

How to prepare a character assessment to support design policy within a neighbourhood plan

Putting the pieces together



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1. Introduction

This resource provides guidance on how you can undertake a character assessment of your local area that will help you to develop policies on design to include in your neighbourhood plan. It will explain:

- what a character assessment is
- the benefits of completing a character assessment
- how to complete a character assessment
- how to use the character assessment in your neighbourhood plan

2. What is a character assessment?

A character assessment is a document that describes the distinct appearance and feel of a settlement or an area. It communicates the key physical features and characteristics that combine to give a particular settlement or an area its local distinctiveness and unique identity.

3. The benefits of completing a character assessment

Poorly designed development proposals are often the result of a lack of understanding of, or in some cases a disregard for, the character, feel and appearance of the local area. Such proposals can fail to conserve or enhance the unique qualities of the local area for which they are proposed, and may harm and erode the existing character.

Conversely, good design, that is both visually attractive and functional, stems from having an understanding of a development's setting and the character of the local area. This understanding can help to ensure that new development proposals are of an appropriate design; one that respects and compliments the existing local character.

By preparing a character assessment you have the opportunity to document and describe the existing character of your neighbourhood area. The character assessment can then be used by developers and their architects to help them understand the local character. This in turn will help them to progress sensitively designed proposals, in keeping with the feel and appearance of your local area.



4. How to complete a character assessment

Step 1: Identifying the broad character areas within your settlement

The first step in preparing a character assessment is to identify the broad character areas that exist in your local area. You then need to set these out on a map. Character areas can be described as areas that have their own distinctive, individual character or 'sense of place'. They are areas which share a similar appearance and feel as each other.

Identifying character areas in your settlement or neighbourhood area is best done as a round-table group exercise. Get a large map of your neighbourhood area and a handful of coloured markers, and then set about dividing the settlement into different character areas. The map you use for this exercise should be detailed enough to allow you to appreciate the layout of buildings within the neighbourhood plan area.



Figure 1: Divide your area into a number of character areas using a large map and some coloured markers¹

This exercise is not an exact science. Using your local knowledge and existing understanding of your neighbourhood area you can choose to divide your area up according to criteria such as land uses, building types or the period when buildings were constructed (e.g. 1930s 1960s etc). You can use a combination of these criteria to identify different character areas. Existing boundaries, such as roads and rivers, can be useful pointers to where different character areas begin and end.

It can be useful to refer to online resources such as [Google maps](#) and [Bing maps](#) (the latter includes a 'bird's eye' aerial view that is particularly useful) when doing this exercise.

¹ Photography credit Royal Town Planning Institute



You should end up with something like the map shown in Figure 2. Here the settlement has been divided into broad character areas. At a later date you may want to formalise your hand drawn character area map to make it more presentable and include it in your final character assessment document (see example at Figure 3).

It should be noted that the map you produce during this first exercise should be seen as a draft. Following a walk-around exercise (see Step 2) you may wish to refine and tweak the character area boundaries.

