Introduction to Headington Character Assessments

CHARACTER

Character[1] relates to the defining features of an area, which makes that area feel distinctive or gives a definite sense of place. Character usually is seen in physical features such as landscape, buildings or spaces which may have been forged through a historical process which is evident in such features.

An areas character is seen by many people as a very important aspect of a place, and one which should be preserved, improved or modified. 'Character' is fundamentally important to the Headington Neighbourhood Plan. Indeed, the second objective of Headington's Neighbourhood Plan is to "*Establish and promote an identity which embraces the diverse nature of Headington*".

Within Headington, character (and identity) can be seen as operating at two levels (at least). Firstly within the overall area of Headington the character of Headington is defined by the existence of large hospitals and educational institutions intermixed with residential communities and a retail/business centre. **It is this mix which makes Headington 'special'.**

Secondly, at a more detailed level, the character of Headington is made up of several distinct sub-areas. The character of these sub-areas is the subject of the assessments described here.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF CHARACTER ASSESSMENT ISSUES

By many standards Headington is fortunate, but the preparation of the individual Character Assessments brought to light several interlinked matters of concern that are shared throughout the area.

Whilst Headington residents are proud of the area's world-class hospitals and educational institutions, the economic and social benefits of even the most prestigious institutions inevitably have their downside. Development in recent decades has brought increased traffic to the area: many feel that saturation point is at hand and that this is having an adverse effect on Headington's residential character. However, proposals to alleviate traffic flow are themselves a cause of concern, as verges and other valued landscape features may be jeopardised. (See the Access to Headington proposals released by the County Council in July 2015).

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[1] 'Character' is used here as described by Oxford City Council see
http://www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decP/CharacterAppraisalToolkit.htm

Workers commuting into Headington add to the area's parking problems, as do patients and visitors to the hospitals. Shopkeepers need more customers, but those coming into the area by car add to the congestion. Despite efforts to regulate parking permissions, the sub-division of houses into flats and HMOs has added to the tally of residents' cars. Converting front gardens to parking-spaces, with a consequent loss of old walls, hedges and vegetation is not only unsightly but a threat to effective drainage and water management.

Many of the area's concerns about increasing HMOs relate to poor exterior and garden maintenance. Improperly stowed wheelie bins and litter are another issue in most parts of the suburb. Yet without the conversion of single-family dwellings, commuting and its problems would only grow to cope with rising employment levels.

It is important to remember that the Character Assessments are primarily concerned with visual character, and the issues identified during the process relate primarily to the built environment. What has been confirmed is how highly local people value the pleasures of their streets and how determined they are to conserve them.

PURPOSE

The National Planning Policy Framework makes a number of references to the importance of local character when making planning policies and planning decisions. For example:

58. Local and neighbourhood plans should develop robust and comprehensive policies that set out the quality of development that will be expected for the area. Such policies should be based on stated objectives for the future of the area and an **understanding and evaluation of its defining characteristics**. Planning policies and decisions should aim to ensure that developments:

    - **respond to local character and history, and reflect the identity of local surroundings and materials**, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation;

61. Although visual appearance and the architecture of individual buildings are very important factors, securing high quality and inclusive design goes beyond aesthetic considerations. Therefore, planning policies and decisions should **address the connections between people and places and the integration of new development into the natural, built and historic environment**.

126. Local planning authorities should set out in their Local Plan a positive strategy for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment, including Historical Assets most at risk through neglect, decay or other threats. In doing so, they should recognise that Historical Assets are an irreplaceable resource and conserve them in a manner appropriate to their significance. In developing this strategy, local planning authorities should take into account:
    - the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the **significance of Historical Assets** and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
    - the wider social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits that **conservation of the historic environment** can bring;
    - the desirability of new **development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness**; and

- opportunities to draw on the **contribution made by the historic environment to the character of a place**.

169. Local planning authorities should have up-to-date evidence about the historic environment in their area and use it to assess the **significance of Historical Assets** and the contribution they make to their environment. They should also use it to predict the likelihood that currently unidentified Historical Assets, particularly sites of historic and archaeological interest, will be discovered in the future. Local planning authorities should either maintain or have access to a historic environment record.

