



SHAPING NEIGHBOURHOODS: CHARACTER AND CONTEXT

SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING GUIDANCE NON TECHNICAL SUMMARY

JUNE 2014

**LONDON PLAN 2011
IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK**

MAYOR OF LONDON

COPYRIGHT

GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY

Published by
Greater London Authority
City Hall
The Queen's Walk
More London
London SE1 2AA

www.london.gov.uk
enquiries 020 7983 4100
minicom 020 7983 4458

ISBN 978 1 84781 543 9

Crown Copyright All rights reserved. GLA 10032216 (2011)

Front cover photo: Hannibal Road Gardens (Tower Hamlets), Peter Barber Architects

The Mayor would like to acknowledge the work of LUC (Land Use Consultants), and Jerry Tate Architects in the preparation of this SPG and those who contributed to this document and shared photographs.

Copies of this document are available from
www.london.gov.uk

SHAPING NEIGHBOURHOODS: CHARACTER AND CONTEXT

SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING GUIDANCE NON TECHNICAL SUMMARY

JUNE 2014

CONTENTS

1 Introduction and purpose	1
2 Why understand character and context? Benefits and key principles	7
3 Process overview	11

This guidance will form part of the over-arching Shaping Neighbourhoods Portfolio. It is currently envisaged that it will have 4 parts

A. Character and Context

B. Social Infrastructure

C. Play and Informal Recreation

D. Accessible London

FOREWORD



Planning for neighbourhoods in a city as dynamic and diverse as London is a tricky business. The planner must steer a careful course between the whirlpool of total change and the shoals of complete preservation: on the one hand, the hazard of so changing the character of an area that it loses its much loved distinctiveness; and on the other, the risk of being so constrained by what is there at the moment that innovation is stifled. We have much worthy of being preserved, but equally have places where the existing character badly needs overhauling.

I am bringing out this guidance to try to help those facing these challenges, and to provide advice on how to navigate them. It explains the fundamental importance of getting an understanding of a place before taking decisions on its development – how it has come to be the way it is; the things about it that people who live, work, visit or just travel through value or want to see changed; the economic, social and other forces driving change. This understanding can then provide a springboard for development that makes a real contribution to a place and its people. A development that shows a clear understanding of, and relationship with, the

context of an area is one that is more likely to be successful economically as well as aesthetically. As the guidance points out, this is not about preserving neighbourhoods in aspic, rather its about an approach to encouraging development that changes what needs changing and makes a contribution to London's overall success – but which also protects the things that are essential to an area's individual character and perhaps makes the best of previously hidden strengths.

This document seeks to help those concerned with development capture these issues, setting out approaches and processes that can be used to build the necessary understanding of place and draw on that to inform the design of development and planning decision-making. It emphasises the importance of engaging with communities and others with an interest or something to contribute from the earliest stages. Following this structure approach should help ensure quicker and better-informed planning decisions and the kind of high quality buildings and urban realm that will be valued by local residents and users alike. We have been helped in putting this document together by a steering group with representatives from boroughs, civic and amenity groups and developers. Their knowledge and insights have been essential to its preparation, and I would like to take this opportunity of thanking them for their contribution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Boris Johnson'.

Boris Johnson
Mayor of London



Claredale Street (Tower Hamlets)

Karakusevic Carson Architects

A striking contemporary scheme that responds to intact Victorian terraces and Denys Lasdun's Keeling house both of which surround the site. A restored street pattern helps to integrate a variety of different units and tenures around public and private spaces. The materials pallet complements the varied surroundings.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

- 1.1 *“If you wish to have a just notion of the magnitude of this city, you must not be satisfied with seeing its great streets and squares, but must survey the innumerable little lanes and courts. It is not in the showy evolutions of buildings, but in the multiplicity of human habitations which are crowded together, that the wonderful immensity of London consists.” Samuel Johnson*
- 1.2 This short guide provides a summary of the main messages in the Character and Context SPG which has been produced to aid the implementation of Policies 7.4 and 7.1 in the Mayor’s London Plan 2011.
- 1.3 The Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) on Character and Context sets out an approach to understanding character and context so that it can be considered in the planning and design process to guide change in a way which is responsive to individual places and locations. Understanding the existing character and local context of a place is essential to an appreciation of how a place could develop in the future, whether that is protecting important elements crucial to an area’s distinctiveness as a place or identifying those elements that could be enhanced through managed change. Identifying and valuing the existing character, structure and function of a place will enable this process and should be the starting point for any development strategy.
- 1.4 London is a dynamic place and has many functions and values. It is a neighbourhood and home for residents, a national capital, an international centre for finance, tourist destination and seat of culture to name just a few. Any area has to be seen in its wider context, whether Londonwide or within a local travel to work area, many localities are influenced by things outside their boundary. The SPG shows how the diversity and different values of London can be articulated, and how this understanding can be used to help guide and manage change and shape our future places.
- 1.5 The social, cultural, environmental and economic relationships between people and their communities are reinforced by the physical character of a place. New development should help residents and visitors understand where a place has come from, where it is now and where it is going. It should reflect the function of the place both locally as part of a complex urban city-region, and the physical, economic, environmental and social elements that have shaped it over time and are likely to influence it in the future.
- 1.6 The importance of good design and the recognition of intrinsic character is recognised in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), specifically in the core planning principles (NPPF para 17). This is complementary to policies expressed in the 2011 London Plan, particularly policies relating to local character. The SPG provides the guidance to support implementation of Policy 7.4 Local character in the London Plan.
- 1.7 The SPG also supports the Place Making objectives of Policy 7.1 Building London’s neighbourhoods and communities. It forms part of a portfolio of documents that together make up the Shaping Neighbourhoods SPG.
-

