

OXFORD CHARACTER ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

DETAILED CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

This character assessment toolkit is designed to help you examine the character of areas, buildings and places in areas of Oxford to identify the features that contribute to their distinctiveness, interest and amenity. It also provides opportunities to identify features or issues that detract from the character of areas, spaces and buildings.

How the toolkit will be used

The historic environment makes an important contribution to the character of the city as a distinctive, interesting and special place. The buildings, spaces, associations and history that combine to create places mean different things to different people. The toolkit should help people to analyse the character of areas, spaces and buildings in a structured way. This should help to identify, define and understand the significance and value of different features of the environment that contribute to its character and distinctiveness.

While there is an accepted need for change to occur within many places in the city, proposals for change should be measured against their existing significance to ensure that their present values are not eroded. This should help to ensure that change enhances and sustains the value of the historic environment to the city for ourselves and future generations. The evidence and understanding provided by the process will enable management of change in an effective and positive manner.

What makes up character?

Elements of character include both the uses of an area and its physical features, such as styles of building, construction materials, architectural details or green landscape features. Others elements of character may be more emotional or personal perceptions of a place, such as historical or cultural associations with a place or building. Others may be relatively ephemeral or transitory, such as the smells and sounds associated with particular activities, which may occur only at certain times of the day or year. The features, listed in the Survey Sheets below, are common components of character, but the list is not exhaustive.

HOW TO USE THE TOOLKIT

Undertaking your character assessment

In undertaking your assessment it is important to visit the area/building/space to complete a visual survey. In pilot studies, people have found they prefer to take photos and make brief notes whilst in the area, giving them time to examining the surroundings. They then make more detailed notes on the questionnaire, once they have completed the survey. Although there is no prescribed method for carrying out an assessment, the following structure may be helpful:

- It works best on a street by street basis. If you wish to assess a larger area it will be worth surveying each street individually and putting together an overall picture after all the surveys are finished.
- Take an initial walk around your survey area. Use this opportunity to note your initial thoughts/perceptions of the area and assign a score (see below) to the broad character features.
- Taking photographs is strongly recommended as they can illustrate and visually explain any comments you make on the questionnaire. They are also useful to look back over after you have completed the survey.
- Annotating a street plan/map is also a useful way to explain certain features e.g. direction of views, location of key buildings, spaces, etc.
- Make comments using the explanation of terms to prompt your thoughts.
- Give a score to each feature based on your opinion of its negative or positive contribution to the space.
- It is also worth noting how the building/space/area being assessed relates to its wider context e.g. how a building sits within a street or a street within an area. The setting and interrelationships between the single element, such as a building, and the wider context, such as the street, are just as important as the quality of the buildings themselves.

The tool kit is divided into a series of themed questionnaires that will prompt you to consider the contribution of different features that might contribute to the character of the area/building/space. The features listed are the main components of character but the list is not exhaustive. Depending upon the asset being assessed e.g. a building, street, space etc, not every feature in the list may be relevant and a comment should be entered only where applicable.

Each feature requires a brief comment of how you feel it contributes to the character and value of the area. The option is provided to assign a numerical score to reflect your perception of the significance of each feature to the character of the asset. The 'scores' given may vary from one individual to another. However, trends will be seen when comparing different surveys of the same asset.

Initial Reaction to an Area

The initial reaction is a summary of what you see and feel when you first enter the area being assessed.

Survey

In the main body of the toolkit, the character features outlined in the 'Initial Reaction' section are broken down into individual questionnaires. These prompt a finer level of analysis of each of the broader character themes. Again, not every feature in the list may be relevant and a comment and a numerical value should be entered only where applicable.

Final Reaction

This prompts a reassessment of your initial reactions. It allows you to see if your perception of the asset's character has changed as a result of the in-depth study. Try placing the nine character groups in an order of preference, with '1' being the feature you feel the most important contribution to its character and '9' the least.

Spirit of Place

This is an open question allowing you to articulate what you feel about the place and how it influences all your senses

Need more help?