170. Where appropriate, **landscape character assessments** should also be prepared, integrated with assessment of historic landscape character, and for areas where there are major expansion options assessments of landscape sensitivity.

Oxford City Council refers to the character of an area in its Core Strategy 2026, Policy CS18:

> **Urban design, townscape character and the historic environment**
>
> Planning permission will only be granted for development that demonstrates high-quality urban design through:
>
> • responding appropriately to the site and its surroundings;
>
> • creating a strong sense of place;
>
> • being easy to understand and to move through;
>
> • being adaptable ……
>
> • contributing to an attractive public realm;
>
> • high quality architecture.
>
> Development proposals should respect and draw inspiration from Oxford's unique historic environment (above and below ground), **responding positively to the character and distinctiveness of the locality**. Development must not result in loss or damage to important historic features, or their settings, particularly those of national importance and, where appropriate, should include proposals for enhancement of the historic environment, particularly where these address local issues identified in, for example, conservation area character appraisal or management plans. Views of the skyline of the historic centre will be protected

Oxford Heritage Asset Register

Oxford City Council maintains a register of buildings, structures, features or places that make a special contribution to **the character of Oxford and its neighbourhoods** through their locally significant historic, architectural, archaeological or artistic interest.

The Oxford Heritage Asset Register (OHAR) was developed between 2012-15 by the Council, with funding by English Heritage, in partnership with Oxford Preservation Trust and local communities.

By identifying what is special about different parts of the city and particular Historical Assets, the City Council can better protect and manage them through planning policies and planning decisions.

Conclusion

Consequently, to help inform the neighbourhood plan, to identify specific planning policies and to identify potential assets for the Oxford Heritage Asset Register, a character assessment of most areas of Headington was undertaken.

ASSESSMENT PROCESS

The Oxford Character Assessment Toolkit was used. The toolkit was designed by Oxford City Council in conjunction with Oxford Preservation Trust and English Heritage to "*help you make your own assessments of the character of the landscape and built environment*" (ref *An Introduction to the Character Assessment Toolkit* by Oxford City Council). It helps assessors 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 provides opportunities to identify features or issues that detract from the character of areas, spaces and buildings. It provides a basis by which Historical Assets may be identified. For details of the toolkit see
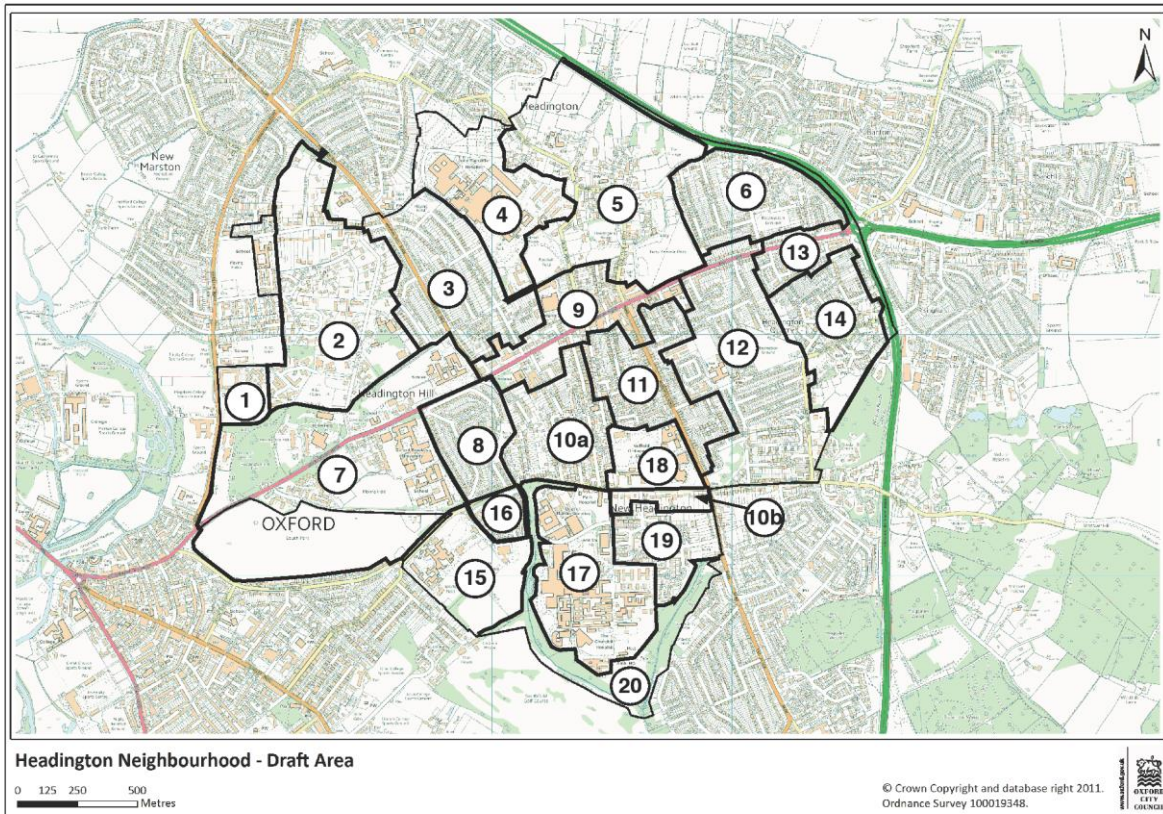http://www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decP/CharacterAppraisalToolkit.htm

