



Historic England

# Streets for All North 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 North West 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 North West's streetscapes.

This guidance has been prepared by Darren Ratcliffe, Historic Places Advisor in the North West, and Rowan Whimster.

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## Front cover: Rochdale, Greater Manchester

A multi-award winning project to uncover a medieval bridge in Rochdale town centre, which was once a focal point for the trans-Pennine woollen trade, has transformed the public realm in this historic northern town. As well as shedding more light on the borough's rich heritage, the scheme exposing the historic bridge (a feat delivered by the council with help the Heritage Lottery Fund and Environment Agency) also reduces flood risk in the town centre. © Rochdale Borough Council

## The public realm

The North West of England encompasses sites and landscapes of world significance, including the Lake District and Hadrian's Wall. As well as the metropolitan cities of Liverpool and Manchester, its historic settlements range from Victorian coastal resorts and the ancient cities of Chester, Carlisle and Lancaster to the industrial landscape of the Pennines and prosperous market towns of Cheshire.

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 streets a better place for drivers and pedestrians alike. As well as improving traffic flows this means placing 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 public safety.

*Streets for All* demonstrates how opportunities can be translated into action. In a world of scarce resources and competing priorities it sets a clear agenda for councils, 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.



The new tree-lined Fishergate in Preston, with its wide pavements and contemporary clutter-free shared space, is a much more attractive place to spend time as a pedestrian and will be a real boost for the commercial and economic heart of the city. © Planit-IE

## Identifying local distinctiveness

The character of the North West's built environment has largely been shaped by its industrial legacy and underlying geology – the source of natural materials from which buildings and streets have traditionally been constructed.

From Manchester's Albert Square to Blackpool's grand promenade or Keswick's ancient market place, the distinctive character of public spaces needs to be thoroughly understood if they are to be properly conserved.

The protection and enhancement of local distinctiveness helps to foster a greater sense of pride and identity throughout the region. Properly coordinated, it also has the potential to make historic places 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 North West's cities, towns and villages.



Fleming Square, Maryport, Cumbria. This traditional pebble stone paving provides a beautiful and durable surface. If possible, smooth paving can be provided to assist users of wheelchairs or buggies.



This rare surviving example of timber setting in Rochdale's King Street emphasises the importance of retaining locally distinctive materials or construction techniques.

## Opportunity into action

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

*Creating Inspirational Spaces*<sup>1</sup> (2007) promotes improvement and aspiration in the quality of the North West's streets and public spaces. Alongside some world-class rehabilitations of the public realm there remain many places that fall short of the standards to which we should all aspire.

Throughout the North West, local authority highways budgets are under increasing financial pressure. One of the most serious consequences is that the traditional stone setts and cobbles that give so many of the region's historic towns their character are in danger of being tarmacked over in the interests of short-term budgetary savings or temporary repairs.

Research shows that traditional high-quality pavements and streets add economic value to conservation areas. Their existence in historic places provides much of the subtle character that attracts visitors, in just the same way that the appeal of a historic house is enhanced by surfaces containing fine carpets and timber floors.

Visual clutter remains a major issue in the North West as it does in other regions. In recent years there has been increasing practical evidence that stripping away barriers and unnecessary signs and markings not only makes places safer and more attractive but also saves money.



Instead of restoring areas of loose setts in Alston's historic High Street, the local council replaced them with patches of tarmac, seriously damaging the appearance of the conservation area. Historic England have advised that properly conducted repairs to this historic stone surface will not only help to conserve the character of the town, but actually save money in the long-term.



Barrow Borough Council invited the Landscape Institute to launch a competition to improve the public realm around a series of four-storey tenement flats that had high vacancy rates. The winning design includes the transformation of a large central car park into an attractive public space.

© Farrer Huxley Associates

## Case study: Altrincham, Greater Manchester

Altrincham has been a market town since 1290 and is today an affluent commuter settlement just eight miles from the heart of Manchester. However, in 2012 George Street, the spine of the medieval town, had to be placed on Historic England's register of Conservation Areas at Risk because of the poor condition of its public realm with empty retail shops.

In response, Trafford Council and Altrincham Forward embarked on an ambitious £6 million programme of regeneration designed to place the market back at the heart of town's prosperity.

This began with the creation of a Public Realm Strategy, led by a firm of landscape architects who were already based in the town. This was followed by detailed public consultation which was in turn underpinned by research into the character of the town's surviving historic fabric.

One of the aims of the project was to redress the balance between vehicles and pedestrians. As a result, honey-hued stone paving now extends through the town centre up to the Lower Market and renowned Altrincham Market House.

### Conclusion

Transformation of the space has already attracted new use, increasing property values and the prosperity of surrounding businesses. Street trees and robust furniture provide a human scale to the public spaces. The Grade II listed Market House is now home to some of the locality's finest food and drink traders.



Subtle details, such as the imprint of webbed feet within occasional paving panels, have enriched the space along with the tactile sleeping-geese seats. © Planit-IE



In Goose Green, café tables now spill across the newly laid segmental arch stone paving.



# 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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[HistoricEngland.org.uk](http://HistoricEngland.org.uk)

## North West office

3rd Floor, Canada House  
3 Chepstow Street  
Manchester M1 5FW  
Tel: 0161 242 1416  
Email: [northwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:northwest@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

If you would like this document in a different format, please contact our customer services department on:

Tel: 0370 333 0607  
Email: [customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk)

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