



Historic England

Coventry High Street Heritage Action Zone



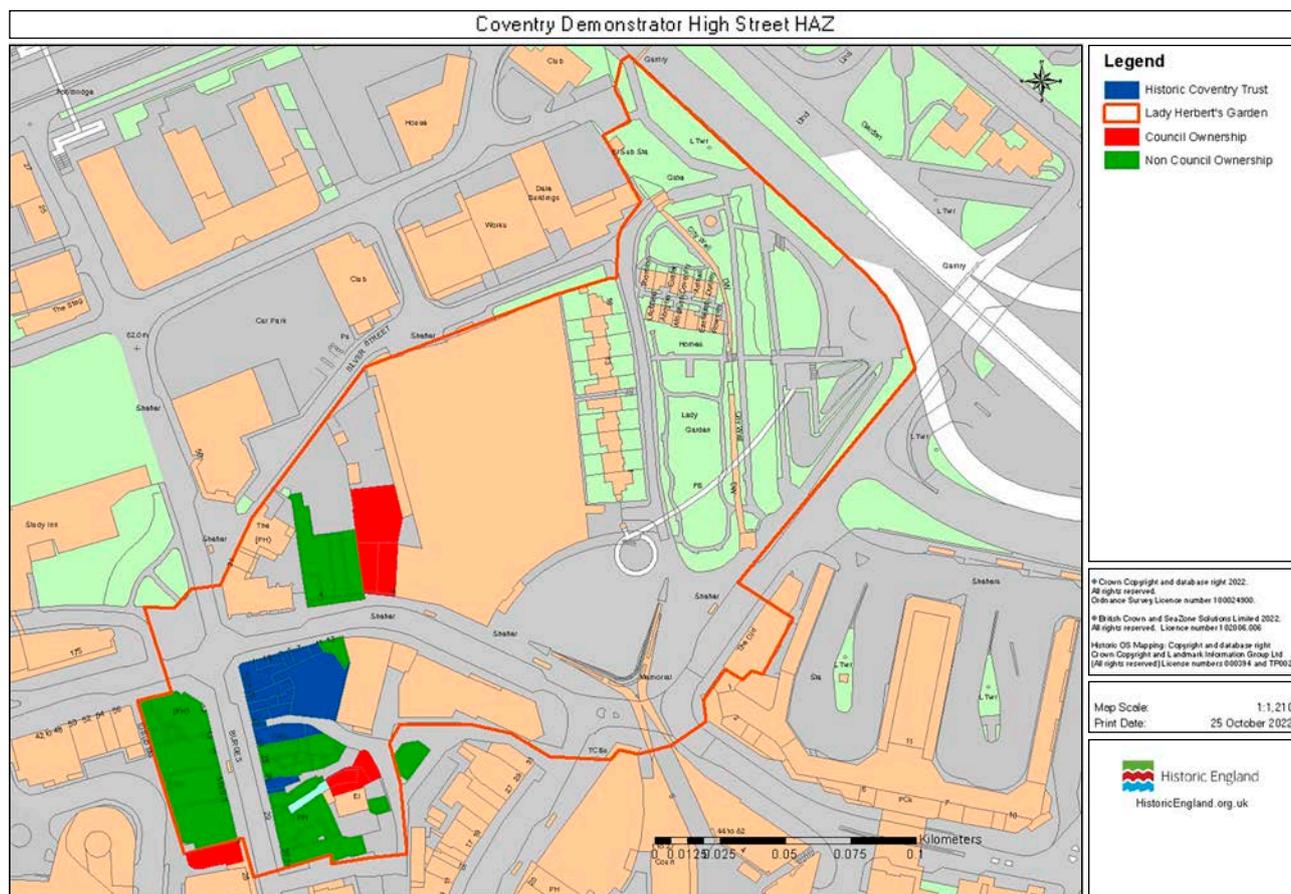
Introduction

In 2019 [Historic England](#) (HE) announced the launch of [High Street Heritage Action Zones](#) (HSHAZ); a **£95 million heritage-led urban regeneration programme** to be delivered in **over 65 high streets across England**. The Burges and Hales Street in Coventry were selected to be the programme demonstrator. The Coventry HSHAZ scheme was delivered at pace to act as a pathfinder for the rest of the programme. This briefing provides an overview of what HE has learnt from the evaluation of the Coventry HSHAZ project.