POLICY 7.4: LOCAL CHARACTER

Strategic

- A Development should have regard to the form, function, and structure of an area, place or street and the scale, mass and orientation of surrounding buildings. It should improve an area's visual or physical connection with natural features. In areas of poor or ill-defined character, development should build on the positive elements that can contribute to establishing an enhanced character for the future function of the area.

Planning decisions

- B Buildings, streets and open spaces should provide a high quality design response that:
- a has regard to the pattern and grain of the existing spaces and streets in orientation, scale, proportion and mass
 - b contributes to a positive relationship between the urban structure and natural landscape features, including the underlying landform and topography of an area
 - c is human in scale, ensuring buildings create a positive relationship with street level activity and people feel comfortable with their surroundings
 - d allows existing buildings and structures that make a positive contribution to the character of a place to influence the future character of the area
 - e is informed by the surrounding historic environment.

LDF preparation

- C Boroughs should consider the different characters of their areas to identify landscapes, buildings and places, including on the Blue Ribbon Network, where that character should be sustained, protected and enhanced through managed change. Characterisation studies can help in this process.

1.8 The objectives of the SPG are to::

- provide specific guidance on the attributes of character and local context in London (physical, cultural, socio-economic, perceptions and experience);
- provide information on data sources and resources available to inform understanding of London's character and context;
- provide an analysis and appreciation of the correlation and inter relationships between these different aspects of character, including examples of how this analysis can be articulated and presented to others;
- Examples of good practice to illustrate how an understanding of character and context of a place can be used to help manage change in a way that sustains

and enhances the positive attributes of that place and show how this helps in informing change and development.

THE AUDIENCE FOR THE SPG

1.9 The SPG is aimed at providing guidance for:

- Boroughs in preparing information about place and context as evidence base for their policies in their Local Plans and in assessing planning applications;
- Developers and their consultants in preparing planning applications, so that an understanding of character can help achieve the right development in the right place;
- Neighbourhood Forums / Communities in understanding and preparing Neighbourhood Plans for their areas.

SOME DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

Character is created by the interplay of different elements, including the physical or built elements that make up the place, the cultural, social and economic factors which have combined to create identity, and the people associated with it through memories, association and activity.

Context can be defined as the way in which places, sites and spaces inter relate with one another whether physically, functionally or visually, or the way in which they are experienced sequentially and understood.



Dalston Eastern Curve Garden
J & L Gibbons / muf architecture / Design for London ©
Sarah Blee

CHAPTER TWO

WHY UNDERSTANDING CHARACTER AND CONTEXT? BENEFITS AND KEY PRINCIPLES

BENEFITS OF UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER AND CONTEXT OF A PLACE

2.1 Sense of place and identity form the setting to the lives of people and communities, through experience, association, and use or activity. Places which develop in a manner that responds to the local character and context of that place are likely to be more sustainable, contribute to good quality of life and attract investment – economically, culturally or intellectually. In order to facilitate appropriate levels of growth and change which respect a community's sense of identity and distinctiveness, it is necessary to consider how places have developed.

2.2 London is a dynamic city; it is defined by constant change and evolution from a port and imperial capital, the seat of government, a centre of international trade and commerce to a 'world city'. It is a multi-layered city of organic evolution, with numerous fragments from its different periods of development, none completely erased, some still very redolent of the era in which they were developed and others often not fully cohesive or uniform. Change and the intensive distribution of different, often competing uses are a characteristic of the capital. Having a good understanding of different places can be used to guide and manage change in a way which responds positively to London's particular character, history and evolution.

