

Understanding, characterising, and advocating local historic environments through Neighbourhood Planning: Community workshops from English Heritage / Historic England & Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service

Project Closure Report

Historic Environment Record and Advisory Service

Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service
Worcestershire County Council
The Hive
Sawmill Walk
Worcester
WR1 3PD

archaeology@worcestershire.gov.uk
www.worcetershire.gov.uk/archaeology



INFORMATION GRID	
Author(s):	Jack Hanson
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Project Closure Date & Costing

The project closure date, 31st March 2015, has been agreed with Pete Boland the project sponsor for Historic England. The project was completed within the agreed timescale and budget.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of the project was to build capacity within Neighbourhood Planning communities to ensure the historic environment can be adequately understood, recorded, and championed by local stakeholders. This seeks to ensure the character and quality of neighbourhood-areas is appropriately advocated in terms of its townscape, landscape, historic buildings, and archaeology; and that these are capitalised upon for the betterment of the area through locally responsive conservation, development, and design.

This project has aimed to:

Develop a programme of workshops to provide professional-training to communities undertaking Neighbourhood Plans in the characterisation and championing of the historic environment

Deliver this training to Neighbourhood Planning groups, selected on a range of criteria, and agreed with Historic England

Ensure the targeted communities are sufficiently versed in enhancing the historic environment evidence base for their Neighbourhood Area

Ensure the historic environment will be appropriately represented within said Neighbourhood Plan documentation through well-informed policies and statements of significance

Disseminate the refined methodologies of engagement to stakeholders including English Heritage and partnered Local Authorities.

Business Case

In recent years English Heritage/Historic England has funded several initiatives via its regional capacity budgets and the NHPP which have undertaken critical appraisal of historic environmental engagement with the Neighbourhood Planning process. These have considered means of professional engagement alongside the relative capacities, capabilities and needs of local communities undertaking the plans. These have included studies at both national (e.g. Partington, 2014) and local (e.g. Hanson, 2013) scales.

These projects have identified a number of key issues and conclusions:

- Awareness of available historic environmental resources such as county Historic Environment Records is notably low amongst many communities undertaking Neighbourhood Plans. Further, knowledge pertaining to methods of enhancing these evidence-bases is often inadequate relative to the expectations on communities to do so in support of their Neighbourhood Plan.
- There is a common discrepancy between the aspirations of communities to ascribe significance to their local heritage assets, and their current capacities to do so. This often derives insufficient understanding of the criteria, objectives, and rationale of existing forms of statutory designation. There is therefore a tendency for Neighbourhood Plans to exclusively advocate the preservation of assets and areas already designated as of national significance; thus, negating many undesignated assets of comparable importance to the local area.
- While local communities often possess unparalleled knowledge of their local historic environment, a general shortage of expertise regarding its significance towards a wide range of local agendas (such as economy, amenity, and 'countryside') relegates its subsequent influence and consideration within Neighbourhood Plans.
- Numerous professionally-led appraisals of 'case-study' neighbourhood-areas have proven effective towards promoting and supporting 'historic environmentalism' by Neighbourhood Plan Steering Groups, alongside delivering sufficiently robust evidence-bases to support the resultant Plan and its policies (Walsh, 2012; Partington, 2012). It has however been recognised that these studies have not produced sufficiently cost-effective methodologies to be delivered across a county, regional, or national scale under the current fiscal constraints imposed upon historic environment services and statutory agencies.
- Many Historic Environment services are only actively consulted by Neighbourhood Plan groups towards the end of the process, diminishing their capacity to inform the creation of evidence and policies which adequately reflect local conservation and environmental concerns. The provision of basic training to communities in the identification, characterisation, recording and championing of the historic environment at an early stage can however do much to alleviate this.

These issues have informed discussion between the West Midlands Historic Characterisation Forum – a partnership between numerous Local Authority historic environment services and stakeholders across the region, led and coordinated by English Heritage. A consensus has been reached that at present Local Authorities broadly lack sufficient capacity to deliver sufficiently robust, locally-responsive historic environment evidence-bases and guidance to all communities undertaking Neighbourhood Plans. We must therefore prioritise the provision of training to key community advocates to ensure that they are, at the very least, adequately versed in both the concepts of historic environment, and the techniques and policies through which to deliver its enhancement and conservation for the betterment of their respective neighbourhood-area.

