



Historic England

Streets for All East of England



Summary

In 2017 Historic England published an updated national edition of *Streets for All*, a practical guide for anyone involved in planning and implementing highways and other public realm works in sensitive historic locations. It shows how improvements can be made to public spaces without harming their valued character, including specific recommendations for works to surfaces, street furniture, new equipment, traffic management infrastructure and environmental improvements.

This supplementary document summarises the key messages of *Streets for All* in the context of the East of England. It begins by explaining how historic character adds value to the region's contemporary public realm before summarising some of the priorities and opportunities for further improvements to the East of England's streetscapes.

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Front cover: Cathedral Square, Peterborough

Peterborough. Streets are for people. Exploiting street spaces or squares for markets and events creates a focus for public life and enhances a sense of place.

The public realm

The East of England contains a wealth of historic cities, towns and villages set in magnificent lowland and coastal landscapes. But it is not only their fine buildings that give these places their special character. Just as important are their public spaces – the streets and paths through which people move, and the squares and precincts in which they connect.

The historic places in the East of England have evolved over hundreds of years and are rich in inherited character and sense of place. Sometimes, however, this character will have been degraded by neglect, environmental pressures or the remorseless presence of vehicles.

Today, the focus has shifted to making the public realm a better place for everyone. This means enhancing a place's sustainability by placing a greater emphasis on walking and cycling, on the value of public transport, on the safety of vulnerable people and children, and on making our historic places accessible for everyone, rather than just improving traffic flows.

There is also a need to incorporate resilience to the effects of climate change and extreme weather

in a manner which conserves the character of historic places, particularly in coastal locations.

Streets for All shows how practical solutions to common highway problems can be accomplished without harm to the valued character of historic places, and indeed how they can achieve positive enhancements to them. The underlying principles are to reduce clutter, co-ordinate design and to reinforce a place's distinctive local character, while maintaining safety for all.

Streets for All also demonstrates how opportunities can be translated into action. In a world of scarce resources and competing priorities it sets a clear agenda not only for councils but also for local communities and businesses.

It begins by identifying the elements that make an area distinctive – its landscape, the form and layout of its historic places, as well as its building materials and traditional detailing. It then addresses some of the common problems that can diminish the quality of public areas and explains how integrated townscape management can provide answers.



Lavenham, Suffolk. The discrete use of bollards, planters, widened footways and demarcated parking areas have together helped to enhance the visual character of this popular tourist destination.

Identifying local distinctiveness

The character of the East of England's built environment has been shaped by its social, ecclesiastical, agricultural and commercial past. It is also inextricably linked to its underlying geology and environment – the source of the natural materials from which its buildings and streets have traditionally been constructed.

From the narrow winding lanes of medieval Norwich, the important civic spaces of Ipswich and the seafronts of Yarmouth and Cromer to the 'Arts and Crafts' style garden-city conformity of Letchworth, not to mention the wide verges and village greens of rural settlements, the distinctive character of its public spaces needs to be thoroughly understood if they are to be properly conserved.

The protection and enhancement of this distinctiveness helps to foster greater local identity throughout the region. Properly coordinated, they also have the potential to make its historic places more attractive to inward investment and cultural tourism.

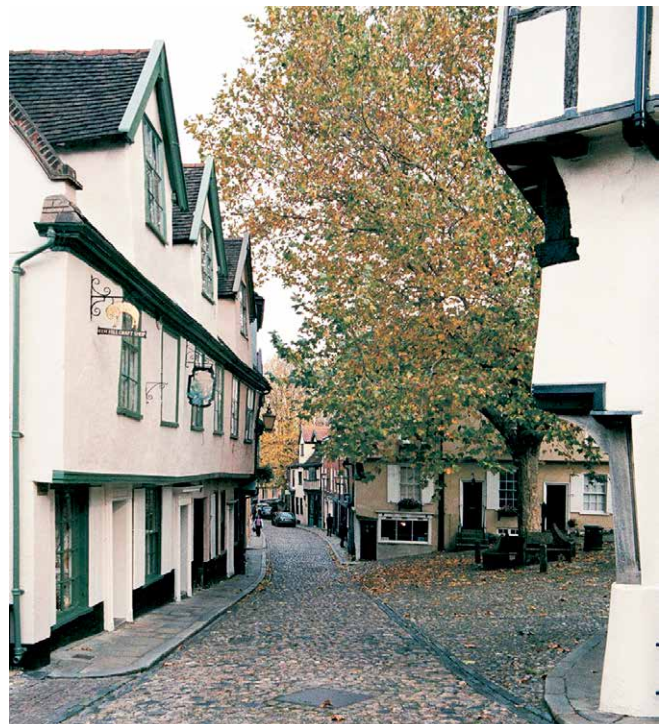
A successful public realm is one in which the differing needs of drivers, pedestrians and other users such as cyclists are served without the need for excessive signs, road markings or physical barriers. Traffic calming measures should be fitted sensitively into the street scene as though they were part of the original design of the area.