2.3 An understanding of the character and context of a place can help to:

- Ensure high quality responsive design and a good fit between place and site design,

and help develop local design frameworks;

- Contribute to the development of policies and objectives for an area based on its intrinsic character;
 - Inform change by providing evidence for capacity studies, sensitivity assessments, regeneration strategies, etc to help determine the right development in the right place;
 - Improve visual and physical connections with natural features or elements such as green infrastructure – the All London Green Grid and Blue Ribbon network;
 - Integrate sustainable design with its context including urban greening/green infrastructure, climate change adaptation;
 - Recognise local historic character and contribute to conservation management – understanding sites and assets in context including identification, conservation and management of heritage assets, significance and setting;
 - Achieve or maintain suitable densities, and intensification where appropriate, in a way that responds to, creates or reinforces the local character of a place;
 - Identify, conserve and manage key views, including the consideration of the siting of tall buildings;
 - Contribute to a sense of safety and security by creating well-designed legible places with opportunities for casual/natural surveillance and activity;
 - Reinforce a sense of meaning, civility, belonging and distinctiveness.
-

- 2.4 Such an understanding of the character and context of a place can be used at various scales by a variety of different interest groups including local community and neighbourhood groups, spatial planners, development managers, developers and their consultants.
- 2.5 Given the diversity of London's people and places, there may not be a single view about the character of an area. In practice there may need to be a process of understanding between a range of view points and a need to strike a balance between them.
- 2.6 Some examples of how an understanding of a place can help inform change and design outcomes are shown in the case studies below.
- 2.7 Some guiding principles for understanding the character of a place
- Place is all around us and everywhere has a distinctive character
 - Character is about people and communities as well as the physical components
 - Places are connected and overlap – boundaries, edges and transitions are important
 - Place is a dynamic concept – evolution and change are a fundamental characteristic of London
- 2.8 These principles are expanded upon and explained in the full SPG.
-



Barking Town Centre Project ©GLA
Barking town centre project brings together a range of public space, housing, economic development and, transport and open space projects to comprehensively regenerate the town centre. Together these schemes are designed to restate the character of the place in a new and improved built form.

CHAPTER THREE

PROCESS OVERVIEW

PROCESS OVERVIEW

3.1 In order to fully appreciate the character of a place, a much more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the elements that make up character is needed than may have traditionally been considered. This section provides an overview of the main elements of character to cover and a process to follow that can help in gaining an understanding of the character of a place. A detailed account of these steps and the elements of character is expanded in the full SPG.

SUMMARY OF THE STEPS IN THE PROCESS OF UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER OF A PLACE

3.2 The figure opposite outlines the principal steps in the process which are summarised briefly in the remainder of this section.

3.3 Any study to understand the character and context:

- should be a transparent, open and collaborative process;
- can be undertaken at different scales, from individual sites and streets to whole boroughs and city-wide and should fit within a hierarchy of information;
- requires a proportionate approach to be taken to the evidence gathering and analysis according to the scope and purpose of the study.

SCOPING

3.4 The scoping stage covers the following elements:

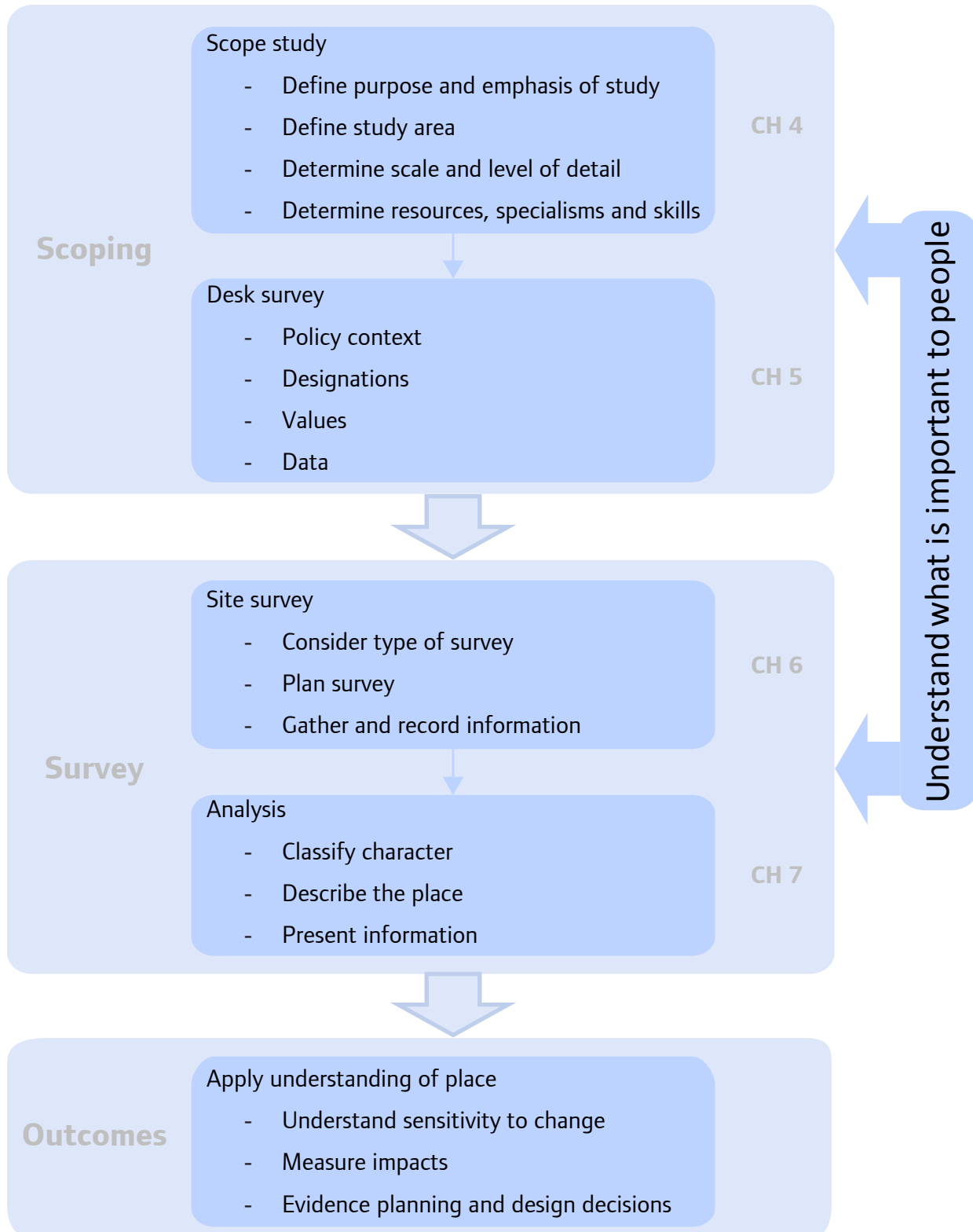
- Definition of the study purpose and emphasis
- Identification of the study area
- Determination of the required study scale and level of detail
- Determination of required and available resources, specialisms and skills.