Several projects, both within and beyond the historic environmental disciplines, have deployed 'walking methodologies' to provide such training with high levels of success (Hein et al. 2008). English Heritage / Historic England has advocated such approaches, particularly through their 'Placecheck' programmes. By undertaking training in situ, coupled with practical exercises in historic landscape or townscape characterisation, local communities are able to obtain the skillsets required to expand their respective local evidence-base, and most significantly critique their local environments in respect of both risks and opportunities that they present. The formation of the Neighbourhood Plan can therefore be undertaken with broadened perspectives on means through which to proactively champion the conservation and enhancement of the historic environment through concepts such as 'Constructive Conservation' for the sustainable growth of historic places, multi-objective landscape-management plans, and townscape heritage initiatives.

In summary, these approaches have been shown to build sufficient capacity within communities to ensure consideration of heritage within Neighbourhood Planning moves beyond inventories of heritage assets, towards the formation of truly locally-responsive planning policy for historic environmental enhancement and conservation. This Service and its fellow applicants believe this approach to community capacity-building is the most viable and sustainable solution for ensuring the provision of adequate professional guidance in respect of the historic environment and Neighbourhood Planning across the region.

The Neighbourhood Planning Workshop Model

Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service has successfully developed and delivered a bespoke methodology through three workshops, encompassing Neighbourhood Plan working groups from the parishes of Martley, Clifton upon Teme, Barnt Green, Cofton Hackett, and Lickey & Blackwell.

The workshops were divided into two sessions: the first incorporating a series of practical exercises, aimed at providing guidance and instruction on identifying and recording historic environmental assets and character; with the second formed of an indoor session to examine sources of evidence, means through which to enhance local records, and outlining 'best-practice' examples of Neighbourhood Planning policies.

These exercises addressed many of the aforementioned issues, through the following mechanisms:

Recording the character of historic areas

Critical examination of characterisation-methodologies has revealed that many of the attribute-led approaches advocated by heritage bodies are not fit-for-purpose in the context of community-driven initiatives. This is largely resultant of a general lack of characterisation-expertise within the majority of communities; thus necessitating high levels of professional leadership in order to articulate local characteristics. While these approaches have proven highly successful in many exemplar studies (*Lincoln Townscape Assessment; Oxford Characterisation Toolkit*), there is no capacity to deliver such services across the breadth of ongoing Neighbourhood Plans.

These workshops have therefore adopted a 'notation-led' approach to characterisation, developed in the latter-half of the 20th century (Cullen, 1968; Lynch 1960) and redeveloped for heritage bodies within the *Bristol: Our Place* project. This involved splitting each group into sub-groups, with each provided with a blank map of the locality in question, 'notation' legend of key characteristic features, a set of coloured markers, and a number of cartographic resources such as historic OS mapping and aerial photographs. Consequent to a short introductory spiel on the concepts and processes of townscape and landscape characterisation, each group was set off to identify and notate the distinctive and characteristic features of their area (see Appendix B). Once completed, the group had a collective discussion, resulting in a list of the primary characteristic features, alongside how they would like to see them enhanced or removed based on their positive and negative impact respectively.

Identifying and record locally significant heritage assets

Early Neighbourhood Plans have shown a tendency towards solely, or predominantly, advocating heritage assets already designated as of national significance. Issues of locally significant heritage, and local listings have therefore commonly been overlooked. This places such assets at greater risk, with absence of advocacy potentially being used to represent absence of local significance. Concurrently, the quality of historic environment evidence bases within Neighbourhood Plans (a prerequisite for completion) has been seen to be low, with insufficient evidence of form, function or condition provided for many assets; thus hindering local advocates' future potential to authoritatively argue for significance or impact upon it.

