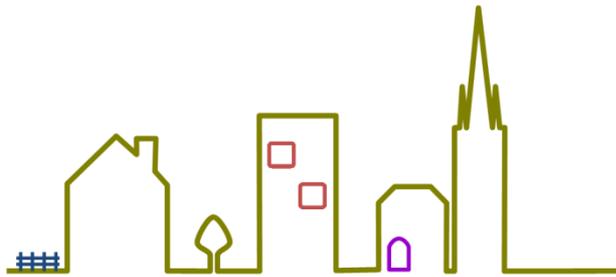


High Quality Design in Oxford

Respecting Heritage and Achieving Local Distinctiveness

Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)

Paper to support the questionnaire about the issues and proposed approach of the SPD



February 2015



INTRODUCTION

Managing change

1. Oxford is a world-renowned historic city with a rich and diverse built heritage. It is also a dynamic city that must adapt and change. Managing this change in a way that respects the city's heritage is vital for the continued success of the city, for the benefit of people who live and work here and for businesses to continue to thrive here.

2. Successful design and the heritage of Oxford should not be separated. Oxford's historic environment and local townscapes are themselves the product of change and should be considered as an inspiration for good urban design. For the continued success of the city, new design must be of high quality, and this means it must draw from and respect Oxford's heritage. Design should respect the old but also perpetuate the tradition in Oxford of creating great modern buildings of such quality that they endure as world-class buildings. However, all modern buildings should contribute to local distinctiveness; it is not just the 'landmark' buildings that are important.

What is this document?

3. The City Council is committed to producing a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) to ensure that high quality design is achieved in all new developments across Oxford. This project is still in the early stages. Several streams of work are being used to inform the scope of the document, including the Heritage Plan Framework, which itself is informed by public engagement and which identifies a need for further planning guidance.

4. This early scoping work has helped to identify the main issues (set out in Appendix 1) that we feel the Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) could help to address. This has led to some aims for the document and we have started to develop ideas for how the document could work to achieve these aims.

5. We would like your opinion on whether you agree with the general approach we propose in this document. We would also like to know whether you think we have missed any issues or aims and any other ideas you may have for addressing them. **We have produced a questionnaire to use alongside this document.**

Issues

6. A number of issues that the SPD might address have been identified through discussion within the City Council and also some early discussion with stakeholders. These issues are set out below. They are grouped depending on whether they relate to outcomes, processes or the need for further information and guidance.

ISSUES

OUTCOMES

- Design quality of new development often drops outside of conservation areas;
- Shop fronts and signs are often generic and not designed to fit with the building as a whole or their position in Oxford;
- Private parking often has a negative design impact on front gardens and streetscape.

PROCESSES

- Design and access statements vary in their detail, quality and usefulness;
- Design and access statements are not required for most householder applications, so many proposals are presented without any design rationale;
- There is likely to be reluctance from officers to negotiate to improve design if it affects timescale targets. More guidance to ensure applications are of high design quality in the first place would be beneficial;
- It is not always easy for officers or members to feel confident in making a design judgement, particularly if there is not enough detailed backup in planning guidance;
- Some detailed matters that may affect the overall design of a scheme are often left to condition e.g. bin/bike store, materials, landscaping, boundary treatments, SUDs.

INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE NEEDED

- New work as part of the Heritage Plan such as the View Cones study, Local List/OHAR, Character Appraisal could have more guidance on when to use it, who should use it, how to use it;
- Further guidance is required on how to interpret Local Plan policies about heritage, in particular Policy HE.9 about the high building area and HE.10 about view cones;
- Guidance on how design should reflect or draw from the character of the area it is in, regardless of whether it is in an area designated for its heritage value. There is also a lack of guidance on residential parking design;
- There is a lack of specific design guidance for Oxford as a whole and especially outside of Conservation Areas, leading to a lack of recognition of what makes Oxford special.

Aims of the SPD

7. The intention of the SPD will be to guide developers to understand the context of the city and local area in which they are seeking to develop, and to respond to it appropriately with their design. The SPD will seek to ensure a high standard of design in submitted planning applications by encouraging a clear design rationale to be developed from the start and explained in planning applications. It should provide specific design guidance to explain the general principles of good design. By bringing information together, stating what we expect and what is needed to meet policy requirements, it should make it easier to assess planning applications and speed up the decision making process, as well as ensuring good design from the outset.

8. It is intended that the SPD will complement and support the Oxford Design Review Panel process, which aims to raise the standard of design in major and significant development schemes across the city. Whilst the SPD could potentially take a broader approach by considering all scales of development, both the SPD and the Oxford Design Review Panel have common aims in ensuring that design issues are considered from the very early stages.

Next steps

9. We will collate comments we receive through the questionnaire and publish a consultation report in Spring 2015. We will use your responses to help inform the draft document, and we will consult on that draft later in 2015.

PROPOSED CONTENT OF THE SPD

PART A: DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENTS

10. One of the documents that the City Council requires to support many types of planning application is a design and access statement. This document is used to explain the design evolution and concept.

11. Our website contains guidance on what to include in a design and access statement, and further guidance is readily available online. However, design and access statements can vary in quality and value.