Corner of Hales Street and the Burges, under construction, 2020
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Overview of Coventry HSHAZ



Map of Coventry Conservation Area and HSHAZ, 2022 © Historic England

In May of 2019 [Historic Coventry Trust](#) (HCT) was awarded over **£2 million** for heritage-led regeneration encompassing capital repairs, cultural programming and community engagement. The goal of the project was to ensure **‘the Burges is a vibrant and thriving area of Coventry that is valued by the local community’**. With support from Coventry City Council and the Coventry Business Improvement District, HCT delivered a sensitive regeneration of the HSHAZ area.

The Coventry HSHAZ project was planned to end in 2020, however, due to the wider socio-political context (including the impact of Covid-19) it was delayed. The historically sensitive restoration of the Burges and Hales Street and Swanswell Gate finished during 2022.

The History of Coventry and Local Context



The Burges viewed from Bishop Street, 1935

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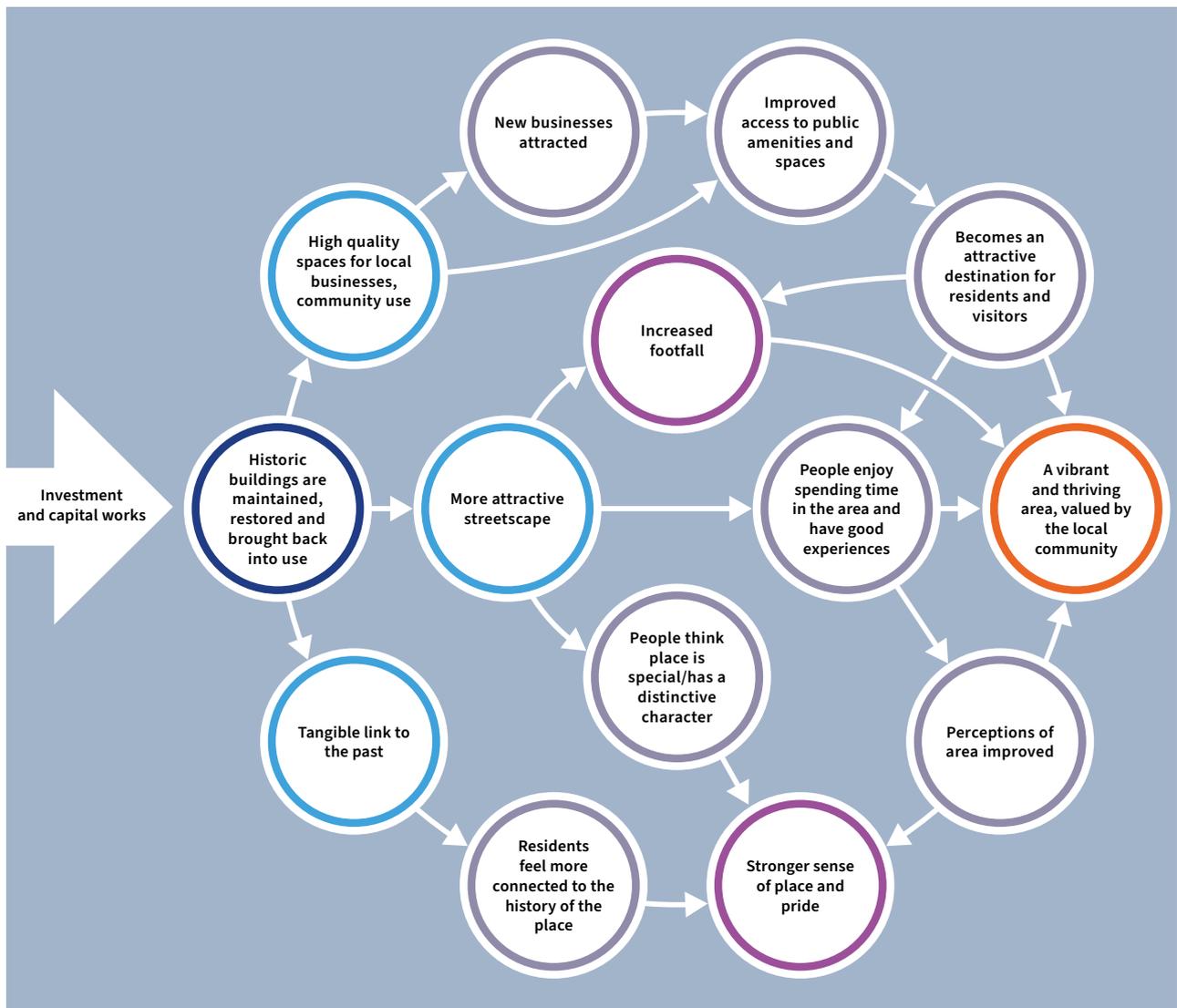
The historic city of Coventry grew from an early 12th century market that had evolved outside the gates of a nearby Benedictine Abbey. Since its foundation, it has remained a centre for trade: from the 14th century wool industry to 18th and 19th century weaving and horology (or clockmaking).

