

**All Party Parliamentary Group for Civic Societies seminar, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2016**

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**RESPONDING TO DEVELOPMENT PRESSURES IN CATHEDRAL CITIES**

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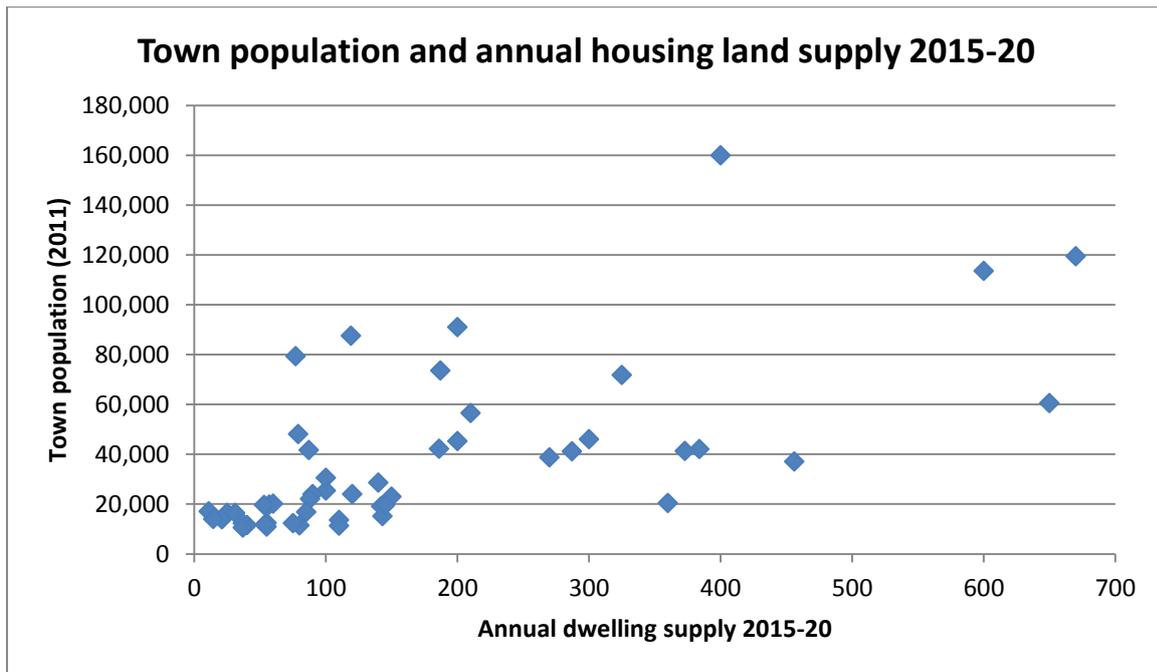
To protect an individual historic building there is a raft of legislation and decades of policy and experience to help decide what change should be allowed to that building in its setting. However there is nothing equivalent at the scale of the historic town or cathedral city. Rarely do people say: 'the city would benefit from this development', or 'that development would harm the appreciation of the city'. Certainly there are conservation areas for particular historic areas, and certainly the planning system helps to shape where growth should go. However, it is extremely rare for future growth and change to be determined primarily because of the great historic value of individual towns and cities.

How, therefore, can urban growth be reconciled with the heritage value of historic places and their settings, particularly our historic cathedral cities? Are some of them unsuited to taking additional rapid growth? Are our historic towns taking a disproportionate amount of growth simply because they are such wonderful places that so many people want to live in them? How should we decide what change is acceptable? Are there good practice examples which more local authorities could use? And also, what can you do about all this?

These were the kinds of question that Green Balance was commissioned by English Heritage to answer in 2014. Our lengthy report, with David Burton-Pye, *The Sustainable Growth of Cathedral Cities and Historic Towns*, is available to download. This paper presents some highlights, and also includes some research findings about the role of Civic Societies which could not be included in the report for lack of space. The research was not asked whether or not particular places were 'full', and what should happen next in those places. We started from a position of expecting change to happen and not assuming that this would necessarily be bad for historic towns: lots of them have changed considerably over the years but are still very wonderful. I would be much more worried by economic decline and the decay of the fabric.

The first question for the research was to find out how much development, and of what type, was planned in historic towns. This divided between imminent development in 2014 (we used unimplemented planning permissions to measure this), and the likely trends over the next five to seven years, (for which we used land allocations in towns in local authorities which had adopted modern Core Strategies.) We studied 50 historic towns, though some were more historic than others.

The main findings on future housing supply are shown in the graph below. If every town had a housing supply commitment proportionate to its population, then the dots could be joined by a straight line from bottom left to top right. Clearly the dots are widely distributed, but there is much that they indicate about growth plans in historic towns.



