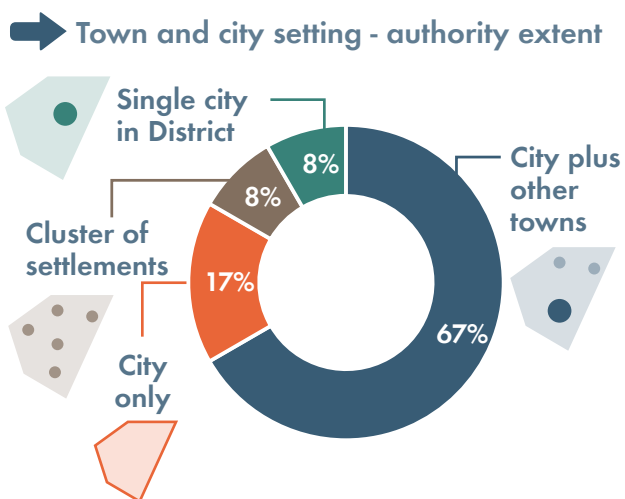
Council structure

2.0.11 The case studies illustrated the range of council structures. The relationship of historic environment management to policy-making, investment strategy and corporate planning was evident in all. However, the position of the conservation team within the organisation could determine their degree of influence. In Chester the team sits within the Total Environment department, which brings together all built form, landscape and ecology officers as a service with an associated target for bringing in fees. Elsewhere, conservation teams sit more squarely as part of the mainstream planning service, with some closer to economic regeneration departments than others.

2.0.12 Most case study authorities were district councils, in a two-tier structure, but three were unitary. Unitary authorities may be better placed to have a fully integrated Heritage Strategy particularly when it includes highways and transport responsibilities.

2.0.13 Joint working with a neighboring authority (as at Malvern Hills District Council and neighbouring Wychavon) can ease pressure on staff resources, but it requires political flexibility and like-mindedness.

"The recognition of the need to protect and enhance the heritage assets in the city is strong, both from the District Council members and all age groups within the city's population. The conservation team at the District Council are evidence of this recognition too." Local authority Officer





Opportunities #1

- There should be regular dialogue between civic societies and conservation officers. This must be a two-way process, with civic societies looking for ways to support the conservation team where appropriate and councils giving modest funding or small amounts of officer time to support civic society initiatives.
- Heritage training for councillors is essential. Councillors should be encouraged to take up the training available to understand their committee and officers' work. There are many training resources for councillors to support them in their roles.
- Urban or landscape Character Studies should be accessible to councillors and training provided on how to use them in their decision-making.
- Councillors need guidance on how to read plans and understand scale, as well as the issues set out in national level policies and designations.
- All historic towns and cities should consider appointing a Heritage Champion, but it should not remove the need for other councillors to engage with the historic environment.
- In some instances exploring opportunities to co-locate councils could support better co-working and decision-making.
- Planning committee members should be drawn from the full range of places in their district.
- Councils need to be open with the public about what, when and how they can have a say in planning matters. This should include making planning powers clearer.
- Councils and civic societies should look for volunteers to support conservation teams, this could include: Local Listing work, historical research and Conservation Area Appraisals.

3 Resourcing in Local Councils

Repeated local authority budget cuts have transformed the way they have to operate, including their planning functions.

The reduction in funding affects staffing, capital spending, development management and policy-making, which all affect councils' conservation work.

This section examines the themes that emerged in the interviews with local planning authorities and civic societies.

Staff numbers – issues and consequences

2.0.26 Budget cuts are straining many councils.

All twelve of the case study authorities confirmed a loss of staff within the planning team, including conservation.

This deficit is not specific to just heritage and conservation, other disciplines such as urban design or landscape architecture face identical issues.

2.0.27 This depletion of conservation skills and the transfer of work to fewer shoulders has caused several issues:

- Loss of heritage expertise, leaving planners to juggle roles and engage with heritage issues beyond their capabilities.
- Not enough time to address the finer details in planning applications.
- Inability for conservation teams to engage in strategic work, including the growth agenda.
- Younger, less experienced officers taking on demanding or complex casework.
- Casework overload for those remaining.

2.0.28 The loss of key members of staff, and the burden placed on others, have come at a cost:

- A dwindling source of advice for the upkeep of historic buildings and heritage assets.
- Key details – the quality control element – are lost at the reserved matters stage.
- Insufficient attention given to non-designated heritage assets.

- Insufficient time for pre-application discussions or public engagement.
- Decisions taking longer.
- Less specialist or experienced officers poorly equipped to negotiate with developers and fight to conserve heritage or to challenge over-development.
- An increased reliance on bidding for limited external funding, or volunteers.
- Failure of enforcement.

planning applications, advise on shop fronts, enhance the public realm, consider the sustainability of new developments or resist the closure of heritage tourism.. These are very important issues that need to be considered.

- 2.0.30 In conclusion, budget cuts have produced a deficit in the quantity and quality of staff, their services, and the resource to invest in conservation.

“There are now three of us in the team – conservation officer, archaeologist and team leader. It used to be a much larger team with 8 or 9 people including urban designers”

Local authority Officer

- 2.0.29 Ever restrictive resources provide huge challenges in bringing important mechanisms to the forefront of planning. Most of the civic societies were concerned about the loss of key staff. These concerns were linked to the perceived negative impacts within the built environment as a result of a lack of staff to comment on

“The reduction in staffing has led to pressures on existing staff and also a decline in in-house conservation expertise available. There is a lack of time and expertise to negotiate with big developers and little appetite to significantly challenge excessive development.” Civic Society

Unitary Authorities & Shared approaches

- 3.0.30 In recent years many Councils, including Cheshire West and Chester have become unitary authorities. The historic city has become a small part of a larger whole and, therefore, only one of numerous priorities to consider.
- 3.0.31 One civic society felt that having no “elected body which speaks for the historic core” of their city made it difficult to push heritage matters to the forefront of planning matters and decisions more than before, so that unitary authorities may cause damage to the historic environment.
- 3.0.32 Malvern Hills District Council is not unitary, but it shares operations and staff with its neighbour Wychavon. This arrangement gives both councils access to specialists for ecology, conservation, design, trees, and the wider natural environment, and appears to work well.
- 3.0.33 The trend towards unitary authorities across England poses questions around the attention given to conservation across

large areas. Malvern Hills District Council’s experience provides insufficient evidence on whether this approach could be adopted by those with little or no conservation staff already. Civic societies questioned whether sharing merely spreads an already stretched resource too thinly.

Political Support

- 3.0.34 Despite the funding pressures, some local planning authorities stated that they have partially recovered and have been able to refill vacant posts. Five of the twelve interviewed local authorities felt that they were currently in a strong position with access to specialists and an adequately sized team. This is linked in the research to the level of political support for in-house expertise. Members’ recognition of the value of conservation helped Chief Officers to protect heritage resourcing.
- 3.0.35 A Heritage Champion could help in this respect. However, civic societies reported that they did not feel that the commitment from champions was always adequate. One

civic society suggested that the Champion could be one of their members instead, who would be expected to give the role due weight.

“Generally important heritage issues with economic implications are determined on party lines or cross-party. Less economically significant heritage issues determined on merit.” Civic Society

“The city’s interests are not adequately represented - issues that concern the city are being decided by councillors who live outside the city with different priorities shaping transport and planning policies.” Civic Society

➔ Heritage or Design Forums

5 of the 12
case studies
have Heritage
or Design
Forums

including CCAPor CCAACs

Outside experts

- 3.0.61 To make up for the lack of in-house staff, at least two of the case study local authorities employed conservation consultants. This is similar for other disciplines such as urban design and landscape architecture; it has been estimated that 40% of English councils are using this approach.
- 3.0.62 The research found links from this use of outsourcing to salaries, and authorities’ inability to recruit or retain experienced staff. Several interviewees expressed concern that by resorting to consultants the payroll budget becomes even more strained.
- 3.0.63 Planners reported that Design Review Panels and Conservation Area Committees were a valuable source of advice. However, their capacity for further supporting casework was limited. For externally managed panels, their selection of projects for review did not always align with council’s priorities.

3.0.64 There was a consensus across the case studies that more resource needs to be provided for authorities to increase their ability to attract and hold onto high quality specialist staff and focus resourcing internally.

“There is no Heritage and Design Forum, but there is a City Conservation Area Panel. The Civic Society contributes to the city’s Conservation Area Panel.”

Civic Society

“The Heritage Team are well resourced and this has built up over the years – we now have three officers. But we find it difficult to find and keep people. We’ve become a good training ground or school for heritage specialists, but we often lose staff once they are fully trained and can be tempted away by higher salaries in private consultancy.”

Local authority Officer

Historic England

3.0.65 At least two of the local planning authorities interviewed said at a time when their own resources were stretched, they valued Historic England’s input on casework or policy. Timely, precise and comprehensive responses were particularly welcome.

“It would be extremely useful to have advice from Historic England on sites very early on (in advance of any applications or even the pre-app stage) especially where the sites are very sensitive and there are lots of options available. This would ensure that we had a clear sense of priorities and direction for heritage and character, and would mean we can be proactive rather than back-tracking later, as can sometimes happen at the moment when Historic England comments land.”

Local authority Officer



Opportunities #2

- Develop a Heritage Strategy with public involvement, including a 5 year Action Plan as a way of marking the commitment to conservation.
- Councils should monitor staff numbers in relation to the scale of growth and change underway to plan for sufficient resources.
- Pre-application advice fees should fully reflect the workload cost for planning, heritage and design staff.
- Seek early engagement with Historic England for the principles and objectives for local planning, key sites and pre-application advice.
- Staff need strategic direction on heritage expectations as teams are often unable to create new initiatives or policies, manage planning applications in sufficient detail, or update older heritage protection guidance.
- Heritage and design issues should be determined by qualified staff to avoid important details being overlooked or agreed without sufficient knowledge.
- Heritage officers need to be brought into policy-making and planning discussions early, with a focus at the pre-application stage on heritage and archaeology, helping heritage matters throughout the planning process.
- The heritage team needs to be regarded internally as effective and develop good relations with other departments (e.g. development management, enforcement, transport planning).
- Experienced staff are retained wherever possible. Junior staff learning 'on the job' should be supported with continuing professional development and gaining qualifications.
- When employing consultants, officers need project management expertise to ensure that the extra resources are used to best effect.

4 Policies and Evidence

4.0.1 Sound knowledge of the local environment and the right policies are essential to support good decisions. The case study towns and cities have varying experiences in this regard, with some local authorities stating they have a good level of support, and others feeling ill-equipped to champion heritage in their decision-making.

Heritage policies and protection

4.0.2 National protection for the historic environment is set out in planning law and in the National Planning Policy Framework. Local policies vary in breadth and depth between local authorities, reflecting a different interpretation of what heritage itself constitutes, and how it might relate to wider strategic aims like economic growth. Some officers stated that their understanding of 'heritage' is broad, considering both the setting of historic assets and the city within the wider heritage context. Other authorities have a narrower view of heritage and character, with the cathedral as the pinnacle of heritage within the city, drawing the most

attention in local policy and the supporting evidence base. Even in authorities that believe in a broad definition of heritage, policies are sometimes written in a way that can promote one type of heritage over another (for example archaeological heritage over buildings), subtly undermining other historic assets, especially those that are undesignated.

4.0.3 The way in which heritage policies are framed in Local Plans also matters. Officers at a number of authorities stated that their Local Plan are underpinned by the notion of encouraging growth in the context of heritage. But the civic societies often disagreed, explaining there appeared to be no heritage or design input at all into the broader plan-making work of the council, which reduced the effectiveness of the Local Plan policies in protecting heritage. Within plans, the allocation of residential development sites continues to be an issue. Civic societies felt that sites were being allocated without any reference to the impact of development on the setting



of the historic city. It is clear that work is going on behind the scenes, but a lack of understanding of the process by stakeholders is undermining trust. There were instances where heritage evidence was clearly influencing plan-making, and crucially this is taking place more transparently - enabling local stakeholders to appreciate the process. For example, Lancaster City Council's heritage team were involved in developing the Growth Strategy, preparing heritage assessments for site allocation. This has been successful, putting heritage more at the forefront of the growth agenda in the city.

4.0.4 Views, particularly to the cathedral or out towards the rural hinterland, are often a contentious issue for councils to tackle, and some consider they lack the policies and evidence base to support their decision-making and protect views. There are differing levels of guidance between local planning authorities. Some cities do not identify any protected views. In other authorities, views are dealt with in the form of identifying key views within

a conservation area appraisal, right the way through to preparing a full views assessment of the city (as in Oxford).