A guidance document is available to view on the Character Assessment Toolkit Website. This includes explanations of some of the terms used in the questionnaires and some prompts to help you think about the contribution of different types of features to the character of the area. If you feel there is an additional feature, feel free to make a note of that separately in the comments box at the end of the questionnaire. Not every feature in the list may be relevant and you need only enter a comment where you feel it is applicable.

A visual study may only take you so far in understanding what is special about an area. By researching its history you may develop a better understanding of how the buildings and spaces reflect its evolution and its unique character. You may wish to focus this research on how the physical characteristics reflect the process of its development, such as the formal design of a landscape, the functional and artistic elements of a building that reflect its use, or the social and economic processes that have influenced the evolution of a settlement. The Character Assessment Toolkit website includes a Research Area with tips and links to help you get started with your research. Some of the information may be readily accessible as online resources, whilst others may require visiting the local studies library, record office or other archives.

Assigning numerical values to features

Assigning a numerical value or score provides a mechanism for analysing and interpreting results over a wider area. Without scoring consistent interpretation and evaluation of text and written comments can be difficult

- +1 to +5: Positive features that add to the character or special nature of an area. This ranges from +1, slightly adds to the character, to +5, that significantly adds to the character.
- 0: Neutral features that are neutral. They neither detract nor add from/to the character of the area.
- -5 to -1: Negative features that detract/take away from the area. This ranges from -5, significantly detract, to -1, slightly detract.

Further Research

SURVEY DETAILS

STREET/BUILDING/ AREA NAME	Waterways estate, north Oxford, OX2 - Elizabeth Jennings Way / Clearwater Place
DATE	23 rd May 2015
TIME	2:15-3:30
WEATHER	Overcast, mild spring day

1: INITIAL REACTION: What do you first see as making the most important contribution to the character of the area? Is the area's character defined by the public or private spaces, groups of buildings or particular views, the presence of particular materials or its trees and greenery? Do these reflect particular aspects of the area's history? Are less tangible features, such as the activity, noises and smells of the area significant? Please provide a few brief reasons for your choices.

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
SPACES	Planned space with large plots dominated by apartment blocks of 3-4 storeys lining the road. Symmetrical blocks to each side at west end; east end single sided, curving terraced crescent of 4 storey terrace houses facing lake	+5
BUILDINGS	Traditional modern housing and apartments, very consistent colouring in light beige brick. A regular rhythm of gables fronting the road. Some interesting variety in the design of the apartment blocks surrounding the lake, but there is a lack of variety in the colour and texture of the buildings and Elizabeth Jennings Way The relatively young fabric to the buildings has limited the softening effect of weathering and extensive white plastic details typify modern housing construction.	+4
VIEWS	Straight channelled view looking east from Stone Meadow framed by apartment blocks, interrupted by the hump-backed bridge over canal. View west from Woodstock Road opens to playing fields to the north and curves away to the south, with views to the east over the lake and area of trees and grass.	+5
LIGHT/DARK	Light and spacious	+4
SURFACES	Modern tarmac roads and pavements with paved speed humps and cobbles at street corners.	0
GREENERY & LANDSCAPE	Well tended, relatively young trees, similar height but appealing mix of planting and colours. Edges of the estate at Woodstock road, Bainton Road defined by mature trees. Mixture of mature and young trees, shrubs and grass bordering the lake.	+5
USES AND ACTIVITY	Unrestricted parking along main street, children running across street and playing in local play area. Residents' parking surrounding apartment blocks. Properties are a mix of private and social housing.	+1
NOISES AND SMELLS	Children playing Noise from nursery during the day Birdsong Cricket being played on adjacent playing fields Occasional cars passing over speed humps Faster traffic along the Woodstock Road Noise from trains increasing towards the west end. Occasional large planes flying overhead on the way to RAF Brize Norton.	+3
GENERAL COMMENTS	Turning into Elizabeth Jennings Way from Woodstock Road one passes from the old into the new. A quiet, modern, well designed, well looked after and desirable suburb, popular with families	+5

2: SPACES: A 'space' is normally the gap between buildings and other features. They may be formally designed or develop informally over time. They may be enclosed by surrounding buildings, trees and foliage, have structure created by the alignment and spacing of surrounding buildings or property boundaries, and be narrow or wide and open. The character of areas can depend on their uses and vibrancy, as well as the choice of paving, kerbs, seating, telephone or post boxes or the presence of formal planting or other greenery.



