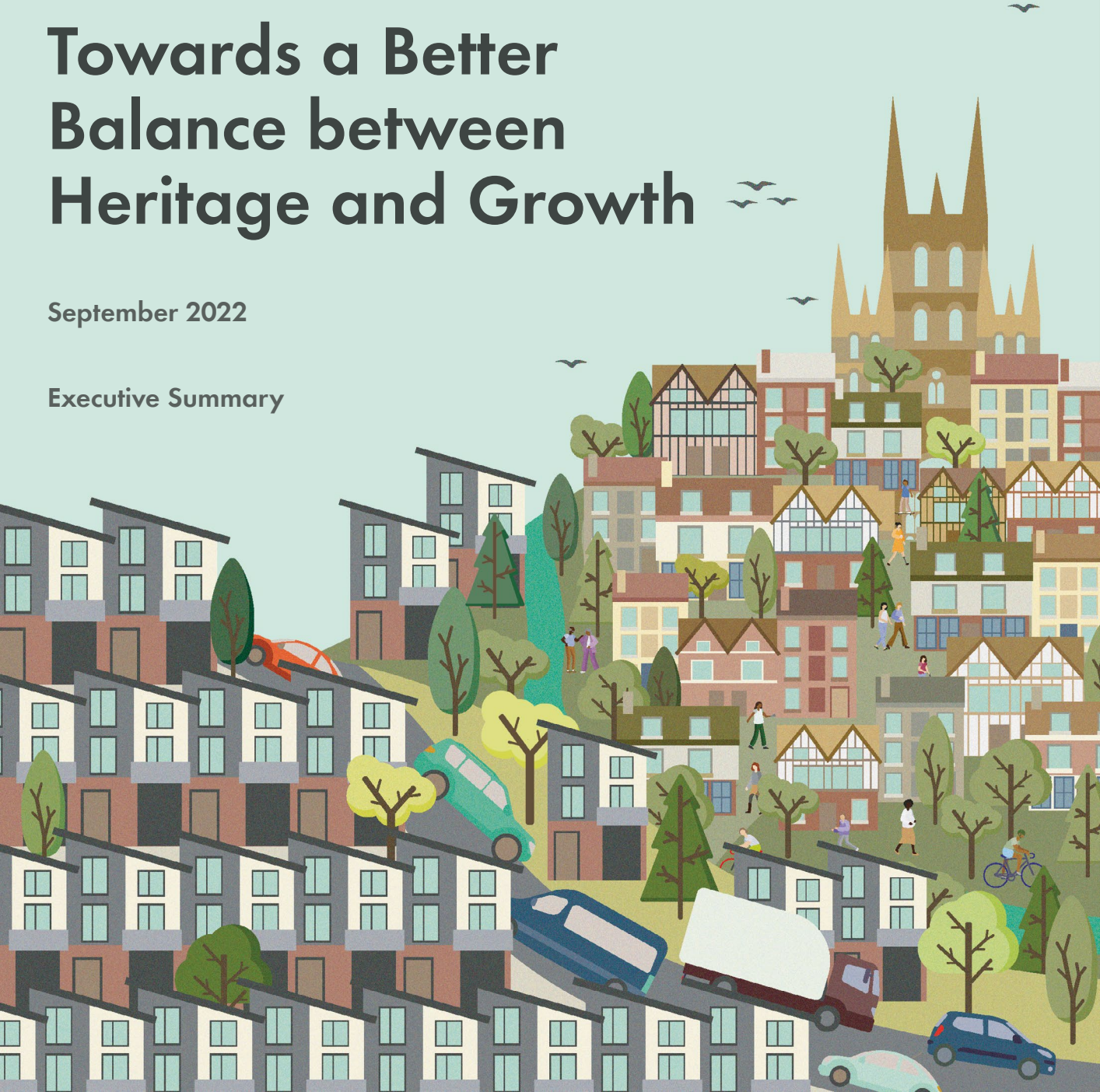
Towards a Better Balance between Heritage and Growth

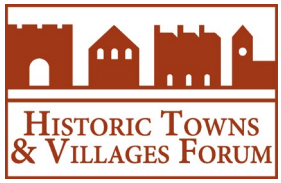
September 2022

Executive Summary



Produced in collaboration by the Historic Towns and Villages Forum, the Alliance of Historic Cathedral Cities and Towns and Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners.