4.0.5 Other cities, such as Lancaster, use mechanisms like masterplans or design codes that focus in on specific areas to identify strategic and local views to be protected. Councils recognise the importance of protecting views, but the majority lack the capacity for detailed assessments and enforcement, therefore heightening the vulnerability of assets. Local authorities gave examples of specific schemes where there is pressure to increase the height of development, threatening the setting of the cathedral. Whilst not opposed to high quality taller structures, many councils would benefit from a straightforward way of managing key views.

Evidence base – Heritage Strategies

- 4.0.6 Some local authority officers felt that there were good evidence documents in place, whereas others were too stretched to prepare them. Even in places where there is robust guidance, there can be a lack of awareness among officers that these studies exist, or where they can be found.
- 4.0.7 Seven of the case study towns and cities have Heritage Strategies, including Canterbury, Lancaster, Wells (update in

progress) and Peterborough, and Wakefield is commissioning one. Canterbury has deployed its civic society to undertake data gathering to inform the work, which can be a positive approach.

- 4.0.8 Canterbury City Council felt their strategy helps to 'put heritage at the heart of their corporate plan'. A critical part of the strategy is an Action Plan, which was approved in 2019, but funding challenges mean that at the time of writing few of the proposed actions have been implemented. A bid to the Levelling up Fund includes some funding for heritage assets.

- 4.0.9 In the interviews with civic societies, it was clear that many had different perspectives to the local planning authorities on whether the heritage strategies (and indeed other corporate or planning strategies) gave heritage enough priority. Many civic societies were concerned that heritage is being downplayed in favour of growth and excessive development. In many ways, conflict is inevitable - councils

➔ Heritage Champions and Heritage Strategies



5
of the 12
case studies
have Heritage
Champions

2 in 3 of the case studies have a Heritage Strategy (or have commissioned one)



are responding to central government initiatives, growth targets and budget cuts, while civic societies are focused on the quality of life of local residents.

Good example – Canterbury

Canterbury's [Heritage Strategy](#) has been recognised as a comprehensive piece of work. The council undertook extensive community and stakeholder engagement and drew on the expertise and input of the Canterbury Society. The Heritage Strategy was followed by an

Action Plan which aimed to deliver long-term economic, social, and environmental benefits to Canterbury while continuing to maintain and celebrate heritage. The challenge now is to deliver on the Action Plan in the context of a funding crisis.



Evidence base – Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans

4.0.10 Most of the case study towns and cities have Conservation Area Appraisals. These are expected to be updated every five years, but this is often a low priority for conservation teams who need to keep up with casework and filling in gaps in the evidence base. The lack of up to date Conservation Area Appraisals and accompanying Management Plans was highlighted to be a concern for many civic societies.

“The Conservation Area has had no significant initiative to protect the heritage since the publication of an Appraisal, Review and Strategy some of which has been implemented. There is no Local List. There is a views policy in the local plan.” Civic Society

“There are significant issues and challenges surrounding conservation area management within Local Planning Authorities. We are currently in discussion with Historic England colleagues regarding how to address some of these recurring largely resource-driven issues.”

Local authority Officer

“There is a very serious negative impact on the character of the historic core created by the traffic levels created by the peripheral developments.” *Civic Society*

Evidence base – character and identity

4.0.11 Some local authorities want more guidance on how to identify the characteristics of different historic areas, and the implications this has for what growth should look like: the location of sites from a heritage perspective. Local planning authorities with Characterisation Studies such as in Chester, have found this to be a useful part of the evidence base. There are varying levels of guidance between authorities about character and identity, from drawing up character areas within Conservation Area Appraisals, acknowledging character within city centre masterplans (like in Lichfield), to comprehensive character studies which extend beyond the conservation

area, and which adopt a much broader view of character. For places like Chichester, a lot of guidance on character and heritage comes from outside the authority e.g. the South Downs National Park Authority, which has guidance on housing extensions, Article 4s (additional restrictions applying to certain areas) and a shopfront guide. Some councils do not feel they have any adequate guidance regarding the character of the city centre.

4.0.12 At the other end of the spectrum, Oxford City Council prepared a toolkit with funding from Historic England, for use by community groups, planners and developers, to understand the character of historic areas. It adopts a comprehensive and collaborative approach, to assess both townscape and landscape characteristics within the city, and can be implemented in other areas too.

4.0.13 Overall, around half of the case studies had a Character Study in place. Some of these only covered the city centre or central conservation areas, whilst others covered the whole settlement and landscape setting. Generally the decision on whether to produce a Character Study was resource-driven. Most local authority officers saw the value of such a character evidence base, but time and resources were an obstacle. Those civic societies that had worked on character studies or Conservation Area Appraisals found the experience rewarding. A residual concern was that these studies needed to be accessible, well understood, and continually used by both officers and applicants.

“Before the Characterisation Study, it had got to the point where heritage appreciation stopped anything happening. The Characterisation Study helped move it forward to understand what was important.”

Local authority Officer

Good example – Malvern

Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in partnership with the Local authority has produced a [toolkit](#) for applicants and decision-makers which enables an assessment of visual impact to go beyond just presence in a view. The colour assessment allows a much more detailed understanding of how to manage the introduction of new development into the skyline, roofscape and street character.



Extract from colour assessment

Local heritage assets

- 4.0.14 The Historic Environment Records provide detailed information on a wide variety of historic assets and are usually held at county level. They are a primary source of information for planning, development management, and land management, and can be used as a basis for further local work on heritage value and characterisation.
- 4.0.15 Some authorities like Worcester City Council also have a Local List, to identify non-designated assets of local interest.

“The Local List was revised and greatly expanded by the Society, on behalf of the then overstretched Conservation Officer, some years ago. Currently a further review is underway with the ambition that it can become a Supplementary Planning Document.”

Civic Society

- 4.0.16 Shopfront guidance is worthwhile to prepare, with many councils producing Supplementary Planning Documents to support the retention of historic shop fronts and the introduction of sensitive new shop fronts. This guidance should be well publicised and easy to use. Some authorities are producing public realm design guides to help improve the quality and maintenance of historic streets and spaces.

Neighbourhood Plans

- 4.0.17 Several authorities acknowledged the contribution that neighbourhood plans can make to local planning. They can be a useful way of engaging the community in heritage matters, including support for Local Listing and conservation area management.
- 4.0.18 Not all of the case studies have neighbourhood plans in production, and some civic societies, like Winchester, would like to see them produced to help capture the local character of areas and craft policies that would tackle heritage at risk.



Data availability

- 4.0.19 Planning authorities are expected to underpin their policies and decisions with robust evidence, but securing data can be a challenge. Whilst economic and demographic statistics are readily available, information on the current state of heritage assets is harder to find. Some officers wanted greater access to mapped and digital data that could support their work, suggesting that Historic England could help provide or co-ordinate access.
- 4.0.20 Councils and civic societies were both concerned about the need for information to be easy to find and use. In Chester, the Chester One City dashboard has proved a successful way of providing a single reference point and data source for development in Chester in a clear and easily navigable way.

Guidance from others

- 4.0.21 Historic England has existing, valuable guidance relating to the economic value of heritage and the value that comes from maintaining and celebrating historic buildings and other heritage assets (see [Heritage Counts series](#)). Local Planning Authorities value the guidance as an important resource to guide decision-making. Some officers suggested that the advice could be brought together in a way that makes it easier to use - in particular removing any conflicts between advice and collating precedents to encourage the update of proposals.

Opportunities #3

- Local authorities should undertake character studies across the whole settlement. These should reflect the character of the place from historic core to landscape setting.
- Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans are important factual documents as well as tools for setting conservation priorities. Keeping these documents up to date should be a priority. The knowledge and resources of civic societies could help this endeavour.
- Civic societies can also help to draft Local Lists, undertaking research and survey work. The conservation team should set the selection criteria and ensure the draft list is accurate.
- Heritage Strategies are an effective way of establishing the care of the historic environment as a corporate priority. They should be part of the Local Plan process, helping to shape planning objectives.
- Historic England has a role in signposting data on heritage and character. It could assist authorities with their evidence base documents and promote their use in geographical information systems (GIS).
- Building Regulations need to go further to ensure zero carbon objectives are embedded to ensure climate change is considered at each stage.

What the civic societies told us...

Character

➔ What is the character of your town or city?

46%



City or town with variety of historic buildings

27%



Large central area with very many listed buildings

20%



Key building and its immediate urban fabric

% of overall responses to the question (some Civic Societies ticked more than one option)

Political support

➔ Does the political make-up of the council matter?

100% of civic societies interviewed felt there is cross-party support for the protection of heritage

Tourism and retail

➔ How significant is tourism to the town or city?



The number of visitors to each case study range from **149,000 - 925,000** overnight tourists per year (2017-19 averages)

➔ What are the vacancy rates with the city or town centre?

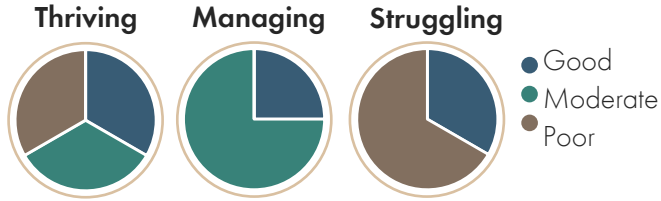
6-15% vacancy rates in 2020 among the 12 case studies

Note: these are pre-pandemic level and likely to have increased

Economy vs heritage

➔ How well is the local historic built environment conserved in places with "struggling", "managing" or "thriving" economies?

➔ Where is growth currently happening or being steered towards?

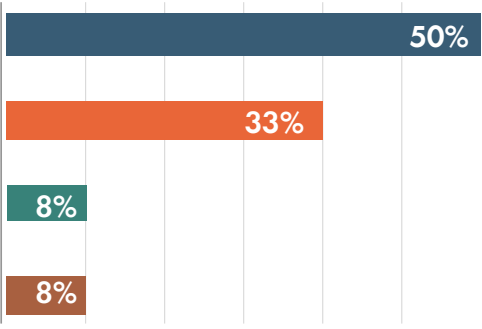


Peripheral - Development on land around periphery of city or town or on strategic

All three options: infill, beyond core & peripheral

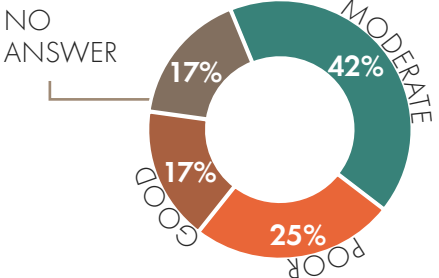
Intensification and infill in historic core & peripheral

Major development in city or town beyond historic core & peripheral



Growth vs heritage

↓ Is conservation of the historic environment good, moderate, poor or disastrous?



2 or 3 of civic societies interviewed feel there is strong or some support for **growth** at the expense of **heritage**

5 Growth Strategies

5.0.1 The significance of any historic town or city is likely to reach well beyond its old centre. The way the town sits in the landscape, the way it has grown along key approaches, across flat land or up slopes, may all contribute to its distinctiveness. A firm grasp of character at this scale should underpin any plans for growth.

5.0.2 There is no single approach to the way an analysis of the historic environment should inform a Growth Strategy. Some places have been steered primarily by the constraints of the settlement's character and location, whilst others have prepared detailed townscape and landscape character assessments to inform locations and capacities for growth.

5.0.3 This topic is extremely important, and one that was mentioned frequently in the interviews with civic societies; two thirds felt there was strong or some support for growth at the expense of heritage. Delivering housing to address the housing crisis is a national priority, but many civic societies commented that the housing being built is too expensive

to be affordable by many local people. Many new houses in attractive places are being bought as second homes, but still growth is being prioritised over the historic environment in Local Plans.

5.0.4 The following topics summarise the data, information and arguments that can be used to direct a Growth Strategy, all of which have links to historic character:

- *Physical or Policy constraints* - mapping landscape designations, flood risk, views, heritage designations such as conservation areas, World Heritage Site settings.
- *Site sensitivity* – landscape character assessment, visual impact assessment, townscape character assessment, heritage impact assessment – one or more of these informing either the initial growth concept options or the site allocations process.
- *Land availability or viability* – any brownfield sites left, which sites are available for redevelopment, is greenfield development more attractive in terms of viability and reduced design constraints?
- *Capacity infrastructure limitations* – such

as transport or drainage or environmental capacity thresholds.

- *Economic drivers* – directing growth demand more towards locations in need of investment or support.

Landscape and setting

- 5.0.5 The landscape setting of historic settlements is fundamental to their character and can be an important governing factor on their capacity for growth. Of the twelve towns, all but one lie on a river, with floodplains and flood risk implications. In addition, five (42%) adjoin Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or a National Park, with a further three with an AONB in the wider setting of the city. This reflects the fact that the evolution of historic cities or towns has been bound to the countryside from their inception. But it means that many face very real landscape constraints to growth.
- 5.0.6 Historically towns and cities have often been located on rivers, at crossing places, near rich farmland or adjoining water

meadows. In recent times, the need to locate new towns adjacent to these features has reduced. Often, poor agricultural land and flat plains may be preferred.

