

CATHEDRAL CITIES AND HISTORIC TOWNS

SUMMARY AND KEY
RECOMMENDATIONS

THE KENWOOD HOUSE GROUP
MARCH 2015

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Early in 2012, we discussed the impact that significant growth proposals around the periphery of Chichester would likely have on the Goodwood Estate, Goodwood House and the City of Chichester itself. We concluded that such development would indeed damage the integrity and long-term future of the Estate, and that it would also have both a significant and harmful impact on the built environment and setting of the city itself, damaging its physical, social and economic infrastructure. This led us to think more deeply about the problems being faced by other similar cities and towns. We therefore commissioned a study to compare the levels of housing growth being proposed for the most important Cathedral cities and historic towns of Britain with those of more recent settlements where high levels of growth could be beneficial. This study highlighted that some of Britain's most important places were being asked to accept as much or greater new housing allocations compared with other less sensitive locations. In particular, large greenfield housing developments on the periphery of these historic places are often seen as the only solution.

Following further discussions, English Heritage commissioned more detailed studies and research, which have validated these conclusions and led us to hold the first meeting of the Kenwood House Group. This group consists of leading figures from a wide variety of backgrounds, all influential in their fields and all with a keen interest in our most important towns and cities. The purpose of our meetings have been to consider the various reports and to discuss how best to protect these special places, whilst making them fit for the 21st century.

Britain's most important cathedral cities and historic towns are national assets with international significance. They tell a story of the history of Britain and do so in a way that brings great economic benefits to this country, not only because of their role as a catalyst for tourism but also as an environment able to attract knowledge-based industries. Many of them play a role in terms of higher and further education, whilst also offering significant opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises and business start-ups and particularly in the fast changing creative and media sectors. In these roles, their success depends on their unique form and built environment and it is this that is threatened by excessive, inappropriate and insensitive housing growth.

They are also very good models for a more sustainable form of development. With their compact, high-density cores they offer high accessibility living and working, with minimal need for high mobility, unlike their suburban counterparts. Examples from Northern Europe show how, with high standards of design, and a multitude

of dense redevelopments and extensions, these historic cities can accommodate significant levels of population growth, whilst achieving real benefits for their residents. Frequently they provide excellent models of sustainable living for the 21st century, whilst still conserving their historic legacy. This is very different from the more suburban and land-consuming pattern of growth now seen in Britain.

At successive meetings, the Kenwood Group has validated and endorsed the new studies by English Heritage together with some invaluable research carried out by Foster and Partners. As a result of these considerations, the nature and scale of the problems faced by our most important built assets is much clearer and we consider that a number of key recommendations can now be put forward.

To help sustain these cities and towns the government should:

- i. make a small number of relatively minor changes to the wording of the NPPF to ensure that in considering the future of historic assets, local authorities give sufficient weight to conservation issues
- ii. make sure that local authorities apply the NPPF correctly to ensure they are delivering sustainable development
- iii. require local authorities to identify those Local Development Orders for Brownfield sites that have heritage interests and ensure that they have appropriate and realistic planning briefs in place

- iv. ensure that instructions to the Planning Inspectorate setting out the need to consider environmental constraints above meeting housing need projections are being rigorously followed
- v. ensure that Inspectors appointed to hold Planning Appeals and Inquiries are appropriately qualified and experienced to deal with the special issues raised by these sensitive places
- vi. encourage special training for councillors in these local authorities together with a requirement and funding to employ sufficient specially-qualified staff
- vii. work with universities to ensure that sufficient suitably-qualified urban designers and conservation specialists are trained and financed
- viii. make clear that strategies for meeting housing need forecasts and planning for growth should not be defined by the restrictions of existing local authority boundaries
- ix. make it easier for Local Authorities to assemble land for regeneration in historic towns and cities
- x. ensure that cathedral cities and historic towns are recognized as heritage assets themselves and that changes that would affect them and their settings are assessed by the planning system as they would be for any designated heritage asset

It is, however, also important to consider our key historic cities and towns in a broader national context. It is clear that Britain has a major and unfulfilled housing need that current rates of house building are unable to satisfy. We are strongly of the view that the present piecemeal planning system, with its emphasis on short term local decisions will not be able to significantly increase current house building rates. To achieve an acceptable rate of development we believe that it will be necessary to have a broad national strategy that locates growth where it will give the greatest gain, where it utilises fully major new infrastructure schemes and where it will help to rebalance the shape of urban Britain. At first sight it may seem at odds with this need to build sufficient houses to propose that greater emphasis is given to conserving and protecting our greatest historic assets. However, the proposals from the Kenwood Group are not anti-growth, and the vital importance of meeting Britain's urgent housing is fully recognised. The Group is therefore keen to ensure that the conservation of these key cities and towns is seen as an important component of this broader national and strategic context, one that recognises:

- i. existing and proposed national investment in strategic transport and other infrastructure and the growth locations that they will generate
- ii. major and under-used brown field sites in existing urban areas
- iii. those locations where significant growth can make a real contribution to existing urban areas

- iv. the need to build at higher densities so as to conserve green field sites and produce compact and fully sustainable urban areas
- v. the need for new developments to provide a full range of land uses, not just housing, and to embrace the urgent need to minimise the need for personal mobility and maximise accessibility
- vi. the need for new and appropriate delivery mechanisms and organisations that can assemble land, cross local authority boundaries, speed up procedures and ensure effective high quality and genuinely sustainable development

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