Funded by
Historic England





Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners



Research team:

Louise Thomas Director, Historic Towns and Villages Forum

Ian Green Chairman, Oxford Civic Society

Jan Pahl Vice President, Canterbury Society

John Walker Chairman, The Ramsgate Society

David Evans Vice Chair, Chester Civic Trust and Trustee

Chris Winter Chair, Wells Civic Society

David Turnock Chairman, Peterborough Civic Society

Jane Manning Urban Designer, Allies and Morrison

Geoff Noble Associate, Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners

Lizzie Lancaster Consultant Planner, Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners

Ellie Trew Urban Planner, Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners

We are very grateful to all who have given their time in the course of this study - completing questionnaires, taking part in interviews and organising site visits - from the following organisations:

The Canterbury Society
Chester Civic Trust
Chichester Society
Lancaster Civic Society
Lichfield Civic Society
Malvern Civic Society
Oxford Civic Society
Peterborough Civic Society
Wakefield Civic Society
Wells Civic Society
City of Winchester Trust
Worcester Civic Society
The City of Durham Trust
Canterbury City Council
Cheshire West and Chester Council
Chichester District Council
Lancaster City Council
Lichfield District Council
Malvern Hills District Council
Oxford City Council
Peterborough City Council
Wakefield Council
Mendip District Council
Winchester City Council
Worcester City Council
Historic England Planners Group (HEPA)

Executive Summary

This research was initiated by a group of civic societies whose members were concerned about the impact of new development on historic towns and cities. In 2015 this led to the setting up of the Alliance of Historic Cathedral Cities and Towns (ACT) and to a pilot study which suggested that many civic societies across England shared this concern.

Having heard the findings from the pilot study at a Civic Voice conference in 2016, the then Deputy Director of Historic England invited ACT to submit a proposal for a more extensive project. This would use a civic society-based, case study approach to investigate how heritage and growth could be better balanced in historic places. The work began in 2019, was delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the final report was published in 2022.



Figure 1 **Peterborough Cathedral**

Aims of the research

1. Investigate the impacts of recent developments on the character, setting and heritage assets of historic cathedral cities and towns.
2. Identify ways in which growth and change can be accommodated without losing the character of historic places.
3. Investigate the impact of local authority budget cuts on heritage and planning for growth.
4. Determine the national and local policies and guidance needed to protect historic cities and towns and to conserve their heritage.
5. Enable civic societies and other community groups to make more effective contributions to the planning system.
6. Consider in what ways advice about the protection of heritage should be adapted to respond to climate change.
7. Assess the challenges to historic high streets and town centres from the Covid-19 pandemic, and from recent changes in working patterns and retail behaviour.

Methods of the research

The USP of this study is that it reports from the grassroots level on key current issues by carrying out interviews with civic societies in twelve case study places. Parallel interviews were also carried out with local authority officers in the same places.

Twelve places around England were chosen to take part in the study, with the choice based on their characteristics, locations and on the willingness of local civic societies to be involved. Places were selected to be as varied as possible in terms of their size, location, economic circumstances, landscape characteristics and degree of pressure from growth.

The data-gathering process comprised three stages:

- Interviews with representatives of local civic societies were carried out face-to-face by members of the ACT team, using a questionnaire tested in a pilot interview. The discussions were recorded and supplemented by visits round the town or city to set the data in a broader context.
- Interviews with local authority officers were carried out virtually by Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners, who spoke to members of the planning team in each place, including a conservation officer, as well as officers from economic and regeneration departments, and some councillors.
- Additional data came from Local Plans, Heritage Strategies, Transport Strategies, Open Space Strategies, Conservation Area Appraisals, 5-Year Housing Land Supply papers, maps and other sources.

In this study light is thrown on the topic from two different perspectives, and so no single 'right' answer emerged on how to create the balance sought. Civic societies and local authorities have different responsibilities and priorities, so often responded differently to the same question, creating a rich and complex picture of heritage and planning in England now.

Key Findings

Balancing heritage and growth

Two thirds of the civic societies said that there was 'strong' or 'some' support for growth at the expense of heritage in current local planning strategies as a consequence of the pressure for housing. Two thirds of civic societies said that support for the conservation of the historic environment by local authorities was 'poor' or 'moderate'. Only two places said it was 'good'. So the study tapped into the real concerns of many historic cathedral cities and towns.

Conserving the historic environment was particularly challenging in places which were struggling economically, where growth was seen as a solution for economic problems. However, it was also problematic in thriving places, where the historic environment tended to attract universities and other prestigious employers, as well as affluent retirees, leading to increases in house prices and pressure for new development.

Resourcing

All twelve of the cases study places confirmed the damaging effects of budget cuts. This has led to the neglect of heritage assets, loss of staff in the planning team, loss of expertise in conservation, urban design and landscape architecture, the employment of less experienced staff and a general overloading of the staff who remain.

A lack of time is a challenge and local planning authorities have had to adapt by sharing resources, contracting out master planning work and revising pre-application planning fees charged to developers.

Politics and local democracy

In two thirds of places the historic city was part of a much wider district. In some of these the council was dominated by councillors from the wider district, in contrast to the small number of members representing the city itself, who frequently came from a different party. This could lead to neglect of the concerns or conflicts about priorities for the historic town or city.

Growth strategies

Historic cities and towns are situated in locations which reflect their history. Of the

twelve case study places all but one is on a river, many have flood plains and flood risk implications. Five adjoin Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), while another three have an AONB near the city. Eight have Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) adjacent to or near the city. So there are real landscape and environmental constraints to growth. These constraints need to be better reflected in the algorithms used to calculate targets for new housing.