- 5.0.7 By their character and history these constraints are common around historic settlements. Local planning authorities may be driven to identify the least harmful locations for growth rather than the most appropriate locations.
- 5.0.8 Landscape setting and the character of the geography of historic settlements heavily constrains their scope for growth. This leads to difficult choices from options of least harm. Moreover, for those authorities where sites have been approved as the result of planning appeals or Secretary of State intervention, the landscape or heritage constraints have been deemed insufficient to deny development.

“Locations for growth on the periphery have been chosen in many cases because they are the least harmful.”

Local authority Officer

5.0.9 Elsewhere, it is clear that the landscape designations around a city were strong and had a clear rationale, but the heritage protection was weaker, less well justified, or simply too narrowly focused on the historic core. In some places, AONB and countryside designations were forcing the Growth Strategy in a direction that could run counter to heritage values. Growth was being steered from sensitive landscapes around the edge of the settlement towards unprotected periphery sites or locations within the built-up area where the impact on heritage was raising concern.

5.0.10 Heritage protection is generally focused on the historic core and existing built fabric, rather the landscape. In many cases this means that the opportunity for growth to be integrated with the centre or even within the wider urban envelope is not fully explored. There were limited examples where view corridors or wider heritage constraints ensured that the setting of the settlement and the impact of development on the periphery were given full weight.

“Unless we can accommodate the growth without further urban sprawl, we will destroy a jewel.”

Civic Society

5.0.11 A common challenge cited in the research was the difficulty of reconciling the protection of landscape and countryside with a desire to safeguard views and the setting of the historic core. Many places were finding it difficult to take a whole settlement approach to character and sensitivity. Without clear evidence and policy designations, it is difficult to identify areas of least harm to the character of the town as a whole.

5.0.12 In some places the identification of important views or view corridors was working well, giving heritage more weight in the Growth Strategy. [*The Assessment of the Oxford View Cones*](#) was effective; by contrast in Peterborough the need for a stronger policy framework and views management was becoming critical. Whilst establishing a views framework is not the sole remedy, it can help to resolve tensions

between landscape and heritage impacts.

- 5.0.13 Many towns and cities in the study illustrated the challenge of managing development on the edge of conservation areas. There is still an impact on heritage, but there is significantly less policy and evidence to work with to influence site allocation capacity and the nature of intensification.
- 5.0.14 An additional point is the danger of less constrained greenfield sites at the periphery of the settlement having little relationship to the character of the place as a whole. These sites are not always in sustainable locations and can be poorly connected to adjacent settlements. The resulting development is at risk of being divorced from the local town or city and its character and could adversely impact on ambitions for modal shift to more sustainable transport.
- 5.0.15 The case studies carried out in the course of this research suggest that many historic places are struggling to find locations for development. Where development is

“The river is one of the city’s most important assets but it currently fails to maximise its potential and is poorly connected to other parts of the city centre.”

Civic Society

taking place despite the challenges, a high price can be paid in terms of damage to heritage, traffic congestion and air pollution. This is not just an issue for the historic places themselves but for the economy as a whole, since Britain’s tourist industry and the higher education sector rely on being able to offer visitors and students attractive historic places.

- 5.0.16 The root of the problem may be that it is not appropriate to treat all towns and cities as equally able to accommodate large amounts of new housing. It will be important to devise future house building algorithms to calculate housing numbers which are informed by what can be absorbed locally, with more extensive data, in which the value of heritage, in terms of both the built environment and the natural environment, is taken into account.

Good example: Lancaster

The geography and setting of Lancaster results in a combination of landscape and heritage designations which leaves very little land left to develop. In order to find the most appropriate locations for growth within this context, the council identified a series of alternative options and worked collaboratively (including the heritage team) to develop the Growth Strategy options.

“To support the preparation of the Local Plan for Lancaster District, [Heritage Impact Assessments for the Allocated Sites](#) have been prepared. For each of the sites, this shows the;

- Identification of heritage assets affected (designated and non-designated);
- Assessment of the site contribution to the significance of the heritage asset(s) identified;
- Assessment of the impact of the potential site allocation on the significance of heritage asset(s);

- What enhancements to the historic environment could be achieved or ways to mitigate harm to the significance of the heritage asset(s);
- Conclusions and recommendations on the potential allocation.

The information has proposed mitigation or enhancements for the historic environment through the potential allocation of sites, and has informed the suitability of a site for development through the Strategic Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (SHELAA).”



Lancaster view (Source: Mark McNeill)

Density and building height

5.0.17 In most historic places, building heights are sensitive. The dominance of cathedrals in their settings means the introduction of anything above the prevailing height may challenge the primacy of the city's supreme landmark on the skyline. At the same time, maintaining the life of the city means supporting new uses and accommodating new forms of housing. Simply introducing the higher density building types being delivered in other towns and cities may be inappropriate. A tailored approach is needed.

“Density should be determined on a site-by-site basis considering both the immediate area’s distinctiveness and local needs.”

Civic Society

5.0.18 In most locations the civic societies were keen to see the skyline of the city centre protected, with a building heights strategy to safeguard the setting and character of the settlement as a whole. Oxford was the

only case study that had a comprehensive tall buildings and heights strategy to guide new development scale. Other planning authorities were in the process of preparing heights strategies or view management policies.

5.0.19 Overall, the research found that managing views could be a challenge. Establishing a views protection framework takes much preparation and needs to be enforced. Given the resource constraints of most authorities, this may not be readily achievable. It might be useful to find a simpler way to protect local character, avoid harm and steer higher density development into appropriate forms and locations.

5.0.20 A common opinion was that sites on the edge of conservation areas are doubly vulnerable. They can be regarded as less sensitive yet are under pressure because of their attractive positions. These fringe locations are sought out for greater height and density, but the policies for securing contextually appropriate development may be lacking.

5.0.21 The nature of edge-of-town developments varied between case studies. In many cases the scale and density was low, and the conflict was more around the selection of the site and its integration rather than its form.

“Low density homes on greenfield sites are not helpful for the environment.”

Civic Society

“The issue is less about development on unallocated sites than about the height and scale of developments on allocated sites.”

Civic Society

Good example: Oxford

The [Assessment of the Oxford View Cones](#) is a fantastic example of pro-active, prescriptive guidance from Oxford City Council regarding building heights and density within the historic environment. The study explores the importance of Oxford’s historic skyline and how this can be maintained and celebrated. The document runs through views of the city from five different angles, highlighting important structures on view and the significance of these views in the past. This document allows Oxford City Council to have a valuable resource touching on important topics to inform decision-making and policies.



Visions, Frameworks and Masterplans

- 5.0.22 A common theme from the case studies was the importance of masterplanning. Generally there had been good experience in the towns and cities, particularly when masterplans were underpinned by a strong analysis of heritage and character.
- 5.0.23 Civic societies raised concerns about sites being allocated without any clear design vision or meaningful capacity assessment. This concern was particularly strong when strategic sites were split between different developers in competition with each other, thereby prompting uncoordinated design responses. Where several masterplans are emerging they need to be co-ordinated.
- 5.0.24 Some authorities wanted to undertake masterplanning work in-house but had insufficient resources. In other places, masterplanning work had been a key focus for officers' time and had borne fruit by resulting in stronger design concepts and better integration of development into the wider context. There were examples of local people and civic societies being

troubled by masterplans, particularly where they had relied on large retail developments that had later proved unviable. Masterplanning was seen as most likely to succeed where it included a strong understanding and assessment of local context and heritage, teamed with an open engagement strategy. They must also include transport plans which demonstrate clearly how they fit into city-wide transport strategies.

"[The competition between developers for strategic sites] results in the impossibility of community planning or a consistent design approach."

Civic Society

"The Local Plan is missing a masterplan for a key area as there haven't been the resources. These masterplans are important in the context of increasing heights issues."

Local authority Officer

Housing demand and targets

- 5.0.25 The attractiveness of the historic core is usually a powerful driver of demand for new housing and growth, even at the edge. The resulting values can inflate the level of growth that might otherwise be assumed for such a place.
- 5.0.26 To address their housing targets, councils undertake a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) to determine the quantity and suitability of land that might come forward for housing development. The Assessment is required as part of the evidence base for the preparation of a Local Plan.
- 5.0.27 Through the timeframe of this research, many of the case studies have been seeking to deal with or challenge the housing targets attributed to them by national government. Many have found it difficult to successfully challenge the growth target allocated to them, and this has led to issues in establishing a Growth Strategy that is sensitive to local character and need but which also meets

their housing target. In some instances, the challenge to accommodate growth has proved so great that councils have been left without a five-year housing supply and therefore vulnerable to housing application approvals being granted on appeal.

"The Local Plan was written in the context that the council would have lots of control over development, but that's been turned on its head with the lack of a five-year housing supply and the council has seen some speculative development which it has had little ability to influence."

Local authority Officer

➔ Population uplift

Across the 12 case studies there is significant variance in the quantum of new homes relative to the size of existing settlements. The average expected population uplift for the local planning authorities as a whole over a plan period was 17%

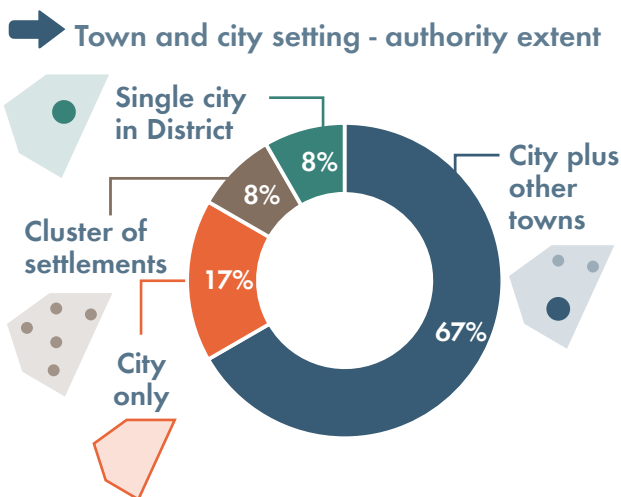


Wakefield: City growth of +0.68% pa
Chester: City growth of +1.03% pa

5.0.28 The housing targets for historic towns and cities within commuting range of major metropolitan cities can be increased to accommodate some of the wider growth needs of their larger neighbours. This was raised by a number of civic societies including Canterbury (London), Lichfield (Birmingham), Wakefield (Leeds), Winchester (London). The recent shift from commuting to working from home raises questions about future demand and whether this might affect other historic towns, previously outside the sphere of influence of major cities.

“The major problem has been how to respond to the top-down allocation of targets for home building in an area with little scope for development and where almost all sites are problematic.” Civic Society

“Being joined up between departments becomes very important when looking at growth outside the core city. It’s difficult to not work in silos, but departments have to speak to each other – time and resources are short. Building relationships between teams is vital.”
Local authority Officer



“Government housing statistics need investigation in the light of the report from the Office for Statistics Regulation report on university cities. If the housing numbers being considered are justified, then there needs to be serious consideration of a new settlement or settlements.”
Civic Society

District geography

5.0.29 The extent of the authority in which a historic town or city sits will influence its Growth Strategy. If the district boundary closely aligns to the settlement, as in Oxford, the growth target pressure is all on that settlement. However, for cities like Wells or Canterbury which sit in large districts with other towns, there may be more scope to spread growth across the district.

5.0.30 Of the twelve case studies, nine are in larger districts with other towns. Oxford, Worcester and Peterborough are the sole settlements in their districts. These latter three represent very different examples and responses to growth:

- Oxford City Council's boundary is tightly drawn and many of the developments on the edge of the city are taking place in neighbouring authorities, which involves negotiations and a duty to cooperate.
- Worcester City Council's boundary is also tightly drawn around the city, but there is a joint working arrangement between

Worcester, Malvern and Wychavon Councils. This is enabling a joint Growth Strategy to be considered across the wider area.

- Peterborough is part of a bigger district, but is the only major settlement that can absorb growth. The city has taken a pro-growth stance for many years and has grown extensively following its designation as a New Town in 1967.

5.0.31 The carrying capacity of a settlement is often at the root of disagreements between civic societies and local planning authorities. Civic societies and the wider public are concerned that these historic towns and cities have reached, or exceeded, a threshold for the growth they can sustainably accommodate. Often this is argued in terms of the load on the transport infrastructure and traffic congestion. Many of the civic societies highlighted the multiple impacts of overloaded infrastructure and congestion including air pollution, degradation of character and damage to the local economy.

