



Historic England

# Streets for All South West



# 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 South West. 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 South West's streetscapes.

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## Front cover: Cheap Street, Bath

Traffic growth and decades of under-investment had resulted in a tired, cluttered and disordered city centre which was at risk of undermining Bath's success as a city. The response was a visionary plan to transform its streets and public spaces. © Bath and North East Somerset Council

## The public realm

The South West of England's multi-layered geology has endowed us with a magnificent legacy of great cathedral cities, market and coastal towns and historic villages. But it is not only 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.

Many have evolved over hundreds of years and are rich in inherited character, though sometimes it will have been degraded by neglect or the remorseless pressure of cars and lorries.

Today, the focus has shifted to making the public realm a better place for drivers and pedestrians alike. As well as improving traffic flows this means placing a greater emphasis on walking and cycling, on the value of public transport, on the safety of children and on accessibility for everyone.

*Streets for All* shows how practical solutions to common highway problems can be achieved without harm to the valued character of places. The underlying principles are to reduce clutter, co-ordinate design and to reinforce 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, its building materials and its 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.



Spaces between buildings can be enhanced using high-quality paving materials and well-designed street furniture that creates uncluttered movement areas.

## Identifying local distinctiveness

The South West of England displays a remarkably rich and varied tapestry of local characteristics, materials and traditions. Fostering this precious resource offers more than aesthetic rewards; individuality and distinctiveness provide a vital sense of identity in an increasingly homogeneous global environment.

From the twisting granite-paved lanes of St Ives to the elegantly planned streets and squares of Regency Bath or the restored civic spaces of Plymouth, the distinctive character of its public spaces need 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, it also has the potential to make its historic centres more attractive to inward investment and cultural tourism.

A successful public realm is one in which the differing needs of drivers and pedestrians 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 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 South West's cities, towns and villages.



A modern café is informally accommodated on this generous traditional pavement.



In Bideford, Devon, a ribbon of York stone paving flanked by cobbles provides a surface that is both traditional and accessible.

## Opportunity into action

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

However, improvement in the quality of the region's streets and public spaces has not been equally spread. Alongside world-class rehabilitations of the public realm there remain extensive areas that fall short of the standards to which we should all aspire. In particular, Historic England's register of [Conservation Areas at Risk](#) shows that too much of the region's historically significant public realm is in poor condition.

Local authority budgets are under increasing financial pressure but there are some notable examples of what can be achieved through thoughtful planning and cooperation. The recent enhancement of Town Square in Weston-super-Mare and proposed improvements to Armada Way in Plymouth have both attracted Local Enterprise Partnership funding, illustrating that money can be found despite times of austerity.

Another welcome development is the way in which Neighbourhood Planning is encouraging communities with conservation areas at risk to recognise the importance of their historic streetscapes and to formulate policies for their protection and enhancement.

The community of Ottery St Mary in Devon seeks to use its neighbourhood planning process to temper the dominance of traffic within the town centre conservation area to create an environment where the public realm can foster improved economic and social wellbeing. The neighbourhood plan for Ogwell in south Devon uses its conservation area appraisal to require new development to include locally characteristic surface treatments such as cobbling, water-worn limestone, hoggin and granite setts.

The growth in cycling and the need to accommodate wheelchair users has led to concern over traditional setts and how these create difficult surfaces to negotiate. In Bristol, the City Council has trialled the use of horizontally sliced setts to create flatter surfaces along demarked routes through wider untouched cobbled areas, a solution that other highways authorities may want to consider.



Weston-super-Mare's Town Square and Italian Gardens have been opened up to become a wider, continental-style space that provides improved access to the seafront and the High Street for pedestrians.

## Case study: Devon cobbled paths

Cobbled surfaces contribute enormously to the character of historic places and most people would agree that the texture of a cobbled street or path has great visual appeal. Nevertheless, when cobbled surfaces are poorly maintained their safety in use may become an issue.

Devon is particularly rich in surviving examples of cobbled paths. These represent a neglected vernacular building tradition, varying with the diverse geology and building practices of distinct local areas.

Cobbled paths can be found in both secular and ecclesiastical places, but many of the best examples form pedestrian routes across churchyards. In recent years, Historic England and SPAB and have been involved in discussions about the care and repair of cobbled paths in Devon and their continued contribution to Devon's special character.

This has been the catalyst for a [research project](#) investigating the survival of cobbled paths associated with places of worship in the county. The construction and significance of the paths is being investigated, as well as the common issues facing users, managers and owners. Recommendations have been made for better maintenance, repair and improvement.



Cobbled pavement, East Budleigh, Devon



Decorative cobbling, Endsleigh, Devon



# 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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