In half the case study places development was taking place largely on land around the periphery of the city, partly because it was easier and cheaper. Many civic societies commented on the traffic and pollution problems that this was creating. Fewer places were focusing on intensification and infill in the city centre.

There was considerable variance in the number of new homes being planned relative to the existing population. The average expected population uplift for the local planning authorities involved in the study was 17 per cent, over the Plan period, but many planned for more. Managing views across the city could be a challenge. Taller buildings in the city centre or excessive growth on the outskirts can damage the very qualities which make these places valued. Several civic societies argued for the creation of new settlements which could ease the pressures on existing historic towns and cities.

Design quality

Out of the 12 case study places, eight had a Heritage Strategy and five had Heritage Champions. There was concern that having a Heritage Champion could make this a niche activity and not a corporate responsibility. Five have Heritage and Design Forums which review planning applications, although in some places this job is done by the civic society.

Most council officers said that elected members grasped the importance of heritage, but civic society members were more sceptical. In particular the civic societies commented that many councillors would benefit from training in the conservation of historic buildings and the protection of the natural environment, and education about the value of heritage, including its economic value.

Civic societies were also concerned about the quality of new developments. They highlighted the need to meet much higher environmental and design standards and to develop active travel links, green spaces and green infrastructure.

Stakeholder engagement

Several authorities acknowledged the contribution which Neighbourhood Plans can make, seeing them as a useful way of engaging the community in heritage matters. However, civic societies felt frustrated by the process and by the constraints imposed by the higher status of Local Plans.

It was generally agreed that public engagement with planning needs to be improved. Officers tended to see this in terms of improving public knowledge about the planning process, while civic societies wanted to see engagement taking place at a stage when there was still time to influence decisions. Several civic societies valued close links with council officers and discussions with them, as recommended in the Toolkit in this report.

Climate change

All 12 of the case study places have declared a climate emergency, but many civic societies questioned whether this declaration had been translated into action. Some said that they were waiting for more robust policies and guidance, perhaps from Historic England.

Town and city centres

All respondents were concerned about the current situation in town and city centres, with vacancy rates running as high as 15 per cent in 2020. Council officers described the efforts that were being made to encourage the conversion of retail facilities to residential accommodation and the development of arts and cultural initiatives to bring old buildings back into use and support the vibrancy of town centres.

There was a consistent view among civic societies that more could be done to support tourism, for example, by promoting the story of the place and its heritage assets.

Many lamented that funding cuts had led to the closure of tourist offices, museums and historic buildings. There was concern about recent changes to the Use Classes Order which could lead to a loss of control of historic city centres, although not in Conservation Areas, which can use Article 4 Directives to claim exemption.



Key Recommendations

For National Government

A Recognise that funding local authority staff and expertise is key to the conservation and growth of historic towns and cities. Without this investment, many decisions will continue to be made on an ad hoc basis, which will erode the very historic character upon which England's economic prosperity depends.

B Devise future house building algorithms to calculate housing numbers which are informed by what can be absorbed locally, with more extensive data and appreciation of heritage and the natural environment taken into account.

C Promote the retention and re-use of existing historic buildings to reinforce local character and respond to climate change.

D Ensure that the views of local communities are given more weight in the planning process, for example, by ensuring that planning procedures are better understood and that consultation takes place at an earlier stage, when it is still possible to shape decisions.

For Historic England

E Provide more guidance and support to local authorities on the weight to give heritage in Local Plans and publicise training for councillors and officers on heritage and design.

F Update and reissue the *Heritage Counts* studies on the economic value of heritage, while also promoting recent guidance on adapting historic buildings to climate change.

G Provide a library or resource for local authorities of best practice examples on the sustainable refurbishment of historic buildings, and their economic and 'green' value.

For Local Authorities

H Create a culture which recognises the economic, social and cultural value of heritage by developing heritage and design expertise as a fundamental part of local authority planning and development teams, as well as early involvement in Local Plan reviews.

I Ensure that all councillors receive regular training on heritage and design to make sure that they understand how to maintain and enhance the character of historic places.

J Promote greater understanding of, and emphasis on, heritage through the production of a Heritage Strategy with a clear delivery plan with recommended actions.

K Ensure that planning committees represent the full range of places within the local authority area so that decisions about historic places are made by representatives of, and for the benefit of, those towns and cities.

L Support Heritage and Design Forums which can play a valuable role in protecting heritage and in reviewing emerging strategies and applications.

M Encourage civic societies and other community groups to engage with their local authority on heritage and growth at all stages – from Local Plan reviews to commenting on reserved matters applications for individual development sites.

For Civic Societies

N Develop close positive relationships with elected council members and heritage and design officers, in order to work collaboratively in protecting heritage and fostering good design.

O Support local authorities in encouraging greater involvement in planning consultations by local people, especially among harder-to-reach and more diverse groups in the community.

P Bring local experts to the attention of planning, heritage and design officers and councillors so that they can make a positive and informed contribution to planning.