5.0.32 Pressure on the historic core in relation to parking is also cited, as well as the lack of social infrastructure to support new residents. However, planning authorities are obliged to base their strategies and decisions on hard evidence, and either the data is not available to support these concerns, or the infrastructure modelling demonstrates the new demand can be met.

5.0.33 The case studies have also shown how heritage and character concerns can result in dramatically different growth strategies. In Lancaster, Malvern and Worcester, concerns about harm to the historic settlement by exceeding its capacity have led to an acceptance that further growth around the periphery in the new Local Plans would not be sustainable. This has prompted an argument for a different response to growth. The new settlement at Rushwick will serve both authorities, through the South Worcestershire joint development plan.

5.0.34 This strategy was also evident in some of the civic societies' thinking as a solution

to managing growth targets, and was an argument being strongly promoted by the societies to councils. At Lichfield the concern of local people about peripheral development has led the civic society to campaign for a new settlement. In some cases problems arise when a historic settlement is just one among many towns in the district. In some instances this can lead to the neglect of heritage, particularly when the councillors for the historic place are not part of the majority political party in the district, as in several of our case study locations.

Good example: Worcester and Malvern

Worcester, Malvern Hills and Wychavon authorities have worked together to establish the draft [South Worcestershire Development Plan](#). This joint working has allowed the authorities to establish a draft Growth Strategy which identifies locations of least harm to heritage assets across a wide area, and which has ultimately moved the Local Plans towards a single new settlement strategy. This avoids overburdening the historic settlements beyond their capacity. The new settlement is proposed at Rushwick to the west of Worcester focused on a new railway station. Whilst the parameters around the new settlement will be subject of debate, the proposal does alleviate what had become unsustainable growth pressures on both Malvern and Worcester.



Worcester view (Source: Oliver Mallich)

Transport infrastructure

- 5.0.35 Most of the case study towns experience daytime traffic congestion. This is caused by multiple factors, but frequently local people see new growth as feeding congestion problems. However, the physical layout of historic towns and cities plays an important part. At the core of these cities is a very fine grain historic street pattern often pedestrianised or with limited vehicular traffic allowed. From most of these historic cores is a series of radial routes.
- 5.0.36 In seven of the 12 case studies, inner ring roads were introduced in the 20th Century to alleviate congestion and protect the historic core from traffic movements. Whilst they have certainly taken the pressure off the historic core, they no longer alleviate congestion, rather they are frequently the focus for it.
- 5.0.37 Ten of the case study towns also have bypasses or outer ring roads. The ongoing success of these at keeping traffic moving was questioned. In Oxford there is

increasing conflict between cross-city local traffic being directed to use the ring road and long-distance traffic bypassing Oxford.

5.0.38 Malvern and Lancaster have neither a ring road nor a complete bypass (beyond more distant motorways). Each is of very different character and setting, and they do experience congestion at peak times. Whether or not the congestion experienced in historic towns and cities (with or without ring roads) can be considered as at a critical threshold, there is a concern about managing more traffic.

5.0.39 A shift from cars to more sustainable transport is needed in all of the case study towns and cities and the civic societies have been vocal in their support for this. Some felt that until it was tackled no more new housing should be considered. However, there were strong opposing views about maintaining and enhancing car access into the centres.


5.0.40 Increases in the value of land arising from the granting of planning permission are largely created by the state/local

“Effective coordination of transport planning and development planning is essential, but sometimes problematical in the shire county arrangement with districts holding development planning authority and county councils holding transport planning authority. There are multiple examples of poorly coordinated development and transport planning, with harm to the heritage of the city and to the enjoyment of the heritage – not least of which is that our city has acute traffic congestion and but demand management measures and enhancing public transport (including rail) use are not a priority.”

Civic Society

“A thriving local economy can good or bad for the conservation of heritage – in our city it is for the most part good for heritage, although there have been planning and transport decisions which have been exceptions to this general rule.”

Civic Society



community. It is fair, therefore, that a significant proportion of this uplift should be available to invest in new infrastructure and public services. There should be discussion of the means of achieving this, including repeal of the 1961 Land Compensation Act and improvements to compulsory purchase powers.

“People always want someone else to give up the car, it’s a difficult balancing act. But as fewer young people are learning to drive, there’s an opportunity to encourage them to use buses and help support a really good bus service.”

Councillor

“While new developments individually claim to ‘just be within the capabilities of the existing road system’, there is little evidence that the totality of developments will not cause severe traffic problems through wide areas of the town.”

Civic Society

“The potential impact of the proposed level of growth on the city’s role as a historic city has yet to be adequately assessed in the various development strategies of the county and district. This assessment is overdue.”

Civic Society

“The main concerns are the lack of supporting road infrastructure to cope with the developments. Also, in one development in the city, the primary school designated for this housing estate is at least 1.5 miles from the development which will result in an increase in car journeys.”

Civic Society

“There is concern at the lack of recognition of the severe transport problems facing the city in the context of the proposed scale and location of major growth. In the longer term these conditions will impact on the attractiveness of the city to businesses and visitors and on the vitality of the city centre.”

Civic Society

“Another key decision which came out of the Local Plan process was that any developments coming forward through allocations should not be developer-led (in terms of design, relationship to context etc). So this time, in-house urban design teams are in place to masterplan these significant growth areas ensuring that heritage, character [and] design are well established from the beginning and make any developer work within that framework. This has helped to alleviate residents’ concerns and provide reassurance – this is not going to create ‘anywhere’ places. This ensures that the elements residents feel so strongly about are at the forefront of the discussions.”

Local authority Officer

Delivering good growth on allocated sites

- 5.0.41 New development should be fully integrated with the existing settlement. However, too often the approach is to use greenfield peripheral land to minimise controversy. As a result, new developments are isolated, undermining the contribution they could make to the lifeblood of the town and are less sustainable. This can be made worse when speculative developments are granted on appeal.
- 5.0.42 Some of the case studies also showed the importance of keeping control of allocated sites once they have been confirmed in an adopted Local Plan. Lancaster and Malvern Councils have committed to masterplanning and design guidance in-house, rather than allowing it to be developer-led post-allocation.

Good example: Winchester

The northern extension of the city has been informed by visual and character assessments to ensure it does not negatively impact on the setting of the city. In addition, the masterplan has been steered to ensure integration, support a clear character response and avoid it becoming an island development. Local engagement has been actively used to shape the masterplan and layout. The architectural style proposed is not traditional and this has been controversial, and there are concerns about the density of development being too low. Overall, the proposals show how development at the periphery can be steered well.



Barton Farm development (Source: JTP)

Population and demographics

- 5.0.43 Many historic towns have elderly populations. The majority of the case studies have higher proportions of over 65s but also as university towns, high proportions of young adults (18-25). In many cases these locations have high house prices making it hard for young people to settle in the area. Exacerbating this trend is that many of the case studies are attractive retirement places. Both Chichester and Canterbury have some of the highest numbers of over 65s entering the area (each in the top 30 in England), Wells and Lichfield are not far behind.
- 5.0.44 Both civic society and local authority interviewees flagged concerns around ageing populations and how this is affecting the long term sustainability of the settlements. Whilst many of the case studies also have strong student populations, often few students could afford to live in the city and instead lived outside and commuted in – as experienced in Chichester with the majority of students

living in Bognor Regis and travelling into the city. An additional challenge in relation to accommodating students is how student housing is dealt within housing targets and whether university cities are disadvantaged because students do not pay council tax.

5.0.45 An additional challenge in relation to accommodating students is how student housing is dealt with in housing targets and whether university cities are disadvantaged because students do not pay council tax. Up until 2012, the English local government funding system took account of the loss of council tax revenue to local authorities with high numbers of student residents. This was one of over a hundred indicators used to assess relative funding needs. Councils were compensated according to indicators about the numbers of students who were exempt from paying council tax.

5.0.46 However, the system was altered in 2012 and these indicators now have only a residual effect. This means that it is not

possible to identify a specific sum of funding that is allocated to a local authority to compensate them for the loss of council tax revenue resulting from high student numbers. Given that many historic places are also university towns, this has serious financial implications.

5.0.47 Without interventions through well-planned housing growth, many of the case studies feared an ageing population would have a negative impact on the viability of the city and its local economy. In turn, the nature of housing need in these historic settlements would shift and be increasingly shaped by the needs of an older population.

“Our district has an ageing population (5% more over 65s than the national average) which creates interesting and skewed retail demands in the city centre.” Local authority Officer

Opportunities #4

5.0.48 The interviews revealed many ways in which the growth of historic towns could be better managed:

- The future of the city must be informed by its past – a historical perspective is needed to ensure change is genuinely sustainable. Settlement-wide assessments are needed to determine carrying capacity threshold points – these must consider the impact of the settlement on the setting, views of the settlement across the wider landscape, the impact on the environment and on infrastructure and the ability of the centre to serve an increase in population.
- Joint working across local authority boundaries on growth strategies may lead to the best solutions for meeting local housing needs.
- Sustainable transport and fully integrated development are key to the success of any peripheral growth. Realistic transport strategies must underpin where growth goes.

- Councils should work across the tiers of local government for well-coordinated land use and transport planning, and public realm guidance and projects.

5.0.49 The Importance of the Landscape and Views within Historic Settings

- Create a clear spatial urban planning framework for assessing potential development land, with the setting and structure of the settlement as major influences, as well as the strength of links to the core area.
- The geographical constraints of historic towns and cities must be factors which inform (and therefore reduce) the amount of development attributed to historic towns and cities. By definition in historic places there are likely to be constraints on the land available for building.
- Ensure that the landscape setting and topography are reflected in, rather than overwritten by, building locations and forms. Policies which capture this relationship will make it clear for both

councils and developers what will be successful.

- Promote compact and higher density development to make better use of land, and maintain good active travel distances to the settlement centre and its facilities.
- Maintain view corridors and sightline protection to heritage assets that sit within the topography – flat or hilly - to preserve the relationship between the settlement and its setting.
- Avoid developments which block visual sightlines from major heritage assets to the periphery, or within the settlement. In this sense the continued relationship between the historic natural and built assets needs to be recognised and not undermined.
- Where taller buildings are possible without undermining the visual dominance of major heritage assets such as cathedrals, determine acceptable view corridors and new building heights, and the design characteristics required for new taller buildings.
- Include options for permitted development rights where changes of use from office to

residential proposals would increase the height of existing buildings.

5.0.50 Visions and Masterplans

- Develop a Vision for the historic settlement creating a shared goal and focus with land owners, stakeholders and potential developers, and hold regular reviews on the scale of development growth anticipated in the masterplan.
- Produce an Urban Design Framework and Masterplan for the city or town, with site-specific briefs or masterplans. Councils taking the lead and producing masterplans for allocations in-house, rather than being led by developers, ensure that heritage, character and design expectations are well-established from the outset.
- Where developments are promoted by developers, agree at the outset the quality of design, sustainable transport and accessibility needed to avoid 'value engineering' processes in later stages.
- Large sites in particular need co-ordinated and strong visions, developed in-house and collaboratively with local people.

- District or borough-wide strategies should include car parking, the public realm and green infrastructure.
- Undertake public consultation and engagement on the Vision, Urban Design Framework, site-specific masterplans and the associated policies to inform responses to subsequent planning applications.
- Adopt a Design Protocol (as in Chichester) to set out the processes and tools that the council will use to build on strategic policies.
- Promote Neighbourhood Plans for smaller settlements or urban quarters to incorporate community views, more public engagement in planning, and greater weight for policies relating to non-designated heritage assets such as Local Lists.
- Where large-scale developments are proposed, undertake community engagement about the character of the area to inform design codes on street types, form, massing, materials, setbacks, boundary treatments, open spaces and

more, as promoted in the *National Model Design Code*.

5.0.51 Sites for growth

- Develop a Heritage Impact Appraisal and Character Assessment in advance of the SHLAA process to allow heritage to influence development.
- Adjust housing allocation algorithms to take account of the sustainability and capacity of areas so that realistic housing targets can be set, especially where there are limits created by historic built or natural environments.
- Where Areas for Development are identified or the removal of sites from the Green Belt is proposed, ensure that there is an open public consultation at the appropriate stage. It is important for the general public to be consulted at the right stage, when what they say can still affect planning decisions. Civic society members find it very frustrating to be consulted when decisions have already been made.
- In the context of many poorly connected edge-of-town developments built since the

1960s, ensure that proposals which add further growth to these areas forge strong through-routes to good links to the historic centre.

- Speculative and unplanned peripheral greenfield development proposals should be precluded by clear policies and designations for land which has been deemed as unsuitable, such as playing fields, country parks, wildlife areas, flood plains and more.
- As greenfield developments are often promoted as more economically viable than brownfield sites, ensure that their design quality and accessibility is exemplary.
- As areas just outside conservation areas are comparatively less constrained, provide additional guidance to reflect the important setting nearby and promote good quality development.
- Consider whether allocating land for a new settlement could overcome landscape and environmental constraints associated with nearby historic settlements, and be of a size that includes infrastructure, including

health and education facilities, access to jobs and high quality public transport.

