



Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study

Torbay Heritage Strategy 2021 - 2026
Entered by Torbay Council

Sponsored by

STRIDE TREGLOWN

1.



TETRA TECH
Planning

1. Project background

Torbay Council is a unitary authority covering the towns of Torquay, Paignton and Brixham and the surrounding rural area. The area is rich in archaeological, built and cultural heritage, including internationally important Ice Age finds, world class literary links, significant fishing history and impressive Georgian and Victorian townscapes. However, the area's post-war economic decline obscured the significance of these assets for decades and led to many sites deteriorating. In 2019, Torbay Council recognised that a Heritage Strategy was needed to support the protection and enhancement of the area's historic fabric and to realise the potential of heritage to drive economic and cultural renewal.

An earlier Heritage Strategy had been commissioned in 2011. However, it was not formally adopted by Torbay Council and had not been reviewed since its creation. Numerous changes had since impacted the culture and heritage sector; there had also been significant political changes locally and nationally, and cultural developments on the ground in the Bay. In addition, the Torbay Local Plan was also in the early stages of being reviewed. The new Heritage Strategy needed to be closely linked to the key policies and help build the infrastructure for positive change. The launch of the High Streets Heritage Action Zones [HSHAZ] showed the Government's commitment to historic high streets and realising the potential of our heritage assets. The new Heritage Strategy needed to reflect local ambition for renewal of the towns' centres and bids to schemes such as HSHAZ and the Future High Streets Fund.

The project was jointly managed by Jim Blackwell, Principal Planner (Delivery) at Torbay Council, and Martin Thomas, Executive Director of Torbay Culture. This joint perspective meant that from the outset the thinking behind the Heritage Strategy integrated spatial planning and cultural development. A brief for external consultants was put out to tender and was won by Heritage, Arts and People (HAP), a Devon-based heritage consultancy. The lead consultant on the project for HAP was Katherine Findlay.

Key dates:

2019

- Brief produced. Expressions of Interest and commission – December.

2020

- Heritage Arts People – commence the project in February.
- Research and strategy writing – February to May.
- Three week public consultation by questionnaire – February.
- Stakeholder meetings and event – February and March.
- Heritage asset scoring and review – March.
- Draft Strategy available – May.
- Present to Councils Senior Leadership Team, Informal Cabinet, Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny Panel – May and June.
- Four week public consultation – July and August.
- Review commentary and evolve the Strategy preparing for adoption – August to October.
- Adoption by Cabinet – November.

2021

- Action planning phase. • Implementation framework.

2. Outcomes for People and Communities

People and communities are at the heart of the Torbay Heritage Strategy, which has been consciously structured as a driver of cultural and economic development as well as a spatial planning tool.

There is enormous interest in local heritage among Torbay residents and the Strategy encourages opportunities for all our communities to understand, enjoy and share our history. The work on the Torbay Heritage Strategy started with public and heritage sector consultation and was developed in response to it, rather than the more conventional approach of drafting a document and then putting

it out for consultation. This grassroots approach meant that people in Torbay were genuinely involved and able to influence the process. 99% of local people who responded to the online survey carried out at the start of the project said that experiencing the heritage around them was important to their quality of life, with 76% saying it was very important.

Individuals and communities will benefit from greater engagement with heritage through commitments in the Heritage Strategy to:

- Integrate key heritage sites into planning for sustainable transport, promote Active Travel and explore potential for more heritage trails
- Ensure visitors with a range of access and sensory needs feel welcome at all Council-run heritage sites and that their needs are met
- Give voice to diverse perspectives in the interpretation of heritage at all Council-run sites
- Increase and support volunteering opportunities at key heritage sites
- Explore opportunities to for heritage services to work with social services to benefit groups most in need in Torbay, including looked-after children
- Create better guidance for building owners to use in Conservation Areas
- Support museum and archive collections for the benefit of all
- Explore options for a residents' scheme to reduce cost of access to heritage sites

The Heritage Strategy recognises that residents and visitors most frequently engage with heritage while moving through the historic environment and that this impacts on wellbeing and quality of life for all. The Strategy provides protection for the historic environment and encourages new development that respects and finds inspiration in the distinct characters of our towns and countryside.

The Heritage Strategy has resulted in a significant change in the strategic funding context. The strategy has already supported some key funding bids, including those made by regional partners such as the South West Heritage Trust who have chosen to pursue projects in the Bay due to the demonstrable commitment to heritage from the local authority.