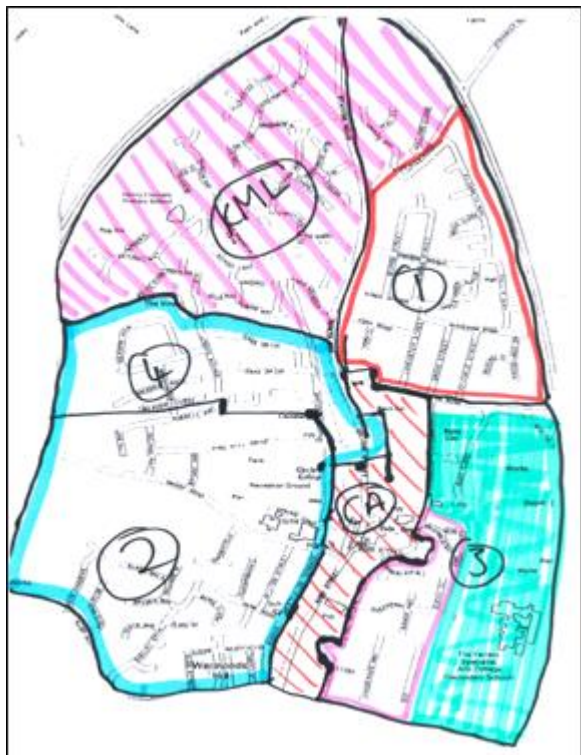


Figure 2: Draft hand drawn character areas map²

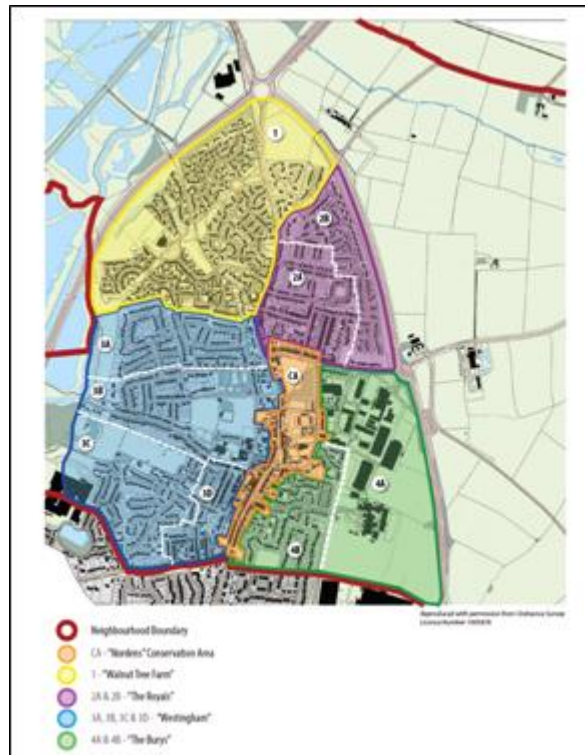


Figure 3: Formalised character areas map³

Step 2: Walk-around your initial character areas and record the key characteristics using the character assessment pro forma

Having divided your settlement or neighbourhood area into different character areas, the next step is to identify and record the distinct character of each of these areas.

To assist with this exercise, we have produced a [character assessment pro forma](#). This provides a structured approach to identifying and classifying the distinctive character and context of a settlement or neighbourhood area. The pro forma has been designed to enable you to create your own light-touch character assessment.

² Photography credit Higham Ferrers Parish Council

³ Photography credit Higham Ferrers Parish



The pro forma breaks character down into the following ten distinct categories:

1. layout
2. topography
3. spaces
4. roads, streets, routes
5. green and natural features
6. landmarks
7. buildings and details
8. streetscape
9. land use
10. views

The pro forma includes a guidance note with details of what you should consider and record under each of these categories.

An alternative character assessment toolkit and pro forma, produced by Oxford City Council in partnership with English Heritage, can be found [here](#). This pro forma may be more suitable for those who wish to undertake a more detailed character assessment.

Using whichever of the two character assessment pro forma you think most suitable, your group should walk-around each of the individual character areas identified in 'Step 1.' As you walk around record the key characteristics of each of these areas (see example at Figure 4).

This exercise is best undertaken in small groups, rather than by individuals, as this allows for discussion during the recording process and for people to agree what the important features of each particular character area are.

Critical to this exercise is taking photographs as you walk around each area (it can be useful to identify a designated photographer for each walk). These photographs will form a key part of your final character assessment document. Photographs will mean that you can go beyond simply describing the character of each area, to providing images to illustrate key features and buildings.

You should also use this walk-around as an opportunity to consider whether the initial character area boundaries you identified in Step 1 are appropriate or whether they need to be adjusted in light of what you have observed through this first-hand experience of your neighbourhood area.

When you have completed a pro forma for each of the identified character areas, you should discuss the findings with the wider parish / town council or neighbourhood forum. Getting the views of others will help to ensure that what you have recorded is an accurate and balanced record of the character of each area.



CHARACTER ASSESSMENT PRO FORMA			
Character Area... <i>J. MARSH ESTATE</i>		Assessor(s)... <i>D. WILLIAMS + P. HART</i>	
		Date... <i>03/02/15</i>	
Layout	Topography	Spaces	Roads, streets, routes
Relationship between buildings, spaces and routes, and how these elements are arranged in relation to each other	Landscape setting / gradient of the local area (flat, sloping, valley, plateau, hilltop, etc)	Parks, playing fields, allotments, cemeteries, village greens, car parks, market squares, etc	Vehicular routes, pedestrian pathways, cycle paths, shared surfaces, rights of way, bridleways, etc
<p>TERRACED ROWS OF HOUSING, CLOSE TO ROAD. SMALL FRONT GARDENS.</p> <p>NARROW FOOTPATHS ALIGNING ONE-WAY STREETS.</p> <p>LONG BACK GARDENS WHICH BACK ONTO EACH OTHER.</p>	<p>RELATIVELY FLAT AREA - NO SIGNIFICANT SLOPE IN AREA</p>	<p>CENTRAL GREEN SPACES USED BY LOCAL RESIDENTS FOR GENERAL RECREATION.</p> <p>AREAS OF PARKING INTERSPERSED THROUGHOUT AREA.</p>	<p>ONE-WAY ROADS WITH PEDESTRIAN FOOTPATHS ON EITHER SIDE.</p> <p>CYCLE PATH AND FOOTPATH CUTTING THROUGH CENTRAL GREEN SPACE.</p>

Figure 4: Extract from a completed pro forma⁴



Figure 5: Walk around each character area and record the key characteristics and features of each area - doing this exercise as a group allows for discussion and agreement⁵

⁴ Photography credit Royal Town Planning Institute

⁵ Photography credit Higham Ferrers Parish Council



Step 3: Identifying other sources of information

Once you have recorded the key features and characteristics of each character area using the character assessment pro forma, you can explore what other sources of information exist that can help inform your character assessment.