3.5 The purpose and emphasis of the study will dictate the extent to which it should integrate other subject areas and also determine who to involve and engage (community and professional stakeholders). It will also dictate the nature and presentation of outputs, and whether use can be made of existing relevant work.

3.6 At the outset, it is necessary to define the extent of the area to be considered. For example, borough level characterisation studies may work up to their boundaries, taking appropriate account of links to adjacent boroughs and particular elements which create context. In other cases, the extent of the study area may be defined by changes in architecture, built form, density or different land use and functional relationships. Also it is important to note that boundaries of places are not fixed and definite on the ground; the edges of places are often zones of transition and change. More information on boundaries is set out in the full SPG.

3.7 A proportionate approach should be taken to the amount and type of

The process of understanding the character of a place (the chapter headings relate to those in the main SPG)



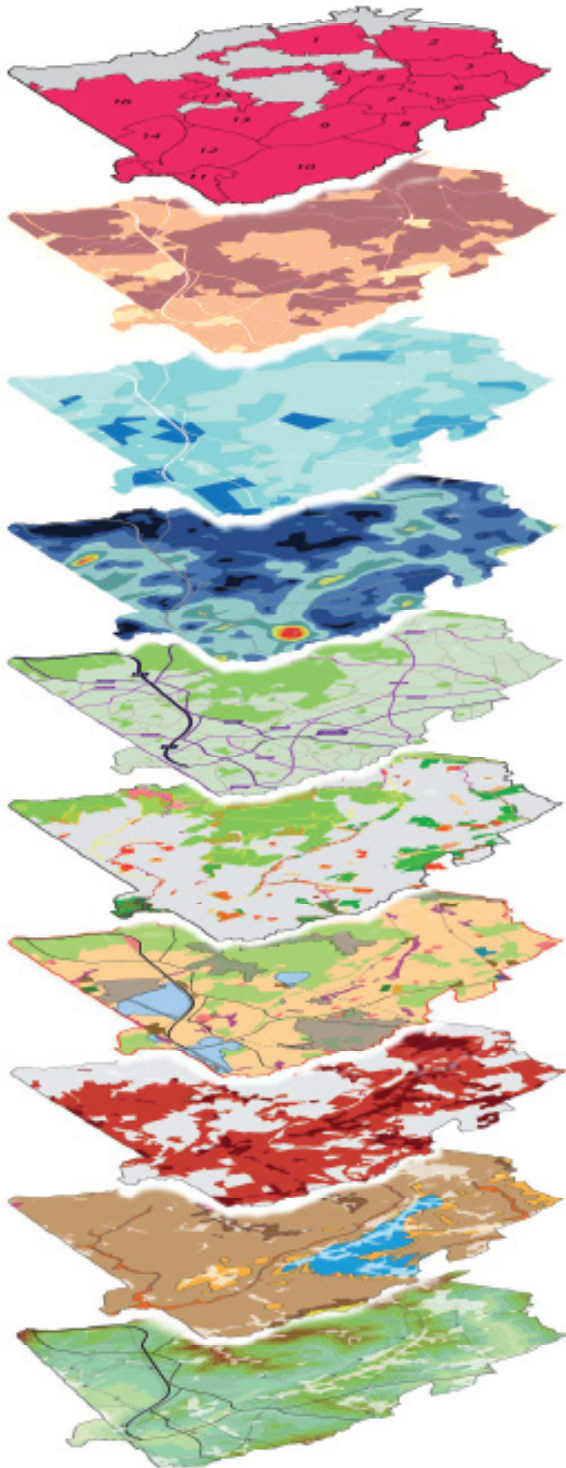
information needed for a study. Some more strategic studies may only require a general description of the character of the place as a framework for the development of generic strategies and guidelines to manage change. Other types of studies may require more specific detail, for example, in central or inner London boroughs which may be defined by an intricate and varied streetscape network, or where there are proposals for the siting of clusters of tall buildings or for a comprehensive redevelopment of a neighbourhood or site. Similarly, documents such as Conservation Area Appraisals, neighbourhood plans and concept statements may all require a fine grain level of information.

