

# Draft Central Oxford (City and University) Conservation Area Appraisal

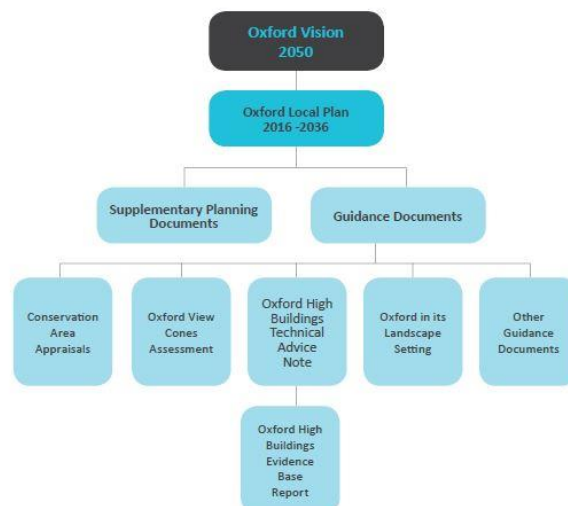
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Conservation Area Appraisals are required to include a management plan or guidance to aid the process of managed change for residents, institutions, developers, and other stakeholders. The guidance is presented under a series of headings where the principal issues are identified with recommendations to address them. The recommendations for these future changes will involve the collaboration of all who use, work in, and enjoy the conservation area.

The Management Plan and Design Advice forms part of the main Central (City & University) Conservation Area Appraisal and this document sits underneath the Local Plan, as shown below. These documents are part of the Local Plan and will be taken into consideration by planners. It is expected that any proposals for development within the conservation area will have taken the Management Plan and Design Advice into account and shaped the proposal around their requirements.

Policy and Guidance Hierarchy



## **7.1 Effects of Designation**

In order to protect the special environment, stricter controls exist within conservation areas, restricting the kinds of alterations that may be carried out without specific planning permission. These are not intended as a hindrance to change, but as positive management to safeguard the character of the area as a whole. There are greater restrictions relating to extensions and alterations, new buildings, cladding, satellite dishes and flues. There is also greater control over demolition and works to trees and adverts.

Up to date information about what works require planning permission in a conservation area can be found online at: [www.planningportal.co.uk](http://www.planningportal.co.uk).

## **7.2 Streets, public spaces and green and blue space**

One of the weakest aspects of the Central Oxford (City and University) Conservation Area is the shortage of public open space and the condition and appearance of its streets. In part, this is the legacy of the Saxon and medieval street layout which comprises narrow streets and few designed public spaces that can now be heavily congested. But it also reflects the popularity and success of the city, resulting in the sheer number of people and vehicles trying to use these streets. And it reflects too, past policy and practice in transport and public realm design.

Green space is a major contributor to the special interest of the conservation area, but the greater majority is privately owned and managed with limited public access. Blue spaces (rivers and the canal) are also an important contribution to the character of the conservation area and have formed a key role in the history and development of the area, but these are often less visually and physically accessible.

### **Key issues:**

- Shortage of public space putting pressure on the main streets: summer tourists increase this pressure, reaching pedestrian saturation.
- Accessibility constraints for pedestrians because of the narrow and congested pavements and busy streets with vehicles.
- Large amounts of street furniture and clutter: advertising boards, undocked bikes and scooters, bins, traffic signs and signals.
- The wide number of stakeholders/actors that have responsibility for the public realm.
- Shortage of public resting areas.
- Shortage of publicly accessible green space and limited access to blue space.
- Inconsistent design, materials, quality and maintenance of street materials and furniture.
- Low numbers of street trees in some areas.

## Recommendations

- Prioritise a series of renewals to enhance the appearance of streets, including systematic decluttering and introduction of appropriate high-quality, robust surfacing materials.
- Greater emphasis on the coordination and management of the public realm and streetscene.
- Increase pedestrianised public space by converting, better utilising and reimagining key areas such as Broad Street and St Giles.
- Support the increased pedestrianisation of streets where these are recommended by transport and place making strategies.
- Identify opportunities to plant new trees that are appropriate to and enhance the specific character and appearance of individual streets and spaces.
- Support strategies for shared space with pedestrians and then cyclists having priority over motor vehicles.
- Identify opportunities to increase public access to existing private green space with coordinated and publicised opening hours.
- Identify and make the most of opportunities to link up networks of public spaces, particularly green spaces and green corridors and secondary streets.
- Take opportunities for major new development to improve pedestrian and cycle connectivity and incorporate public open space, street trees, and soft landscaping.
- Publish guidance on the design of streets and public spaces using coordinated approaches to lighting, high-quality materials, furniture and designs.
- Keep up to date an advertising and shopfront guide, including a targeted enforcement strategy and the reduction of street clutter.

