

# THE SUSTAINABLE GROWTH OF CATHEDRAL CITIES AND HISTORIC TOWNS



for English Heritage

by

**Green Balance** with **David Burton-Pye**



October 2014

policies relating to the historic environment are not particularly detailed but are based on historic characterisation and in Leek include “protecting and improving the setting and historic character of the town”. It remains to be seen how heritage assets and the setting of Leek will be protected by the proposed Design SPD, Conservation Area Management Plans and indeed the Site Allocations DPD (which will be informed by the Landscape and Settlement Character Study).

3.33 In Chesterfield the Core Strategy made a fresh start to heritage with extra policies at the request of English Heritage. The very detailed development management policies for heritage and design in the 2006 Local Plan were dropped, though the importance of Chesterfield’s medieval street pattern and of particular views and the setting of the conservation area will remain relevant. Instead the new Core Strategy takes a different approach which is to protect heritage assets that enhance the quality of the borough and improve those that detract. A new policy advocates innovative building designs albeit that development should respect character, form and setting of the surrounding area, and another protects views of St Mary’s church with its twisted spire. Heritage-related SPDs are proposed or in preparation.

3.34 In Selby, the Council observed that prior to the Core Strategy there was a general perception that development was inappropriate in conservation areas and that listed buildings could not be altered. The Core Strategy recognises that growth can be acceptable in Conservation Areas but that new development must be well designed. This is offered as a more ‘rounded view’ which sees heritage as a facilitator of high quality new development rather than a constraint on growth. This is in the context of Selby having a positive Core Strategy policy on the setting of the Town Centre Conservation Area and Selby Abbey.

3.35 Officers in Thornbury advise that considerable attention was given in the Core Strategy to meeting growth requirements: this was at the expense of the heritage to some degree, notably at Park Farm on the north side of the town, but that this was outweighed by the need to maintain services and facilities and the benefits that these would bring to the town as a whole. Environmental protection remains an important part of South Gloucestershire’s strategy. Details are given in paragraph 3.42 as this was principally a response to the National Planning Policy Framework.

3.36 We conclude that the overall effect of the change to Core Strategies was only limited impact on heritage policy. In most local planning authorities there was no real change, with the approach adopted only adjusting to the needs of the new regime. Core Strategies are more strategic documents than the Local Plans they supersede, so some authorities took the opportunity to revise their strategic approach and move their focus away from traditional development management policies. An improved evidence base on heritage issues usually underpinned this, representing a real advantage of the new system. Most of the policy changes aimed to improve the approach to heritage and in only one authority was the primary objective to facilitate more urban growth than previously. That was spurred in part by the recently issued National Planning Policy Framework, though reflective of local needs and still in the context of a commitment to heritage protection.

'local list' of buildings which are not on the statutory list but are still locally significant. This would enable them more easily to fulfil paragraph 129 of the NPPF that "Local planning authorities should identify and assess the particular significance of any heritage asset that may be affected by a proposal (including by development affecting the setting of a heritage asset) taking account of the available evidence and any necessary expertise." This was not investigated in detail, though authorities for the selected towns were clearly familiar with it. Those commenting had generally made little progress in the preparation of local lists. Local listing has been undertaken in Newbury and Berkhamsted (both still under review), while in Hastings the initial preparation of a list has been devolved to an enthusiastic local voluntary organisation.

3.41 The third aspect of the NPPF investigated was the local response to the way it prioritised growth in relation to heritage. **The NPPF is clearly positive in its approach to both issues, so the local interpretation has an element of choice.** Most authorities reported no real local change to the priorities relative to each other. However, in both Wymondham and **Thornbury greater priority had been given to growth at the expense of heritage.** In Wymondham it was reported that this growth agenda had been reflected in Conservation Officer advice being overridden more often in planning officers' recommendations to councillors.

3.42 The most significant consequence of the NPPF was identified at Thornbury. **Here the greater emphasis on growth due to the NPPF had resulted in a major site being released at the expense of heritage to secure urban development for wider benefits.** The spatial approach in the Core Strategy that allocated strategic housing to Thornbury identified **the need to sustain and enhance its facilities and services in the face of competition from other retail outlets, the need to retain the town's schools and the role of the historic town centre.** Thornbury Town Council too very much promoted the requirement for additional housing growth in Thornbury: **the town was potentially suffering from economic and social decline** and that if not addressed, as a result of the town's age and demographic profile, it would struggle to maintain key services and facilities. **This point was grasped by the Core Strategy Inspector in making the overall planning balance.** During the preparation of the Core Strategy a major application was submitted at Park Farm (to the north of Thornbury and now one of the sites in the town identified in the Core Strategy for growth). Subsequently, amendments to the Core Strategy provided a comprehensive explanation of why the Park Farm site was chosen in preference to others around the town. Amendments also strengthened the approach to the historic environment. Finally, a policy in the Core Strategy states that the housing capacity of the area north of Thornbury and near the Castle School will be confirmed through the completion of an Historical Environment Character Assessment which will also inform the layout and scale of development to help mitigate any possible impact on heritage values and assets. This was submitted as part of the masterplanning/application process. **English Heritage accepted the mitigation measures proposed.** In this way the NPPF had a direct effect on the Core Strategy, with promotion of growth being accompanied by tighter requirements to ensure that implementation respected heritage interests as far as practicable.

