

## BALANCING HERITAGE AND HOUSING GROWTH IN WELLS



### **How is growth being managed in historic towns and cities, and can growth and heritage be better balanced? A new study aims to find out.**

Chris Winter, Chair of the Society, is a member of the Alliance of Historic Cathedral Cities and Towns (ACT) Steering Group, which, together with other organisations, is carrying out vital research.

Louise Thomas\*, of the Historic Towns and Villages Forum (HTVF) reports:

The Society is a key partner in a new research study funded by Historic England, working with the Historic Towns and Villages Forum (HTVF) and the Alliance of Historic Cathedral Cities and Towns (ACT)\*\*. This study, *Balancing heritage and growth in cathedral cities and historic towns*, focuses on them as whole settlements.

The study aims to produce practical, policy-relevant recommendations to help local authorities to tackle the challenges of truly sustainable growth in relation to heritage. Most importantly it will empower local communities to assist in this. The project is built around the contributions of local civic societies in identifying local character and challenges to heritage.

The basis of the study is that legislation and policy for protecting heritage tend to bite at the level of the individual building, historic site or limited locality (e.g. conservation areas). There is no legislation devoted to historic towns as a whole. Yet many struggle to balance heritage, the demands of growth, the need for investment, or what is most sustainable. Working with the HTVF, ACT and consultants Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners, the project will deliver a method or toolkit for assessing the types and characteristics of development likely to be sympathetic to historic places and those likely to be problematic. There will also be guidance for planners, civic societies and specialists on how to ensure benefits from development, especially in places with separate county and city governance. In the longer term the study hopes to achieve:

- a greater understanding of the benefits of growth in historic towns, in areas under development pressure or promoting heritage-led regeneration;
- the mitigation of potential damage to urban historic character; and,

- a contribution to on-going local and national planning policy formulation focused on sustainable growth challenges in historic towns as a whole.

Since this project began in December 2019, it has of course been affected by the restrictions related to COVID-19 and social distancing. Much of the early data collection has involved the partners conducting interviews with other civic societies and local planning authorities, and also visiting other towns.

### **The effects of COVID-19 restrictions**

The massive reduction in traffic has led to a widespread appreciation of our public realm (whether streets or parks), safer walking and cycling. We've had a clearer view of our heritage – natural or built, grand or ordinary – across less cluttered and polluted streets. The strengthening of community relationships is also to be celebrated, especially as work, commuting, office politics and busy lives in general had overshadowed the value of the neighbourhood.

However, the vulnerability of high streets and town centres has increased. Cafés, tourism, leisure activities and flexible workspaces, which had been seen as the saviours of the town centre 'experience', are under threat if degrees of social distancing are required for the remainder of 2020 at least. Some businesses may become unviable.

Perhaps we can take comfort from the longevity of our historic centres and their ability to adapt as we plan our way forward. The conversation about the need to rethink town centres had already started and so the first hurdle has been cleared. However, it will take some time to see the impact of the virus on the rest of the economy and how that will affect growth and regeneration plans, confidence and investment.

But what of local authorities which were already under pressure? The threats of not having a five-year housing land supply in place or not determining applications in time remain in place at the time of writing. So developers could gain planning consent thanks to the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' regardless of the desirability of their proposals. There is also a risk that planning officers can be diverted to COVID-19 related services, especially in those authorities that have not identified planners as key workers. Officers could become ill, already under-resourced teams would not be able to cover for them and key community concerns could be overlooked. Councils are now introducing online committee meetings so that the delegated authority powers granted to senior officers should not be needed. Yet this period and the months that follow could prove a testing time for town planning.

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Louise is the co-editor of the Urban Design Group's quarterly journal *Urban Design*, and a Trustee of the Francis Tibbalds Trust. She also teaches post-graduate urban design and urban planning master's programmes at the University of Westminster, London.