

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 - Frenchay Road (FR) (from the southern canal bridge to Elizabeth Jennings Way) and Complins Close (CC)
DATE	4 March 2015
TIME	1430-1530
WEATHER	Fine, dry, bright

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	<p>FR: Well 'treed', wide street. The Green at the north end and the canal and the Trap and the Trap Grounds at the south. The gravel surfaced square toward the north end of the row of houses. The sweeping entry in from over the canal bridge.</p> <p>CC: A quiet formal square of houses and apartments centred around a well treed green</p>	5
BUILDINGS	<p>FR: Red brick, mock Victorian scale and styling, emulating older North Oxford streets, changing to the formally arranged cream render and mellow yellow brick apartments at the north end. Shapes change but materials, scale and style lend the street a cohesion and unity of character.</p> <p>CC: Red brick terraces in materials, scale and style that lend the square a cohesion and unity of character. Cream render and mellow yellow brick apartments along south side provide enclosure to fourth side of square with an imposing entrance archway to the close with apartment above and their difference in scale and material makes sense, and so does not clash, because they also front the main road through the Waterways, Elizabeth Jennings Way.</p>	5
VIEWS	<p>FR: Looking south from Elizabeth Jennings Way view is dominated by trees and terminates with view of trees in the Trap Grounds. Looking north view is dominated by large archway over entrance to Complins Close and view through into it. In between glimpses of canal and wildlife corridor.</p> <p>CC: Views out to canal and wildlife corridor and through archway down Frenchay Road (as above from north).</p>	4
LIGHT/DARK	Both roads are characterised by generous space between facing buildings so that space between is well lit and welcoming.	5
SURFACES	Grey tarmac of roads and pavements are occasionally broken up by paviours. It does not dominate. The surfaces of the buildings and the planting are more dominant features.	4
GREENERY & LANDSCAPE	Both areas are dominated by maturing trees, hedges and shrub planting, giving them a verdant and generously treed feel even in winter.	5
USES AND ACTIVITY	Quiet residential areas with occasional vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists. Mainly private properties but south east corner consists of social housing (2 apartment blocks and a terrace of houses) managed by GreenSquare.	5
NOISES AND SMELLS	Birdsong, Trains passing nearby on the western border of the estate. Some hooting.	4
GENERAL COMMENTS	Green, well cared for and very attractive residential streets.	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.



Frenchay Road looking south

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
FORMAL / INFORMAL SPACES	<p>FR from south: greenery and water of canal towpath to rear of properties on eastern side of road; informal green space adjacent watercourse, on west side of road before first house, well contained with planting, with worn path through grass on pedestrian desire line and unused bike stands; formal square created by last houses, with gravel surface, mature trees and hedges; wildlife corridor crosses road and links with canal; large formal square framed by apartment blocks on FR and Elizabeth Jennings Way and adjacent to canal.</p> <p>CC: formal square framed by houses and apartments with links out to canal and wildlife corridor.</p>	4
GAPS BETWEEN BUILDINGS	<p>FR: occasional breaks between houses or archways to parking areas offer narrow glimpses: to the east to the canal corridor with its mature trees and older residential areas beyond changing to more modern development and other homes on the Waterways at the north end, and; to the west to the wildlife corridor with its maturing trees and planting and other homes on the Waterways.</p> <p>CC: large gap between apartments and houses provides clear views toward canal and other homes on the Waterways in one direction and the wildlife corridor and other new homes on the Waterways in the other. More restricted views through archways to parking areas offer similar but more limited views in the northern corners of the square.</p>	5
MEANS OF ENCLOSURE	FR: metal railings in a traditional style provide a sense of cohesion and unity to the street. The railings are backed by mature planting. There is only a short section where tall walls (c.2m red brick, stretcher bond to match	4

