

To: Cabinet
Date: 15 November 2023
Report of: Head of Planning and Regulatory Services
Title of Report: Central (City & University) Conservation Area Appraisal - Adoption

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	That Cabinet consider and formally adopt the Central (City & University) Conservation Area Appraisal, enabling the document to be used to inform the decision making process for Development Management and to form an evidence base to inform Planning Policy.
Key decision:	Yes
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Planning and Healthier Communities
Corporate Priority:	Enable an inclusive economy; Pursue a zero carbon Oxford; Support thriving communities; Deliver more affordable housing.
Policy Framework:	National Planning Policy Framework, Section 16 Oxford Local Plan 2016-2036, Policies DH1-DH7

Recommendations:	That Cabinet resolves to:
1.	Adopt the Central (City & University) Conservation Area Appraisal; and
2.	Endorse the adopted Conservation Area Appraisal for use in informing development management decisions and as part of the evidence base for planning policy decisions.

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Central (City & University) Conservation Area Appraisal
Appendix 2	Statement of Community Engagement
Appendix 3	Risk Register

Introduction and background

1. The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 states that areas of special architectural or historic interest, within which it is desirable to preserve the character or appearance of the area, should be designated as conservation areas.
2. The Central (City and University) Conservation Area (CCAA) covers the historic core and centre of Oxford. The conservation area was designated in 1971. It is perhaps one of the most important conservation areas nationally because of its extraordinarily rich buildings and history in a concentrated space. It comprises outstanding architecture and townscape and is one of the masterpieces of European architectural heritage. Its history, its architecture, its townscape and its landscapes combine harmoniously, and frequently spectacularly to convey a strong sense of the specific nature of the city.
3. Guidance from Historic England recommends that designated conservation areas should undergo a formal character appraisal to justify their original designation, to define their significance and values, and to inform decisions regarding future change.
4. Although the architecture and history of this area has been studied extensively for many decades, there hasn't been an assessment of the conservation area by the City Council as Local Planning Authority since it was designated.
5. The overall purpose of the appraisal is to help manage change in the conservation area positively, not prevent it. The function of the appraisal is to assess and articulate the special interest of the conservation area and any threats or opportunities for enhancement. This will inform the process of formulating policies and guidelines and aid making rational and consistent planning decisions within it.
6. The appraisal project has taken a significant time to complete because of the complex nature and size of the area. It has been prepared following Historic England guidance.

Approach of the CCAA

7. The appraisal comprises a main overview of the heritage significance of the whole area, as well as management guidance and design advice. This overview has been informed by and extends to include nine Character Zone statements which provide the detailed analysis of the conservation area.
8. The Appraisal is required to include Management Guidance, and this sets out the identified threats, issues and opportunities for conserving and enhancing the character and appearance of the conservation area. The Design Advice section seeks to guide applicants and developers who are undertaking new buildings and alterations within the conservation area.
9. The nine Character Zone chapters comprise a more detailed analysis and explanation of the characteristics of each different areas within the conservation area. These areas have been categorised by a common character which could include the predominant age, for example, medieval core, or predominant use and type of architecture, such as College Architecture.
10. This whole appraisal is supported by historic and layered mapping which highlight key features of interest such as listed buildings, building lines and the city's fortifications, for example.

11. The appraisal will be used as a tool to assess and manage the significance and character of the conservation area. It will help inform planning decisions, ensuring so far as possible that any proposed developments within the conservation area are sympathetic to its character. The appraisal will also serve as a reference for property owners, architects and developers providing contextual information and guidance on appropriate design principles within the area.

Consultation

12. The preparation of this Conservation Area Appraisal involved engagement with residents' associations, members of the public, ward councillors, local institutions including the University of Oxford and Colleges and key stakeholders. Both in-person and online meetings and workshops were undertaken, weekend drop-in sessions were held at the Town Hall and each online consultation was publicised and promoted through the local media, physical posters and social media. Key stakeholders received direct communication by email or letter.

13. The appraisal has undergone public consultation three times; once in October 2018, again in May 2019 when the boundary of the conservation area was extended to include the Western Fringe and the University Science Area, and finally in March 2022 with the addition of a Management Plan and Design Advice section. The feedback has generally been positive but where further issues or suggestions have been raised, we have, where appropriate sought to take these on board and the documents have been amended accordingly.

14. A summary of the public comments received, and the response to these comments is attached as Appendix 2.

Financial implications

15. No financial implications are anticipated. The appraisal provides valuable information for residents and businesses in the area, and for potential developers for whom it will help inform their proposals. It will provide benefits and efficiencies for officers of the Planning Department when considering listed building consent and planning applications in the area. The costs of producing the CCAA have been covered by the existing budget.

Legal issues

16. Section 69 (2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 places a general duty on Local Planning Authorities to review existing Conservation Areas, and Section 71 places a general duty on them from time to time to formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of any parts of their areas which are Conservation Areas, taking account of views expressed.

17. There is no statutory requirement for consultation before a conservation Area Appraisal is adopted, but Historic England advice and best practice guidance is extra statutory consultation should take place.

18. The Appraisal will become part of the evidence base for planning policies and will represent a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

Level of risk

- 19. There is not considered to be any material risk involved in adopting the appraisal.
- 20. The risk register is attached at Appendix 3.

Equalities impact

- 21. Consultation was carried out on three drafts of the conservation area appraisal. The consultation met the requirements of the Statement of Community Involvement for Planning and had due regard to meeting the needs prescribed in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. The consultation was structured in order to avoid differentiation between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

- 22. Historic environments and buildings are inherently carbon efficient due to their construction methods, materials and design principles that prioritise natural ventilation, daylight and thermal mass.
- 23. The Design Advice chapter has a section on Sustainability and Climate Change and provides advice about designing new buildings and altering existing ones to adapt to our changing climate as well as how to reduce carbon emissions and taking a whole building approach to understand how each building can target improvements to maximise gains and minimise harm.

Report author	Clare Golden
Job title	Urban Design and Heritage Team Leader
Service area or department	Planning Services
Telephone	01865 252220
e-mail	cgolden@oxford.gov.uk

Background Papers: None