**New Town Heritage Explorers:**

**The Character Assessment Toolkit**

To save your own copy: File/ Download/Word

**Chosen Area:** [ADD YOUR NOTES HERE]

You could also use a **smartphone** to **record text** under each section, using the **microphone** or the keyboard.

Don’t forget to take **photos** of what you are observing!

## 

## **The Toolkit Sections**

In order to help you notice the many different characteristics in an area, the following five sections of this Toolkit provide a guide to what to look for.

1. Milton Keynes: A History of Design

2. Being Part of the wider City/ Town/ Village/ Area

3. Within the Area

4. The Public Realm & Details that Matter

5. Experience and the Senses.

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# **2** **MILTON KEYNES: A HISTORY OF DESIGN**

Visit the City Library and the City Discovery Centre to look at Milton Keynes’ historic maps, documents and drawings for your area of interest in particular. Community history records may also be relevant.

Historic Environment Records (HERs) contain information about the archaeology, built heritage, and history of an area.

· Does your area’s character come from its early pre-New Town history or its more recent New Town character and design? Which is more distinctive?

· How has the area’s use changed over time? What has caused that?

· Are there clear planning and design intentions that have shaped the area?

· Is that information easily available for others to find out about locally?

· Are there features that deserve more research and interpretation to explain this area’s historic character?

**Summary Notes:**

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# **3** **BEING PART OF THE WIDER CITY/ TOWN/ VILLAGE/ AREA**

**The shape of the landscape**

· What is the lay of the land? Are different ground levels or slopes a major part of the area?

· Do you have a sense of the scale of the wider area being here? What gives it that scale?

**Roads, streets, routes**

· Are the roads and main local roads or streets a dominant part of the area?

· Is it easy to walk, cycle, drive and catch buses to other places from here?

· How do the pavements, footpaths, bridleways, Redways, bridges or underpasses meet vehicle routes? Do they run alongside the main roads and is it easy to work out where you are?

· Do they provide direct connections to other places? And are they suitable for use all year round?

· What is the scale of the public routes – is it generous or just enough space?

· Is there a variety of street widths, tree planting, ground surfaces and lighting? Can you identify 2-3 types of streets for example?

· Are there views to nearby buildings? Are the nearby buildings tall, average or low-rise in height, and do they overlook the roads and paths?

**Land uses**

· What are the buildings used for in the area – residential, offices, shops, cafes and restaurants, industrial units or storage, a school, a community centre, healthcare (doctor, dentist or similar services), leisure and entertainment, religion, or something else?

· Are there many mixed use buildings, or groups of local facilities or activities in different buildings?

· Do any buildings seem to be underused or particularly busy? Are there some facilities missing that you would expect to find here?

**Natural or man-made green features**

· Are there visible or hidden water courses running through this area?

· Are they part of a canal or river network?

· Is the area liable to flood or become very boggy and so not used all year round?

· Are any parts of it designated as nature reserves or Sites of Special Scientific Interest – is there any information about that locally?

· Is this an area with signs of wildlife – insects, birds and other animals?

**Summary Notes:**

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# **4** **WITHIN THE AREA**

**The layout of development**

· Is this an area with a straight or curving street pattern?

· Is it a grid or a series of cul-de-sacs, or a mix of both?

· Is it related to another grid square in its character?

· Is it clearly divided into buildings (and car parking) or areas of open space? Or is it all intermingled?

**Buildings**

· Are the buildings in terraces, clusters, detached or standing alone?

· How many storeys do the buildings have? Are they generally the same size or very mixed in height and width?

· Do they look permanent or temporary?

· Does it seem very formal with planned spaces, or more natural and informal in its layout? If so, what adds to that formal or natural feel?

· Are there lots of common features between the buildings or have many of them been changed by their occupiers? Are they more attractive as a result?

· Do they seem spacious and well proportioned?

· What are the building materials?

· What are the roofs like? Are they similar or different shapes?

· Is there a pattern in the window shapes and sizes in the area?

· Are the buildings in a good condition and well maintained?

· Are there obvious energy-efficiency features in the design or added later (e.g. solar panels, external insulation, enclosed glass porches)?

· How would you describe the architectural period or style of the buildings?

· When do you think they were built?

**Streetscape**

· Are the buildings consistent in their layout along the street or are some set back and hidden by planting?

· Do they have rear gardens (or courtyard spaces), and does that make a difference to how the space in front of the buildings is used?

· Are the front gardens (or yards) similar or do they vary along the street?

· Is there a sense of enclosure from the buildings or trees and shrubs?

