

OXFORD CHARACTER ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

DETAILED CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

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ENGLISH HERITAGE

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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 – Stone Meadow & Cox's Ground
DATE	4 March 2015
TIME	2-30-3.30pm
WEATHER	Sunny and cold.

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.



Stone Meadow east side



Apartment block opposite the end of Elizabeth Jennings Way

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
SPACES	Spacious, open, houses & apartment blocks set back from road.	+5
BUILDINGS	Modern, vernacular architecture to echo Victorian and Edwardian buildings in surrounding north Oxford area. All house & apartment blocks. Various styles and materials but designed as a harmonious whole. Varied orientation of buildings in relation to roads.	+5
VIEWES	Linear views, both lengthways & laterally.	+4
LIGHT/DARK	Bright & open feeling due in part to the young trees	+5
SURFACES	Mainly tarmac to roads and pavements, with some cobbling, paving slabs, paviours and compacted gravel.	+4
GREENERY & LANDSCAPE	Ample planting of medium-sized ornamental trees, hedges and shrubs. Consistent semi-mature height of trees reflects their comparative young age and same planting date	+5
USES AND ACTIVITY	Residential, parking, playground.	+5
NOISES AND SMELLS	Significant noise from railway lines all along the west side. Otherwise generally clean and quiet. Children playing in the local playground in Stone Meadow. Occasional large and low flying planes heading for RAF Brize Norton.	-3

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.

GENERAL COMMENTS	A mixture of private and social housing. Pleasant lack of intrusive street furniture. Consistent modernity characteristic of modern estates	+5
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Cox's Ground looking north

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
FORMAL / INFORMAL SPACES	Spaces designed formally and coherently overall, with mainly public but some private.	+5
GAPS BETWEEN BUILDINGS	Spacious and well-proportioned so buildings do not feel claustrophobic or hemmed in.	+5
MEANS OF ENCLOSURE	Mixture of hedges, brick walls and high-quality black metal railings.	+5
BUILDING PLOTS	A mix of houses and apartment blocks, varied in size and orientation, within an overall design.	+5
WIDE/OPEN SPACES	Good width between buildings. Houses set back from road behind low hedges and railings. Estate playground in spacious area integrated with parking between two rows of houses. Wildlife corridor runs down whole east side.	+5
NARROW / ENCLOSED SPACES	Some gardens and parking spaces. Southernmost two wings of houses on east side have imposing brick entrance columns and gates (never closed).	+5
WINDING / STRAIGHT SPACES	Road has slight curve allowing opening up of vistas.	+5
RELATIONSHIP OF THE SPACE TO BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES	Successful and well-planned. West side is completely linear north to south, whereas east side broken up into sections from east to west. Gives feeling of variety and discovery.	+5
USES AND ACTIVITY	Residential, parking and playground. No parking restrictions on road so some commuter parking is an increasing problem.	+3
PAVING MATERIALS	Tarmac & some cobbling for pavements & roads; paviours & compacted gravel for private parking areas; paving slabs for apartment block entrances and paths.	+4

STREET FURNITURE	Elegant lamp posts and matching railings with soft warm lighting. Pleasant lack of other street furniture, signs, clutter.	+5
IMPACT OF VEHICLES AND TRAFFIC	Cul-de-sac so no through traffic. Traffic generally slow and not dangerous. But considerable parking, including increasing commuter parking.	+3
USABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE SPACE	Space very accessible and used as designed as a residential street.	+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?

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
CONTRIBUTION OF BUILDINGS TO THE SPACE	Good varied definition and layout within an estate which was designed overall as a coherent whole. Rhythmic and regular symmetries exist within the overall variety of designs which help to give a pleasing impression of harmony to the whole. Careful detailing of particular building elements adds to the variety and interest. Thus it would be easy for inappropriate additions or extensions to buildings or roofs to disrupt this rhythmic harmony.	+5
SIZE/SCALE	Variety of sizes of houses and apartments; moderate in scale (either 2 or 3 stories) and not overdeveloped. Houses 3 or 4 bedroomed, terraced or semi-detached.	+5
AGE	c. 2000.	NA
MATERIALS	Brick – yellow or pale red/orange, with buff/cream stone window dressings. Matching red or grey roof tiles. Distinctive deep blue metal balconies and pipework on apartment block linking Stone Meadow & Cox’s Ground, clearly visible when approaching along Elizabeth Jennings Way. Black ‘Juliet’ first floor balcony railings to the town houses. Black guttering and downpipes.	+5
WINDOWS	Double glazed white uPVC casement windows. Several complementary designs of glazing bars. Variety of single or double height bay windows, either rectangular or bowed. Distinctive angular orientation of bay windows in matching pair of apartment blocks either side of end of Elizabeth Jennings Way.	+5
DOORS	Solid wood front doors, variety of subdued colours. Some doors with open lead (or lead-effect) canopies in a regency style.	+5
ROOFS / CHIMNEYS / GABLES	Extensive gabling of front facades of houses. Pitched roofs with some flat roofs within some apartment block structures. Some mansard roofs. Varied roof lines and structures but uniform in design so look harmonious and part of overall scheme, with no significant incursions from dormers, extensions, etc. Roof line, etc. carefully designed to appear harmonious so significant additions/alterations, particularly to street-facing areas, such as large or numerous dormer windows or extensive solar panelling, would spoil this coherence and thus be inappropriate.	+5
USES (PAST AND PRESENT)	Residential. Two apartment blocks and some houses at southern end of west side are social housing, the rest are private.	NA

CAN YOU TELL IF A BUILDING HAS BEEN ALTERED?	Externally, yes, because it would stand out from the harmonious and integrated design of this part of the estate. To the rear, houses along Cox's Ground are beginning to see a move to rebuilding the original conservatories, with one house having extended over 2 stories and pushed the building line some 2m to the north.	NA
CONDITION	Modern buildings so condition is good, with some flat roofs possibly needing replacing, as to the polycarbonate conservatories.	+5

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?