Attracting new and younger visitors and lengthening the tourist season are fundamentally important to Torbay's future economy. Market research has shown that there is a large market of younger visitors who highly value heritage experiences at destinations and who are currently not choosing Torbay. This strategy puts heritage at the centre of our visitor offer for the first time.

3. Planning Contribution

A planner has been involved throughout this project taking a lead role in project management and implementation. The officer has 20 years experience in Development Management, Conservation, Urban Design and Forward Planning. This experience has benefited the whole process from brief writing to adoption as well as understanding the influence the Strategy can have within the existing policy framework.

The officer has been committed to aligning the Strategy with local ambitions expressed through Torbay Together's vision, and complemented by plans and strategies including the Torbay Economic Strategy 2017-22, English Riviera Destination Management Plan 2017-21, and Enjoy, talk, do, be: a cultural strategy for Torbay and its communities 2014-24. In the cultural strategy, the important links relate to Strategic Aim no. 2 'maximising distinctive natural and built cultural assets'; and the objective 'Protect and enhance spaces for culture'.

In the past, strategies of this nature would be delivered solely within the Forward Planning Team following the usual sequence heading towards adoption. The strong link between the planner and Torbay Culture was established during the early bid process for the Great Place Scheme which Torbay benefited from in 2016. The early vision was to attempt to influence placeshaping through a variety of routes, one of them plan making. Working effectively with Torbay Culture and HAP enabled us to take a creative approach rooted in strong narratives, listening first and being guided by key stakeholders and the public.

Strong and effective leadership was required to ensure the milestones were followed towards consultation and adoption. The Strategy evolved over time and the planner needed to navigate the series of informal and formal Member meetings, absorb comments with HAP and Torbay Culture and ultimately gain a consensus on content.

David Edmondson, Assistant Director - Planning, Housing & Climate Emergency:

'We are delighted with the Heritage Strategy, it is already having a significant effect raising the importance of heritage matters across Torbay and ensuring that they are front and centre in the minds of Officers, Councillors and the development industry, as well as providing a greater understanding to all the population about all the excellent assets Torbay possesses.'

The project required a great deal of patience and flexibility over content and timing given the subject area. The project team relied on a huge range of research to provide a robust strategic document, whilst balancing the expectations of those who had taken the time to contribute. The majority of the work took place remotely which led to additional time being spent on the Strategy's formulation. The project managed this process effectively with minimal delays

The lead officer's past experience helped with the process of scoring and prioritising the range of heritage assets as part of the core objectives. A project team was developed with a range of internal officers and external partners to make a rigorous assessment of the Bay's assets.

4. Outcomes for climate action

The Strategy is at the early stages of implementation and action planning. The following objectives secure outcomes for climate action:

- Heritage assets in Torbay are protected from the effects of climate change and carbon reduction is central to their management.
- New flood defence schemes recognise local distinctiveness in design and materials and take into account relationship to heritage assets.
- All Council managed heritage assets with on-site staff review working practices to minimise energy and fuel consumption.
- Conservation practices at Council managed heritage assets are reviewed to take into account climate issues including flood risk, rainwater and heat protection, effects on building fabric, underlying stability, suitable planting, pests and invasive vegetation.
- Updated Conservation Area Appraisals assess risks from climate change and all guidance for building owners includes reference to mitigation and/or carbon reduction measures.
- Sustainable transport to all key heritage sites is encouraged and supported.

5. Outcomes for sustainable development

The Strategy contributes to many of the sustainable development goals, but most notably:

GOAL 3: GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The integration of heritage sites into planning for sustainable transport, promote Active Travel and explore potential for more heritage trails. Influencing links within the adopted LCWIP to improve the walking and cycling network, green spaces and trees which benefit mental and physical health.

GOAL 4: QUALITY EDUCATION

Ensure visitors with a range of access and sensory needs feel welcome at all Council-run heritage sites and that their needs are met. Provide guidance for owners of historic buildings to give them the skills to care for the assets. Provide quality and visible interpretation in the streetscape.

GOAL 8: DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

The continued use of the Strategy to protect and enhance the historic fabric and to realise the potential of heritage to drive economic and cultural renewal.

GOAL 10: REDUCED INEQUALITIES

Give voice to diverse perspectives in the interpretation of heritage at all Council-run sites. Increase and support volunteering opportunities at key heritage sites. Explore opportunities to for heritage services to work with social services to benefit groups most in need in Torbay, including looked-after children.