Sculpture on the green in front of Clearwater Place looking north

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
FORMAL / INFORMAL SPACES	Formal, straight road to the west, curving road to the east. Split between private residential properties and public roads, etc,	0
GAPS BETWEEN BUILDINGS	Frequent, green gaps with pathways and a wildlife corridor, side roads, parking areas and broad views north and south from the bridge over the canal. The road passes through the wildlife corridor running north to south through the estate.	+5
MEANS OF ENCLOSURE	Symmetrically framed by apartment blocks at western junction with Stone Meadow. Single sided enclosure with a curving parade of town houses facing the lake at the eastern end	+5
BUILDING PLOTS	Large plots dominated by apartment blocks	+5
WIDE/OPEN SPACES	Main roadway has a broad feel as the central spine through the estate. The junction with Frenchay Road forms a large open space with extensive parking to one side and the landscaped Green opposite. Part of the eastern end of the road overlooks the lake and surrounding greenery, with an open space of grass, trees, shrubs, a sculpture and seating near the lake between the mini-roundabout on E J Way and Clearwater Place.	+5
NARROW / ENCLOSED SPACES	Narrow pathways and side roads intersect the main road	+5
WINDING / STRAIGHT SPACES	The road curves down from the Woodstock Road then makes a 90 degree turn right westwards at a mini roundabout next to the lake and then remains straight to the junction with Stone Meadow.	+4

RELATIONSHIP OF THE SPACE TO BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES	Planned space with well used pathway along EJ Way serving as the main pedestrian and cyclist route out from the estate to North Oxford. The street is well overlooked by the buildings.	+5
USES AND ACTIVITY	Residential. Mostly privately owner with several social housing apartment blocks managed by GreenSquare. Children playing at junction with Frenchay Road and Ryder Close. Houseboats along canal. Joggers, cyclists and dog walking. Nursery on ground floor of one building.	+5
PAVING MATERIALS	Tarmac, interrupted with paved shallow speed humps.	0
STREET FURNITURE	Black railings lining the road and containing the planting. Traditional style lamp posts. Some double yellow lines on main road.	+4
IMPACT OF VEHICLES AND TRAFFIC	The road is lightly used with no through traffic. Mini-roundabout is potentially a hazard as the turn is tight. Poor parking by commuters at eastern end of E J Way can cause obstructions. Planned increase in double yellow lines here – waiting for implementation by county council.	-2
USABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE SPACE	Relatively busy with pedestrians and cyclists walking to Oxford and Summertown. Post box at junction with Frenchay Road and access to the green and canal towpath.	+4

3.0 BUILDINGS: Do buildings make an important contribution to the character of the area and if so what features are significant to their contribution? Do buildings reflect an important period in the area's history and is this reflected in their past or current use? Do buildings share a uniform scale and size, or is there a high degree of variation that is visually attractive? Are the buildings very old or do they form a single development with shared or similar architectural detailing? Do styles of windows, doors or other features add to the visual interest of the buildings, reflect their origins and use, or form part of a designed scheme? What condition are the buildings in? Have changes increased or reduced their interest, or have they lost important features?