3.43 We conclude that the findings in the selected towns suggest that the impact of the NPPF on heritage and growth has been very modest in most local authorities, even when

Core Strategies were updated to meet NPPF requirements. Practical responses such as the preparation of local lists of heritage assets have been limited and often delayed. The biggest effects have been on the local rebalancing between growth and heritage: although this is often negligible, the Thornbury experience shows that the NPPF can facilitate a more growth-based agenda through both Core Strategy preparation and development management in individual cases.

### Variation in local authority commitment to towns' heritage character and setting

3.44 The climate of opinion towards heritage in a local authority is enormously important in shaping outcomes in practice, as examples given above have demonstrated. The attitude to heritage is usually led by elected councillors as a cultural issue across a council, while recognising that individuals can take views that depart in various ways from the collective position. It can also be strongly influenced by dominant individuals (including senior planning officers) or by a history of significant past events. Some of its impact is direct, such as planning decisions to allow or refuse developments, the degree of compromise of heritage interests which authorities are prepared to allow, or the talking-up of heritage for regeneration or tourism purposes. Other effects are indirect, such as the policies which can be adopted in development plans, the level of staffing devoted to heritage, whether conservation officers are actively engaged in planning for major development sites, and the expectations for heritage which are generated in a town.

3.45 The study wanted an identifiable and comparative measure of councillors' views. This cannot be a wholly reliable exercise, but one strong indication of councillors' priorities is given in the Corporate Plan or equivalent document issued by almost every council on an annual or periodic basis. Typically a short statement of political priorities (with a commitment to everywhere being 'vibrant!'), these can be revealing by what they do and do not say. These documents were analysed in authorities covering each selected town and checked for the appearance of key words, such as 'heritage', 'historic', 'townscape', 'character' and 'setting'. The results are in Table 7. This shows that five of the eighteen authorities' corporate documents did not mention heritage issues at all. Ten more did so only very briefly or in a generalised way, and sometimes qualified their commitment. Just three gave the built heritage a significant place in their forward thinking (Winchester, Suffolk Coastal (for Woodbridge) and South Gloucestershire (for Thornbury)). All authorities emphasised economic issues as a priority, sometimes with remarkable levels of ambition.

3.46 The documentary evidence obtained and the interview results for this study gave strong hints about the climate of opinion towards heritage in each town. Paragraph 3.18 above noted briefly some of the range of attitudes which local authority councillors are perceived to have towards heritage. Taken together with the results from the review of Corporate Strategies, we conclude that the main findings are that attitudes to heritage vary widely between towns and that a commitment to the economic wellbeing of each town lies distinctly above heritage in the order of corporate priorities.

## Conclusions

3.47 The weight given to the need to safeguard the character and setting of smaller cathedral cities and prominent historic towns in the plan-making process varies greatly between towns. Heritage plays a highly significant role in shaping development in some towns but in others is set to one side. **The economic wellbeing of towns is councillors' primary concern everywhere**, though this is interpreted differently from place to place. Heritage may either be viewed as fostering a town's distinctiveness, attracting visitors and raising the quality of life (e.g. Winchester and Woodbridge), or be viewed as a cost burden (e.g. Taunton and Wigan). The observed differences are primarily a function of the prevailing local authority cultural attitudes affecting each town. Broadly speaking, the process reinforces itself, with numbers of conservation staff, evidence commissioned, policies adopted and practical decisions taken all reflecting the relative priority given to heritage by councils.

3.48 This pattern has not been greatly affected by the preparation of Core Strategies or other Development Plan Documents under the post-2004 forward planning legislation, or by the issuing of the Government's National Planning Policy Framework in March 2012. In the large majority of cases heritage policy is marked by continuity from the former system of Local Plans to the current system of Core Strategies. This has been reinforced by the substantial delays in the transition, due largely to suitable new development management policies not being in place, with Saved Policies from the former system therefore remaining in place. **There is some evidence that the relationship between heritage policy and growth policy has changed slightly in favour of growth, following the NPPF particularly, with a specific major example in Thornbury.** However, it is not clear that this is significantly different from what might have happened had the former system of regional planning been maintained, which itself would have put pressure on local authorities to provide for additional development. In view of the broad continuity of policy, the findings here may be taken as reasonably indicative of the degree to which existing planning policies can be expected to safeguard historic settlements in future.

3.49 **Heritage considerations are having some impact on the scale of development promoted through plan-making at historic towns, but this is secondary to the determination of central and local government to provide the necessary homes, jobs and facilities for a rising number of households.** Many of the historic towns studied are affected by proposals not just for organic growth and urban renewal but for major greenfield urban extensions and, in cases like Berkhamsted, continued increases in urban density as the price paid for maintaining the town boundary in its setting (which is also designated as Green Belt in that case). Even important historic towns like Wymondham are affected by major growth, often selected for their location, role in the urban hierarchy or availability of land, irrespective of their heritage status. In these towns efforts are usually being made to accommodate growth and change with as little damage as possible to the historic core and the setting of the town. The Sustainability Appraisal of emerging plans is in varying degrees identifying the strengths and weaknesses of policies affecting historic towns, but often much more could be achieved. The main requirement is probably to capitalise on information gathering with more robust conclusions and recommendations.