3.8 Some examples of mapping of the character of a place for different scales and purposes are shown below.

3.9 It is important to determine the people, skills and resources required to complete a study. Skills and resources such as time, together with the scale and level of detail of the work, will determine the ultimate cost. Even a relatively modest study or assessment, involving input from a limited range of professionals and stakeholders can help inform policy-making and interpretation in many situations. Community led studies can also provide a valuable input to decision-making at relatively low financial cost, although they require a commitment of time and enthusiasm.

3.10 Much of the work in understanding the character and context of a place can be undertaken by anyone with good local knowledge. Conversely, undertaking a study may also call on a number of specialisms which may also be needed. For example, landscape architects, urban designers, architects/conservation architects, archaeologists and planners can add value if resources are available. At the outset a decision should be made about any specialist skills and expert knowledge required.

3.11 Particularly where resources are limited, it may be that use can be made of existing relevant area studies as this can help avoid duplication of work, provided account is taken of the age of such studies and the original purpose for which they were commissioned. Relevant studies and/or assessments may be available from the local boroughs, local libraries or local history centres, or through community groups.

BOROUGH SCALE MAPPING (SOURCE: LONDON BOROUGH OF CROYDON)

- Character
- Housing types and tenures
- Indices of multiple deprivation (IMD)
- Public transport accessibility (PTAL)
- Movement network
- Open space
- Land use
- Historic evolution
- Geology
- Topography

SURVEY

3.12 The survey stage involves consideration of physical, cultural, social, economic and experiential characteristics, how these come together in a place and the way in which such elements are experienced by people. Surveys are drawn from a combination of desktop studies of data (whether documents or mapped information), on-site surveys and engagement with the local communities.

3.13 The main elements of survey are:

- Collect baseline information
- Understand policy context
- Understand existing designations
- Values: Understand what is important to people
- Collate and use baseline data

3.14 Baseline information for understanding the character of a place can be assembled from a variety of sources, whether paper or digital maps in a spatially referenced form (Geographic Information Systems). Potential themes to consider are set out in the figure opposite and explored more fully in the full SPG.

3.15 It is useful to understand the policy context and the forces for change such as growth pressures or issues such as climate change which may affect the location. The policy context set out in the London Plan is a starting point for understanding the dynamic nature of the capital and potential change scenarios. Understanding the local policy context is also essential, particularly

for smaller scale assessment such as for neighbourhood plans.

3.16 A review of whether existing designations cover or adjoin a study area is essential. Whilst designations or their absence may not always be relevant to sense of place, they do provide an understanding of why a place or elements of a place may be valued for particular reasons as well as their potential sensitivity to change.

3.17 In addition to gaining an understanding of designated values, an appreciation of what local people value in a place and why, can be invaluable in understanding and reflecting the sense of place and its character. The full SPG presents some effective tools and techniques for involving local people in studies of place (Appendix 2 of the full SPG).

3.18 The figure below shows the main elements of character and supporting sub elements which can be explored in developing an understanding of the character of a place. Not all the themes set out in Figure 3.7 will necessarily be relevant to every type of study. Data used will depend on the study scale and its purpose, Data should not be collected for its own sake.

3.19 The full SPG provides detailed information on use of data and factors to consider in relation to physical, cultural, socio economic and experiential aspects of place, and on how to capture such information in site surveys.

