

Introduction: Examination of residential character

1 Introduction

Stratford-on-Avon District Council has commissioned a study of the character of a series of residential districts from the School of Property, Planning and Construction of the University of Central England. The study has been carried out by Professor Peter Larkham, Professor David Chapman and Dr Nick Morton, with research assistance by Alex Birkhamshaw.

2 Studying area character

A substantial number of recent character analyses, including a range of types of suburban area, have been examined. The published advice from English Heritage has been considered, research on appraisals and examples of good practice reviewed, and the remit and structure of appraisals have been discussed with the consultants currently redrafting the English Heritage advice.

An outline structure of factors for consideration has been compiled from this comparison. However, not all factors will be of equal importance – or even represented – in every area.

2.1 Sources

Information has been obtained from a wide range of sources, including intensive on-site examination of areas and buildings; from historic maps in several local libraries and archives; from the local planning authority's records; from the County Sites and Monuments Record; and from local publications. For some areas, plot dimensions and other measurements have been obtained from digital mapping. Building dates are obtained principally from visual inspection and comparison with historic maps.

In the field it was felt that the most important “headline indicators” of the condition of an area as it has changed over time are the conversion of original wooden windows to new materials (especially aluminium and uPVC frames) and the conversion of front gardens to car-parking spaces. Our recording of the latter is based on a field estimate of the amount of the front of the plot that has been converted.

2.2 Sub-areas

Many of these areas clearly consist of a range of sub-areas, each having distinct characteristics. These are often the results of particular phases of design and construction. This study identifies such areas and deals with them separately.

3 Recommendations

We were asked to suggest whether any of these areas were worthy of designation as conservation areas.

A conservation area is “an area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance” (1967 Civic Amenities Act; 1990 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act, s. 69(1)). Neither the Act nor successive Circulars or planning guidance have defined ‘special’, or the other terms contained in this definition. “The Act does not specify to whom the preservation or enhancement of the area must be desirable; and opinion is scarcely likely to be unanimous”. However it is for the planning authority to determine which parts of its area are of special interest and to determine the weight afforded to any particular factor. The guidance offered in the relevant Planning Policy Guidance (PPG 15) is vague:

“It is the quality and interest of areas, rather than individual buildings, which should be the prime consideration in identifying conservation areas. There has been increasing recognition in recent years that our experience of a historic area depends on much more than the quality of individual buildings – on the historic layout of property boundaries and thoroughfares; on a particular ‘mix’ of uses; on characteristic materials; on the quality of advertisements, shop fronts, street furniture and hard and soft surfaces; on vistas along streets and between buildings; and on the extent to which traffic intrudes and limits pedestrian use of spaces between buildings ...” (para 4.2).

It is permissible to designate parts of an area, not in themselves special, in order to protect the setting of buildings forming the focus of a conservation area. “There is no need to look separately at each piece of land in a potential conservation area to see whether it is of special architectural or historic interest; the intention of Parliament must have been that a planning authority would consider the whole of an area as an entity which might give rise to the special interest”.

The courts have also held that an area could be designated for the historical interest of its plan layout and tenure system, including its rarity locally, despite the buildings being “of minimal interest in the eyes of many”.

If areas possess a definable character which does not appear to be “special” or worthy of preservation or enhancement, then nevertheless policies can be developed that might retain that character, and such areas may be suggested as suitable for other, non-statutory, definitions such as “area of townscape merit”. Many other local authorities have successfully adopted similar types of designation.

4 Purpose of this study

If adopted, the character studies will form Supplementary Planning Guidance to the emerging Stratford on Avon Local Plan. It is therefore important that their contents are understood and, ideally, accepted by a broad range of those resident in, or with other interests in, the areas examined. The draft studies will therefore be subject to consultation with owners and occupiers, local residents and community groups, elected members, and the public generally. The results of this consultation will be considered in the preparation of the final form of the character studies.

5 Areas studied

The areas suggested for study (see map over) by the District Council are as follows:

- An area north of the Alcester Road
- An area centring on Avenue Road, including Welcombe Road and Maidenhead Road
- Banbury Road
- A small area north of Clopton Road by the estate markers
- An area between the Evesham Road and Shottery
- Loxley Road
- Shipston Road
- Tiddington Road

6 Summary conclusions

6.1 The study areas

For the eight areas studied our recommendations can be summarised thus:

	Recommend conservation area designation	Recommend area of townscape interest designation	No designation recommended
Alcester Road		Yes	
Avenue Road	Yes		
Clopton Road		Yes	
Banbury Road		Yes	
Evesham Road	Small extension	Yes	
Loxley Road			Yes
Shipston Road		Yes	
Tiddington Road	Yes		

6.2 A further conclusion for Bridgetown

With particular reference to the four roads east of the river, converging on Clopton Bridge, we feel that their character and appearance, and their function as approach roads to the town itself, are compromised by the quality and functioning of the Eastern bridgehead area. This has been discussed in several previous studies including the Town Centre Conservation Area study and the riverside study by Roger Evans Associates. A significant effort is needed to improve the traffic flow, the setting of the Listed Alveston Manor (especially its detached gazebo), and the visual impact of the roundabout area and especially of the petrol station.