Elizabeth Jennings Way looking east from the bridge towards the lake

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
CONTRIBUTION OF BUILDINGS TO THE SPACE	Modern, traditional residential architecture with no commercial premises lends a very quiet atmosphere to the area. Very striking and imposing design of the first apartment block seen when entering from Woodstock Road – a “statement” building on the entry to the estate.	+4
SIZE/SCALE	Apartment blocks are substantial at 3-4 storeys and houses are 4 storey terraced but adequately spaced to allow good light	+5
AGE	10-14 years old	0
MATERIALS	Exclusively light beige coloured brick used along EJ Way, with white plastic coping defining the gables fronting the street Stone effect banding and cream render. Grey artificial slate roofs. Extensive cheap plastic features and polycarbonate conservatory roofs generally let down the quality of the buildings.	+4
WINDOWS	White uPVC double glazed casement windows in a consistent style, with blue aluminium frames (and matching balconies) to apartment corner windows	+4
DOORS	Painted timber doors in a variety of muted colours.	+4
ROOFS / CHIMNEYS / GABLES	Some interesting and dominant brick chimneys to the curving parade of houses facing the lake. Otherwise not a predominant feature.	+3
USES (PAST AND PRESENT)	The road is on the site first developed as a brick works (with associated lake) and then a factory connected with the car industry in Oxford, with Elizabeth Jennings Way lying between the area that was part of the on-site parts / goods warehouse and the sports and social club grounds. The road is now wholly residential, except for a commercial nursery.	0
CAN YOU TELL IF A BUILDING HAS BEEN ALTERED?	The apartment blocks lining E.J. Way generally remain in their as-built condition with little or no significant alterations.	+5
CONDITION	Built condition is generally good except for poor weathering to plastic coping.	+4

4.0 VIEWS: Are there views of interest and distinction? Is a view well known because of a historical event, painting, prose or poetry, or is it popular with local residents as a part of a public place? Are views glimpsed through gaps between buildings, channelled by lines of trees or buildings, or open and

expansive? Does the shape of a street create a series of views, or is a single viewing point particularly important? What features of the view contribute to its interest? Does a landmark, such as a building or group of trees, form a focal point? Does the view include an attractive frontage or roofscape? Is the view urban or rural in character? Do background features like the city's rural setting contribute to the view's attractiveness?



Elizabeth Jennings Way looking west from near Woodstock Road entrance

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
HISTORIC / POPULAR VIEWS	No historic views – views from the bridge over the canal are assumed to be valued locally and provided to pause along the footpath	0
FORM OF VIEW: SHORT OR LONG, UNFOLDING, GLIMPSED, CHANNELLED OR WIDE AND OPEN	Long view east and west, channelled between apartment blocks and interrupted by hump-backed bridge over canal. Sweeping, unfolding views of playing fields, houses, apartment blocks and lake when entering from Woodstock Road	+5
FOCAL POINTS	The view looking south across the green and canal from the Elizabeth Jennings Way bridge provides perhaps the key focal point of the estate and the green is the location for community social events such as the summer and Christmas BBQ/hog roast. The view over the lake and its surrounding greenery is charming and much appreciated.	+5
STREETSCAPE	The streetscape is lined with comparatively young trees of the same age and height and there is much planting of shrubs and grass in the garden areas. There is a sculpture next to the mini-roundabout on the green by the lake in front of Clearwater Place which was commissioned for the estate and symbolises the site's industrial and motoring past connections.	+5
ROOFSCAPE	A regular rhythm of gabled roofs line the central section of the street from the lake to Stone Meadow A contemporary 'birdswing' roof tops the western-most apartment block that addresses the key view into Elizabeth Jennings Way from the Woodstock Road	+4
URBAN/RURAL VIEWS	Semi-rural views north and south along the wildlife corridor from where it crosses E J Way.	+4
VIEWS OUT OF THE SPACE	Any potential views across the railway to Port Meadow are obscured by mature planting and terminate with an apartment block at the junction with Stone Meadow that dominates the view west from the canal bridge. Views north and south along the canal from the bridge. The views east to the lake towards Woodstock Road terminate with extensive mature planting.	+5

	There are views out across the Keble and St Hugh's colleges' playing fields through younger trees that follow the curve of the road.	
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5.0 LANDSCAPE: What landscape features contribute to the area's character and how do they affect it? Do hedgerows or grass verges create a rural feel or do street trees provide a leafy suburban character. What hard surfaces are present, are they attractively designed or do they use materials that are out of keeping with the area? Does their maintenance affect their contribution? Is a river or canal a significant feature in the area? Does it have scenic or wildlife value