Short exercises on how to record locally significant heritage assets to a level acceptable by Local Authority curators (e.g. HERs, Conservation Officers) was therefore undertaken simultaneously with the aforementioned characterisation exercise. This involved the provision of basic buildings and monuments survey forms, designed for completion in less than a minute per form. These facilitate information on form, location, and condition to be recorded in manner both fit-for-purpose for a Neighbourhood Plan evidence base, for consequent enhancement of statutory heritage databases, and to display significance with the planning process.

Recording Landscape Character and Landscape Characterisation

Deficiencies in the representation of landscape character within early Neighbourhood Plans often stemmed from two sources: a misunderstanding of the local complexities that form 'character', and resultant lack of recording or advocacy beyond "protection of the countryside"; or an over-reliance on pre-existing information such as National Character Area statements, which often do not reflect local character beyond a 'strategic' level.

Unlike urban character, resources are available to support the assessment of landscape character from a largely desk-based approach. A shot exercise was therefore undertaken to display how utilising datasets such as HLC to enhance resources such as Landscape Character Assessments (LCAs) could readily produce fit-for-purpose, and critically locally responsive evidence bases. Critically, these exercises were undertaken in respect of local amenities – such as local open green spaces, allotments, networks of Public Rights of Way, or local watercourses – to promote how the historic environment and its advocacy are critical towards a whole range of contemporary issues.

Constructive Conservation

A common issue facing heritage professionals engaging with Neighbourhood Planning, is seeing the historic environmental discipline "pigeon holed" into issues of historic narrative, away from the social, economic and environmental issues of which it plays a significant role.

An 'in-situ' discussion of the tenants of 'constructive conservation' was therefore undertaken in respect of a number of heritage assets within each area, usually targeting a significant asset (such as the local church), a community amenity (such as a village green or high street), and a sight of redevelopment potential (such as a farmstead). These 'thought experiments' aimed to encourage local advocates to consider how the preservation and/or enhancement of the area could be achieved, and most importantly what opportunities historic environmental practices offer through which to do so. Areas of discussion included the local economy, local community-security (house prices etc.), and local health. In doing so, we encouraged communities to move away from representing historic environment and heritage in isolation within their plan, towards a more holistic approach.

Historic Environmental Resources and Policy

Following the first half of the workshop, a session on obtaining and using historic environmental resources was undertaken. This was achieved through a round-table discussion within a local indoor facility, taking the form of an 'outreach' exercise commonly deployed by local Historic Environment Services. This covered sources of historic environmental data (HERs, HLC etc.), literature (grey literature, LCA statements etc.), and expertise (County Archaeologists, Conservation Officers, regional Historic Places Advisors etc.).

Examples of good practice in historic environmental policy were utilised to display how local issues could be advocated in a concise, but effective manner, and how they may seek to enforce those policies was briefly discussed. This was deemed vital, in order to ensure that the strong evidence base, facilitated by the earlier exercises, was to be appropriately deployed within the plan's key components.

Finally, the workshop-leader chaired a short discussion to establish frameworks and schedules of further work, ratified by the groups. This included obtaining HER searches and pertinent information, and setting a timetable for surveying character and local heritage assets utilising the methodologies with which they had been trained. This final stage was deemed critical, in order to ensure that the skills and capacity provided by the professional-led exercises could be readily disseminated to the wider, engaged community; and further that the impact of such events were not diminished through a 'lag' in revisiting the techniques.

Outcomes

The project has been both successful in developing a model of workshops for Neighbourhood Planning groups, alongside providing advocates of the targeted localities with adequate capacity to identify, record, and advocate for their historic environments.

The adoption and synthesis of various approaches to characterisation and heritage assessment appear to have provided local groups with a workable solution to the generation of robust historic environment evidence bases. Critically, each group has already continued the work initiated within the workshops, without the professional leadership critical to many previous mechanisms of localism-driven environmental assessment.

Concepts of historic environment, landscape character, and constructive conservation are therefore being considered in an appropriately holistic manner within the targeted groups; thus, likely facilitating more effective representation within the resultant plan. Relationships between local advocates and local authority personnel have also been enhanced, especially in terms of understanding of respective capacities. This should therefore facilitate more efficient and cost-effective engagement in future.