	<p>houses) are used, to give privacy to the gardens of the two 'sentinel' houses that mark the transition in the road from houses to apartments. Near apartments dwarf yellow brick walls support metal railings in similar style to rest of street (low walls have become mired in dirt and original colour is lost).</p> <p>CC: mature shrubs partially enclose the footpath serving the terraces of houses and shielding the central parking and cycling stands. Post and rail fences mark the boundaries to canal and wildlife corridors. Where private gardens meet the parking areas they are 1.8m close boarded fencing.</p>	
BUILDING PLOTS	<p>FR: Buildings are set well back from the road, often to allow for frontage parking and some planting, sometimes just to give space to planting.</p> <p>CC: houses are at the back edge of a footpath that serves all the houses in a row with only very small areas of private space 'under' the front window.</p>	5
WIDE/OPEN SPACES	Both roads are characterised by the generous space between facing building frontages.	5
NARROW / ENCLOSED SPACES	FR is a spacious feeling road and Cc has a more closed, intimate feel.	0
WINDING / STRAIGHT SPACES	FR forms a straight line with properties on both sides. CC is square in shape.	0
RELATIONSHIP OF THE SPACE TO BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES	<p>FR: The northern end of houses is marked by two identical 'sentinel' houses in a different style to the others on the road, that side tight to the back edge of the pavement, closing the view and creating a gateway between the stretch of houses and the square formed by the apartment blocks. This transition is also marked by and assisted by the crossing of the wildlife corridor.</p> <p>CC: The central open space provides the focus of views and activities for the surrounding terraced houses.</p> <p>All the open spaces and planting areas are well managed.</p>	5
USES AND ACTIVITY	The streets are residential. The canal attracts boaters, dog walkers, ramblers and strollers, cyclists and fishermen.	5
PAVING MATERIALS	Grey tarmac roads and pavements, York slab paths, occasional red block pavements and some bonded or loose gravel in parts.	4
STREET FURNITURE	FR: Bike racks are slotted in where the road has been narrowed to help keep vehicle speeds low, and are also found alongside visitor parking at the north end. Bollards in black plastic guard open spaces from being used for parking. Street lighting is provided with mock Victorian 'gas-light' style columns. There are a couple of utilitarian green telecommunications boxes. On the corner of The Green and of FR and Elizabeth Jennings Way is a	4

	<p>traditional 'GR' metal post box.</p> <p>CC: Bike racks site alongside visitor parking in the centre of the square, part shielded by planting. Street lighting is provided with mock Victorian 'gas-light' style columns.</p>	
IMPACT OF VEHICLES AND TRAFFIC	Traffic on both roads (both are cul-de-sacs) is light.	4
USABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE SPACE	<p>FR: The Green is well used by residents and visitors, both informally and for community events. It has two benches and a litter bin. More private areas around the apartment blocks are sometimes used for sitting out in by residents.</p> <p>Both roads are so lightly trafficked that children can, with care, play in the street.</p>	5

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?



Frenchay Road north east side



Frenchay Road looking north east



Complins Close looking north west

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
CONTRIBUTION OF BUILDINGS TO THE SPACE	The buildings frame, enclose and overlook the spaces, and provide good passive surveillance so that the spaces feel safe to use.	5
SIZE/SCALE	The buildings are large (two to two and a half and many are three or more storeys). There is an overall sense of unity in the scale and transitions between heights have been handled sensitively with gradual rather than sudden changes.	5
AGE	Both are modern developments, constructed in one continuous build as a planned estate in the early years of the 2000's.	5
MATERIALS	For both roads houses use the same red brick with clay tiles and apartments are finished in a cream render and mellow yellow brick off-set with features in blue metal (entrances, balconies and some window surrounds), with flat grey tiles to the roof. FR: a string course runs at first level around the front and sides of the houses, and a 'fishtail' band along the street facing roof pitches.	5
WINDOWS	Apartment have mostly white uPVC frames (blue frames on feature 'towers'), with large double glazed glazed panes, with a mix of fixed and casement windows. Houses are white uPVC frames, with large glazed panes containing internal glazing bars to give different effects of subdivision, with a mix of fixed and casement windows.	5
DOORS	Apartment entrances are clearly announced with central architectural features, glazed overhangs and large paned glass doors. Houses have half solid half glazed doors, with the glass sections including stained glass features and 'sky lights' [not correct term] above the doors also including a stained glass feature. Many doorways have simple but pronounced lintels. Some have an outer, open porch before the door is reached. Colours vary but sit within an overall colour scheme that helps to provide cohesion and unity of white, green, red and blue.	5
ROOFS / CHIMNEYS / GABLES	FR: the large semi-detached houses present imposing gables ends to face the road; terraces in between present a simple sloping roof (see alterations below). Apartments are a mix of large simple sloping roofs and some flat roof areas. The semis have modest chimneys, the terraces none, and the two sentinel houses (which reference the Arts and Crafts style in some of their detailing) have grand, prominent chimneys that help mark the 'gateway'. CC: the terraces present a simple sloping roof to the front, broken up at the ends and centres with gable frontages and in between by square bays that run up through all three	5

	storeys. The apartments present a series of large gables overlooking the square, echoing the more domestic scale gables of the houses.	
USES (PAST AND PRESENT)	<p>These roads are on a site first developed as a factory connected with the car industry in Oxford. FR is in an area that was part of the on-site parts / goods warehouse and CC is on the site of the sports and social club grounds.</p> <p>Both roads are now wholly residential.</p>	5
CAN YOU TELL IF A BUILDING HAS BEEN ALTERED?	<p>Some houses have already been altered, with expansion into the roof space being most common. There are no (large) side dormers.</p> <p>FR: A number of houses have added modest front dormers that are in scale with the roofscapes, sometimes accompanied by roof lights. These dormers are all in similar style and complement the architecture of the terrace. There is one example of a larger rear dormer on a property backing onto the wildlife corridor on the east side of Frenchay Road, and which is visible from the road. This much large dormer is disproportionate to the scale of the roof and is not in keeping with the architectural style of the terrace.</p> <p>CC: A few houses have extended into the roof, using roof lights rather than dormers. This has resulted in some sections appearing to be dominated by roof lights.</p>	4
CONDITION	The properties are still quite young and the overall condition remains very good.	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?



