



Historic England

# Streets for All North East



# 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 East 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 East's streetscapes.

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**Front cover: Tubwell Row, Darlington, County Durham**

Delivered as part of Darlington Borough Council's integrated town centre regeneration strategy, the space around Darlington's fine covered market is now an inclusive public space and gateway to the heart of the town.

## The public realm

The North East contains a wealth of historic cities, towns and villages set in magnificent upland and coastal landscapes. But it is not only fine buildings that give them their special character. Just as important are their public spaces – the streets and paths through which people move and the squares and quarters 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, buses 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.



Clifford's Fort was established as a defensive gun battery near the mouth of the Tyne during the Anglo-Dutch wars of the 17th century. In 2013 the fort was removed from Historic England's Heritage at Risk Register following a £1 million Townscape Heritage Initiative scheme funded by North Tyneside Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. As well as bringing unused buildings in the Fish Quay Conservation Area back into use, the project included substantial improvements to the fort's parade ground, the main area of open space in the conservation area, which was revealed from beneath its 20th century overburden and better presented in the context of the mouth of Tyne as a promenade and events space, using high-quality natural materials.

## Identifying local distinctiveness

The character of the North East's built environment has been shaped by its 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 the winding streets of medieval Durham to the classical conformity of Grainger Town at Newcastle, 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 our 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 North East's cities, towns and villages.



Bow Lane, Durham. This carefully re-laid cobbled surface provides a beautiful and durable lane in the historic heart of the city. As here, smooth paving should also be provided at crossings to assist users of wheelchairs or buggies. © Durham County



Traditionally, back lanes were laid with stone setts or blue scoria blocks, a by-product of the iron industry, and these survive in many areas, particularly across the Tees Valley.

## Opportunity into action

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

There have been some inspirational improvements in the quality of the North East's streets and public spaces, both large and small. But the benefit has not been equally spread, and there remain extensive historic areas that fall short of the standards to which we should all aspire.

Throughout the North East, local authority highways budgets are under increasing financial pressure. Natural materials and traditional designs that give such rich historic character are in danger of being lost in the interests of short-

term cost-saving. Inappropriate maintenance, including by utility providers, continues to spoil otherwise well-presented historic and restored streetscapes.

Visual clutter remains an issue in the North East. In recent years there has been increasing practical evidence that stripping away barriers and unnecessary signs not only makes places safer and more attractive but also saves money.

Research shows that traditional high-quality streetscapes add economic value to conservation areas. They provide much of the subtle character that draws visitors, and can be the strong, simple backdrop against which the economic and social future of our conservation areas is played out.



Keel Square is Sunderland's first major civic space, carved from realigned modern roads and stretching into Bishopwearmouth Conservation Area, where restored surfaces in natural materials provide a much-improved setting to listed buildings, such as The Peacock pub. The addition of the Keel Line public artwork, incorporating the names of over 8,000 ships built on the Wear since 1786, adds great heritage value to this pivotal regenerative square.

## Case study: Central Station, Newcastle upon Tyne

Newcastle's Central Station has always been a significant architectural gem in the city with a Grade I listed status. However, its grand porte-cochère and the public realm around it along Neville Street had become blighted by the uncontrolled pressure from cars, taxis and buses. A redesign was therefore identified as an opportunity to transform this gateway to the city and attract private sector investment.

Completed in 2016, the £20m Central Gateway project – put together by a partnership of the City Council, local businesses and infrastructure providers – was signalled as a key economic priority for Newcastle, but it came at a time of city-wide cuts to services in the wake of the recession.

Central to the scheme's success were radical improvements to the unwelcoming open spaces outside the station. Following extensive consultation with groups including the Elders' Council, Newcastle's Disability Forum and the Public Transport Users Group, the public realm was dramatically transformed with more generous

spaces for pedestrians and improved routes to and from the station.

A two-way cycle lane was added and vehicle congestion eased. To improve conditions for pedestrians, the taxi rank was repositioned and all vehicles removed from the porte-cochère, which was dramatically transformed entirely for pedestrian use.

The redevelopment is helping to unlock the multi-million pound regeneration of the Stephenson Quarter development behind the station and is also attracting new businesses into and around the station.

### Conclusion

As a result of a creative partnership between public and private sector investors, Newcastle now has a fitting gateway to the city centre that has made the station area more impressive and accessible to arriving and departing visitors.



Neville Street after completion of the Central Gateway project. © Newcastle Chronicle



# 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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