12. We feel that there is an opportunity to improve the consistency of design and access statements, using them to help ensure design quality and to help planning officers to assess design and determine applications. A central proposal we have for the SPD is for it to include design and access statement templates to be completed. The templates will be worded to help developers completing them to show how the requirement for high quality design (as set out in Core Strategy Policy CS18 and National Planning Policy Framework) has been met. The intention of the SPD is not to have design guidance that leads to 'tick-box' schemes, and the design and access statement templates will not be written with an expectation of any style of design. Instead, we intend to write the templates as series of carefully considered questions. The questions will be framed to ensure that all steps in creating good design are followed.

13. We are considering providing these templates for all types and scales of proposed developments, including those that are not required to submit design and access statements, such as many types of householder planning applications. The templates will be intended to help applicants demonstrate they comply with our policies and the overall aspiration of the SPD to ensure high quality design in Oxford. Several templates would be needed, including one template with questions to be filled out for larger developments and another that contains only a few easy-to-answer questions that will be relevant to smaller developments such as residential extensions.

See Part A of the questionnaire for questions on this section

PART B: IDENTIFYING LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS AND HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

14. The starting point of good design is understanding the site’s context. Design should respond to location, rather than be in a style that could be used anywhere.

15. An analysis needs to take place of the character of the surrounding area. The design and access statement template could ask questions about what features are characteristic of the area and contribute to a sense of local distinctiveness. Understanding what contributes to the valued characteristics of an area leads to an understanding of how to reflect and enhance those characteristics, helping to create a stronger sense of place. Consideration should also be given to what might threaten characteristics that are important to creating local distinctiveness.

16. We are considering including character descriptions of areas across the city in the SPD, with pointers to typical positive characteristics in the area and potential threats and opportunities. Based on this, a set of principles to guide design in the area could be developed and included in the character area summaries. The level of detail included in any character area summaries is likely to be quite general but they could be a useful starting point to help developers answer the questions in the design and access statement template.

17. There are infinite ways that the city might be divided into character areas, and previous work has divided the city in different ways. Defining character areas will supplement existing work such as Conservation Area Appraisals. Rather than being part of the main body of the SPD, these character area appraisals could be produced as supplements, allowing the opportunity for them to be developed over time, adapted to refer to the most up-to-date Conservation Area Appraisals and accommodating work carried out by neighbourhood planning groups etc. The following table sets out possible options for character areas appraisals for the SPD.

<p>Option 1 Do not provide any background information on any character areas of Oxford</p>	<p>Because detailed street-level analysis will always be required, it could be considered unnecessary to have any more detailed guidance. However, it is important to also understand the wider area’s key characteristics, features and history, and this option does not help developers or decision makers to understand what it important to the area overall.</p>
<p>Option 2 Provide guidance on the character types shown in the map at Appendix 2</p>	<p>General descriptions and key features would be given for the character of the historic core, historic villages, 18th, 19th, 20th century suburbs and institutional/business areas. Further divisions are possible, for example dividing early and later 20th Century suburbs.</p>
<p>Option 3 Using zones identified in the Landscape Character Appraisal</p>	<p>This identified over 50 areas, which is likely to be quite unmanageable in terms of providing guidance in the SPD. Because the immediate local area will always need to be considered as well as the wider character area, and more in-depth analysis will always be required as part of the</p>

	design process, it is considered that these areas may be unnecessarily small.
Option 4 Redraw character areas, perhaps adapting or combining approach 2/3.	

See Part B of the questionnaire for questions on this section

PART C: EXPLAINING HOW TO RESPOND TO LOCAL CONTEXT

18. The intention of the SPD will not be to dictate design styles or be prescriptive about design. Developing an understanding of the site’s context does not mean that the only valid design response will be to try to copy the surrounding style. It is not the case that all schemes will need to be of the same materials, height and massing of the surrounding area. Contemporary, traditional and vernacular pastiche styles of design may be appropriate. The SPD will focus on ensuring that the proposed design is thoughtful in terms of layout, scale, massing, built form and landscaping in a way that responds to and achieves harmony with its surroundings or that injects high quality design that improves the area.

19. As part of the design process there should be consideration of the local context and positive and negative contributions to local distinctiveness that have been identified through the analysis. The table below shows the aspects of local distinctiveness and character for which the SPD could give an explanation of how design should respond.

20. Some information could be included in the character area descriptions that might form part of the SPD. The level of detail included in any descriptions of wider character areas will need to strike a balance between useful detail and providing so much detail that it won’t be relevant across a whole area or that will be too large and resource-intensive to be manageable as part of the SPD. Where new large-scale greenfield developments are proposed, the City Council will expect design codes to guide the character of the new development. The City Council will provide these to support any Area Action Plans it produces.