- First, there is a concentration of towns in the bottom left. That simply means there were lots of small historic towns of under 35,000 population in our sample. Most of them were not anticipating much development. The clear outlier is Newmarket.
- Second, towns of similar size can have very different development rates: see for example the scatter of towns of around 40,000 population with annual growth rates planned between under 100 and over 450 dwellings. There is an especially striking difference at around 60,000 population, where Taunton has more than three times the planned growth of Tunbridge Wells.
- Third, the same large variation can be found at particular levels of development: for example, at around 200 dwellings annually, Tunbridge Wells is not unusual, being in the middle of the town size range for that scale of development. Hastings has 50% more population but is expecting to build less. Even amongst the towns with large building rates, Colchester and Taunton are both expecting to build 650 houses annually, but Taunton is half the size of Colchester.

It is large urban extensions which push towns to the right of the graph: not just Newmarket, and Taunton, but Newark, Bridgwater, Bury St Edmunds and Wymondham for example.

There is a similar random pattern for imminent housing development, indicated by unimplemented planning permissions. The research also investigated retail, commercial and infrastructure development. As with housing, proposals were split between greenfield and brownfield sites, and between unimplemented planning permissions and land allocations. The main finding is that the large majority of housing and commercial development planned for the next five to seven years in historic towns is expected on greenfield sites. In other words, mainly outward expansion is expected irrespective of any urban intensification taking place. Most retail development, however, is planned on brownfield urban sites. Otherwise there were no reliable trends in the data:

- there are no clear differences between regions;
- the types of development proposed vary from place to place; and
- the scale of different types of development is not tied to settlement size.

What this means is that just because a town is historic does not tell us anything useful about the development pressure it will be under. So there is little evidence to suggest that historic towns generally are taking a disproportionate share of growth, though some seem to be. If it's not heritage, then to find out what is actually shaping their growth, we need to look at historic places individually.

The second question for research was: 'how much weight is being given to safeguarding the character and setting of historic towns in the plan-making process?' We took it upon ourselves to answer the obvious follow-up question as well: 'how much weight is given to those policies in practice in decisions affecting historic towns?' We studied in detail 20 historic towns in 18 local authorities.

To find out what impact current planning policy was having, our choice of sample was limited to authorities which had adopted Core Strategies since the publication of the National Planning Policy Framework in 2012. We studied all the relevant planning and technical documents, and then held telephone discussions with the local authorities' Conservation Officers, and with local voluntary heritage organisations.

Unsurprisingly, the driving force in planning for growth in historic towns is the determination of the Government, imposed on local authorities, to provide the necessary homes (and jobs and services) for a rising number of households. Local authorities are allocating growth to places best located to accommodate it and with land available, especially larger towns, with little regard to their heritage status. So even important historic towns like Wymondam in Norfolk are affected by major peripheral growth proposals. Where peripheral expansion is constrained, urban intensification pressures can be enormous, such as at Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire, which is surrounded by Green Belt. Heritage interests are having some impact, particularly on how development is delivered on the ground, but these are secondary to the main policy objective of development.

That does not mean heritage is doomed. The weight given to safeguarding the character and setting of historic towns in plan-making varies greatly from one place to another. Heritage plays a highly significant role in shaping development in some towns but in others is set to one side. Our evidence showed clearly that the economic wellbeing of towns is councillors' primary concern everywhere, but 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 (the view in Winchester and Woodbridge for example), or be viewed as a cost burden (such as in Taunton and Wigan). The observed differences are primarily a function of the prevailing local authority cultural attitudes at member level. Broadly speaking, the process reinforces itself, with the relative priority given to heritage by councillors reflected in:

- numbers of conservation staff employed,
- the amount of proactive work on heritage undertaken,
- the policies adopted and
- the practical decisions taken.

This was a central finding of this part of the research, reinforced by our other work, and gave rise to our principal recommendation. The sector needs to impress upon councillors the vital place which historic towns and cities have in the lives of local people and the country. This means challenging the underlying opinions which some councillors and senior officers hold, such as that:

- the historic built environment can look after itself;
- historic buildings are a nuisance rather than a benefit; and
- heritage gets in the way of investment rather than adds value to it.

Civic Societies need to impress on councillors that we the people care for our historic towns and we will not let ignorance and philistinism damage them. Concerned people and organisations often start from solid heritage-based arguments (on why, for example, a particular planning application would damage a heritage building), and make the local Conservation Officer the first port of call when promoting that case. That is a good start, but our research showed that much more needs to be done than that to have an impact. In one authority we came to the view that the Conservation Officer was not really pressing the case for heritage as hard as practicable. More significantly, Conservation Officers were not taken particularly seriously in at least 4 of the 20 authorities. This means that time should also usefully be spent on trying to persuade case officers and senior managers who may be disinterested in heritage. Your case will also need to be presented to councillors. They need to be convinced that heritage is good not just for your town and for votes but, if they have any doubt about it, for the economy too.

