CHARACTER ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT

INTRODUCTION

This character assessment toolkit is designed to help you examine the character of areas, buildings and places in the Parish to identify the features that contribute to their distinctiveness, interest and amenity. It also provides opportunities to identify features or issues that detract from the character of areas, spaces and buildings.

How the toolkit will be used

The historic environment makes an important contribution to the character of the Parish as a distinctive, interesting and special place. The buildings, spaces, associations and history that combine to create places mean different things to different people. The toolkit should help you to analyse the character of areas, spaces and buildings in a structured way. This should help to identify, define and understand the significance and value of different features of the environment that contribute to its character and distinctiveness.

While there is an accepted need for some change to occur within the Parish, proposals for change should be measured against their existing significance to ensure that their present values are not eroded. This should help to ensure that change enhances and sustains the value of the historic and rural environment of the Parish for ourselves and future generations. The evidence and understanding provided by the process will enable management of change in an effective and positive manner.

What makes up character?

Elements of character include both the uses of an area and its physical features, such as styles of building, construction materials, architectural details or green landscape features. Others elements of character may be more emotional or personal perceptions of a place, such as historical or cultural associations with a place or building. Others may be relatively ephemeral or transitory, such as the smells and sounds associated with particular activities, which may occur only at certain times of the day or year. The features, listed in the Survey Sheets below, are common components of character, but the list is not exhaustive.

HOW TO USE THE TOOLKIT

Undertaking your character assessment

In undertaking your assessment it is important to visit the area/building/space to complete a visual survey. In pilot studies, people have found they prefer to take photos and make brief notes whilst in the area, giving them time to examining the surroundings. They then make more detailed notes on the questionnaire, once they have completed the survey. Although there is no prescribed method for carrying out an assessment, the following structure may be helpful:

- Take an initial walk around your survey area. Use this opportunity to note your initial thoughts/ perceptions of the area and assign a score (see below) to the broad character features.

- Taking photographs is strongly recommended as they can illustrate and visually explain any comments you make on the questionnaire. They are also useful to look back over after you have completed the survey.

- Annotating a street plan/map is also a useful way to explain certain features e.g. direction of views, location of key buildings, spaces, etc.

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

- Give a score to each feature based on your opinion of its negative or positive contribution to the space.
- It is also worth noting how the building/space/area being assessed relates to its wider context e.g. how a building sits within a street or a street within an area. The setting and interrelationships between the single element, such as a building, and the wider context, such as the street, are just as important as the quality of the buildings themselves.

The tool kit is divided into a series of themed questionnaires that will prompt you to consider the contribution of different features that might contribute to the character of the area/building/space. The features listed are the main components of character but the list is not exhaustive. Depending upon the asset being assessed e.g. a building, street, space etc, not every feature in the list may be relevant and a comment should be entered only where applicable.

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

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 of the broader character themes. Again, not every feature in the list may be relevant and a comment and a numerical value should be entered only where applicable.

Final Reaction

This prompts a reassessment of your initial reactions. It allows you to see if your perception of the asset's character has changed as a result of the in-depth study. Try placing the nine character groups in an order of preference, with '1' being the feature you feel the most important contribution to its character and '9' the least.

Spirit of Place

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

Assigning numerical values to features

Assigning 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 and written comments can be difficult

- +1 to +5: Positive features that add to the character or special nature of an area. This ranges from +1, slightly adds to the character, to +5, that significantly adds to the character.
- 0: Neutral features that are neutral. They neither detract nor add from/to the character of the area.
- -5 to -1: Negative features that detract/take away from the area. This ranges from -5, significantly detract, to -1, slightly detract.

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 over time. 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 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 or 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 BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES		
USES AND ACTIVITY		
PAVING MATERIALS		
STREET FURNITURE		

IMPACT OF VEHICLES AND TRAFFIC		
USABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE SPACE		

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

FEATURE	*COMMENTS*	*VALUE -5 TO +5*
CONTRIBUTION OF 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		

4.0 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 a part of a public place? Are views glimpsed through gaps between buildings, channelled by lines of 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 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 contribute to the view's attractiveness?

FEATURE	*COMMENTS*	*VALUE -5 TO +5*
HISTORIC / POPULAR VIEWS		
FORM OF VIEW: SHORT OR LONG, UNFOLDING, GLIMPSED, CHANNELLED OR WIDE AND OPEN		
FOCAL POINTS		
STREETSCAPE		
ROOFSCAPE		

URBAN/RURAL VIEWS		
VIEWS OUT OF THE SPACE		

5.0 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 of canal a significant feature in the area? Does it have scenic or wildlife value?

FEATURE	COMMENTS	VALUE -5 TO +5
LEAFY AND/OR GREEN IMAGE		
HARD URBAN LANDSCAPE		
PUBLIC/PRIVATE GREENERY		
DOES WATER FORM A KEY FEATURE OF THE AREA		
TOPOGRAPHY		

6.0 AMBIENCE: Many less tangible features, such as activity, changes in light during the day, shadows and reflections affect reaction 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		
NOISES		

7.0: 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 you 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.

RANK IN ORDER OF CONTRIBUTION BETWEEN 1 (HIGH) AND 9 (LOW)

FEATURE	*EXAMPLE*	*YOUR* *HIERARCHY*
BUILDINGS	1	
SPACES	5	
LONG/SHORT VIEWS	2	
LIGHT/DARK	4	
SURFACES	3	
GREENERY & LANDSCAPE FEATURES	6	
NOISE, SMELL AND TRAFFIC	7	