THE ELEMENTS OF CHARACTER

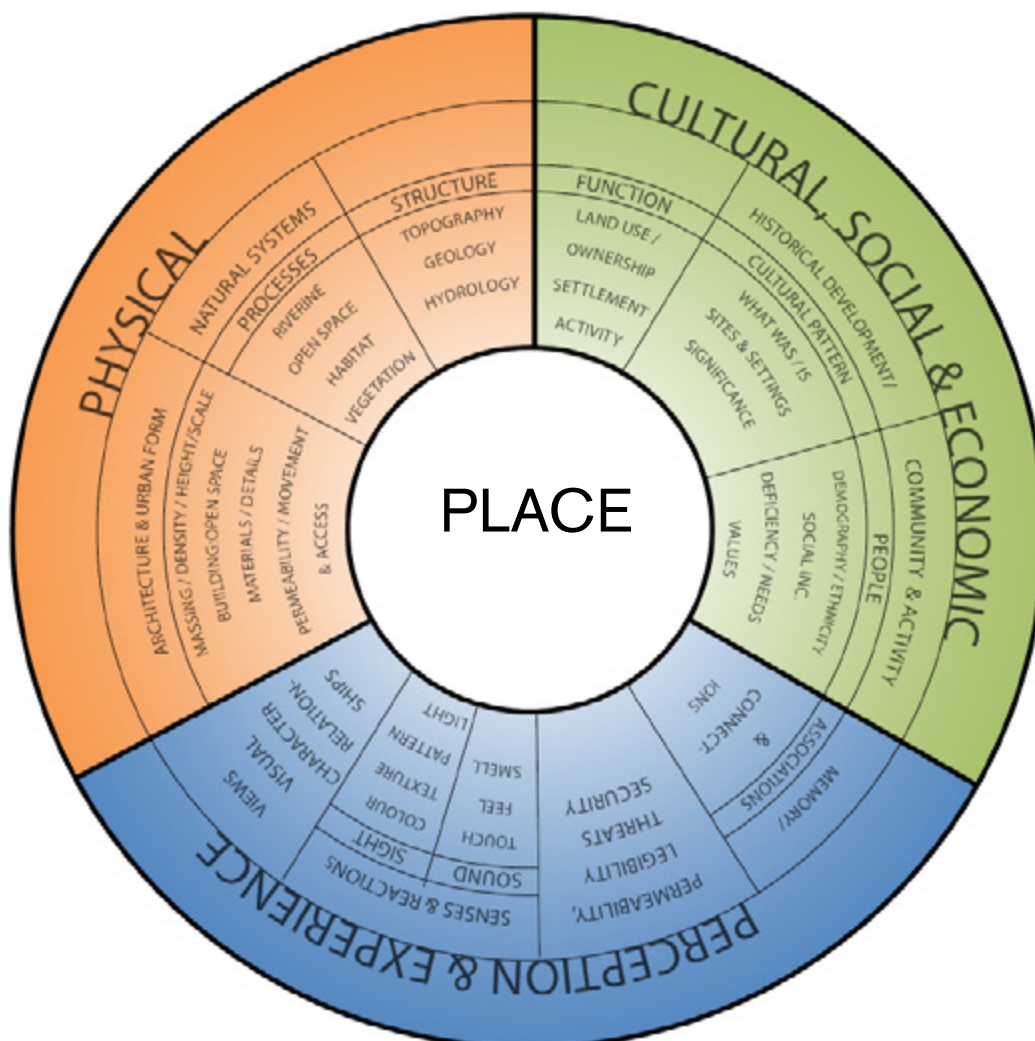
3.20 All places are made up of combinations of the following elements, as summarised on Figure 3.1:

- **Physical:** including underlying structure such as geology and landform, landscape, architecture, urban and built form and settlement
- **Cultural:** the evolution of places over time, often also linked to social, environmental and economic factors and the ways in which places function and the activities which define them

- **Perceptual and experiential:** the sensory aspects of a place – how places are used and experienced. It also includes memories and associations which people or communities have with that place

3.21 The diagram shows the relationship between the various elements of character that make up a place. More detail on these elements of character with exploration of possible data sources and a discussion of issues to consider under each theme is developed in the full SPG.

Elements of place and sub themes – understanding areas to explore



ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

3.22 When surveys have been undertaken and information on characteristics gathered, the next stage is to describe, analyse and present this information. The principal elements of this stage are:

- Classifying character, including defining areas of distinct character and identifying/defining boundaries, drawing from information gained from the survey
- Describing the place with reference to information gained on physical, cultural, social, economic and experiential characteristics, and what is important and valued by the community/users
- Present the information, using mapping, graphic descriptions with words and images, or using drawings and sketch information to describe a place.

3.23 The full SPG gives more detail on this stage. It also presents a series of outcomes of how an understanding of the character of a place can be used to positively focus change and design proposals.

GEORGIAN TOWNHOUSE SUBURBS, KINGS CROSS

The information below has been generated for a sample townscape type, although it could apply at any scale down to neighbourhood and site specific.