The research also tried to find out what difference there was to the balance between growth and heritage interests arising from various recent changes in context like:

- the new forward planning system introduced in 2004;
- the recovery from the recession; and
- the National Planning Policy Framework published in 2012.

These all had surprisingly little effect, as cultural attitudes in authorities were so important. Nonetheless, priorities could be changed by other means which councillors could understand. For example, we found that one authority for a selected town, which had a fairly poor record of attention to heritage, had apparently recently improved its performance on heritage issues in order to bring itself more closely into line with the higher standards in a neighbouring authority with whom it was developing a close functional association. Better still was evidence that councillors do respond to the pressure of local opinion. In Chelmsford, Hastings and Folkestone new voluntary organisations had sprung up in the last few years in part (or entirely) to tackle what they saw as their local authorities' inadequate regard to local heritage. They gave us evidence that better decisions were being made as a result (albeit usually more slowly than they would have liked).

For example, in Hastings a new local group called Save Our Heritage, formed in 2013. This had attracted active local people including former town planners, historians and architects, so that they probably now have more expertise than the local authority. The Conservation Officer at Hastings BC was very supportive. They have sufficient volunteers to begin compiling a local list of important historic buildings, while a panel run by the Council (incl. councillors) assesses the findings. (Note that authorities generally welcome help with local listing, as it helps them meet an obligation imposed by the NPPF.) Save Our Heritage makes

expert comments on planning applications which have had a big impact, and councillors have been lobbied. The result is that councillors increasingly recognise the value of townscape and heritage, and changes to attitudes are happening: for example,

- Save Our Heritage is sometimes invited to pre-application discussions with developers;
- the Council now listens more to Historic England, and to its Conservation Officer;
- delegation rules have been changed so members now decide more heritage cases (as there had been a problem with lack of heritage appreciation by some officers);
- Save Our Heritage reinforces its credentials by sending its newsletter and minutes of its meetings to councillors, and can speak with authority from the public gallery at council meetings.

Meanwhile, Chelmsford has a new Community Interest Company, Changing Chelmsford, which focuses on protecting the historic city centre and the public realm, and in Folkestone the new organisation Go Folkestone is helping councillors to take decisions more sympathetic to heritage. The evidence is that councillors' cultural approach to heritage really can be changed. It is important to understand that results like these can be achieved without planning policy towards heritage itself being changed first. Pressing the heritage case on councillors is clearly one place to concentrate effort. Local voluntary organisations can be an effective vehicle for achieving better local heritage outcomes, and we recommended that Historic England should give bodies like civic societies the support and advice you need to do this even more. Finally on policy implementation, encouragingly, in our sample the Planning Inspectorate and Secretary of State came out with virtually unblemished records on heritage.

Civic societies should also consider studying councillors' Corporate Plans to see what political weight is given to heritage relative to other issues: we found them very revealing. This is in effect where an authority's governing party writes down its priorities and direction of travel, so there is no reason why you cannot try to influence it.

The third and final section of our research was to study how the special character of smaller cathedral cities and historic towns in their settings could be conserved, while provision is made to accommodate their future development needs. This was essentially a study of methodologies for reconciling heritage with significant growth at the whole settlement scale, through the planning system.

We studied nine methodologies in eight cities:

- World Heritage Site designation in Bath. This is an option open to very few other cities, but what turned out to be very effective here was the inscription across the entire city and the importance of protecting Bath's setting in a bowl of hills. This case study produced valuable lessons for non-WHS locations both on the merits of high quality design (insisting on high quality throughout the city and not just in the historic core), and on using a Management Plan – a partnership vehicle – to get everyone behind the idea.



– A design response in Chester. More than most places, Chester has tried to accommodate large amounts of growth by emphasising the importance of high quality design to make it fit in. However, what was considered appropriate in the 1960s would hardly be considered so now.



– View cones in Oxford. The idea here was to protect the setting of the city and its spires by preventing physical development within the splay of views from surrounding vantage points, including avoiding outward city expansion in various directions.

– Historic landscape characterisation in Lichfield. A lot of good work has been done in Staffordshire on historic characterisation methods, and this was applied and refined in Lichfield. The methods were used to inform the choice of areas for substantial urban development allocations in the new development plan, with designs often incorporating views to the Cathedral.

– Protecting the setting of Salisbury Cathedral. The old-style Local Plan for Salisbury District specifically identified land around the city, on a map, where development would not be permitted in order to protect the setting of the cathedral, and this was entirely effective. The new Local Plan does not retain this designation, but has still allocated development land away from sensitive areas.