The wildlife corridor crossing Elizabeth Jennings Way

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
LEAFY AND/OR GREEN IMAGE	A transition from mature trees on the Woodstock Road into a modern planned environment of younger trees, shrubs and grass.	+5
HARD URBAN LANDSCAPE	Black tarmac predominates, interspersed with cobbled and paved areas. The green has areas of gravel pathways.	+2
PUBLIC/PRIVATE GREENERY	Extensive, well-maintained planted areas line the street. The Green has a sizeable grassed area used for community social events	+5
DOES WATER FORM A KEY FEATURE OF THE AREA	The Oxford canal that runs under E J Way bridge and through the heart of the estate forms the most visible waterway. An attractive, heavily planted natural watercourse that also forms part of the wildlife corridor crosses the road, running parallel to the canal. In addition, the lake at the west end of the road (a deep former clay pit for the brick works that originally occupied the site) and its grassy banks form an attractive amenity, although one whose edges for safety reasons are heavily screened with mature planting.	+5
TOPOGRAPHY	Generally flat. A slight decline downwards from the Woodstock Road to the mini-roundabout by Clearwater Place. The bridge over the canal is raised and provides the main view point.	0

6.0 AMBIENCE: Many less tangible features, such as activity, changes in light during the day, shadows and reflections affect reaction to an area. How does the area change between day and night? Do dark corners or alleyways feel unsafe at night time? What smells and noises are you aware of and is the area busy or tranquil? What affect, if any, does vehicle traffic have on character?

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
ACTIVITIES	Pedestrians walking, jogging, cyclists, dog walkers, and children playing, nursery during week-days	+4
LEVEL OF ACTIVITY	Generally quiet. Noise from nursery in immediate surroundings during week-days.	+5
TRAFFIC	As a no-through road, only a low level of local residential and delivery traffic passes through. But commuter parking issues in unrestricted parking areas	+2
DARK, SHADY, LIGHT, AIRY	The road has a light and airy, partly thanks to the smaller younger trees	+5
DAY AND NIGHT	The road is quiet at night, except for freight rail traffic along the eastern boundary which can be heard far along EJ Way thanks to noise from the tracks and the sounding of southbound train horns. The road feels safe at night thanks to good levels of 'eyes on the street' from surrounding apartments.	+2
SMELLS	None.	+5
NOISES	Children playing on the street and in the local playground. Birdsong. Cricket being played in Keble & St Hugh's Colleges playing fields. Occasional chug of a narrow boat along the canal Cars passing over speed humps Railway noise. Faster traffic is audible when close to the Woodstock Road. Occasional large planes flying overhead on the way to RAF Brize Norton.	+4

7.0: FINAL REACTION: Take a moment to consider the notes and scores that you made, in your initial reactions survey sheet and the subsequent pages. Are there any features that you would now rate as having a greater positive or negative value, or are there particular aspects of these features that you would highlight as having a high significance to the character of the area? Try ranking the features in order of their relative importance in forming the area's character and appearance.

<i>RANK IN ORDER OF CONTRIBUTION BETWEEN 1 (HIGH) AND 9 (LOW)</i>		
FEATURE	EXAMPLE	YOUR HIERARCHY
BUILDINGS	1	3
SPACES	5	2
LONG/SHORT VIEWS	2	4
LIGHT/DARK	4	5
SURFACES	3	6
GREENERY & LANDSCAPE FEATURES	6	1
NOISE, SMELL AND TRAFFIC	7	7

8.0 SPIRIT OF PLACE: Having undertaken the survey and scoring now try to sum up the character of the area in a few brief sentences, picking out the most significant positive and negative features of its character and appearance.

Elizabeth Jennings Way forms the main entry route into the Waterways estate and presents a modern, civilised and well planned neighbourhood which is well looked after and quiet with attractive planting, and which is popular with families with children, as well as older retired people. The apartment blocks are a mixture of private and social housing, with many of the private apartments rented out, with many of the private apartments rented out.

The buildings and their surroundings present a very pleasing mix of styles and detailing within a harmonious whole that has clearly been well-designed and thought out.