



Historic England

# Streets for All West Midlands



# 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 West Midlands. 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 West Midlands' streetscapes.

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[HistoricEngland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/streets-for-all/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/streets-for-all/)

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**Front cover: Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery**

Simple contemporary art and high-quality paving create an elegant setting to this important civic building.

## The public realm

The West Midlands contains a wealth of historic cities, towns and villages amidst some magnificent landscapes. 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.

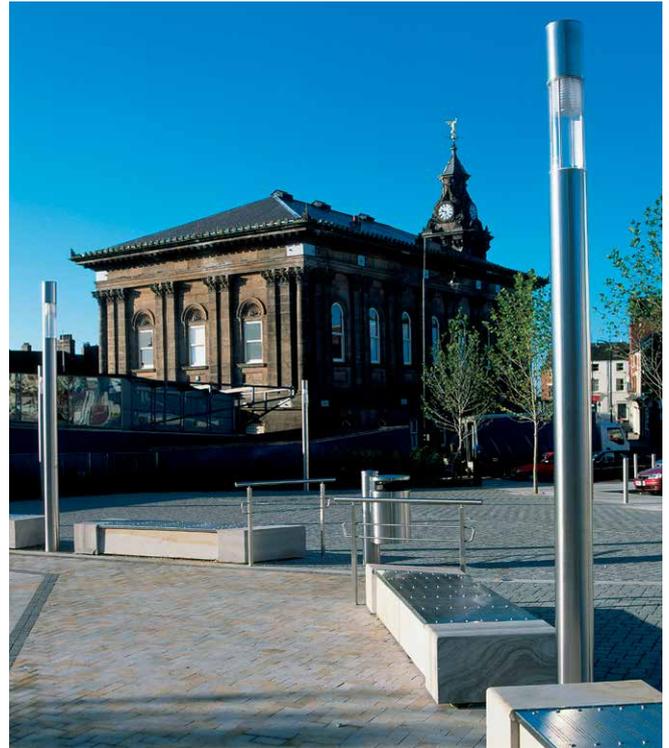
Many have evolved over hundreds of years and are rich in inherited character, though sometimes it will have been degraded by neglect or the remorseless pressure of cars and lorries.

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.

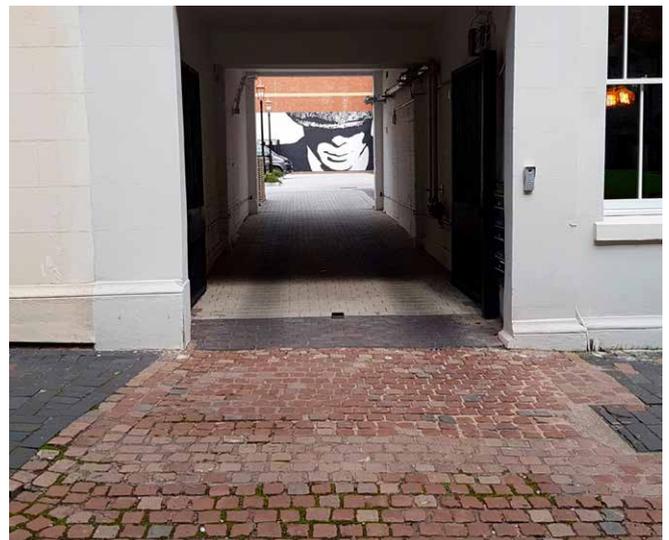
*Streets for All* shows how practical solutions to common highway problems can be achieved without harm to the valued character of places. The underlying principles are to reduce clutter, co-ordinate design and to reinforce local character, while maintaining safety for all.

*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.



Thoughtful townscape management and the use of high-quality materials are the keys to creating a successful, clutter-free public realm that respects its historic origins.



Careful retention of traditional details and materials can reinforce local distinctiveness.

## Identifying local distinctiveness

The character of the built environment of the West Midlands has been shaped by its richly diverse industrial and rural past. It is also inextricably linked to its underlying geology – the source of the natural materials from which its buildings and streets have traditionally been constructed.

From Birmingham’s Victoria Square to Lichfield’s historic market place or Shrewsbury’s medieval streetscape, 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, 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 also 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 is why good design needs to be at the heart of the West Midlands’ cities, towns and villages.



St. Paul’s Church and Square represents the 18th-century genesis of Birmingham’s Jewellery Quarter as a high-status residential suburb.

## Opportunity into action

Recently across the West Midlands there has been a growing and welcome trend for the value of the public realm to be recognised by the region's Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Support has been given to many schemes for the enhancement of streets and public spaces, as illustrated by the Worcestershire LEP's input to Worcester Cathedral Square.

In 2015 a strategic advice paper commissioned by the West Midlands Combined Authority made two very salient points:

- 'There is a strong rationale for continuing focus on public realm quality across both new and existing places in the West Midlands. This work is likely to need to be accompanied by a significant change to better fit some town centre uses to changed economic circumstances.'
- 'Town centres will be critically important in future. Their importance goes beyond their retail function, because they are the 'public face' and skilled workers of a locality, and create the environment that will either embed economic processes locally, or

encourage them to leave.'

Peter Brett Associates, September 2015

Supported by the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP, Birmingham is now in the top three of spenders on public realm nationally, while support from the Coventry and Warwickshire LEP has contributed to the delivery in Coventry City Centre of £33 million of public realm improvements since 2011.

Similarly the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire LEP has invested heavily in the city, their chairman stating 'The LEP is very pleased to be working with Stoke-on-Trent City Council on a range of schemes to create an attractive and aspirational city where businesses will want to locate and people will want to live and to visit'.

In the west of the Region the Marches LEP plans public realm enhancements in the commercial centre of Shrewsbury.



Construction of the Deansway dual carriageway in the 1960s led to the demolition of Worcester's historic Lichgate Street and divorced the Cathedral from the city. Completed in 2017 by Worcestershire County Council in partnership with Worcester City Council and the retail developer, the new Cathedral Square. This redresses the balance with a much reduced carriageway and enhanced public space that gives prominence to the statue of Edward Elgar on his new plinth, and reinstates a much more fitting foreground to the Cathedral.

## Case study: Church Street Square, Birmingham

Church Street Square is a project that was part of Birmingham's Big City Plan Initiatives programme. The aim is to create a world-class city centre by breaking the 'concrete collar' of the 1960s Ring Road, reducing the influence of the car and enhancing pedestrian and cycle access to public space.

Investment in public spaces was one of the key priorities that had been identified by local businesses in the consultation phase of the programme. As a result, Birmingham City Council and Colmore Business District agreed that walkable, quality spaces needed to be at the heart of their plans.

Completed in 2012, the Church Street project emerged from a joint vision to invest in improved pedestrian links with Birmingham's historic

Jewellery Quarter and create greener spaces for people to enjoy.

This existing space, previously a wide carriageway with more than twenty car parking bays, has now been transformed into a high quality public square. The space now has seating, soft landscaping, trees, enhanced lighting and a piece of public art called *Umbra* by Wolfgang Buttress.

### Conclusion

This collaborative approach between Colmore Business District and Birmingham City Council has resulted in a high quality public realm that is significantly more pedestrian friendly, as well as being a pleasant place for people to spend time in.



This major public realm enhancement scheme transformed a previously wide carriageway into a new open space with reduced road width, benches, trees, greenery, public artwork and enhanced lighting.



# Historic England

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