**Summary Notes:**

**5** **THE PUBLIC REALM & DETAILS THAT MATTER**

**Landmarks**

· Are there obvious visual landmarks that you can use to find your way around, such as public art, unusual buildings, a group of shops, a bridge, or a distinctive group of trees?

· Are there places where the layout includes gateways or entrance type features into the area? Does it still mark the start of the area or has something changed?

· Are there other ‘landmark’ places which you know but are hard to describe to others - a good place to sit or play, where there is often wildlife, or which remind you of a specific occasion?

**Views**

· Can you see other places from this area – are they wide open views or glimpses between buildings or trees?

· Are these obvious and well-known views or just known locally?

· What can you see – is it a specific public space or park, the roofs of nearby buildings, development in another area, the countryside surrounding Milton Keynes or a specific landmark in the city/ town/ village/ area?

**Green spaces**

· Are there public green spaces in the area?

· Have they been designed or laid out for a specific use – like playing fields or playgrounds, or is it space to gather by the shops, or a wildlife area?

· Are there many trees in this area, and where are they planted?

· Are there many shrubs and other plants, and are they in private gardens or public space?

· Are they formally laid out green spaces or more natural (e.g. is it symmetrical, in geometric shapes, and following a clear pattern)?

· Are there mostly paved or grassy areas? Are they well maintained and attractive to use?

· Have the green spaces changed in how they are used or kept, or their size?

· Are they in front of buildings, in a gap between buildings, or alongside vehicle routes?

· Are there specific boundaries, and does it feel enclosed or open?

· Do the nearby buildings overlook it? Is this welcome?

· Are there other features, building materials or furniture which make it distinctive and memorable?

· Is there nearby traffic or other movement (e.g. passing trains) which changes its character at different times?

· Are there 1-2 species, shapes or sizes of trees that have been planted widely here? Is this different to other areas that you know well?

· Is there a noticeable difference between the character of the private gardens and the public areas? Are they both equally green, or does one have more planting than the other?

**Car parking and service access**

· Is there much space for car parking in the area?

· Is it public (paid, with permits or free), private, on front gardens, along the street or in shared parking courtyards?

· Are there signs that car parking spills over to/ from other areas? What difference does that make to the overall street scene?

· Do the roads and paths which are ‘private roads’ or service lanes differ? Do they look better maintained?

· How are waste and recycling bins managed – is there enough space to keep them in front gardens or yards? Is there a shared bin storage area? Does it look like part of the original design or is it newer?

· Does the car parking and bin storage detract from the street scene or is it well planned?

· Are there bike stores or racks, and do they look well used?

· Are there signs for cycle and walking routes to other places?

**Summary Notes:**

**6** **EXPERIENCE & THE SENSES**

**Urban relationships**

· How do you see this area in relation to the rest of the city/ town/ village/ area? Is it fairly self-contained (like an old town or village), or part of the area as a whole, or even a special district (due to the activities that take place there, or its history)?

· Is it linked to other places in local perceptions?

· Are there obvious boundaries to the area - where it starts and finishes?

· What is the theme of the grid square’s name and its streets? Is there a link between the character of the area and its name?

· Is there any information locally about its design history and theme?

**Ambience**

· Is this a busy place - all year round, all week long or at specific times of day or night?

· Is it shady or well-lit by day and at night?

· Does it feel safe or unwelcoming? What is this caused by?

· Are there typical sounds or noises in this area and what do they contribute to its atmosphere?

· Does the presence of traffic or other passers-by affect how the area feels?

· Are there distinctive smells, and are these man-made or natural?

· What is the overall feel or atmosphere of the area? Does it feel safe, quiet, busy, chaotic, isolated, unpredictable, calm, people-friendly or car-dominated?

**Social history**

· Are there specific communities of people who live or work here?

· Do you know where they are from and what brought them to the area?

· How well established are the different communities, and are there signs of alterations to the buildings or spaces to reflect their needs?

**Summary Notes:**

**7** **ASSESSMENT & RECOMMENDATIONS**

· Having looked at your area in detail, what are the main features that define its character? This is your ‘Second Impression’, which may be different now that you have looked in detail at the area.

· Have any important characteristics or features been lost already?

· Are there threats to the character of the area that you can see?

· Will anything else change in the future and what would cause this?

· What are the opportunities here for improvements?

· What would be the most important message that you would pass on to others about this area and its future?

**TIP:** To put your assessment report together, you can either leave the questions in place and add your observations under each section, or turn the questions directly into new sentences!