Public spaces can also be thought of as 'outdoor rooms' enclosed by buildings. To avoid unsightly clutter, their street furniture needs to be placed with the same care as the objects in an indoor space. Traditional lamp-posts, bollards and seating are all important sources of local character, but high-quality, new design can enrich the public realm, enhance accessibility and encourage its greater use.

Streets that are safe and attractive places for people to live and work need to be the rule, not the exception. That's why good design needs to be at the heart of the East of England's cities, towns and villages.



Ipswich, Suffolk. High-quality paved surfaces, discrete planters and a minimum of clutter give this important civic space a sense of orderly calm.



A harmonious combination of historic buildings, traditional cobbled surfaces and a carefully tended tree are what gives this quiet backwater its sense of quiet calm.

Opportunity into action

Since Streets for All was first published in 2005 many of its recommendations have been taken up across the East of England, not just by local authorities but by private owners and developers who appreciate the value of investing in an enhanced public realm.

Looking ahead, local authorities planning improvements to their streetscape and public realms may find it helpful to be guided by Landscape Character Assessments and Conservation Area Appraisals of the kind adopted in Essex by the County Council and most of its associated districts to identify the most appropriate materials and methods of construction in historic spaces.

Many London councils are including greening schemes as part of wider programmes to enhance the character and desirability of urban areas as well as mitigate some of the impacts of climate change. Similar strategies could be adopted in some of the East of England's more urban areas, provided

that the character of Conservation Areas and the settings of listed buildings are properly respected.

There will also be an increasing need to consider the impacts of Sustainable Urban Drainage (SUDs) and Water Sensitive Urban Design (WSUDs) schemes on Conservation Areas and other heritage assets in the face of climate change. In particular there is the potential to use SUDs to support public realm enhancement and urban greening, especially when linked to existing features such as village ponds, fenland drainage channels and pollarded trees.

Pedestrians and drivers in Suffolk and Norfolk's historic towns and villages have benefited in recent years from the traffic-calming policies advocated by their county councils, but some other highway authorities have been slower to move away from the notion that 'keeping the traffic moving' is all that matters.



Aldeburgh, Suffolk. Well-designed modern paving and street furniture are sometimes a better choice for historic areas than off-the-shelf 'heritage' solutions.

Case study: Saturday Market Place, King's Lynn, Norfolk

The historic port town of King's Lynn is an attractive place to live, work and visit. Its strategic position on the road and rail network, its riverside location, and its status as the principal town in north-west Norfolk, means it is planning for significant housing and economic growth.

The St Margaret's Conservation Area includes the town's principal shopping streets as well as the Saturday Market Place. Although it includes a wealth of exceptionally important historic buildings, including the Grade I listed Town Hall, it had become blighted by poor maintenance and the uncontrolled growth of traffic.

In 2014 the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk District Council launched a major programme of investment with the support of Norfolk County Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund's Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) grant programme. The key elements of the scheme were to remodel the Saturday Market Place and restore the town hall complex as a centre for the cultural life of the town.

Work to the public realm involved widening the footpath in front of the Town Hall, providing better access to the building and resurfacing the market place using granite kerbs and Yorkstone slabs. As well as incorporating a one-way system to control traffic movement in the area, the project involved the installation of sensitive new lighting and high quality street furniture.

Conclusion

The success of the Saturday Market enhancement has since helped the town secure its nomination as a Heritage Action Zone (HAZ), the aim of which is to show how well-designed new development that has an understanding of historic character and place at its heart can reinforce the economic, social and environmental vitality of King's Lynn, while respecting and enhancing its historic character.



As a result of sensitive planning and the use high-quality materials, Kings Lynn's Saturday Market Place has not only been transformed into a much more enjoyable place for pedestrians but has also attracted a wide range of new uses to this important public space. © West Norfolk Council



Historic England

We are the public body that looks after England's historic environment. We champion historic places, helping people understand, value and care for them.

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