- Intact residential streets of a coherent and unified character, typically constructed between 1830-1850
- Typically two and three storey terraced town houses arranged along narrow streets or in crescent formation, usually with narrow, deep building plots. Some remain as houses, others have been sub divided as flats in the 20th century.
- Close street frontages create an intimate and small scale character.
- Boundaries are defined by wrought iron railings, behind which lie short front gardens or the lower/basement storey, partially sunken below street level.
- Buildings are built of London stock, with slate roof tiles, and characterised by their symmetry and regularity of detail in a plain, understated style.
- Sash windows with glazing bars create rhythm and articulation along the street, as do panelled front doors with fanlights above.
- Buildings present elegant frontages to the street contributing positively to the public realm. Chimneys and dormer windows contribute to a visually interesting roofscape.
- Occasional glimpses of tall high rise modern buildings, which rise above the rooftops.
- Pavements include riven York stone with granite kerbs, and granite sets form the road surface. Black heritage lamps and bollards contribute to the sense of historic character.
- Views are focussed and contained along streets, framed by elegant facades. Slightly taller buildings mark the end of the street, forming a visual focal point or local landmark.
- A quiet, private residential suburb, in marked contrast to the adjacent vibrant and busy

Example streetscape elevations (Source: Urban Practitioners/London Borough of Waltham Forest)



A rare example of railings. Whilst these are unlikely to be original, they are of an appropriate type for the age of the house.

Replacement windows. Whilst clearly not matching the materials they at least maintain the basic proportions.

Glazed in porch

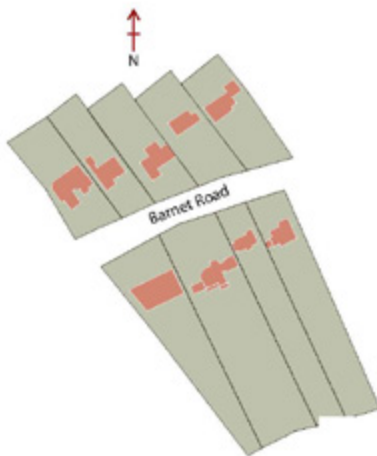


The street elevation above illustrates a typical Victorian terraced street.

This terrace, like those the Westwood area, illustrates the consistent rhythm of the Victorian form.

The street is composed of a series of four stories with a similar height but alterations which are needed through the length of the street. Changes continue support the rhythm throughout.

Example plans and sections from the London Borough of Barnet Characterisation Study
(Source: Urban Practitioners/London Borough of Barnet)