GOAL 11: SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

The Strategy carefully balances the need for new development to reinforce and enhance the cultural and natural heritage the area and contribute to sustainable transport and social cohesion.

GOAL 13: CLIMATE ACTION

Within the established objectives, ensure Heritage assets in Torbay are protected from the effects of climate change and carbon reduction is central to their management.

GOAL 15: LIFE ON LAND

Clearly set out objectives to preserve and enhance the special character of Torbay's agricultural landscape. Ensure ancient field systems are managed effectively. Access to and around rural areas is easy and enjoyable by public transport, walking and cycling. Make effective links to the ecological and natural environment policy framework.

GOAL 17: Partnerships for the goals

Effective partnership and local community involvement have been at the core of the project. Set up a local Heritage Forum to continue this momentum and create a collaborative working partnership

6. Community Engagement

From the beginning, our approach was to consult widely both internally and externally and to develop the Torbay Heritage Strategy in response. There was an online residents' consultation that received 745 responses. An online method of consultation was devised before the Covid pandemic in order to make it as accessible to as many people as possible, and as restrictions were introduced the online approach proved invaluable in enabling people to participate from home. The survey was widely promoted through Council and Torbay Culture channels and through networks that could reach people who may not have responded to official Council communications. These included online communities of interest, such as Facebook groups that share old photographs of Torbay. Responses were incentivised with a draw prize of annual membership to Torbay's most well-loved heritage destination, Torre Abbey. This encouraged people who were interested in heritage but may be put off by admission fees at some sites (a key audience) to take part.

The residents' survey found that local people care deeply about special places and are enthusiastic about opportunities for greater engagement as visitors, volunteers and event attendees. Findings that directly influenced the development of the Strategy included:

- More local people rated historic parks and gardens as 'very important' than any other type of heritage asset (81% of respondents). This unexpected result encouraged greater consideration of parks and gardens in the strategy and prompted separate listing and prioritisation where they are attached to designated buildings, for example at Oldway Mansion and Lupton House. It led to greater recognition within the Strategy that Torbay's parks and gardens are distinctive and historically significant, and of central importance to the character of the area.

- The most commonly cited barriers to visiting heritage sites were lack or cost of parking and admission prices, and the suggestion of a residents' heritage scheme was made repeatedly. This deepened the connection between the Strategy that we developed and the Local Cycling, Walking and Infrastructure Plan being developed in parallel. It also led directly to the inclusion of a commitment to explore options for a scheme to reduce the cost of accessing heritage sites for local residents.

There was also a stakeholders' gathering for local heritage and community organisations, held shortly before Covid restrictions were introduced. Organisations that could not attend were consulted in detail separately. 19 organisations contributed their expertise and shared their priorities and hopes for the Strategy.

From this process, we drew out a series of stories that make Torbay special and developed a set of objectives around them. The story-led structure of the final document fulfils an important function in making it readable and interesting, fostering pride in our collective heritage and further encouraging individuals, communities and organisations to be part of a step-change in how heritage is perceived and cared for in the Bay.

7. Leading Practice

Torbay Council's Spatial Planning team and Torbay Culture have worked closely on place shaping in recent years. For places to really work for people, a truly collaborative practice has to be nurtured, and the development of the heritage strategy is a beautiful example of that. We regard heritage and culture, good planning, and engagement with people as all equal in our thinking. The appointment of HAP was important because in Katherine Findlay we had a consultant who shared our values, and we could work together, in partnership, to make the strategy become a reality. This shared flexibility and open-mindedness was key. As described, we listened first, then shaped ideas, and listened more, updating our thinking as we progressed.

This has influenced other Council strategies and plans, viewed as a good model to take forwards, with other local authorities have asked us about our approach, so they can learn from our experience. A good measure of success has been how - despite the extreme challenges of COVID-19 - we were able to progress. During such a crisis it could have been 'easy' for partners to postpone this using the crisis as a reason to focus on other more urgent priorities. What is a living testimony is the determination to make our home better - that energised us and our partners to keep moving forwards, and make the strategy work for people.

We have developed a set of clear objectives, with a short term and longer term action plan that can be followed by Council and partners. Of these we have a set of deliverables that we are clear can be completed in the first 12 month period, with some flexibility in respect of pandemic delays; and a medium term plan for the following four years. The wider connections to other place based projects - including the regeneration of the bay's towns through government and commercial investment - is something which this strategy can help.