Notably, many groups expressed how the exercises have helped them frame their approach to the Neighbourhood Plan beyond their section(s) on heritage, landscape and environment. Due to the small-size of many of the targeted communities, members of each group were often tasked with leadership of multiple or cross-disciplinary sections. The mechanisms of impact and assets, particularly the notation-led approaches, were seen to be transferable to broader areas of the plan such as highways-management and studies of local economic viability.

Most rewardingly, many groups have expressed a view that the workshops have provided a critical means of (re)focussing the substantial endeavour of undertaking a Neighbourhood Plan. Each of the groups expressed a frustration that a combined saturation of guidance on a range of environmental issues, coupled with a lack of authoritative 'roadmaps' regarding the assessment of individual factors in respect of Neighbourhood Planning, has resulted in an inefficient and somewhat meandering workflow. The workshops provided much needed frameworks to make definitive progress; thus reenergising initiatives at risk from failure.

Positive feedback from all groups was received in both verbal and written formats. A synthesis of feedback is attached within Appendix A

Issues

The workshops have been highly successful at finding means to address the key issues outlined within the *Business Case*; however a number of additional and significant issues have been identified. These require attention beyond this project, and may necessitate further work.

The workshops have highlighted an area significant to historic environmental advocacy towards which much of the existing guidance provides insufficient information: ensuring Neighbourhood Plan policies are appropriately utilised within design and planning practices *after* the plan has been ratified. A substantial proportion of projects, research, and pilot studies examining issues of local advocacy and the historic environment (including this project) have focussed on processes of identification and recording, with some examining the production of appropriate planning policy. Few, however have addressed the means through which communities will successfully enforce the utilisation of their evidence bases and policies to support or contest development they deem to enhance or detract from their locality respectively. While full assessment of the impact of Neighbourhood Plans will only be possible in a number of years, Historic England may be able to obtain foresight of potential key issues and opportunities in this regard through examination of the use-or-misuse of local policies in (e.g.) Village Design Statements in respect of change to local heritage.

The assessment of environmental assets and landscape character remains an inherently complex issue, with communities attempting to engage with such issues regularly feeling saturated with pertinent information and guidance. Such workshops, while useful, are at risk from “adding to the noise” if not supported with appropriate guidance from an authoritative, central authority. In Worcestershire the notation-exercise, rapid building recording methodology, and workshop-model have allowed the exercise to avoid such issues in part; however, developing a fully definitive ‘product’, also encompassing vital areas such as exemplar character statements and evidence bases, was not within the scope of the project. This could readily be achieved through further funded workshops, to facilitate additional development.

Further Work

It is strongly recommended that further funding is obtained for the continuation of the workshops across Worcestershire in order to deliver critical capacity to its Neighbourhood Planning groups. This must be achieved within a timescale that facilitates sufficiently early engagement, to ensure historic environment is not “shoe-horned” into the resultant plan towards the end of the process. The continuation of the workshops across the West Midlands is also encouraged, alongside pushing for broader delivery through other Regional Capacity Building funds, again encouraging partnerships between multiple local authorities. Worcestershire will therefore be seeking to submit an application for further funding to Historic England West Midlands in due course. There is also potential for delivery of workshops beyond the region in partnership with external organisations.

Many previous studies into Neighbourhood Planning and the historic environment have called for a ‘Toolkit’ from Historic England, targeted specifically at the production of Neighbourhood Plans, and this is echoed by this report. This toolkit should synthesise critical information, provide frameworks of practical (and critically achievable) mechanisms to characterisation and heritage assessment, and be supported by notated examples of fit-for-purpose policies and evidence-bases around which more locally-defined version can be produced for each Neighbourhood Plan. The English Heritage branded *Knowing Your Place* document remains the closest iteration to such a product; however it is notably lacking in the two latter criteria of mechanisms and exemplar documentation. There is clear opportunity to revisit *Knowing Your Place* consequent to recent projects, and remarket the sector’s expertise to its target audience under the new Historic England brand.