- Include the use of a strategic gap or green buffer in policies where coalescence between settlements would reduce their local identity and limit expansion on a historic settlement's edge.
- Where there is no 5-Year Housing Land Supply in place, set out demonstrable sustainability principles and growth objectives to guide speculative development.



Wells market

6 Design Quality

6.0.1 A constant theme from respondents was the importance of design quality. All of the civic societies were concerned about the nature and quality of new proposals. This disquiet ranged from major development sites to small extensions.

6.0.2 Concerns around the design quality of new development are not unique to historic towns; it is a subject of national debate and the focus for new policy. However, concerns around design style and quality may be most keenly felt in cherished historic environments. Their long evolution has established a strong identity, against which new proposals have to be judged.

6.0.3 A number of issues were raised about design quality and in relation to key sites in the case study locations:

- Design quality
- Design vision
- Design and heritage considerations in the planning process
- Existing buildings
- Design guidance
- Climate change and designing for net zero carbon (see later Climate Change chapter)

“Anything you add has a much bigger impact here because of the heritage.”

Local authority Officer

Design quality

6.0.4 In general, the status of major historic towns means applicants are more likely to come forward with above-average design proposals. However, it is still a frequent concern in less prosperous historic towns and cities that economic viability arguments will be used as a counter to paying for good design. Some authorities have to push hard, at the risk of deterring much-needed investment, to demand good quality proposals.

“The city’s Design Review Panel was established following a major failure in design of a new development. However, recourse to its advice is not compulsory for developers.”

Civic Society

Design vision

- 6.0.5 The common agreement around the importance of high quality design diverges into real points of conflict around architectural style.
- 6.0.6 Most of the case study towns had found it difficult to establish a common vision on architectural design. Local residents and sometimes civic societies can have a strong desire to see traditional design delivered on all schemes. By contrast, local planning authorities are generally more open to contemporary architecture sitting comfortably alongside the historic fabric, but also supporting the intensification needed in a sensitive and well-designed way. Several examples were offered where modern buildings had fitted well into the townscape (in Chester and Chichester). Other than Oxford, contemporary residential development was much rarer.
- 6.0.7 Joint working between civic societies, local authorities and others could help to define the essential qualities of the place. This in turn might help to establish a broader

design vision, reaching beyond sometimes entrenched matters of style and taste.

“There is a negative perception of ‘modern’ buildings in town among residents and politicians – a general feeling that the town isn’t an appropriate place for contemporary architecture.”

Local authority Officer

“The District has tried to accommodate growth by emphasizing the importance of high quality development planning and design including heritage management. The council aims to fulfil the ambitions of the earlier high quality planning studies, but not all city planning decisions in the last decade have measured up to the standards set in earlier decades. The city is also now encountering new and urgent challenges including climate change resilience, post Covid economic recovery along with continued inadequacy of local authority funding and staffing levels.”

Civic Society

“There is a complete distaste and distrust in anything contemporary.”

Local authority Officer

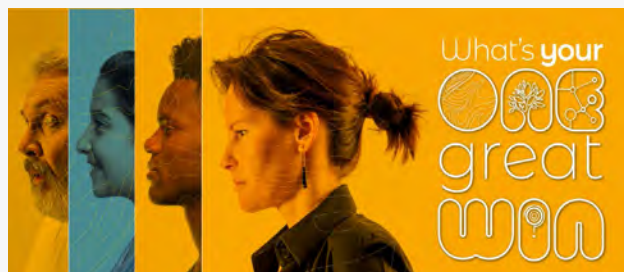
Good example: Chichester

Chichester District Council prepared a [Design Protocol](#) in 2013 which sets out clear expectations and guidance around delivering high quality design in developments. This document sets out the character of the district clearly and succinctly, emphasising what is particularly special in each location. It includes a list of key views and vistas which is supported by an appendix on landscape and visual amenity assessment. The Protocol highlights the key issues for applicants to consider in the design process, as well as a set of design principles to follow including “understanding the place” and “sensitive to existing landscape and topography”.

Good examples: Shared design vision

Winchester

The Town Forum has sought to establish a city-wide vision through [One Great Win](#). This has a wide remit, but touches on the nature of development, densities and style. This is a community-led initiative which is seeking to influence local planning strategies.



Design and heritage considerations in the planning process

- 6.0.8 As the resources section highlights, most authorities across England have found it hard to maintain their design and conservation expertise. Even in those authorities that have managed to protect their planning service, there have still been acute casework pressures.
- 6.0.9 Almost without exception, the local authority officers interviewed emphasised the value of early input from conservation and design officers. Most agreed that a creative dialogue before applications were submitted generally led to better results.

“Dialogue at the outset of the project is really important – going back to basic principles and agreeing this. We are making projects go back to this now, to ensure the first stage isn’t lost. Often the problems that have come up on proposals are around issues that should have been dealt with at the outset. So parameters around height, massing, setting etc. need to be debated right at the outset before looking at options. It’s crucial to communicate the expectation and be really clear on this from the beginning.”

Local authority Officer

“Things don’t go well when heritage or design officers aren’t engaged in pre-apps.” *Local authority Officer*


“The Society feels strongly that lip service is played to heritage and history concerns, but this does not translate into strong support in terms of funding or initiatives for heritage, or a strong concern for conservation and heritage in planning decision-making. Recent funding is for improvements but none are related to preserving the heritage of the city.” *Civic Society*

Good example: Oxford

Oxford City Council have refined the process it follows for applications based on experience over the last 10 years. The process emphasises early involvement of both design and conservation expertise. The ideal process begins with a Planning Performance Agreement (PPA) setting out how many hours the conservation officer and urban designer are needed. The initial pre-app that follows has very early involvement with the conservation officer and urban designer alongside the lead planner. Together they set out a series of 8 meetings, each with a focus. Post-meeting reviews are conducted after each with all comments in writing, showing the evolution of thoughts and formal comments where appropriate. The process includes early design review, then 2-3 design reviews for some large schemes as they progress.

6.0.10 In most of the case studies, planning officers found that the quality of the design proposed and the openness of the applicant to engage with the planning process and negotiation was dependent on the type of applicant. In many cases, a major economic driver in a cathedral city is higher education – Oxford, Canterbury and Lancaster among them. Generally, well-resourced education institutions engage very well with the process, and come with a strong understanding of the quality of design required and the professional team needed to support this. Often the prestige and character of the city is part of the attraction of the education institutions and therefore there is a clear interest in delivering the best quality development. Universities also often have interest in adding greater development intensity to sites to address multiple pressures for space and this can require lengthy and careful negotiations with the LPA and local residents to achieve a good balance.

6.0.11 The case study locations had varying experiences of housing developers. For



some, the gravitas and character of the location meant developers came forward with high quality and more sensitive proposals as a matter of course. However, in some of the smaller cities and towns, the volume housebuilders had initially put forward standard proposals and much time and effort had been required to steer the design to suit the local context.

6.0.12 For commercial development, towns and cities with “managing” or “struggling” economies had experience of national chains presenting generic or insensitive proposals. National budget hotel chains were frequently cited as being initially inflexible or having little regard for local context. Where planning authorities had pressed for changes, poor schemes had been avoided. In other instances, the economic priority for investment and support of the tourism economy had won out over design quality.

6.0.13 A crucial factor in maintaining high quality design through planning negotiations and on to delivery can be development

economics. Many towns had experiences of having to accept design compromises to support the scheme’s viability. More than one authority cited specific negotiations where the quality of materials had to be sacrificed to achieve a minimum level of affordable housing.

6.0.14 The views of Historic England were respected, but one local authority was concerned that the body had not always followed up with formal written advice. In at least one case, a different outcome could have resulted. In places with low land values and high economic need, it was felt that Historic England should take more account of viability and the difficulty of

"We have a very close working relationship with Historic England. We agreed an objective to drive down the percentage loss of heritage. For one of our recent developments we set a target of maximum of 5% loss."

Local authority Officer

"With a high quality aesthetic comes a high price tag for doing anything. We therefore risk ending up with lots of buildings at risk as owners struggle to cope."

Local authority Officer

"Heritage can become a conflict with economic investment. In the past archaeology or conservation officers might have been regarded as blockers, but this has now balanced itself out. Now heritage and conservation is a principal driver."

Local authority Officer

"From time-to-time economic development objectives can come into conflict with heritage. Finance is always the obstacle, and there is always a squeeze from developers."

Local authority Officer

"It should be possible to build more 'character' into new housing – rather than putting up 'off the shelf' estates."

Civic Society

"Our Design Review Panel is made up of local experts generally. The Panel is really useful when we get stuck in negotiations. Having local experts can be good and bad – sometimes needing less passion and more objectivity."

Local authority Officer

"Design and beauty – beautiful on the outside but poor to live in."

Local authority Officer

Existing buildings – refurbishment vs redevelopment

6.0.15 Whilst the design of new development and the delivery of new sites is a common concern for local authorities and civic societies, both agreed about the importance of re-using the existing stock of buildings. This has been brought into even greater focus with numbers of vacant buildings as a result of the pandemic, including the value of ‘meanwhile or worthwhile’ uses in vacant spaces.

6.0.16 Civic societies sought clearer strategies and follow-through on bringing vacant buildings back into use.

6.0.17 The conversion of vacant buildings to new uses brings a great opportunity but is not without risk. Case studies such as Wakefield Council categorised the buildings most sensitive to change:

- Town centre retail units.
- Buildings of highest architectural significance or buildings of group value can suffer most harm. Often the grandest buildings are the most expensive to

restore so the conservation team are under pressure to accept inferior design, materials and finishes. Equally where groups of buildings are involved, value engineering often comes into play, with pressure to concede, resulting in harm to the heritage.

- Unlisted dwellings of historic interest can be particularly at risk of insensitive change to accommodate modern requirements, without the additional control afforded by designation.

“Permitted development changes of use from office to residential are often accompanied by proposals to raise the height of office buildings.” Civic Society

“There is no formal programme of housing refurbishment. Some small-scale refurbishment has taken place in the former council housing stock, now owned and managed by a housing association. Some of the housing association properties have had external cladding to improve their energy efficiency.” Civic Society

“The recent Homes Strategy 2020 – 2025 released by the council is particularly welcomed by the Civic Society for its commitment to refurbishing existing buildings on a greener basis, whilst ensuring that new developments are of the highest possible and allowable specifications.” Civic Society

Good example: Lancaster

The Moor Lane Mills scheme in Lancaster involved converting several mill buildings to office use and student flats, during the 1980s. These listed buildings, together with the landmark water tower are an intrinsic part of Lancaster’s roovescape and its industrial heritage. In the same way, the conversion of the Grade II listed Moor Hospital Annexe, and one of its satellite buildings Campbell House, has successfully seen the re-use of another of Lancaster’s iconic landmark buildings. These represent Lancaster’s role as the regional centre of mental health provision in the 19th and 20th centuries, whilst successfully creating a new community within the city.



Moor Lane Mills scheme (Source: Alan Marsh)



Design guidance

6.0.18 The research has shown the value of good design guidance – for decision-makers, and those making changes - as a factor in successful outcomes. At Oxford, a comprehensive set of policies, guidance documents and toolkits has established a sound basis for achieving design quality. Most of the case study towns and cities, however, lack such an armoury.

6.0.19 All of the local planning authorities agreed that fuller national guidance was needed to support their efforts. Authoritative technical guidance from Historic England on energy efficiency and renewable energy integration into historic buildings was awaited.

6.0.20 Civic societies had further suggestions for additional guidance:

- Shop fronts, with information to shop owners about approved styles.
- Enforcement when unsightly shop fronts are put in place without approval.
- The design of streets and urban spaces.


- Views and sensitive management of the skyline, including roofscapes from the public realm.
- Adapting historic buildings to be more carbon neutral.
- Enforcement of carbon neutral standards for new homes.

Opportunities #5

- A city-wide conversation should be encouraged to establish a design vision. This could establish principles at the strategic scale, supported by detailed elements on building and public realm design headlines. This work should be preceded by a Character Study to inform the vision.
- Internal processes on pre-applications and planning applications should involve the conservation and design staff at the first opportunity. Setting clear parameters and expectations at the outset avoids difficult negotiations later and helps to build trust and clarity.
- Local planning authorities should be encouraged to establish parameters in relation to building heights or protected views. This need not be a full view management framework or exhaustive building heights strategy, but it should highlight the sensitivities and provide a basis for informing site allocations and capacities.