During World War Two Coventry endured cataclysmic air raids, destroying much of the city and its historic fabric. However, pockets of the medieval and later historic architecture survived, notably in the HSHAZ area formed by the Burges, Palmer Lane and Hales Street.

From the later 20th century, the city underwent a significant economic and social shift forcing a slump in manufacturing, the closure of factories and a high rate of unemployment. The HSHAZ area, at the centre of the city, has suffered visibly from the impact of the decline in economic fortunes. The Conservation Area has been identified as 'at risk' and Coventry City Council (CCC) estimates the depreciation of the built environment has been detrimental to the local visitor economy. The HSHAZ scheme was shaped by this context and, thus, was designed with the dual purpose of conserving the built heritage of Coventry and bringing new vibrancy and growth to the high street.

Theory of Change

As part of our research, Historic England have developed a Theory of Change. A Theory of Change is an evaluation tool used to illustrate how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. In this instance, our Theory of Change visually articulates how the HSHAZ programme could generate benefits for heritage, people and communities.



Heritage Led-Regeneration Theory of Change

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Our evaluation aims to test how this Theory of Change works in practice, using the Coventry Demonstrator as a case study. The impact of the HSHAZ programme as a whole will be investigated using mixed method research. Evidence for the Demonstrator has been limited as due to the rapid delivery of the project key quantitative data was not captured.

Evaluation Findings: Successes

Embedded Delivery

The HCT took a unique and successful approach to delivering the Coventry HSHAZ **rooted in connection to local history, people, and place**. HCT was already a trusted and established organisation in Coventry, so was able to leverage existing connections with local council, owners and tenants to deliver a cohesive project.

Many of the properties in the HSHAZ area at the start of the project were in Council ownership. Having a strong reputation, HCT had Council support and sign-up. In tandem, HCT engaged meaningfully with tenants and owners. This combination meant almost all properties in the HSHAZ area agreed to take part in the scheme.

Lessons Learnt

Delivering the demonstrator highlighted some of the challenges engaging with shops on the High Street. Each business has its own set of circumstances and unique needs. Landlords are not always contactable or interested in engaging. The intervention could also be disruptive to tenants who resultantly are reluctant to take part.

Thus, it is essential to have an active, resilient and approachable programme manager to navigate these challenges. Placing value on face-to-face conversations and individual connections helps overcome these barriers to engagement.

In total:

- 14 buildings were repaired;
 - 8 properties situated on the Burges (c.70%);
 - And all 6 properties Hales Street (100%) took part in the project;
- 16 historic shopfronts were installed or repaired;
- 1 additional project to carry out internal works to enable use as a holiday let (Swanswell Gate) was also completed.

Historic buildings are maintained, restored and brought back into use



30 the Burges, before work, 2019
© Historic England Archive



30 the Burges, after work, 2021
© Historic England Archive

High quality spaces for local businesses, community use

The strong buy-in from key stakeholders enabled a clustering of investment that, in turn, generated a fundamental improvement to the appearance of the area. The external evaluator underlined the high level of consistency across the capital works, including implementing a pre-agreed design and palette, and the quality of repairs made to traditional features, foundational to the historic buildings.



1 Hales Street, before work, 2019
© Historic England Archive



1 Hales Street, after work, 2021
© Historic England Archive

In the summer of 2021, The Burges and Hales Street won the **Future Cities Forum High Streets award**, evidencing excellent use of heritage to improve the high street socially, economically and aesthetically.

Since Phase 1 completion, the Council has transferred ownership of the buildings to HCT. Thus, ensuring a lasting legacy for the project and guaranteeing that tenants can remain in situ ultimately safeguarding the local community and public value generated by the project.

More attractive streetscape

The aesthetic continuity is a direct result of HCT's stakeholder engagement and trust in HCT to manage the delivery centrally. HCT worked with two contractors across the project to ensure consistent and quality enhancements. The most striking success of HCT's approach is the impact of the HSHAZ on place. Overall, the evaluation found that the investment significantly contributed to the restoration and conservation of the historic fabric and the character of the Burges for current and future generations.