Play area in Stone Meadow looking north west from the wildlife corridor

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
HISTORIC / POPULAR VIEWS	None.	NA
FORM OF VIEW: SHORT OR LONG, UNFOLDING, GLIMPSED, CHANNELLED OR WIDE AND OPEN	Wide, open and inviting. Area is a cul-de-sac and initial view on entry from Elizabeth Jennings Way (the only way in) is long and unfolding with linear west side buildings (north-south orientation) clearly visible, south along Stone Meadow or north along Cox's Ground. East side buildings are set at right-angle to road (east-west orientation) and so emerge sequentially while moving north or south. These 3 east-west openings and the east side of Cox's Ground lead to the estate's wildlife corridor and stream which runs in a straight line from Hook Meadow south to the Trap Grounds.	+5
FOCAL POINTS	An open parking/garden area, with a council-run children's playground, leading to wildlife corridor. An apartment block with distinctive, varied design and striking deep blue detailing to balconies, pipework, etc. forms a focal point separating Stone Meadow and Cox's Ground, visible from a distance when approaching down Elizabeth Jennings Way.	+4
STREETSCAPE	Varied residential housing, with private parking and public parking on road. Open space parking/garden area with playground. Varied vertical and linear views of buildings.	+5
ROOFSCAPE	Wholly residential. Varied roof lines and designs, with gables, mansards, cornices and a few false chimneys. Maintains the estate aesthetic of variety within a coherent overall design. Large extensions, numerous extra dormer windows, significant solar panelling, or the like would disrupt the varied symmetries within the overall design and thus be inappropriate.	+5
URBAN/RURAL VIEWS	Traditional English suburban – roads, front gardens, parking, moderate scale houses and apartment blocks.	+4
VIEWS OUT OF THE SPACE	Views to neighbouring areas from rear of properties and street ends. North to Hook Meadow nature reserve, south to the Trap Grounds nature reserve, east to the estate's wildlife corridor, and west to the main railway lines north from Oxford.	+3

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?

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
LEAFY AND/OR GREEN IMAGE	Many small roadside trees, hedges, shrubs in public garden areas, and some grass, plus greenery in surrounding areas give a very leafy, tranquil feel.	+5
HARD URBAN LANDSCAPE	Tarmac roads and pavements, some cobbling, paving slabs around apartment blocks, pavements and gravel to parking areas, but considerably softened and broken up by extensive planting.	+4
PUBLIC/PRIVATE GREENERY	Mixture of public and private to front of properties, mainly public. Houses have private back gardens.	+5
DOES WATER FORM A KEY FEATURE OF THE AREA	Oxford Canal runs through the estate, close by. The estate's sustainable urban drainage system runs through a watercourse as part of the wildlife corridor, along the rear of properties on the east side from Hook Meadow south to the Trap Grounds.	+5
TOPOGRAPHY	Level terrain.	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	Residential, public and private parking, playground.	+5
LEVEL OF ACTIVITY	Low producing quiet ambience.	+5
TRAFFIC	Quiet, cul-de-sac. Traffic slow moving. Problem of increasing commuter parking on free public roads.	+3
DARK, SHADY, LIGHT, AIRY	Light and airy with plenty of sunlight. Not overshadowed by very tall structures.	+5
DAY AND NIGHT	No significant differences.	0
SMELLS	None.	+5
NOISES	Very low apart from significant noise and vibration from railway lines along western boundary which are likely to increase with new railway developments. Occasional large and low flying planes heading for RAF Brize Norton.	-2

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.

RANK IN ORDER OF CONTRIBUTION BETWEEN 1 (HIGH) AND 9 (LOW)

FEATURE	EXAMPLE	YOUR HIERARCHY
BUILDINGS	1	1
SPACES	5	4
LONG/SHORT VIEWS	2	5
LIGHT/DARK	4	6
SURFACES	3	7
GREENERY & LANDSCAPE FEATURES	6	2
NOISE, SMELL AND TRAFFIC	7	3 (because of railway issues)

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.

Positive:

Well-designed estate with mixed private and social housing.
Designed as a whole to appear varied but harmonious.
Variety of mainly traditional building styles within an integrated whole, built with good-quality materials.
A modern take on the traditional Victorian/Edwardian north Oxford suburb.
Spacious layout with plenty of greenery.
Wildlife corridor on eastern boundary and is a great environmental and aesthetic asset.
Mostly a sense of peace, quiet and security.

Negative:

Noise and vibration from the railway lines along the western boundary which are likely to increase with railway line developments.
Any significant changes to the buildings would disrupt and spoil the sense of controlled variety within a careful and harmonious overall design which is a hallmark of this road and the estate as a whole.