– New settlements around Cambridge. In one of the best examples of co-operation planning between authorities, new settlements (mainly on old airfields) are being developed both to meet South Cambridgeshire’s housing land obligations and to absorb some of Cambridge’s growth. Cambourne is well-advanced, and long-awaited Northstowe (illustrated) is next. There’s a balance to find between self-sufficiency and recognising Cambridge’s dominance.



– Urban intensification also in Cambridge. The city is achieving urban intensification quietly. The Council’s policies encourage land recycling but are based on what is sympathetic to the location, not on deliberate attempts to raise densities or secure more intensive use of land. Cambridge is aiming to increase the number of houses within the built-up area by 14% in 20 years, consistent with protecting the historic city. The effect is that



Cambridge is being transformed outside the historic core (illustrated near the railway station), within the city’s tightly defined administrative boundary.

– Green Belt in Durham. Durham has the country’s newest Green Belt, and we hoped to examine the impact of its introduction on the growth of this small city. For various reasons this was the least successful case study.

– Urban extension in Winchester. After a long gestation period, a large wedge of land north of the city has been allocated as an urban extension for 2,000 houses, with the City Council trying to knit this development into the city in a similar way to its other suburbs.



Some of these methodologies could equally have been studied in various cities (there are more urban extensions around Cambridge than anywhere else, for example, and urban intensification has long been a feature in many of the case study localities). Also, there is one other methodology which appears frequently in our case studies: limits on the height of new development to protect historic skylines. This had been stunningly effective in Salisbury and also an important feature in planning in Oxford and Cambridge, for example.

For this work we held face-to-face interviews with local authority Conservation Officers and planning policy officers (usually separately), and again with a representative voluntary organisation.

We obtained information from our case study cities on various aspects of heritage practice which we had identified as issues in our study of 20 historic towns, like Conservation Officer numbers. The table below shows the number of staff in post at the time of our research compared broadly with the position five years beforehand. The message here is that whatever civic societies or Historic England want to happen in respect of protecting heritage towns, it probably won’t happen unless more Conservation Officers are put in post first.

Change in number of Conservation Officers in case study cities (full time equivalent)

City	Number of COs in spring 2014	Number of COs about 5 years previously	Comments
Bath	3	5	Three planners are being given limited training in Conservation
Cambridge	<3	4	Manager now devotes less than full time to Conservation
Chester	2	7	Establishment reduced from 7 to 4 at local government reorganisation
Durham	7	9	Numbers difficult to judge due to local government reorganisation in 2009
Lichfield	1.6	2	Excludes part of team manager’s time
Oxford	7	12	Team includes archaeology, trees and biodiversity staff
Salisbury	2	3	
Winchester	3.25	3.75	Staff have extra responsibilities now

We offered six recommendations from these case studies, but three may be of particular interest to civic societies. First, no single methodology is better than others, though there is a lot to be said for using them in combination. How to reconcile heritage with growth is a matter for local circumstances: there are important differences between what works best for cities on flat land or surrounded by hills, for instance.

Second, there simply has not been a national debate on the capacity of historic towns and cities to accommodate projected levels of urban growth into the foreseeable future. There should be. At present, local authorities feel themselves on the receiving end of Government housing land supply objectives, and are largely making up their approaches to historic places as they go along. It is not always working and rarely works really well.

As well as heritage, we assessed how the cities had performed in terms of growth. The table below gives an indication of how proportionate or otherwise is the planned growth of our case study cities relative to their 2011 Census populations. This shows that growth rates vary discernibly between cities (though note that Oxford and Cambridge have administrative boundaries drawn closely around their built-up areas).

Case study city shares of housing development within their local authorities

	Bath	Cambridge	Chester	Durham	Lichfield	Oxford	Salisbury	Winchester
2011 population of city	95,000	145,818	86,011	47,785	32,877	159,994	48,327	45,184
2011 population of LPA	176,000	123,867	329,608	513,242	100,654	151,906	116,000	116,595
<b>City share of 2011 population</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>39%</b>
Additional dwellings in plan period city	7,020	14,000	5,200	5,220	3,912	8,000	6,060	4,000
Additional dwellings in plan period LPA	13,000	14,000	22,000	31,400	10,030	8,000	9,900	12,500
<b>City share of housing growth</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>32%</b>

Third, student numbers are a significant issue in many cities. Students bring in money and vitality as well as educational benefits. However, they often generate adverse impacts on local character through the housing they need and the way they use it. The problems multiply especially when they occupy substantial numbers of properties which would otherwise be available to the local population. There ought to be a way of establishing where the public interest lies between the growth tendencies of educational institutions and other wider interests including planning and heritage.

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