6.0.21 Guidance

- Bring together the many sources of information currently available about managing the historic environment into a comprehensive set of resources and guidance.
- Cross-reference the guidance available from Historic England into easy-to-access resources, with case studies illustrating key points of principle.
- Establish a national database of case studies and good design examples that councils can add to.
- Prepare new guidance on climate change, ecological design and retrofitting buildings for greater sustainability, based on urban design and historic conservation principles.
- Undertake and adopt a public realm design guide so that all public streets and spaces can be improved to match the quality of the settlement's historic environment, and make enforcement objectives clearer for different areas.
- Consider more strategic heritage support for settlements and their setting, such as Heritage Port status to both protect port-



related heritage assets and the historic environment, and promote greater design quality. This Status would reinforce the historic role of the port that may be neglected today; and promote it as an asset for future use and celebration.

- Adopt clearer shopfront design guidance for improvements and enforcement actions.
- Consider whether a colour assessment and guidance for developers on key views and new developments will support better design quality.
- Consider how new development briefs and design codes can be produced where there are no resources to produce them within the council, but by working collaboratively.
- Agree de-commissioning and regeneration plans when major employers or functions are relocated away from the town or city, so that job losses or access to facilities are phased and managed.
- Agree follow-on social and cultural heritage projects where major change is planned, so that local heritage is captured, and the process of change creates new opportunities.

- Where opportunities for infill development are available in historic areas, prescribe design quality expectations for new buildings so that they reflect the historic character and built form of the area.
- Adopt Local Lists as part of Neighbourhood Plan policies to give weight to otherwise vulnerable heritage.

6.0.22 Historic England as a source of support

- Provide support and help to councils developing planning objectives, such as the percentage of acceptable loss of heritage, or a requirement to undertake a Heritage Impact Assessment.
- Increase the level of support available prior to pre-application discussions, for example on developing options.
- Add greater visibility and weight to the expert support provided, for example by providing written statements.
- Provide clearer guidance on how to prepare Local Lists learning from the national pilot projects underway.
- Strengthen the case for Historic England's policies and advice being further integrated into national policy.

6.0.23 Historic England has produced valuable research exploring the connection between economic growth and heritage – and how the two can have a collaborative relationship. This research should be more widely promoted. Heritage must be considered an integral factor of regeneration, sustainable solutions and as a catalyst for growth. The research suggests that heritage does this through stimulating tourism, providing jobs and creating a visitor economy. In 2011, built heritage tourism in the UK supported 134,000 direct jobs and created £5.1bn in economic output. In terms of sustainability, the re-use and refurbishment of heritage assets is key to reducing carbon emissions. New evidence for Heritage Counts has shown that the carbon emissions of historic buildings can be reduced by over 60 per cent by 2050 through refurbishment and retrofit.

7 Stakeholder Engagement and Relationships

“The importance of heritage is about what it means to the man or woman on the street.”

Local authority Officer

7.0.1 Part of the background to this research was a concern that relationships between civic societies and local planning authorities were deteriorating. Anecdotal evidence suggested that many civic societies in historic towns and cities in England were finding themselves at odds with planning strategies and decisions, feeling they were not being listened to. Subsequently, some civic societies had become quite critical campaign groups, with many feeling uneasy about this role and a desire to return to a more collaborative or critical friend role.

7.0.2 Through this research, civic societies and local authority representatives were asked about the way they worked together, and their associations with other stakeholders in the planning process. Tensions and conflicts undoubtedly exist. However,

there were also many instances of positive working relationships and situations resolved through joint working and dialogue.

7.0.3 There was a consensus that early engagement in planning matters was helpful to all parties.

7.0.4 At Canterbury, officers said that workshops for their Heritage Strategy had been useful in bringing together different interests and getting a cross-section of stakeholders, representing different business sectors, places and interests. The historic environment was high on the agenda and well acknowledged by all stakeholders, providing a strong basis for discussion.

7.0.5 The Canterbury Society had concerns about the reduced extent of opportunities to engage. There is no Town Council. In the past there were local area Forums, run by the District Council, where residents could raise issues with their councillors and decisions would be passed to the District Council. However, these Council-run Forums were abolished in

2020. The replacement bodies reinstated by local volunteers and can have good representation by the public and councillors, but no standing in councils' decision-making processes.

7.0.6 In most of the twelve towns, conversations are held between conservation officers and civic societies. Generally, where these conversations are regular and allow for an open exchange, a positive relationship exists. Civic societies thereby feel confident in communicating their views and discussing what might be influenced on applications. A key obstacle cited to a positive relationship was a lack of clarity about the planning system and the limits of council powers. A number of officers and councillors highlighted that civic societies and local interest groups were often investing huge amounts of time campaigning against developments on grounds like transport capacity, when these aspects had already decided much earlier in the planning process (including the Local Plan stage) and could not form

reasons for refusing an application. Greater transparency and a better understanding of the planning process would be beneficial and might avoid a build-up of tensions.

"In a cathedral city, you can't claim ignorance of heritage."


Local authority Officer

"I talk regularly with the Civic Society and Conservation Area Committee"

Council Conservation Officer

"Our city is an area of significant social deprivation, particularly around the city centre. Perhaps, as a consequence, many local people are sceptical about 'heritage' and 'culture', seeing them as elitist and not relevant to their economic needs. However, there is a sense of local identity and civic pride."

Civic Society



"The Civic Society has some very strong passionate views, quite understandably, but don't necessarily understand the pressures of the planning framework that the officers have to work within. Generally, local people tend to engage when they are angry or upset with the planning process or outcome, but often they are talking about an issue which is not on the table at that point in the process. It would be hugely useful to have a resource that explains to civic societies and local people when they should engage on key aspects to avoid the constant disappointment and wasted energy."

Local councillor

"The proposed changes [in the Planning White Paper] are bad for local democracy and would undermine the scope of local communities and councils to influence the future development of their area. This would exacerbate the existing threat to Localism and civic engagement posed by the suggestion that smaller local authorities across the country should be abolished in favour of unitary councils covering much larger populations." Civic Society

Good example – Peterborough

The relationship between Peterborough Civic Society and the local planning authority is strong and as such the civic society has been able to support the planning team's work. This has been valuable during times of stretched staff resources. In particular times of pressure, when the conservation officers have been diverted onto other work, civic society members have stepped into the breach to help out. The civic society is also very active in local listing work. The [Local List](#) was revised and greatly expanded by the Society, on behalf of the then overstretched conservation officer, some years ago. Currently a further review is underway with the ambition that it can become a Supplementary Planning Document.

Good example – Wakefield

Wakefield have been able to hold effective and frequent consultations with the public and wider stakeholders both in person and digitally. Engagement regularly includes the civic societies, key developers, stakeholders, Wakefield College, Theatre Royal, Network Rail, the Canal & River Trust, the Gardens Trust, Georgian and Victorian Societies, and the Church Diocese.

An expert independent voice

- 7.0.7 Civic societies are acknowledged as a repository of knowledge, particularly helpful on matters like Local Listing and research. Many societies include experts on local history who can help inform and support evidence base studies and emerging guidance documents.
- 7.0.8 At the same time, there can be a breakdown of trust between societies and the local planning authority, with the former perceived by some councils as being blinkered and lacking pragmatism about wider planning duties. For their part, civic societies can be frustrated by an apparent disregard for their opinions, or concern about the inadequate training of councillors.
- 7.0.9 The role of civic societies and local experts can be valuable in driving up the design benchmark and quality of proposals. In Oxford, the abundance of built environment experts in the local population means the local planning team must be on top of the detail and furnished with the current

information to avoid legal challenges. This has shown to councillors and senior officers the importance of the planning team, helping to safeguard its role.

7.0.10 Neighbourhood Plans, where they are being led by civic societies (as at Wells) may prove a litmus test in the relationship with the local authority. There is some concern that neighbourhood planning groups may have been misled by national government over their influence on local policies. This is not unique to historic towns and cities, but it comes into sharp focus when neighbourhood forums expect to be able to set strong new heritage policies, but find themselves constrained by the higher status of Local Plans, the National Planning Policy Framework and statute. Certainly, of the civic societies interviewed, those preparing Neighbourhood Plans felt frustrated by the process.

7.0.11 In a number of the case studies, civic society members had invested a significant amount of time in setting up

“The public are very vocal, they have a lot of influence, and the city council has a difficult role in terms of being a) a landowner but also b) the local planning authority. They are under scrutiny all the time.”

Local authority Officer

Neighbourhood Forums, collating the baseline evidence and then establishing a draft Neighbourhood Plan. Many had become increasingly frustrated by the limitations of what could be addressed by a Neighbourhood Plan and the limited weight it was then given in planning decisions. There is a real need to ensure the focus of community resources is directed appropriately within the Neighbourhood Planning process to deliver on community concerns and ambitions.

The conservation officer

- 7.0.14 Most of the authorities in the study had at least one qualified and experienced conservation officer. The postholders were usually well known to their civic societies and there was a good working relationship. There was a great deal of sympathy for the officers' heavy caseload.
- 7.0.15 Where a post had become vacant, the pressure was evident, and a considerable hiatus could occur before a new appointment was made.

Good example - Chichester

Chichester's conservation officers are well engaged early in the Local Plan and decision-making process. The residents and communities are well engaged and tend to turn to the conservation team for answers and discussions, holding the team in the high regard.

The planning service

- 7.0.12 Engagement with the planning service, including development management, policy-making, Conservation Area Advisory Committees and Design Review Panels seemed patchy. It is understood that although there can be tension between civic societies and local planning authorities on planning, cooperation and communication between the two groups is encouraged.
- 7.0.13 There is a Town Forum in Winchester made up of local ward councillors acting as a consultative and advisory body. In conjunction with the council this has produced the Winchester Vision.

"We would like to see a partnership between the public and private sector, with a real level of resource commitment and power to achieve results. Such a body would be led by an effective business leader, bringing in local authorities, utilities, and charitable bodies." Civic Society



Other key stakeholders

- 7.0.16 Major land owners – universities and colleges, cathedral Chapters, or the Grosvenor Estate in Chester– were acknowledged as big players in shaping the future of their towns and cities. This extended to public bodies, such as health authorities or the councils themselves. Whilst in some cases their leverage in the development process might be felt to be disproportionate, the disposal of assets by these bodies could also cause concern.
- 7.0.17 Engagement with universities and higher education providers was generally strong and positive. Of the case studies, Oxford illustrated the greatest influence such players can have, given the extensive land ownership of the colleges and the university’s demand for new facilities to maintain a world-leading reputation. This translated into high expectations for design quality and public realm, but also for quick decision-making.
- 7.0.18 Engaging with prospective developers, particularly those from outside the locality,

could be difficult. In the words of one local councillor “Developers are scared of having conversations with communities.”

Opportunities #6

- All of the officers interviewed agreed that to improve public engagement greater understanding of the planning process is required. A toolkit showing planning timelines and the points at which different players could take part in the process should be established to improve transparency and support civic societies in engaging proactively and supportively.
- Civic societies could help with the appointment of a Heritage Champion and assist with their knowledge-building and advocacy role.
- Develop a better understanding of the planning system for local communities, and the local balance between economic growth, heritage and climate change.
- Create a clear and transparent process for public engagement and collaboration, based on what it is possible to influence and when, and what the practical barriers are to greater civic ambitions.
- A civic society and Conservation Area Advisory Committee (CAAC) can help

to develop a good relationship with local residents.

- These committees aid local authorities with planning applications, queries, policies and consultations relating specifically to heritage and conservation matters within the conservation area. They are independent bodies.
- A Heritage and Design Forum should be a regular consultee and meet monthly. Heritage and Design Forums have a very similar role to the Conservation Area Advisory Committees, however, take a broader approach and examine heritage, conservation and urban design matters relating to planning applications and decisions. Unlike the committees, they are not bound to just conservation areas and can take a broader approach geographically.

7.0.19 Making Plans

- Bring key stakeholders together in the town or city to create a common vision or multi-partner study for future collaboration.
- Ensure that all members of the public can be involved in planning for growth or change.

- Build relationships with major land owners so that large or small developers are aware of and expect to deliver high quality development.
- Promote higher quality developments through civic society award schemes or the equivalent.

7.0.20 Universities and Students

- Work with local universities, colleges or cathedral Chapters to produce a master plan for their estate and a guide for the quality of the buildings and spaces planned. In many towns and cities, the university, high education colleges and other institutions are important for the ongoing conservation of heritage.
- Agree at the outset with local universities that, where a growth in student accommodation is required, whether in purpose-built blocks or HMOs, this will be guided by the institution's commitment to design quality, and not be led by speculative or one-off development proposals.
- Develop partnerships, such as with local universities, colleges and dioceses to develop small-scale or spin-off businesses

and start-ups in technology, health, arts or culture.