Placemaking



24 & 25 the Burges, before work, 2019
© Historic England Archive



24 & 25 the Burges, after work, 2021
© Historic England Archive

Residents feel more connected to the history of the place

The HSHAZ catalysed 'changing perceptions of the area and grow[ing] an appreciation for its history' with 'younger generations connecting more easily with the history of the city' (project participant feedback).

Becomes an attractive destination for residents and visitors

Our data indicates that people are spending more time on the Burges and Hales Street since the HSHAZ project has been completed. On average, dwell time is up by 15% which is approximately 17 minutes per visitor.



Dwell time up by
17 MINUTES
per visitor

An increase in dwell time in a local high street can be indicative of its growing attractiveness to visitors and residents, signalling stronger social ties and a more diverse range of businesses and activities. Increasing time people spend in an area can generate improvement in the local economy, and a stronger sense of community.

Owner and Tenant Perceptions



11-13 Hales Street, before work, 2019

© Historic England Archive



11-13 Hales Street, after work, 2020

© Historic England Archive

Owners and tenants told us: **‘customers constantly comment that it’s much better’**
(Owners and tenant feedback)

‘Customers feed back is it does look nice – the whole street.... Just need to get footfall’
(Owners and tenant feedback) Overall, the external evaluator found that the project has already had some impact on its medium-term outcome to **improve civic pride in the area.**



Increased footfall

Since the completion of the Coventry Demonstrator project, we found that footfall has decreased by 0.4% compared to pre-pandemic levels. This contrasts markedly to the national picture, which has seen footfall on the high street decline by more than **14.2% over the same period**.

Decline in footfall across UK high streets can in part be attributed to the increasing popularity of online shopping, which has changed consumer habits and reduced the need for physical store visits. This has been further exacerbated by economic challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.

The Burges and Hales Street's comparatively smaller decline in footfall can be considered positive for the area and suggest that the area may have implemented strategies that helped mitigate the impact of the pandemic on local businesses and attractions.

Pride in Place



Stronger sense of place and pride

Beyond the physical transformation, the evaluation evidences the impact of the HSHAZ project on local pride. An individual who worked on the project commented that the success of the Coventry HSHAZ can be seen in **'the streetscapes and a sense of pride in wanting to again walk down the street and not be concerned about the tired-looking buildings and lack of pride'**.

Another participant added that the project **'has started to attract a more varied demographic'**. This anecdotal evidence suggests that the HSHAZ has contributed to a greater sense of pride and, positively, a broader range of people engaging able to care for, enjoy and celebrate England's historic environment.

Case Study: Removal of External Shutters

One of the biggest transformations made during this project was the removal of external shutters from shopfronts and replacing them with internal shutters and toughened glass.

This design solution was originally not eligible for Historic England grant aid, yet, costs were prohibitive for owners. Fortunately, HCT were able to demonstrate a level of need and HE reversed the decision. This lesson has now been rolled out to schemes across the programme.

The external shutters acted as a barrier to appreciating Coventry's built heritage. The external evaluator found that removing the external shutters opened the streetscape and created a more welcoming environment; in-keeping with the historic character of the area whilst still protecting local businesses.



5-7 Hales Street, before work, 2019

© Historic England Archive



5-7 Hales Street, after work, 2020

© Historic England Archive

Lessons from the Coventry Demonstrator



Corner of Hales Street and the Burges, Coventry during High Street Heritage Action Zone funded work, 2020
Image: James Davies, © Historic England Archive

- **An embedded delivery team.** In the case of the Coventry Demonstrator, having a trusted partner in HCT with strong connection to the local area and had expertise delivering regeneration projects led to:
 - **Clustering of investment** to make the most impact on the spirit of the area, aesthetically and socially.
 - **Ownership transfer.** HCT gaining ownership of HSHAZ buildings previously owned by the Council guarantees generating:
 - Economic security for the HCT;
 - Stability for tenants;
 - Continuity for the local community;
 - And a continued and lasting legacy for the HSHAZ.

- **Flexible and responsive grant rates** that allow for changes, such as funding internal shutters, create better outcomes for place, heritage and relationships between project partners at all levels.
- **Integrate evaluation from project inception.** Heritage provides a variety of benefits that are often underestimated because they are difficult to capture and articulate. Consistently collecting monitoring data throughout the life of the project is an effective way to demonstrate impacts holistically –without this evidence, evaluation findings are limited.
- **Photography.** Consistent before-and-after photographs are an important tool for capturing change and promoting the project.



Historic England

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