The Green and Frenchay Road looking south west from the northern canal bridge



Southern entrance into Frenchay Road looking north west from the southern canal bridge

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
HISTORIC / POPULAR VIEWS	No historic or more widely popular views. The views that are afforded of the Trap Grounds and the canal are assumed to be much valued locally.	5
FORM OF VIEW: SHORT OR LONG, UNFOLDING, GLIMPSED, CHANNELLED OR WIDE AND OPEN	FR: From the south, after the sudden short descent and sweep around from the canal bridge the road is long, straight and open. Inviting glimpses are provided to both east and west of greener corridors and other streets. CC: Views are framed and contained by the terraces and apartments. Views out reveal with canal and the wildlife corridor.	5
FOCAL POINTS	FR: looking south the eye is drawn in by the closing gap of trees created by the street trees and rests at the far end on the trees of the Trap Grounds; looking north the continuous vista leads through the arch to give a glimpse of and to finish on the partial view of houses within CC. The two canal bridges are striking and significant structures. The single carriageway FR bridge has attractive brick detailing to the embankment walls. The northern EJW bridge is more functional but still grand and has similar brick detailing to its embankments. These are both also of vital links to the rest of the city. While neither 'close' a view both are prominent in views from FR. From CC the view to the canal is particularly fine and is pleasantly dominated by a single mature tree, framed neatly by the surrounding buildings.	5
STREETSCAPE	FR: the streetscape is dominated by the maturing trees and other greenery and the rhythm of the roofscape. CC: the square is dominated by the maturing trees and other greenery and the formal lines of the buildings in its four sides.	5
ROOFSCAPE	FR: the large, pronounced gables are dramatic, quickly dominating and setting the rhythm in the southern most section. The simpler roof pitches of the terraces provide a 'quieter', less dramatic counterfoil to the gables. So far the modest size of the front dormer extensions to the terraces has not disrupted this. The apartment roofscapes are also dramatic, with tower features (especially to the block at the southern end) adding interest and variety. CC: there is a formality and predictable pattern to the rhythm of the gables in the terraces that reinforces the formal setting of the square arrangement, and the apartment block echo that pattern with their large gables overlooking the square.	5

URBAN/RURAL VIEWS	FR: the southern end is dominated by the Trap Grounds and gives a rural feel to views out to the south. In contrast the northern end is dominated by the larger massing and dramatic architectural features of the apartment blocks, and the open space of The Green is more formal, and so this area is clearly urban in character.	5
VIEWS OUT OF THE SPACE	Views of the canal from the Green are important. The rear of the west side overlooks the wildlife corridor, the rear of the east side overlooks the canal.	5

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 looking towards the west side of Frenchay Road

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
LEAFY AND/OR GREEN IMAGE	Trees, hedges and shrub planting dominate the public realm, even in winter.	5
HARD URBAN LANDSCAPE	There are no significant hard landscape areas apart from roads, pavements and parking areas.	0
PUBLIC/PRIVATE GREENERY	All planting is private, falling within either private front gardens and / or under the control of the Waterways Management Company, of the Waterways and Canals Trust (along the tow path).	5
DOES WATER FORM A KEY FEATURE OF THE AREA	Water is a key feature: the canal along the east side, the wildlife corridor water course (which acts as a sustainable urban drainage system for the estate) along the west side and crossing FR, the Trap Grounds beyond to the south, and Hook Meadow beyond to the north.	5
TOPOGRAPHY	The area is effectively flat.	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	Both roads are residential: people leaving for and returning from work; children and parents leaving for and returning from school; children playing in the roads; landscape gardeners; dog walkers, those making deliveries and otherwise visiting properties but few other strangers pass through.	5
LEVEL OF ACTIVITY	Varies with the working and school day, but mostly low.	5
TRAFFIC	Light; both roads are cul-de-sacs.	4
DARK, SHADY, LIGHT, AIRY	The buildings cast shade across the road / squares at the start and finish of the day but in the middle of the day both roads receive good levels of sunlight. At night the street lighting is soft.	5
DAY AND NIGHT	The roads are quiet at night. The number of windows overlooking the public spaces still gives a sense of reasonable safety.	5
SMELLS	Nothing at present. Wildlife corridor has smelt in the past and this has now been addressed with improved drainage work.	5
NOISES	Birdsong. Trains from the railway in the background.	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.

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

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

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.

Broad, open, tree lined attractive residential areas with an interesting variety of styles and detailing but within a coherent overall design. Significant changes to the buildings, particularly their frontages, would disrupt and spoil this unity of design.