

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 - Lark Hill, OX2 7DR
DATE	23 rd May 2015
TIME	2:30 – 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.



Lark Hill looking west

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
SPACES	Cul-de-sac with pedestrian way at one end into Rackham Place. A narrowing of scale from Elizabeth Jennings way. Feels less like a street and more of a landscaped access/parking area, with narrowing and widening of spaces	+5
BUILDINGS	Mainly 2/3 storey houses but one apartment block. Distinctive, varied and quirky building styles to Lark Hill, especially in comparison to Elizabeth Jennings Way. Interesting details, roof and projecting bays. A mix of colour and some strong chimneys. Gives eclectic village street feel but harmonious.	+5
VIEWES	Short views with heavy planting with widening and narrowing aspects during progress from one end to the other.	+4
LIGHT/DARK	Not as light as the main streets with closer spacing of buildings and dense planting.	+4
SURFACES	Lark Hill has less tarmac than other spaces and more paving/cobbles.	+5
GREENERY & LANDSCAPE	Very green with box and privet hedges to parking areas, enclosing front garden areas with attractive shrubs and trees such as white silver birch. Very attractive central area of grass with small trees and shrubs which opens out to view as one progresses along Lark Hill.	+5
USES AND ACTIVITY	Purely residential. Parking significant along all streets but in LH it has an integrated and controlled feel of a space shared with pedestrians, so pavements only exist at the entrance.	+5
NOISES AND SMELLS	Very quiet. Violin practise, Distant noise of trains. Occasional large and low flying aircraft on way to RAF Brize Norton.	+5
GENERAL COMMENTS	Lark Hill presents an appealing quiet urban 'mews' style of street with a private and intimate feel, possibly the most interesting and attractive street on the estate.	+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.

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
FORMAL / INFORMAL SPACES	A narrow space at each end which widens at its centre point surrounding a small "green" to allow increased parking but structured with well-designed planting (shown in photo above)	+5
GAPS BETWEEN BUILDINGS	Closely spaced terraces of houses but separated by openings and alleyways to allow access to rear gardens and/or rear parking areas.	+4
MEANS OF ENCLOSURE	Generally 2 and 3 storey town houses with parking areas to front or rear and with small front and back gardens..	+5
BUILDING PLOTS	Terraced town houses with slightly wider plots than Stone Meadow / Cox's Ground plus one apartment block.	+5
WIDE/OPEN SPACES	Attractive central "green" area with grass, trees and shrubs.	+\$
NARROW / ENCLOSED SPACES	Short green alleyway linking LH and Rackham Place, interesting reduction in scale	0
WINDING / STRAIGHT SPACES	Straight but narrow roadway to restrict car speed	+\$
RELATIONSHIP OF THE SPACE TO BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES	Tall and closely spaced town houses create an intimate feel to the street but with good privacy	+5
USES AND ACTIVITY	Residential street where parking dominates	+4
PAVING MATERIALS	A variety of paving colours separated with strips of cobbles.	+4
STREET FURNITURE	Mock Victorian gas lamps. Little other clutter in Lark Hill apart some bollards in the alleyway into Rackham place.	+5
IMPACT OF VEHICLES AND TRAFFIC	Parking dominates but very little traffic. Parking spaces restricted by planning permission so parking can be a problem. Sometimes a problem with commuter/shopper parking at the eastern end of Lark Hill where there are several "free" parking spaces. The rest of Lark Hill is	+3

	<p>residents only parking.</p> <p>No pavements as such along most of Lark Hill so vehicles and pedestrians share the access road. This is not a problem as the layout means that vehicles have to drive slowly.</p>	
<p>USABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE SPACE</p>	<p>Easily accessible to pedestrians and vehicles which mix well.</p> <p>Cul-de-sac for vehicles but pedestrian/cycle access through bollarded opening to Rackham Place.</p>	+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?