## 7.3 Transport

The negative impact of traffic, particularly buses and coaches, is widely acknowledged as one of the most significant threats to the character and appearance of the conservation area. Its appearance and noise affects the ability to enjoy the space and its pollution and vibration is accelerating the physical deterioration of historic buildings and landscapes. The impact of traffic is not uniform, and is greatest on the main streets where vehicles and pedestrians are using the same space, such as Carfax, Beaumont Street, St Aldates and the top of the High Street. Parking and the lack of appropriate cycle storage can exacerbate the impacts.

### Key Issues:

- Volume of traffic within the centre has visual, noise, and vibration impacts on historic buildings and settings
- The size and frequency of buses and large coaches have a significant negative impact by adding to congestion, visually intruding through inappropriate parking, such as on St Giles and depositing increased levels of pollution on the city's historic buildings
- Parking reduces the amount of public space available, such as on Broad Street
- Lack of coordinated cycle storage
- The increase in number and movement of delivery vehicles generated by the virtual economy
- Future requirement for electric vehicle charging points

### **Recommendations**

- Reduce the volume of traffic within the historic core by supporting the Zero Emission Zone and other strategies.
- Identify appropriate locations for tourist coach drop-off points, and parking locations outside the historic core.
- Implement a coordinated approach to cable-laying and charge point design for electric vehicle charging that takes into account buried archaeology and visual appearance.
- Adopt a coordinated approach to bicycle parking.
- Support the exploration of other solutions for the final mile of deliveries within the historic core to reduce congestion and emissions within the conservation area.

### **7.4 Uses**

The distinctive mix of uses in central Oxford, particularly the University and colleges, is fundamental to its unique appearance and sense of place. However, the balance and nature of uses is not static. Retail trends, tourism, and educational expansion will all have an impact on the future management of the conservation area.

#### **Key issues:**

- Distinctive mixture of uses which changes response to economic, educational, and residential demands.
- Decrease in private residential accommodation and non-educational accommodation.
- Changes in retail behaviour due to economic impact, impact of the pandemic and increases in online purchases.
- The reduction of the amount of retail in historically retail-based streets such as the High Street and Cornmarket Street.
- Small number of landowners with long-term commitment and an interest in the vitality and quality of the city centre means the city is unusually well-placed to respond to these changes.
- There are different retail needs within the city centre, varying from catering for mass tourism as well as local and regional needs. Meeting these needs requires a balancing of the provision for these different needs.
- The impact of permitted development rights allowing a change of use from office to residential and the change in the use class order (e class).

## Recommendations

- Adopt a retail strategy that seeks to retain retail within historic retail buildings and streets.
- Adopt a Covered Market masterplan as part of the revitalisation of historic retail areas.
- Adopt a Shopfront and Advertising Guide as part of the City Centre Strategy to improve the quality and appearance of retail areas, including consideration of an Area of Special Control of Advertisements.
- Work with stakeholders to sustain and reinstate ground floor activity where this historically existed to reduce inactive frontages, and explore opportunities to reuse upper floors to maximise retail, office, and residential uses.
- Support continued residential uses in historically residential streets.

## 7.5 Setting and views

More so than most conservation areas, the setting of Oxford's Central (City and University) Conservation Area is part of its character and appearance. The famed skyline is a centuries-old product of the relationship between the architecture of the city centre and its setting. This setting is commonly thought of in terms of the green hills rising up around the city, but the importance of the low-rise character of Oxford's suburbs to maintaining this relationship should not be underestimated. Equally, the distinct variations in the character of the conservation area's setting from one side to another have a significant effect on determining what kind of development might be acceptable where.

The importance and vulnerability of the setting of the city centre has long been recognised, culminating in the adoption of strategic View Cones and the 'Carfax Rule' in 1962. More recently, the City Council published the *Oxford High Buildings Technical Advice Note* to enable it to shape and assess development outside and inside the city centre in ways that would not harm the significance of the historic environment, including the Central Conservation Area.

The Technical Advice Note contains a robust methodology, clear design guidance and detailed recommendations on acceptable building heights in the different parts of the city where development could be accommodated without harming the significance of the skyline. The effective implementation of the *Technical Advice Note* will be one of the most important tools for the management of the Conservation Area.

