Babergh & Mid Suffolk District Councils

Assessment Toolkit

Detailed Character Assessment

Contents

Introduction

How to use the Character Assessment Toolkit

Survey Details

Introduction

The Babergh Mid Suffolk Character Assessment Toolkit has been based on the successful Oxford Character Assessment Toolkit. This Toolkit has been designed to help examine the character of areas, including buildings, spaces and views within the Babergh Mid-Suffolk Conservation Areas. This toolkit therefore, can be used to identify important features within the area, which contribute to their distinctiveness of each of these areas. By using this toolkit, it will be possible to identify both positive features that enhance the wider conservation area, as well as features which negatively detract from the character of the area.

How this toolkit is to be used

The historic environment makes a positive contribution to the character of area, showing local distinctiveness, as well as making these places individual, interesting and special. The way people interact with the historic environment varies from person to person, with individual people having different views and opinions on what is important within the historic environment. Therefore, this toolkit will help individuals analyse the character of these areas, open spaces, views and buildings in a structured way; helping to identify, define and understand the significance of these areas alongside the value of different features present that contribute to the overall character, sense of place and identity.

Conservation Areas may need to evolve to serve changing needs of the community, these changes need to be measured against the existing significance of an area to ensure that their present value and significance is not eroded. Through effective management, changes should enhance and preserve the value of Conservation Areas, which are Designated Heritage Assets, for current inhabitants and future generations. The evidence and assessment provided through this toolkit will help to enable management of change in an effective and positive manner.

What makes up character?

The character of the places where we live, work and travel is inherently historic, expressed through such things as patterns, materials and periods of building styles, street and road layouts as well as other forms of land use and use of space all of which combined reflect the change and development of an area through time.

The character of place is as much about people's perceptions of areas as it is about buildings or sites. Understanding and appreciation for the historic character of any place being key to ensuring that change is managed sympathetically, sometimes innovatively to reflect and enhance the distinctive qualities of places that visitors and residents alike can acknowledge and cherish.

Elements of character can include both the use of a particular area and its physical features, including styles of buildings, construction materials, architectural details or green landscape features. Furthermore, other elements of character may be more emotional such as historical or cultural association of a place or building. Furthermore, character can encompass smells and sounds related to particular activities which may only occur at certain times within the calendar year. The list below includes common components of character, but the list is not exhaustive.

How to use the Toolkit

Undertaking the character assessment

In undertaking the character assessment, it is recommended that the area, building or space is visited to complete a visual survey. You may also prefer to take photos and make brief notes whilst in the area in order to have more time to examine the surroundings. Although there is no defined method for carrying out the assessment, the following structure may be helpful.

- For this Character Assessment Toolkit, it is recommended that this assessment method is undertaken on a street by street basis. A bigger area can be surveyed, however it will be worth surveying each street individually and putting together an overall picture after all the surveys are finished.

- Take an initial walk of the survey area. Use this time to note down initial reactions to the area, assigning a score to the broader character features.

- Taking photographs is strongly recommended as they can illustrate and visually explain any comments you make on the questionnaire.

- Annotating a street map or plan is also a useful way to explain certain features, directions of views, location of key buildings and important spaces.

- Make comments using the explanation of terms to prompt your thoughts regarding the area.

- Give a score to each feature based on your opinion of whether it has a negative or positive contribution to the space.

- It is also worth noting how individual buildings, spaces or areas being assed related to the wider context such as how a building sits within a street or area. The setting and interrelationship between the single element - such as a building, and the wider context, such as a street, are just as important as the quality of the buildings themselves.

This Character Assessment Toolkit is divided into a series of themed questionnaires as set out within the Oxford Character Assessment Toolkit, that will prompt you to consider to consider the contribution of different features which might contribute to the character of the Babergh and Mid Suffolk Conservation Areas. The features listed are the main components of character but the list is not exhaustive. Depending upon the area being assessed not every feature of the list may be relevant to that location and comments only need to be entered where appropriate.

Each feature requires a brief comment of how you feel it contributes to the character and value of the surrounding area. The option is provided to assign a numerical value to reflect the 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 visible when comparing different surveys of the same asset.

Toolkit User Guidance

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 broader character themes, again, not everything contained within the list may be relevant and a comment or numerical value should only be entered where applicable.

Final Reaction

This prompts a final reassessment of your initial reactions to the area, allowing you to see if your perception of the asset's character has changed as a result of conducting an in depth study.

Spirit of Place

This is an open question allowing you to articulate what you feel about the place and how it influences your senses.

Assigning Numerical Values to Features

You may want to assign 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 can be difficult

- +1 to +5: Positive features that add to the character or special interest if the Conservation Area. This ranges from +1 which slightly adds to the character, to +5 that significantly adds to the character of the area.

- 0: Features that are neutral. They neither detract nor add from or to the character of the Conservation Area.

- -5 to -1: Negative features which detract or take away from the area. This ranges from -5 which is detracts significantly to -1 which slightly detracts.

Survey Details

Street/ Building/ Area Name	
Date	
Time	
Weather	

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		
Buildings		
Views		
Light/Dark		
Surfaces		
Greenery & Landscape		
Uses and Activity		
Noises and Smells		
General Comments		

	2. Spaces: A 'space' is normally the gap between buildings and other features. They may be formally designed or develop informally overtime. 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 can 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 and other greenery.	
Feature	Comments	Value -5 to +5
Formal / Informal Spaces		
Gaps Between Buildings		
Means of Enclosure		
Building Plots		
Wide / Open Spaces		
Narrow / Enclosed Spaces		
Winding / Straight Spaces		
Relationship of the Space to Building and Structures		
Uses and activity		
Paving Materials		
Street Furniture		
Impact of Vehicles and Traffic		
Usability and accessibility of the space		

3. 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 of similar architectural detailing? Do styles of windows, doors and other features add to the visual interest of the buildings, reflect their origins or use, or form part of a designed scheme? What conditions are the buildings in? Have changes increased or reduced their interest, or have they lost important feature?

Feature	Comments	Value –5 to +5
Contribution of the buildings to the space		
Size/ Scale		
Age		
Materials		
Windows		
Doors		
Roofs/ Chimneys/ Gables		
Uses (Past and Present)		
Can you tell if a building has been altered ?		
Condition		

4. 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 part of a public place? Are views glimpsed through gaps between buildings, channelled by lines or 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 local focal point? Does the view include an attractive frontage or roofscape? Is the view urban or rural in character? Do background features like the rural setting of places contribute to the view's attractiveness?

Feature	Comments	Value -5 to +5
Historic / Popular Views		
Form or View: Short or Long. Unfolding, Glimpsed , Channelled or wide and open		
Focal Points		
Streetscape		
Roofscape		
Urban / Rural Views		
Views Out of the Space		

5. 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 pond a significant feature within the area? Does it have scenic or wildlife value?

Feature	Comments	Value -5 to +5
Leafy and / or green image		
Hard urban		
Public / Private Greenery		
Does Water Form a Key Feature of the Area		
Topography		

6. Ambience: Many less tangible features, such as activity, changes in light during the day, shadows and reflections affect reactions 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		
Level of Activity		
Traffic		
Dark, Shady, Light, Airy		
Day and Night		
Smells and Noises		

7. 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 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?

Please rank in order of contribution between 1 (High) and 9 (Low)

Feature	Example Ranking	Your Hierarchy
Buildings	1	
Spaces	5	
Long/ Short Views	2	
Light / Dark	7	
Surfaces	6	
Greenery and Landscape Features	3	
Noise, Smell and Traffic	4	

8. Spirit of Place: Having undertaken the survey and scoring each feature, 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.