The main steps of the assessment project were as follows:

1. Division of Headington into 'Character Areas' – see below. This was carried out using character assessments information of Oxford previously identified by Oxford City Council's Planning department. Headington was divided into 20 Character Areas, each of which has a high degree of historical or landscape coherence.
2. Two volunteers were recruited for each of the Character Areas (excluding the hospitals and conservation areas which were treated differently). Each volunteer was a resident of Headington, not necessarily a resident of the Character Area being assessed. Volunteers took part in a training session, in order to use the toolkit in an effective and coordinated way. Training was led by a planning consultant with extensive experience of Oxford and the Oxford Character Assessment Toolkit.
3. Assessments were carried out using the toolkit forms. Results were documented in an assessment template.
4. Draft assessments were subject to two internal reviews; first by members of the Character assessment project team, then by 'peer' assessors. In some cases the consultant mentioned above was also used as a reviewer.
5. Revised draft assessments were then subject to public consultation – see below.

GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS

The following map shows the twenty Character Areas.

Headington Neighbourhood - Draft Area

0   125   250   500
                          Metres

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Ordnance Survey 100019348.

Three Character Areas or types of area were not assessed:

- The Conservation Areas, areas 2 (Headington Hill North), 7 (Headington Hill South), 6 (Old Headington), 14 (Quarry), because they were assessed when the conservation area appraisals were carried out. See http://www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decP/Conservation_areas_occw.htm . Instead, the section in each Conservation Area Appraisal which identifies risks/opportunities was examined and any changes (improvements or deteriorations) were noted. Such changes may help inform planning policies or projects.

- Three of the four hospital sites, areas 4 (John Radcliffe), 17 (Churchill), 18 (Nuffield). This was because we prioritised residential areas. This is not to say the characters of the hospital sites are not important – but to a large extent the hospitals are important in terms of their influence on the characters of neighbouring areas which have been assessed. The exception was Warneford Hospital (15) which contains an extensive area of publically accessible land (a Town Green). A Character Assessment of Warneford was carried out in conjunction with a representative of the Warneford Hospital.

- Area 1 which is a small area occupied by a student residence. This was not assessed because we prioritised residential areas.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION PROCESS

The assessments were made available for public consultation in the following ways:

- Issued to residents' associations, where such associations exist;
- Notified to all Neighbourhood Forum members for feedback;
- As part of public consultation on the whole Neighbourhood Plan.

All comments were recorded and resulting action identified.