In managing the impact of development outside the Conservation Area, consideration should be given to the immediate setting as much as the wider city and landscape. Development on sites adjacent or close to the boundary of the Conservation Area could affect its significance. For example, they could harm the character and appearance of the historic approaches from the south, north and west, and taller buildings could be out of proportion with the modest historic scale and nature of buildings on the western edge.

### Key issues:

- Internationally renowned skyline with strong relationship to landscape surroundings.
- Significance of setting varies depending on location within the conservation area.
- Setting and views should be a key consideration of new development proposals.

- *Oxford High Buildings Technical Advice Note* is the primary planning tool for managing the impact of new development on the skyline and setting.
- *Oxford View Cones Assessment* is robust evidence for the management of view cones and could be complemented by a similar study for the relationship between buildings and space views at street level.

#### **Recommendations**

- Planning proposals which may affect the setting, skyline, or roofscape of the conservation area should demonstrate application of the methodology and guidance within the *Oxford High Buildings Technical Advice Note*.
- 3D models of planning proposals should also be viewed within the City Council's Vu.City 3D model of Oxford to assist with the assessment of impact on views and setting.

## **7.6 Archaeology**

The conservation area's archaeology is integral to its special interest and inseparable from its history. Much is of national importance, including for example, evidence of the Saxon and Norman town, the medieval defenses and some of the most significant civil war fortifications in the country.

Not all of this is Scheduled, but its significance is no less for this. In the Local Plan and the *Archaeological Action Plan*, the city has well-established policies and guidance for managing this archaeology, which benefit from a long and unbroken tradition of scholarship and excavation in the city.

A challenge for the conservation area, identified in the *Archaeological Action Plan*, is to support commercial and educational developments whilst avoiding significant cumulative loss of important buried remains.

#### **Key issues:**

- Wealth of evidence of past human activity lies beneath the streets and buildings, particularly with reference to the Civil War.
- Few areas of nationally significant archaeology have been protected under legislation as Scheduled Monuments.
- Large amount of medieval urban archaeology preserved beneath college courtyards and gardens.
- The *Oxford Archaeological Action Plan* and supportive planning policy aids effective management of archaeology in the city.
- Major development sites will require careful archaeological management and could yield valuable new information.

### Recommendations

- The *Oxford Archaeological Action Plan* should be reviewed and updated as necessary, including the resource assessment and research agenda.
- Continue collaboration between City and County Councils, local archaeology groups, and developers.
- Encourage colleges and major institutions to introduce archaeological management plans for the long-term preservation of buried archaeology.
- Ensure the impact on buried archaeology is considered at the earliest stages of development proposals to inform development design.

### 7.7 Opportunity Sites and Areas of Enhancement

- Opportunity sites: where the possibility of wholesale replacement has been identified as enabling the removal of an unsympathetic building incapable of adaption; the replacement would be designed as an enhancement to the conservation area. Or where external alterations, roof extensions, and/or recladding of an existing building is proposed, these respond to their context sensitively.
- Areas of enhancement: where smaller changes can be made to improve the appearance.

Not every building, structure, or space within the conservation area contributes positively to its character. Areas of post-war development are now requiring extensive refurbishment or replacement to comply with modern standards and, where appropriate, these can provide the right circumstances to enact positive and enhancing change.

The following considerations are useful when identifying such sites and areas, and testing whether a new scheme would be suitable for the location:

- Plots and scale: does the footprint of the existing building(s) reflect historic plot forms and sizes in Oxford city centre? Is its appearance awkward due to its large or small size?
- People: does the existing building(s) positively contribute to Oxford as a people's city – an enriching, inclusive and inspiring place to live, work and study? Does it relate to streets and public places? Does it animate street life and human interaction?
- Setting: does the existing building(s) relate successfully to its context, particularly the street line, existing boundary walls and landscapes? Frontages facing public streets and spaces are as important as private ones.
- Roofscape: does the existing building(s) positively contribute the Oxford roofscape and skyline?
- Materials: are these of a high quality? Do they reflect the historic building materials in composition, colour, or texture?
- Detail: is the existing building(s) visually attractive, of a clear architectural type, and carefully detailed? Does it sit comfortably with the surrounding architecture in terms of quality?