Local Context Topic	Detail that may be included in the SPD to explain how design should respond to its context.	Area-specific detail that may that may be included in each character area description.
Heritage	Before commencing with design, it should be identified whether there is a designated heritage asset nearby. Its setting, and whether the development site is in its setting, should be identified. The SPD will include a definition of setting and explain how to assess setting. It will also set out the	If the SPD includes information on themed character areas (ie, key features of historic villages in the city considered as a whole, rather than an area-based description of each one) it will not be possible to include area-specific information, although the SPD can still refer to lists of statutory and locally listed

	criteria that define a heritage asset, and state that all development sites should be considered against these criteria.	heritage assets.
Views	The SPD will note the importance of views in Oxford and a description of important views may be included. The View Cones study will be referred to, and when to use it explained. Guidance will be given on how to preserve important views, particularly any contribution to the views of central Oxford. Guidance will also be given on how to identify important views/vistas near to a development site, and how these might inform design.	It may be possible to integrate information about important views into the character area descriptions, but this will depend on the character areas chosen. If the SPD includes information on themed character areas (ie, key features of historic villages in the city considered as a whole, rather than an area-based description of each one) it will not be possible to include information on specific views.
Street-layout	This is a larger-scale aspect of design and will be relevant mainly to larger new developments. The SPD could include suggestions as to how new development may fit into existing layout styles, or help to overcome any problems with the existing layout.	The character area sections of the SPD could include a description of street patterns and block layouts in the character area.
Smaller-scale details of building and street layouts, eg building set-backs, typical boundary markers (railings, garden walls etc), whether there are gaps between buildings and the relationship between buildings and open spaces.	The SPD will explain the importance of responding to the details of buildings/architecture in the area, covering building massing scale and proportions, roof and window types, materials and common features and detailing in the area. It will make it clear that good design does not necessarily mean copying these existing features.	The character area descriptions could cover some of these details, although it will only be in a very general sense. It is this level of detail that is most likely to vary from street to street and will require some kind of character analysis at street level. For building details such as materials, general guidance on high quality might be adequate. There is a danger that by including a description of these details by area it will seem that we are suggesting they should be copied in new developments.

See Part C of the questionnaire for questions on this section

PART D: IDEAS FOR EXTRA GUIDANCE ON SPECIFIC TOPICS

21. Often, detailed elements of a scheme are not decided at the planning application stage but are left to condition, with details to be submitted prior to commencement of the development. Some of these detailed elements are important to the overall success of the scheme. Ancillary services such as cycle parking and bin stores are best considered from the beginning of the design process, otherwise there may be only an awkward, retro-fitted solution that is not in keeping with the rest of the scheme. Providing more detail up-front will be of benefit to the developer/householder as there will not be later costs or time delays to discharge a condition.

22. It is intended that the SPD will set out the details that would be expected in order to help determine a planning application. Guidance on how to address matters such as landscaping would be provided as separate sections of the SPD or as linked Technical Advice Notes. They will give information relating to particular design matters, which will be sensible to have in a document that can be easily updated. The table below lists the general design guidance that we may produce in order to help ensure that these detailed elements of a scheme are got right from the start.

Design guidance topics	What this might include
Householder alterations and extensions	This will give some guidelines, based on leaflets already produced by the City Council. However, the focus will be on using an understanding of the particular circumstances and characteristics of the existing home as the starting point for designing an extension. An understanding of the local street scene is important, for example attention to the general style of houses in the area, spaces between them, boundaries (walls, fences, railings, hedges) and planting. Also important is a site appraisal. This should look at levels, position in relation to neighbouring dwellings, path of the sun, positions of windows on the dwellings and neighbouring dwellings and any significant vegetation. The analysis of the site and its setting will inform the shape, position and scale of any extension.
Bicycle and bin storage	Guidance on how these should be provided in a way that is not an uncomfortable add-on to a scheme.
Materials	Type and colour of bricks; surface treatments and other materials.
Boundary treatments	Hedging, fencing and boundary walls.
Sustainable drainage	Guidance on types of systems that are available and preferable.
Window design and materials	General guidance on what we expect.
Chimneys, flues, guttering and pipes	General guidance on how to use these features to enhance the design of a scheme and ensure high quality.
Biodiversity enhancements	Trees and hedgerow selection and other measures to enhance biodiversity.
Landscaping	Form; layout; accessibility. Guidance on communal areas and creating areas of privacy for flats. Could be combined with biodiversity guidance.
Public art	Giving good examples of how public art can be integrated in to schemes and also how public art might be multi-functional, and well used in a way that gives identity to new developments.
Advertisements	Size; colour; illumination; A boards; estate agent boards.
Shop fronts	Some general guidance on shop fronts can be included, but some guidance will need to relate to the local area. Guidance may be concentrated on the city centre initially.
Accessibility and equality	Wheelchair accessibility; seating; shading; signage; safety (we already have a Technical Advice Note on internal Lifetime Home Standards).
Car and cycle parking	Layout; orientation; impact on streetscape and front gardens (we already have guidance on the number of parking spaces in the Sites and Housing plan and The Parking Standards SPD).

See Part D of the questionnaire for questions on this section

APPENDIX 1– CHARACTER AREAS FOR PART B OPTION 2

These divisions are based on an update of the landuse character areas using research carried out for the Heritage Assets Register Project, with the choice of categories based on the 'Place' section of the Oxford Heritage Statement.