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Appendix A

Synthesis of feedback from the Neighbourhood Plan Steering and Working Groups

The feedback questionnaire posed five questions to participant Neighbourhood Planning groups:

Overall, how beneficial do you feel the workshop was towards the creation of your Neighbourhood Plan?

Were there any particular areas/activities that you felt worked particularly well?

Were there any particular areas/activities that you felt did not work well, or could be improved?

Were there any areas or issues in respect of historic environment / heritage that were not covered that you would have valued?

Would you recommend the continuation of such workshops for other Neighbourhood Planning groups within the region?

Responses were provided both verbally and via email, a summary of which is provided below:

Feedback from all the groups was overwhelmingly positive. Each felt that their Neighbourhood Plan had progressed markedly as a result of the day, and that a new impetus and critically direction had been obtained. Many expressed satisfaction that a framework for further work was now implemented, that had been sorely lacking prior to this. Notably, each of the groups reported that they had successfully instigated the programme of work, and that they were now actively characterising and recording their local historic environments with a high level of efficiency.

Satisfyingly, several groups reported that they had reconsidered the position of the historic environment within their Plan. Prior to the workshops, many had considered it significant, but ultimately peripheral to key issues such as local economy and amenity. The workshops allowed them to reevaluate the impact heritage and local character has on a range of such issues, and are therefore approaching the development of their evidence bases and policies in a more holistic manner.

Other positive comments highlighted: how the workshops had allowed them to more effectively examine 'exemplar' Neighbourhood Plans and understand how they had come to be produced; and expressions of intent to redeploy the techniques they had been instructed in for other issues such as natural environmental assessment, or highways management.

A regular comment surrounded the need for a product which synthesis the information provided alongside a written overview of the techniques they had been instructed in. While all felt confident in repeating the processes, a toolkit which they could work through from the outset of the plan, through survey, assessment, and policy-production was requested.

A desire to cover certain areas in greater depth was expressed from a number of groups, preferably through additional workshops e.g. a full, bespoke day for landscape assessment; or an event which covered applying for additional grant funding from various sources. It was explained that this level of

Historic England-supported engagement was likely beyond the scope of the Regional Capacity Grant fund; however, the possibility for Neighbourhood Planning groups to commission such enhanced engagement from their budgets was raised. It is unlikely however that this will be a financially viable model for many.

Each Neighbourhood Planning Group strongly recommended the continuation of the workshops for other Neighbourhood Planning groups, and expressed a strong interest in any other Historic England initiatives that could support them in future.

Appendix B

Characterisation Notation Method

Neighbourhood Planning for Heritage and Historic Environment

Using these notations populate the map with the features and characteristics that you believe make your area distinctive. Feel free to annotate the map with further information, or create custom symbols where necessary.

	Distinctive planted boundary i.e. hedgerow		Narrow, enclosed and/or sunken lane or street		Locally <u>significant</u> building
	Distinctive area of woodland		Wide, open lane or street		Locally <u>distinctive</u> building
	Distinctive line of trees		Extensive view (point denotes your location)		Group of related historic buildings i.e. village square
	Landmark and/or historic tree or planting		View of local or major landmark from point		Scale of building (number of storeys)
	Locally significant watercourse		View of local heritage asset from point		Distinctive frontage i.e. shops; character property
	Distinctive body of water i.e. ponds		Significant local open or green space		Distinctive roof-line
	Local landmark i.e. church; bridge; geological feature		Area with distinctive sense of enclosure		Distinctive building-line
	Heritage asset i.e. archaeological monument		Area with distinctively open character		Distinctive street furniture i.e. lamppost; postbox
	Important routeway i.e. path, track		Boundary between character zones		Ornamental or commemorative feature
	Custom notation:		Custom notation:		Distinctive historic structural boundary i.e. wall

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ENGLISH HERITAGE
Symbols and method derived from the 'Know Your Place, Bristol' Project

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The Hive, Seward Walk, The Bull's,
Worcester, WR1 3PR
Telephone: 01905 760563