

New Towns Heritage Explorers:
The Character Assessment Toolkit

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This Character Assessment Toolkit has been designed to help communities and professionals to identify what gives places their character, and how to use this information to manage their future.

This report provides guidance on how to undertake an assessment, as well as the key toolkit questions to answer, and what to do with the assessment report that you will produce. Pages 5-15 contain the five main toolkit sections, and can be printed off for the assessment walkabout itself.

I Getting organised

I.1 How large an area to assess?

Preparing a character assessment should be done as a group, so that a range of views are gathered and not just one person's ideas about a place. It is useful to contact local residents' associations, civic societies, historical societies, and parish and town councils to find volunteers, and to suggest forming a working group.

Having found a group of interested people to work with, look at a map of your area to decide how large an area to assess. This might be obvious with grid roads, the railways, canal or river, or place names marking the start of one area and the edge of another.

There is no limit to the size of an area to look at, but there are likely to be many different character areas (and then recommendations to draw up) with larger areas. It is useful to work out roughly where the different areas might be before you go out to look at them. Using Google or Bing maps and aerial views, you can plan a walking route, who will do which areas or sections of the toolkit questions where, and focus on the most important parts first.

It is useful to let the local parish council know what you are planning to do, in case there is already a Neighbourhood Planning group which would find the assessment useful, or there are others thinking of doing a character assessment in the same area. It will also be beneficial to have your final report adopted by the parish council afterwards as a Community Plan or Action Plan, or at least available to download via their website.

1.2 Recording your findings

Before setting off to assess your area, look for a map which shows buildings, paths, roads and areas of trees, plus street names – for example 1:2500 or 1:1250 Ordnance Survey maps (www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk). These are available from local libraries to copy at A4 or can be accessed as a 7 day free trial online. If you are doing this assessment as part of a Neighbourhood Plan, the local council will be able to provide maps for the formal Neighbourhood Plan Designated Area in different file formats and as paper copies.

Print off several copies of the map and the toolkit questions below to fill in when you are out, and read through the prompts beforehand.

One of the most valuable things to do is to photograph what you see to explain it to others, so a camera is essential. Setting up a file sharing folder with your group will help to gather all of the information in one place – e.g. Dropbox.

1.3 Going out for a walkabout

It is important to take the time to walk, rather than drive, around the area you are assessing, so that you see it from different perspectives and experience it as other local people do. You could work in pairs or in small groups, but it will be important to have more than one person looking at each area.

An important first step is to record your first impressions of the area and why. Then go out, make notes and take lots of photographs, as these and online aerial photos will be useful evidence for the assessment later. You may not need to answer every question, as not all places have the same features or characteristics, and there is no need to repeat observations that you have already made earlier in the questions.

Once you have finished your walkabout, remember to record your ‘Second Impression’, which may be different now that you have looked in detail at the area.

1.4 Agreeing the Assessment & Recommendations

Having assessed the area using the toolkit questions below, it is important to re-group and pool all of your observations and findings. Using the map and the notes, it will be

important to agree as a group what the assessment has found in general, and what recommendations you would like to make.

1.5 Pulling it all together

The value of the toolkit approach is that it will allow other people to read and follow your assessment of the area afterwards. In order to produce a report to share or submit to others, your group will need to write a short summary of the findings from the questions that they each studied, provide photos and a map which shows the area and the main characteristics. The simplest file formats to use are Microsoft Word, Publisher or PowerPoint. The questions in the toolkit are designed to be easily edited into a new report.

One or two people in the group will need to act as editors to assemble the final report, and ensure that all of the issues observed are noted clearly.

1.6 What to do next

As the main reason for using the toolkit to do an assessment is to record how the area has changed over time, how it is today, and how it might be improved in the future, it will be important to ensure that the final report is given plenty of publicity and is available to download freely. This will ensure that future developers, designers, the local planning authority, the parish council and those responsible for maintaining local facilities and places, community groups and local residents are aware of the recommendations. You may want to publicise it locally and invite feedback on it first.

If you want to comment on a planning application or a proposed planning or policy document, the assessment can be used to support your comments. In the case of Neighbourhood Plans, the assessment and recommendations will form the starting point for writing policies to conserve and enhance the area's characteristics.

1.7 Still unsure?

If having read about the process of doing a character assessment, you are unsure if this is useful, the benefits of undertaking an assessment are that:

- This is an opportunity to learn about and record how an area has evolved, and use historic archives to chart its progress to-date;

- Potential local improvements can be identified, presented clearly to others and campaigned for;
- Undesirable changes to the area's character can be avoided by explaining in advance what makes up the local character and why those features matter; and
- When working together local communities form good relationships which last.

1.8 First Impressions

Before you go and look at your area in detail, use this space to record your impressions of the area first. It will be useful to compare this with what you conclude at the end of the assessment process:

1.9 The Toolkit Sections

In order to help you notice the many different aspects of Milton Keynes' character, 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 City
3. Within Areas and Grid Squares
4. The Public Realm & Details that Matter
5. Experience & The Senses.

I. 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:
- Does the area's character come from its early pre-New Town history or its 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:

2. BEING PART OF THE CITY

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 city being here? What gives it that scale?

Roads, streets, routes

- Are the grid 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, Redways, bridges and underpasses, footpaths and bridleways meet vehicle routes? 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 here – 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 the Grand Union Canal or the River Ouzel?
- 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?

Summary Notes:

3. WITHIN AREAS AND GRID SQUARES

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?
- 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 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:

4. 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 see 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 about locally?
- What can you see – is it a specific public space or park, the roofs of nearby buildings, development in another grid square, the countryside surrounding MK or a specific landmark in the city?

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, 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?
- 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 or free), private, on front gardens, along the street or in shared parking courtyards?
- Are there signs that car parking spills over onto 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:

5. EXPERIENCE & THE SENSES

Intercity relationships

- How do you see this area in relation to the rest of the city? Is it fairly self-contained (like one of the older towns and larger villages), or part of the city as a whole, or even a special area (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 have come from and why?
- How well established are the communities, and are there signs of alterations to the buildings or spaces to reflect their needs?

Summary Notes:

6. 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?