## Science area

The distinctive nature of the science area is characterised by substantial educational buildings on a grid of streets, with formal elevations set back from the pavement. On two sides it backs on to the significant green spaces of the Cherwell flood plain. Due to the evolving nature of modern science teaching and research, constant change in buildings is required in order to maintain the university's international standard. There are many historic buildings which contribute positively to the character of the area but much could be done to improve their setting and the wider public realm including rationalising cycling parking, improved surfacing and tree planting. The setting of the surrounding buildings, park and flood plan is also of importance; height and rooflines would have an impact on these. Any development should aim to:

- Improve the quality of public realm and spaces and/or landscape between the street and the building line.
- Follow the prevailing building line.
- Face the street with a formal, active elevation.
- Use materials and palettes that compliment and/or integrate harmoniously with the characteristic historic materials of the area, are high quality and well detailed.
- Maintain the prevailing building heights of the science area and design the roofscape with as much care as the elevations, being aware of the city setting in its wider landscape.
- Take a strategic approach to the number and locations of cycle parking.

## Postwar development

Some of the postwar buildings on the western fringe of the conservation area could be demolished without harming the character or appearance of the conservation area. Where sites meet the criteria set out above, if considered appropriate, redevelopment would be an opportunity to:

- Reinststate an urban grain, scale, height and massing that reflects and respects the historic character and texture of the site.
- Reintroduce a more animated roofscape that makes a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area. Any proposals for higher buildings or elements would need to be consistent with the guidance of the *High Buildings Technical Advice Note*.
- Use materials that sit harmoniously in their context, are of high quality and are well detailed.
- Create active street frontages.
- Create new publicly accessible spaces for people to dwell.
- Enhance existing local interest.
- Include walking and cycling routes to help ease the pressure on the major streets.
- Provide cycle parking facilities to help ease the pressure for these facilities on significant historic streets.

## Western fringe

Part of the conservation area is located within the West End which has been identified in the Local Plan as a major strategic location for educational and commercial development. This area of the West End located within the conservation area is characterised (St Thomas' Street, south side of Frideswide Square and Park End Street) by predominantly 2-3 storey nineteenth and twentieth



century development associated with the river, canal and railway, overlaying remnants of medieval streets and settlement. Plots vary in size but are mostly built up to the pavement line. The area around St Thomas' contains important architectural references and character from its historical development and has more of a 'town' character than that of the 'gown' of the university buildings and colleges. This character will be important to preserve.

Development here should:

- Be consistent with the guidance within the *High Buildings Technical Advice Note*; respect and where possible reinforce the setting of landmarks such as St Thomas Church and the Castle.
- Reflect the historic local use of materials. Red brick is the most common building material, in contrast to most of the conservation area.
- Respect and respond sensitively to the richness and variety in roofscapes and character of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings, particularly those on Frideswide Square, Park End Street and Hythe Bridge Street.
- Reflect historic plot boundaries and urban grain and build up to the pavement.
- Exploit the relationship to water that has played a significant role in the history and character of this part of Oxford.
- Improve walking and cycling connections into other parts of the city centre.
- Provide new publicly accessible open space.

## 7.8 Implementation

Consultation and research for this appraisal in phase 1 of the project revealed a broad consensus for the recommendations made in this chapter. Turning this support into action requires collaboration from several parties.

In this, the city has two advantages: the nature of land ownership and the strength of civic society. There is already considerable cooperation, both formal and informal, which can be built upon to strengthen.

The principal responsibility for driving forward the recommendations of this Appraisal falls upon the City Council, not least because of the obligations placed upon it by legislation and in its role in advising on planning applications and listed building consent applications and it is through this process that the City Council will work with partners and landowners to deliver change.

In the current fiscal climate there are huge pressures on the City Council. Therefore, it is essential to derive the most value from existing resources and budgets. The City Council will continue to work across departments to seek to achieve effective coordination, working together to realise opportunities and achieve successful outcomes.

Close cooperation will be necessary with the County Council in particular, because as the highways authority it is responsible for the streets and many public space, whose character and use are both the cause of harm to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area and also an opportunity for significant enhancement.

### Key issues:

- Responsibility for the management and enhancement of the area is split between the City Council as planning authority, County Council as highways authority, landowners, especially the colleges and University, and other bodies.

- A coordinated approach and partnerships are required to meet the challenges and deliver enhancement.
- The partnership between the City Council and the County Council is of great importance because of the impact of transport on the character and appearance of the Conservation Area, and the contribution streets and public space could make to enhancing it.
- Effective management requires an on-going review of resources required and available.

#### **Recommendations**

- The City Council should adopt the management recommendations of this Appraisal and, where appropriate, implement them through the City Centre Management Function, the Local Plan or allied strategies.
- The City Council, with partners where necessary, should continue to review the need for the additional studies identified in this Appraisal and seek to undertake them where the resources for this are available.
- The City Council should seek to undertake a review of the Appraisal, ideally every 10 years where resources are available to reflect changes to the condition of the Conservation Area, emergence of new threats and progress with enhancement recommendations.