7.0.21 Councils as land owners

- Where councils are both land owner, developers and applicant create a transparent process for scrutiny to minimise perceived and actual conflicts of interest.
- Where council-owned land is brownfield land and relatively central, assess the potential for re-locating or consolidating existing uses to make space for growth within centres, rather than identifying sites in more peripheral locations.
- Adopt a masterplan or urban design strategy for potential council-owned development areas to ensure that both the heritage setting, and its buildings are carefully considered, and to create exemplar projects.
- Undertake extensive public engagement on council-owned site developments and consider the use of architectural competitions for key locations.
- Explore opportunities for developing council housing on council-owned sites.

Good example - Chester

The [Chester One City Dashboard](#) is a single reference point and data source for development in Chester. It contains everything in a clear and easily navigable way. The dashboard gives a snap shot of progress, relating directly to the One City Plan and other areas including Transport, Housing, Visitor Economy, Culture, Business and Data, where you can click your way through maps for more project specific information and the many pages of informative sections. It is designed to be a useful resource and tool that visibly joins the dots, coordinates the council's work and reaffirms the strategic vision.



8 Climate Change

8.0.1 Climate change was a key discussion point in the research and a joint priority for the local planning authorities and civic societies. One of the main concerns around climate change focused on the desire for better sustainable transport, but countered by with questions about a lack of parking and reducing vehicular access. Other discussion points included waste management, and city centre living versus suburban growth.

8.0.2 The discussions picked up three key areas in the relationship between heritage assets and climate change:

- the declaration of the climate emergency;
- impacts of climate change on heritage; and
- the need for information and guidance.

“The climate emergency requires an ambitious approach to building performance. We need to avoid missed opportunities which have to be retrofitted in the future.”

Councillor

Climate Emergency

8.0.3 The declaration of the climate emergency was seen as a key part of moving planning forward, proactively in the wake of climate change and its impacts on everyday lives. By declaring a climate emergency, local authorities have been able to initiate meaningful discussions, channel funding, produce targets, and shift planning policies and decision-making towards more sustainable options. All twelve of the case study authorities have declared a climate emergency, which is very encouraging, and the research found this declaration to be supported across all political parties within the councils.

8.0.4 A declaration is an important step in demonstrating to local people that climate change is being taken seriously. However, there were doubts about whether the local authorities were acting on their commitment. Whilst civic societies were pleased with the initiative, around a third felt that their local authority was not



12 out of 12 case-studies have declared a climate emergency

treating it with the required urgency. In particular, the following were lacking:

- Associated action plans;
- Guidance relating to heritage and climate change and the inter-relationships;
- Meaningful engagement to influence change.


8.0.5 This was not a unanimous response. The Chester Civic Trust spoke positively about the effectiveness of Cheshire West and Chester Council in forming the Climate Emergency Taskforce and the Climate Advisory Panel. These bodies were providing internal and external technical advice on the responses to climate emergency, including heritage matters. Some case study locations had established Climate Change Citizen Assemblies such as in Oxford which has been powerful in pushing for change.

“Declaring a climate change emergency is key to achieving a good balance between protecting heritage and supporting growth. Explicit detailed post-emergency declaration policies are not yet clear, including those concerned particularly with heritage assets – climate-proofing old buildings requires very special attention.”

Civic Society

“It is the council’s belief that heritage matters in relation to climate change need significant attention and therefore a background paper, ‘Heritage and Carbon Zero’ has been produced to focus on these matters in greater detail.”

Civic Society



Linking Heritage and Climate Change: Refurbishment and Retrofit

8.0.6 The interviews revealed a joint understanding by civic societies and local authority officers of the threats to heritage from climate change. It was acknowledged that historic buildings represent embedded energy and contribute to the circular economy. However, it was thought that this understanding might not extend to elected members. Councillors seemed inclined to see heritage as an obstacle to climate change objectives rather than as part of the solution.

8.0.7 Planning officers reported that the push towards public transport is an important factor. Accommodating buses in narrow historic streets could be a problem, but encouraging cycling and walking was clearly desirable.

8.0.8 The civic societies expressed concern that although councils encouraged the re-use of existing buildings, their Local Plans and other mechanisms rarely made any specific

commitment to favour refurbishment over demolition.

8.0.9 The need to retrofit existing properties with green technology was recognised, including solar panels, insulation, electric car chargers, more efficient waste and water systems and double-glazing. Acceptable means of upgrading listed buildings and other heritage assets is a challenge. Planning officers and the civic societies both expressed doubt around these ideas, explaining that they were in support of the solutions but unsure how these would play out and through the planning process.

“There are plans within the Climate Action Plan to ‘develop net zero retrofit skills’ etc. but no specific acknowledgement that refurbishment is ‘greener’ than rebuild.”

Civic Society

“On Climate change, larger developments are typically doing little more than statutorily required by planning requirements and current (outdated) building requirements. In cases where planning permission started some years ago, this can amount to virtually nothing.”

Civic Society

“There’s a piece of work we want to do as part of a design piece in the city to understand the links between heritage and climate change and the lost knowledge – what we’ve lost, what we used to know e.g. orientation, ventilation, etc.”

Local authority Officer



Guidance and Clarity

- 8.0.10 The practical challenges for the built environment underlined the need for continuing research and authoritative guidance, at a national level, with demonstration projects that could be replicated.
- 8.0.11 A third of the civic societies interviewed said that their councils were not doing enough to promote best practice, and that they were awaiting robust policies or guidance. Whilst some civic societies may have been unaware of the efforts of their local authority, the consensus was that more needs to be done.
- 8.0.12 These civic societies feared that without sound policies on climate change, planning permission could be granted for environmentally harmful schemes.

“There is no clear commitment to providing electric boilers instead of gas, no provision of car charging points for each house, and only 50% of dwellings provided with solar panels.”

Civic Society

“It would be great to have a central source of information for examples in relation to climate change – a set of central design resources. It should be a national resource, and then used and added to locally. Historic England could help with examples. Councils can bring their local experience and learning to help enrich this resource.”

Local authority Officer

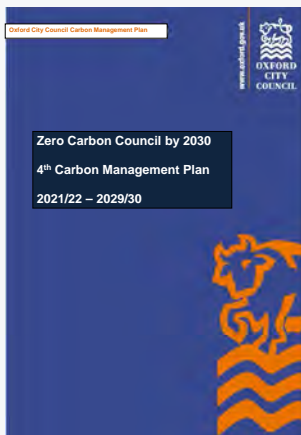
“This council are reasonably serious about climate change as evidenced by the various initiatives.”


Civic Society

Good example – Oxford City Council

Oxford City Council has published comprehensive guidance documents and tools to support greater energy efficiency in historic buildings and new developments. It has policies in its corporate plan, as well as specific schemes, to tackle climate change: Connect Oxford, Zero Emissions Zone, Flood Alleviation Scheme.

Oxford City Council has implemented the [Oxford Heritage and Energy Efficiency Tool](#) to help assess the energy performance of historic buildings, driven by the recognition that historic buildings have a role to play in reducing carbon emissions.





Opportunities #7

- Declarations of climate emergency need to be backed up with clear action plans and translated into policies in the Local Plan.
- Historic England is well placed to promote the positive role that heritage has in climate change strategies – emphasising the circular economy, embodied carbon and re-use. This helps to break down the perception that the historic environment is an obstacle to tackling climate change.
- More guidance, case studies and training is needed on climate change measures in historic contexts and from national bodies such as Historic England. A key early win would be to eliminate any conflict between existing guidance documents.
- More local advice and practical examples are needed of how historic buildings can be made more energy efficient without sacrificing their special interest. This could be a local resource which then contributes to a national database of examples.

8.0.13 Strategy and Policy Development

- Review ways in which councils, local organisations and residents can adopt more environmentally responsible actions and over what timescales – e.g. a One Green City Plan or a summit – to coordinate climate change initiatives.
- Promote the value of historic places in mitigating climate change through compact and dense building forms, accessibility and the embodied energy in terms of construction and materials.
- Adopt policies in which a ‘fabric first’ approach is developed and includes adaptability and greater resource efficiency (e.g. materials, energy, water)
- Adopt a housing strategy which refurbishes buildings and sets high standards for new housing developments.
- Where a climate emergency has been declared, set clear aims and ensure that these are publicly accessible. For example, the council could aim to be carbon neutral by 2030, and encourage others to meet the same standard, review the environmental

impact of its budgets, deliver 100% clean energy by 2030, have low carbon vehicles, and encourage use of electric vehicles by the public, supported by a council-led carbon management action plan, and a coordinated a climate change cross-party working group.

- Work with other local councils to appoint a resilience officer to implement plans focused on biodiversity, cycling, education and waste.
- Include climate change responsive policies in plans at all levels including neighbourhood planning.
- Where full life carbon emissions comparisons are carried out for regeneration area buildings, share these to promote better understanding amongst the local community and developers.

8.0.14 Transport and Access

- Adopt or review car parking strategies to ensure that visitors have clear information about the availability of car parking and alternative modes of travel to the town and city centres.

- Work with retailers and businesses to identify key car parking facilities to support their work and reduce motorised travel (e.g. green travel plans for employees, servicing, and customer parking).

8.0.15 New Development and Existing Neighbourhoods

- Ensure that new developments meet the highest environmental standards including more compact and higher density developments, active travel links, green spaces and green infrastructure. New homes should be carbon neutral, with on-site renewable energy and charging points for electric vehicles.
- Locate housing developments in places with high accessibility by public transport. Develop clearer evidence and guidance on the 'carrot and stick' approach for greater support for Low Traffic Neighbourhoods.
- Re-introduce tree planting schemes.

9 Town and City Centres

9.0.1 By their nature, historic city centres are multi-layered, complex places, often fine-grained with concentrations of notable buildings. The townscape may be an assembly of buildings of many different styles, forms and periods, overlaid on an ancient street pattern. In the case study locations, there is a legacy of care and protection in these centres. Their importance as tourism destinations as well as commercial and cultural hubs have sustained their vitality. The conservation responsibilities come with many challenges, to maintain economic viability and allow for sensitive evolution and upkeep.

9.0.2 Unsurprisingly the centres are a primary focus for local people's interest and concerns. Many of the potential development sites are the most controversial and take the greatest effort to resolve, often over long periods.

"Conflicts have led to paralysis on key sites"

Local authority officer

"The importance of the historic skyline of city centres and their church spires needs further emphasis to discourage tall buildings across the city and stop the incremental upwards creep in height that has been evident in recent development applications."

Civic Society

"The city does not have a high street or a focus for the community such as a town square. Shops are closing and the shopping experience is disappointing."

Civic Society

Retail and town centre uses

9.0.3 Shopping and retail have been at the heart of land uses and activity in the town and city centres. Over many decades, retail trends have exerted development pressures on centres and each case study has responded differently.

9.0.4 The case study centres have exceptional qualities with contrasting layouts and configurations. Chester for example has

the unique asset of the two-tier Rows; by contrast, the elegant spa town of Great Malvern has no conventional high street or town square. Oxford has a much-prized covered market. All have tight and fine-grained street networks.

9.0.5 The more recent national exodus of retail from high streets and shopping centres has brought contrasting challenges. Historic towns and cities have not been immune to this trend, and Chester's experience demonstrates that the risk to the historic fabric of the Rows can be acute. Whilst residential uses have been moving into the vacant upper floors, there are still many empty units. Now the ground floor units are losing occupiers, and this puts the whole fabric at risk of decay due to lack of maintenance, or subject to potentially unsuitable modifications to support new uses. Recent action by the council seeks to reverse the trend.

"The pandemic and shift to online retail revealed the vulnerability of the local economy's dependency on retail." Civic Society

"The centre's identity is based on its development as a Victorian town, and so lacks a typical 'high street' and town square."

Local authority Officer

Good example - Chester Rows

The Rows Conservation Management Plan 2018 (draft) helps to clarify the complex guidelines on development, responsibilities and how the area is managed - to enhance and protect the character of the buildings within the framework of existing policy and best practice. It sets out the key opportunities for dealing with problems and recommendations for actions which together will help to care for and sustain The Rows. A supporting Gazetteer has also been produced which provides useful information and advice for occupiers, agents and enquiries relating to The Rows.

9.0.8 In most of the case studies, increasing the town centre residential population continues to be a priority. However, this can be challenging in some of the most historic cores. The conversion of upper floors into residential units tends to be more problematic in most places. The difficulties of unpicking layers of previous uses and alterations within fine grained buildings has inhibited progress. The conversion of large historic buildings such as former warehouses or schools has generally been more successful. Many of the civic societies expressed frustration that more historic buildings were vacant and decaying.

“Buildings now declining on all floors (only upper floors before).”