Western end of Lark Hill

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
CONTRIBUTION OF BUILDINGS TO THE SPACE	A striking variety of architectural styles and detailing echoing traditional buildings in the relatively short street along Lark Hill but presents a harmonious and pleasing whole. Many 3 storey houses include rear conservatories as part of their original design	+5
SIZE/SCALE	Generous width plots with 3 storey houses and one 3 storey apartment block.	+5
AGE	Lark Hill is the newest street on the Waterways estate and was finished in 2004.	0
MATERIALS	Orange/red brick facades are the main material to Lark Hill, with cream stone and tile detailing, e.g. to door and window surrounds. The houses at the western end have full height cream rendered facades with distinctive buttress and gabled features, shown in photo above. Interesting tiled and stone quoins to houses	+5
WINDOWS	Most houses and apartments have white double-glazed uPVC casement windows; those on houses at the western end of Lark Hill have black painted frames. Some houses have interesting projecting window bays on the top floor, on some others the projecting bays go from top to ground floors.	+4
DOORS	Painted timber doors in a range of muted colours. Three storey houses have recessed porches, 2 storey houses have canopies over the front door.	+4
ROOFS / CHIMNEYS / GABLES	Some distinctive chimneys and gables along Lark Hill providing an interesting, varied but carefully integrated skyline.	+5
USES (PAST AND PRESENT)	Originally a Victorian brick works and then a car parts factory. Gardens have very shallow soil levels.	0
CAN YOU TELL IF A BUILDING HAS BEEN ALTERED?	The variety of styles along Lark Hill makes alterations less obvious though few have occurred as yet. Significant alterations would be very deleterious to the varied but harmonious design of the buildings.	+5
CONDITION	Generally houses along Lark Hill are in very good condition.	+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?



Lark Hill looking east across the green

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
HISTORIC / POPULAR VIEWS	No historic views.	0
FORM OF VIEW: SHORT OR LONG, UNFOLDING, GLIMPSED, CHANNELLED OR WIDE AND OPEN	The unfolding view as one walks along Lark Hill presents a distinctive streetscape. The “green” unexpectedly comes into view as a surprise and the building styles change subtly and pleasingly as one progresses through to the end. Views of the Keble and St Hugh’s colleges’ sports ground from the rear of houses on the north side of Lark Hill and of the canal from the rear of houses on the west side. A narrow gap leads onto the wide space of Rackham place, mainly filled with parking	+5
FOCAL POINTS	The central widest part of Lark Hill forming the “green” is a focal point	+5
STREETSCAPE	Pleasant and varied with a human scale, successfully mixing pedestrians, vehicles, greenery and buildings. Variety of narrow and wide spaces, alley ways. A pedestrian/cycling opening with bollards links Lark Hill with Rackham Place.	+5
ROOFSCAPE	A mix of gable ends and pitched roofs along Lark Hill forming a very varied and attractive skyline.	+5
URBAN/RURAL VIEWS	A brief view from the rear gardens and car park at the west end of Lark Hill across the canal	+1
VIEWS OUT OF THE SPACE	Houses on the north side overlook college playing fields at the rear; houses on the west side overlook the canal at the rear; the remaining properties overlook other properties on the estate.	+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 of

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	Very green and well tended planting along Lark Hill Central small "green" with grass, small trees and shrubs.	+5
HARD URBAN LANDSCAPE	Pavements to parking areas along Lark Hill with planting areas defined by cobbled strips; public roadway is tarmac.	+4
PUBLIC/PRIVATE GREENERY	Small private rear gardens to houses. Front parking areas mainly surrounded by hedges and small trees.	+5
DOES WATER FORM A KEY FEATURE OF THE AREA	A short view of the canal at the rear of the west end of Lark Hill.	0
TOPOGRAPHY	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	Residents coming and going and deliveries. Small number of people passing through short cut via opening into Rackham Place.	+5
LEVEL OF ACTIVITY	Lark Hill is a cul-de-sac for vehicles and very quiet. Normal levels of resident car parking and deliveries.	+5
TRAFFIC	Very light traffic	+5
DARK, SHADY, LIGHT, AIRY	Light and airy,	+5
DAY AND NIGHT	Generally quiet at night.	+5
SMELLS	None	+5
NOISES	Children playing, violins being practised from bedrooms. Distant noise of trains passing and sometimes hooting. Occasional large, low flying planes on 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.

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

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

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.

Lark Hill presents an architecturally unique, quiet urban 'mews' style of street. It has the eclectic feel of a village high street that has developed organically over the centuries. The interest lies in the variety of styles and detailing but within a carefully designed, and harmonious whole. Significant changes to these houses, particularly their frontages, would upset this balanced effect and jar with the test of the street.



Lark Hill looking east towards Elizabeth Jennings Way