Potential sources of valuable information include:

- your local planning authority, who might be able to provide:
 - details of any previously completed character assessments of your local area
 - details of conservation areas within your settlement or neighbourhood area, and any associated appraisals of these areas
 - details of locally listed buildings
 - access to the historic environment record (a database of information on archaeological sites, monuments and buildings in the local area)
- the [Historic England website](#), where you can find details of listed buildings in your local area
- your local library, which may have books on the historic development of your settlement and historic maps.

Step 4: Writing the character assessment document

Using the information in the completed character assessment pro forma, along with photographs and other information obtained from other relevant sources, a character assessment document can be prepared.

We have produced a [template](#) that provides a draft structure for your character assessment document.

5. Using the character assessment to support policies in your neighbourhood plan

Once prepared, the character assessment can be used to inform a variety of policies in your neighbourhood plan including:

- **Conserving and enhancing the local character:** Your character assessment will identify and document the character of your neighbourhood plan area. You may wish to include a policy in your plan that is intended to conserve or enhance this existing character. You can directly cross-refer to the character assessment and its content in a policy. By doing this it is clear to the reader of the plan what components of the built and natural environment make up the specific character of an area that any development proposal will need to be sensitive to. For example, Policy NP/DG1 'Respecting the Townscape' in the [Ascot, Sunninghill](#)



[and Sunningdale Neighbourhood Plan](#) cross-refers to a character assessment produced by their [local planning authority](#).

- **Local views:** Your character assessment may identify important local views. You can use policies in your neighbourhood plan to protect and enhance these.
- **Retain and enhance areas with a similar land use:** Through the character assessment you may identify areas that consist of high concentrations of similar land uses. For example, you may identify an area that consists predominantly of retail uses. These areas and the uses within them, may be particularly valued by the local community and perform an important function in your neighbourhood area. You may want to use policies in your neighbourhood plan to retain the role of these areas, and encourage similar development. For example, policy WS13 of the [Thame Neighbourhood Plan](#) sought to promote the upgrading or redevelopment of existing employment buildings which had been identified as being of less positive character.
- **Pedestrian and cycle connections:** An important part of the character assessment exercise will be identifying and recording key pedestrian and cycle connections in your neighbourhood area. You can use this information to inform a policy to retain, enhance and potentially add to this network.
- **Local Green Space designation / enhancement of open and green spaces:** Green and open spaces play an important role in shaping the character of many neighbourhood areas. Your character assessment will document these features. You can use your character assessment to inform your decisions on whether to designate land as a Local Green Space in your neighbourhood plan, or to identify open spaces that could be enhanced.
- **Promoting new development and improvements:** As well as identifying areas of positive character, your character assessment will also highlight those areas that could benefit from redevelopment or incremental improvement. Your character assessment could be used to underpin an area-based policy setting out criteria for positive changes in a particular area.

The above list is not comprehensive. Your character assessment may prove useful to help support an even wider variety of policies beyond those outlined above. For further guidance on preparing neighbourhood plan policies, please see our [How to write planning policies](#) resource.



Top tips for producing a Character Assessment

- **Don't just focus on buildings and their appearance** within the character assessment – open spaces, natural features, streets, pathways, street furniture and boundary treatments are just a number of other elements that contribute to the character of an area. Character is about much more than architecture and building types.
- **Take plenty of photographs** when walking around, and use these generously in your character assessment. It is much easier to include of an image of a particular building, space or feature than try to describe it at length in the text. Try to take photographs around midday to avoid heavy shadows. If there is a photography enthusiast in your group perhaps give them the responsibility for taking photographs.
- The language used in your assessment should be **clear, concise and accurate**. The character assessment should provide a factual description of the neighbourhood area, with some commentary on the most valued and important characteristics.
- **Use online resources**, such as [Bing](#) or [Google](#) maps, to help both define the boundaries of each character area and inform the character area summary (it is particularly useful in understanding the layout of an area and checking on features that may have been missed on the initial site walk around).
- Try to **involve local people** who might have skills and expertise that could be useful in the preparation of the character assessment, such as local architects and historians.
- **Use existing sources of information** including local planning policy guidance, listed building details, and books on local history and the evolution of your neighbourhood area. Speak with your local planning authority to see what other useful information they might hold.



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