Local authority Officer

9.0.9 The increase in culture and arts uses in the case study towns has been positive and has helped bring old buildings back into use and support the vibrancy of town centres (e.g. art galleries and new cinemas

in historic buildings). Caution was voiced about the manner in which these new uses were introduced. Many local people can feel distanced from major investments in culture and the arts, and there is a need to ensure such investment resonates with and is relevant to local communities.

9.0.10 Both officers and civic societies raised concerns about the recent changes to the Use Classes Order which introduce significantly more flexibility in change of use, and what this might mean for centres. There was a feeling that the changes could be useful in supporting better flexibility of town centre buildings and enable historic buildings to find new uses, but there were also worries that such flexibility could bring challenges and a lack of control. The additional control afforded by conservation areas was not necessarily considered useful in countering this.

“Proposed developments in sensitive parts of the city centre and conservation area for commercial and viability reasons will not safeguard and enhance the quality of the historic environment, and will harm the character of major elements of the ‘heritage asset’ of the city.” Civic Society

9.0.11 The pressure for retail development outside the central area can be particularly pronounced in historic towns. A fine grained historic character has for some case studies been an obstacle to accommodating retail growth in the past, resulting in the development of retail parks or shopping centres on the outskirts of the settlement (e.g. Canterbury) or around an inner ring road (e.g. Chichester). For those case studies where major shopping centres had been developed within the central historic core, there was the added challenge of managing the reduction in demand for large footprint retail and the re-use of these spaces in an otherwise fine-grained centre.

9.0.12 A common challenge across the case studies was the loss of department store operators from key buildings in the retail core. Large buildings, some of them architecturally significant, were now vacant and presented a particular challenge to re-occupy. (e.g. House of Fraser – Chichester, Former Browns of Chester or Debenhams – Chester). Examples were evident in some locations for how such large historic buildings can be repurposed, such as the former Debenhams in Canterbury to be adapted to house a mix of residential, retail and business uses, or Boswells in Oxford to become a hotel and restaurant.

“We never had many chain stores. [The centre] has little vacant space. It doesn’t have large empty units that need filling. The space that has been vacated has been taken up by food and drink. The student concentration makes that possible. Student numbers in the centre have increased hugely and helped create a real concentration of activity.”

9.0.13 Many of the case studies illustrated the importance of education to underpin town and city centre viability. University populations have in many cases supported the retail economy in these centres. The student accommodation demand also provides a viable market for mixed use schemes that might otherwise struggle. Lancaster, Canterbury, Oxford and Winchester are all beneficiaries. The challenge is to accommodate student housing in sensitive formats and ensure they contribute to the settlements, particularly given they do not contribute towards housing targets or council tax contributions.

9.0.14 City centre masterplans have been a key tool in many of the case study locations and continue to be a focus for future effort. But conversations highlighted how it can be challenging to manage masterplan briefs and outputs in a time of change. In several places, earlier masterplans had put too much emphasis on retail as the anchor for mixed development. In recent times as retail demand shrank many of

these masterplans failed to materialise (Lichfield amongst them), while other places were having to revisit projects in the light of changing conditions (Chester). Officers highlighted the need to shift to more diverse and flexible uses for central masterplans. Often, civic societies found themselves opposing emerging city centre masterplans, particularly where these were dependent on large footprint retail development. The experience in Lichfield has some important lessons in this regard.

“The Civic Society propose action for the city centre under four main headings:

- Promoting cultural activities – an economic strategy***
- Promoting tourism and visitors – conservation, place identity and attractiveness***
- Promoting liveability – creating a green centre, with better connections***
- Increasing the number of residents – more city centre and inner-city housing.”***

Civic Society

Good example – Lichfield

For almost twenty years, Lichfield District Council had pursued a major retail-led redevelopment for a site at Friarsgate on the eastern edge of the city core fronting Birmingham Road. Over the years various schemes, development partners and potential occupiers were established, and a number of planning approvals were granted. The District Council acquired the whole site, and some buildings were demolished. However, the scheme failed to progress, primarily due to the decline of the retail sector.

In 2019 a new [City Centre Masterplan](#) was commissioned, the first stage of which was a comprehensive analysis of heritage and local character. The masterplan involved engagement with local stakeholders including the Civic Society, as well as input from Historic England. The masterplan has not solved all the previous issues and concerns, and its engagement was hampered by the pandemic, but early signs suggest a better direction is in place. The council has now adopted a Public Realm Strategy and a Delivery Strategy, both priorities for the Civic Society.

Parking, access and public realm

- 9.0.15 The management and use of public space is increasingly seen as important in historic centres. Some of the case study towns including Chester have had an emphasis on the public realm for many years, with well-established strategies or design guidance. Others like Lichfield are seeing a surge in public interest prompting new initiatives.
- 9.0.16 The increased use and experience of outdoor space during the pandemic had driven greater interest in its quality and maintenance, as well as debates about further pedestrianisation.
- 9.0.17 However, the issue of parking and accessibility by car has not receded. Most of the civic societies raised concerns about problems with parking and congestion. In some locations such as Wells, the problems of poor parking signage led to needless additional traffic circulation, creating more congestion. There were concerns that this leads to driver frustration and to a loss of trade to other towns. At the same time, the

value of parking revenue can mean parking provision conflicts with the quality of vision for places.

- 9.0.18 In some cases, there were differing views between councils and civic societies, and between county councils (the highway authority) and their districts. The need for comprehensive transport strategies was clear.

“Transport is car dominated. There are no pedestrianized streets and few cycle lanes. Cycle routes are often on busy roads. Compared with other towns, the walking ‘experience’ is poor.” Civic Society

“The city centre is starved of visitors due to poor accessibility.” Civic Society

“Parking facilities within and around the city are not only poor but also extremely expensive compared to other local cities such as Preston.” Civic Society

Tourism

- 9.0.19 In each of the case study towns, tourism was an important part of the economy and inextricably linked to the appeal of the historic town or city centre, with its many visitor attractions. For some of the case study locations including Chester and Oxford it was a significant driver, but even for those with fewer visitors the role of tourism to support investment in heritage was fully acknowledged.
- 9.0.20 Of the case study locations, Chester has the highest number of domestic tourist visitors (an average of 925,000 visits to Cheshire West and Chester in 2017-2019, around 45% more than Oxford). Oxford is a stronger draw for international visitors with 581,000 international visits in 2019. In most of the case studies, the cathedral was the most visited destination.

“Tourism is a significant part of the local economy particularly based on the heritage, character and environment of the area.”
Civic Society

9.0.21 There was a consistent view among civic societies that more could be done to support tourism and to promote the story of a place and its heritage assets, through a tourism strategy. In light of the impact of the pandemic there is a real opportunity to revisit tourism economies and visitor strategies in historic centres.

9.0.22 A number of civic societies had concerns about the tourism sector. These were split between an over-dependence on tourism and the effect it could have on an often fragile resource. Elsewhere, it was feared that a lack of focus or investment in tourism was underselling the town or city's unique character.

9.0.23 Peterborough was thought to struggle most on the tourism front. The Civic Society noted: "Because of its curious historic growth, it is difficult to see how critical mass in the 'historic core' – is sufficient in touristic terms to single it out as a 'must-go-to' stop on the East Coast Mainline - could ever be secured. However, whilst Peterborough on its own may not

be a major tourism draw – if taken in association with the high value heritage assets neighbouring villages and with Peterborough as a touring base, the city economy could be enhanced through acknowledgment of heritage."

9.0.24 A number of case study interviewees referred to hotel proposals. At Chester hotels have become a new focus for development. They are experiencing a boom in hotel applications and development which as yet has been unaffected by the pandemic.

"The Civic Society has expressed concern that the current spate of hotel provision in the city will prove unsustainable – noting how the office development boom of the 2000s ceased with the 2008 crash, with several schemes never completed and that the switch to student accommodation in the 2010s led to over-provision and operators struggling to let their rooms." Civic Society

Covid (early impacts and indications)

9.0.25 Covid has disrupted everyday life, changing home, work and social behaviour. It is too early to know what the implications will be in the medium and long term. Local authorities and civic societies spoke about local responses and possible implications for the historic environment.

9.0.26 Some early impacts and indications include:

- Economic strategies: recovery plans have or are being produced, but common concerns were raised about how they are incorporated into planning and management of the centres.
- Decision-making: a greater lenience for small town centre businesses to make changes to their properties, sometimes at the expense of protecting historic character. Hoardings, advertising and outdoor furniture were common aspects where rules were temporarily relaxed.
- Public realm and movement: many centres removed cars from central streets, and

this has allowed a new appreciation of the public realm and the potential for these streets without vehicles. Many towns and cities have had new cycle lanes introduced which has generally been seen as positive and a welcome move.

- Retail vacancies: all of the case studies have seen vacancies as a result of the pandemic, but officers in the majority of the case study towns and cities felt they had fared well as a result of the higher numbers of independent retailers and food and drink outlets that have adapted well to the changes.
- Office space: Demand for office space has reduced with greater homeworking taking place. This poses further risk of vacancies in some of the larger historic towns.

9.0.27 There were some concerns that the Covid impact on economic growth had led to recovery efforts being focused on the economy, and not heritage and other social and environmental imperatives.

“It is clear that heritage tourism can mitigate the effect of high street decline. How long this will take to recover from the impact of Covid is uncertain, but there is little doubt that our heritage assets are a catalyst for the city’s economy.”

Civic Society

“There is a growing but still under performing tourist economy. In terms of growing sectors, the tourism, and cultural sectors will be crucial to future employment growth for the city. To expand on these sectors, there is a need to attract more overnight stays, and to develop the heritage offer further to increase the potential of sector, through events and festivals and festivals focused on the city centre.”

Civic Society

9.0.28 The pandemic also changed the way in which public meetings and consultation took place. Online meetings and engagement had positives and negatives. There were reports of greater opportunities for people to join meetings and engage generally (assuming they had digital access), as in Lichfield and Chester. But there were concerns about the decrease in quality of the relationship and trust between stakeholders, as meetings were not face to face.

Good example – Chester

In Chester, a number of heritage organisations are collaborating to understand and help to manage the impact of the pandemic on the heritage sector. To help inform this work, a survey has been launched aimed at businesses and the skills that underpin the heritage sector. This will complement the recent survey undertaken by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and help to provide a comprehensive picture of the situation across the whole sector.

Opportunities #8

- Recovery plans need to balance short-term interventions to support economic recovery with long-term heritage and character objectives.
- Transport strategies are needed to make historic centres accessible for all whilst enabling a shift away from private cars.
- Resources need to be put towards sensitive adaptation of historic buildings to new uses. Guidance and best practice examples should be collated and shared.

9.0.29 Proactive Management

- Establish a City or Town Centre Strategy to provide a framework for change with heritage at the heart and to promote more effective decision-making about place-making.
- Consider economic development and heritage protection together to ensure that growth is harmonious and draws upon the character of the town or city, rather than disconnected from it.
- Commission local estate agents to work with landlords on how to attract short and

long-term occupiers for vacant units (i.e. meanwhile uses), or underused spaces in historic buildings.

- Promote a managed approach as much as possible to more mixed uses capitalising on the E Use Class, so that retail, financial and professional services, cafés and restaurants, businesses, clinics, health centres, crèches, gyms and other leisure activities are encouraged to take up town or city centre space.
- Provide support to local markets and increase their days of operation.

9.0.30 The Visitor Experience

- Assess the quality of the resident and visitor experience of historic centres, as heritage is a source of civic pride and unique local identity, but is not often reflected by practical experiences of the public realm and local facilities.
- Promote heritage-led regeneration and the reuse of historic buildings as a key part of securing conservation quality.
- Develop culture and arts strategies to attract new interest in the centre, and

make this locally relevant, not imported or too 'highbrow'.

9.0.31 Working with Businesses

- Provide advice on how a Business Improvement District (BID) could help historic centres.
- Create a task force with the local BID to liaise with retailers and businesses on how to support increased trading, including more flexible opening hours and greater online presence.
- Undertake a shopfront improvement scheme to help to grow local businesses, improve the local environment and raise the image of the area, bringing vacant units back into use and transforming shopfronts to reinstate streetscape features.

9.0.32 Improve the Public Realm and Connections

- Assess the character and quality of the public realm network in centres to inform a public realm strategy (with public engagement at both stages). The public realm should be recognised as a core part of the historic environment and as the setting for historic buildings.

- Assess the role of car parking areas in supporting the historic core and options for improving the public realm.
- Review the quality and character of public spaces to provide more green areas, especially if central residential development increases.

9.0.33 Impact of Covid

- Post-pandemic Recovery Plans need to be developed and be publicly accessible and transparent so that communities and businesses can engage with them.
- Where temporary measures were introduced, councils should look at how public spaces could be used differently in the future – through temporary works and public consultation.
- Incorporate the lessons learned about making space for active travel and improving places for people into long-term plans for transport management.