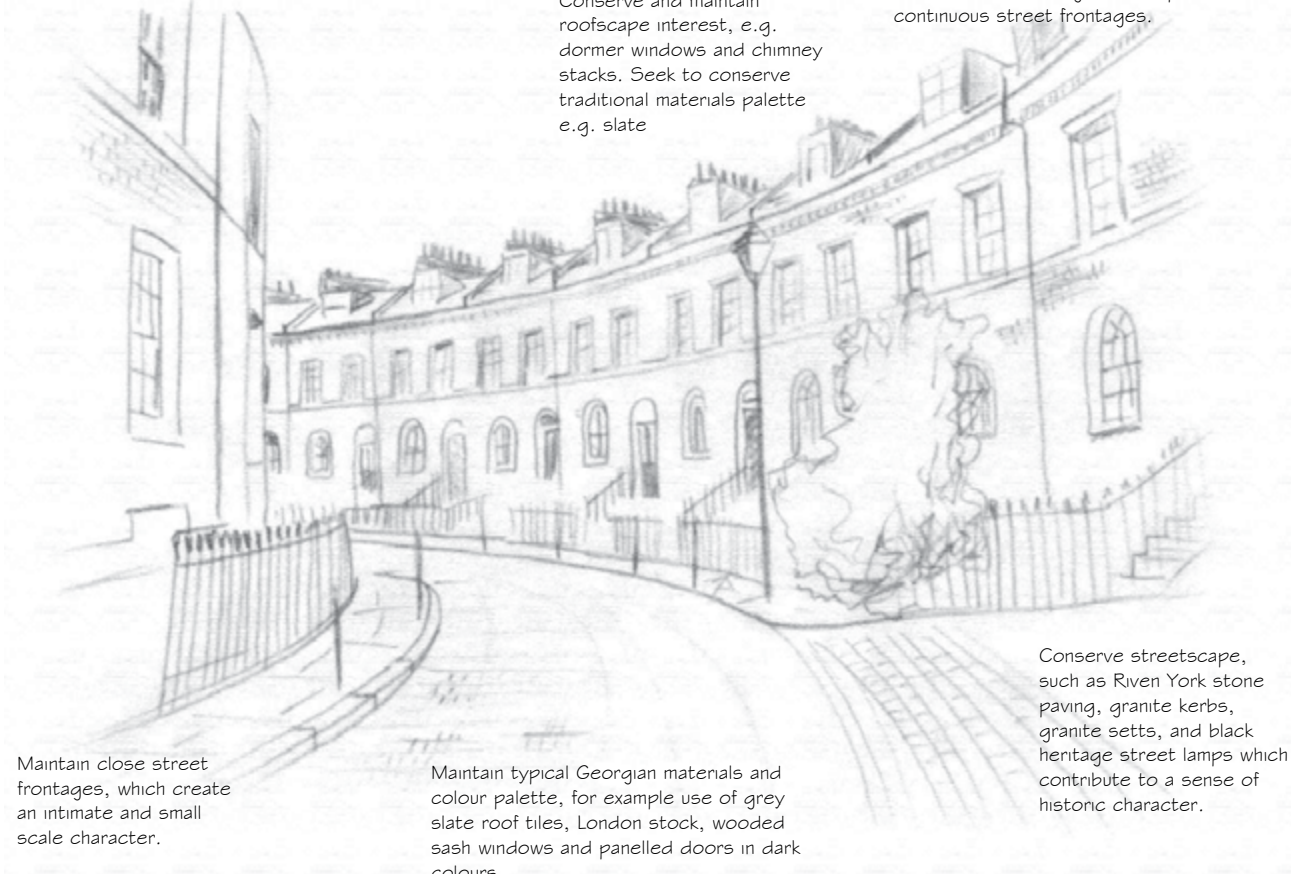


Example sketch information to illustrate principles of a strategy for an area

Conserve rhythm and articulation of building facades, created by repetition of features, such as sash windows with glazing bars recessed windows and arched door ways.

Conserve and maintain roofscape interest, e.g. dormer windows and chimney stacks. Seek to conserve traditional materials palette e.g. slate

Maintain continuous plot frontages, with wrought iron railings. Subtly integrate and accommodate off street parking and maintain small front gardens/impression of continuous street frontages.



Maintain close street frontages, which create an intimate and small scale character.

Maintain typical Georgian materials and colour palette, for example use of grey slate roof tiles, London stock, wooded sash windows and panelled doors in dark colours.

Conserve streetscape, such as Riven York stone paving, granite kerbs, granite setts, and black heritage street lamps which contribute to a sense of historic character.

Other formats and languages

For a large print, Braille, disc, sign language video or audio-tape version

of this document, please contact us at the address below:

**Public Liaison Unit
Greater London Authority
City Hall
The Queen's Walk
More London
London SE1 2AA**

**Telephone 020 7983 4100
Minicom 020 7983 4458
www.london.gov.uk**

You will need to supply your name, your postal address and state the format and title of the publication you require.

If you would like a summary of this document in your language, please

如果需要您母語版本的此文件，
請致電以下號碼或與下列地址聯絡

**phone th
address**

यदि आप इस दस्तावेज की प्रति अपनी
भाषा में चाहते हैं, तो कृपया निम्नलिखित
नंबर पर फोन करें अथवा नीचे दिये गये
पते पर संपर्क करें

us at the

Chinese

#####

Nếu bạn muốn có văn bản tài liệu
này bằng ngôn ngữ của mình, hãy
liên hệ theo số điện thoại hoặc địa
chỉ dưới đây.

Vietnam-

আপনি যদি আপনার ভাষায় এই দলিলের প্রতিপিপি
(কপি) চান, তা হলে নীচের ফোন নম্বরে
বা ঠিকানায় অনুগ্রহ করে যোগাযোগ করুন।

ese

Bengali

Αν θέλετε να αποκτήσετε αντίγραφο του παρόντος
εγγράφου στη δική σας γλώσσα, παρακαλείστε να
επικοινωνήσετε τηλεφωνικά στον αριθμό αυτό ή ταχυ-
δρομικά στην παρακάτω διεύθυνση.

اگر آپ اس دستاویز کی نقل اپنی زبان میں
چاہتے ہیں، تو براہ کرم نیچے دئے گئے نمبر
پر فون کریں یا دیئے گئے پتے پر رابطہ کریں

Bu belgenin kendi dilinizde
hazırlanmış bir nüshasını
edinmek için, lütfen aşağıdaki
telefon numarasını arayınız
veya adrese başvurunuz.

Greek Urdu

إذا أردت نسخة من هذه الوثيقة بلغتك، يرجى
الاتصال برقم الهاتف أو مراسلة العنوان
أدناه

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਸ ਦਸਤਾਵੇਜ਼ ਦੀ ਕਾਪੀ ਤੁਹਾਡੀ ਆਪਣੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ
ਵਿਚ ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ, ਤਾਂ ਹੇਠ ਲਿਖੇ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਫ਼ੋਨ ਕਰੋ ਜਾਂ ਹੇਠ
ਲਿਖੇ ਪਤੇ 'ਤੇ ਰਾਬਤਾ ਕਰੋ:

Turk

જો તમને આ દસ્તાવેજની નકલ તમારી ભાષામાં
જોઈતી હોય તો, કૃપા કરી આપેલ નંબર ઉપર
ફોન કરો અથવા નીચેના સરનામે સંપર્ક સાધો.