A

WHY CHARACTER?

A WHY CHARACTER?

A.1 WHAT IS A CHARACTER STUDY?

Merton Character Study sets out a description of the physical form of the borough, its history, places, streets and buildings. This analysis helps to provide an understanding of the particular attributes which make the borough of Merton what it is today, and draws out the identity of each neighbourhood within the borough. This has been informed by extensive consultation with local residents and stakeholders - with over 450 people participating in the consultation. This process of understanding character is important as it illustrates the distinctiveness across the borough and how these local qualities should inform future approaches to managing growth and change.

Why do we need the study?

Merton, like every other authority in the country has to play its part in solving the nationwide housing crisis. To create a Merton based solution, the Character Study provides an understanding of the characteristics of individual places to inform a context led strategy for the delivery of new homes and other development.

The New London Plan puts significant emphasis on boroughs to deliver growth. It no longer includes the Density Matrix, which sets out appropriate density ranges related to the site's setting in terms of location, existing building form and massing, and the index of public transport accessibility (PTAL) which has been included in previous London Plans. As such it is now even more important for local policy to shape where and how places should grow and change. It is therefore critical that future development is informed by a detailed understanding of the borough's character, and an appreciation of its qualities and places so that growth can be tailored to individual neighbourhoods.

The study's aim is to define an approach to growth for different parts of the borough, informed by an analysis of character. Where areas have a strong existing character this will be reinforced and protected. In other areas there may be opportunities to re-examine what is there with opportunities for improvement. In

areas with less existing positive character there may be opportunities to reimagine these areas into new places.

This report builds on the partially completed character work which was done by Merton Council to help inform the previous draft of the Local Plan. An update to this work is in response to the significant growth and change in the borough since this time and the shift in GLA policy.

What will this document be used for?

This study has been prepared to assist the Council, community groups, stakeholders and others with an interest in the borough to better understand Merton's distinctive local character. It will support preparation of the Council's new Local Plan as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) and be used to inform a character and 'place-based' approach to managing growth in the borough. Similarly, neighbourhood forums will be able to draw on this study to assist with the preparation of their neighbourhood plans. The report will also inform decisions made by Council officers and should be an important tool used by developers and others investing in Merton to ensure proposals positively respond to the local context.

How was this document made?

The methodology for creating this Character Study is about bringing together a library of data sources to build up a clear picture of the borough. GIS data from the Council, GLA Datastore, Office for National Statistics and other open-sources has created the plans, alongside photography, historical research, site visits and analysis. This has been underpinned by extensive public engagement and conversations with residents to develop our understanding and to draw together the conclusions within this study. The approach to engagement is set out over the following page.

A.2 WHAT IS CHARACTER AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

In many ways, the character of a place is defined by an individual's perception of it. This process is partly intuitive and therefore subjective. However, it is possible to gain a common understanding of character, based on evidence and combined perceptions, which seeks to achieve a level of objectivity.

In simple terms, urban character can be understood as the combination and interplay of three factors. First, the physical fabric of the city – the landscapes, buildings, townscape and material infrastructure that exist today. Second, the social fabric of the city – the life and activities that take place within the material environment and how communities use and adapt it. Finally, the historical narrative of a place – why and how development started there and the ongoing story of its evolution.
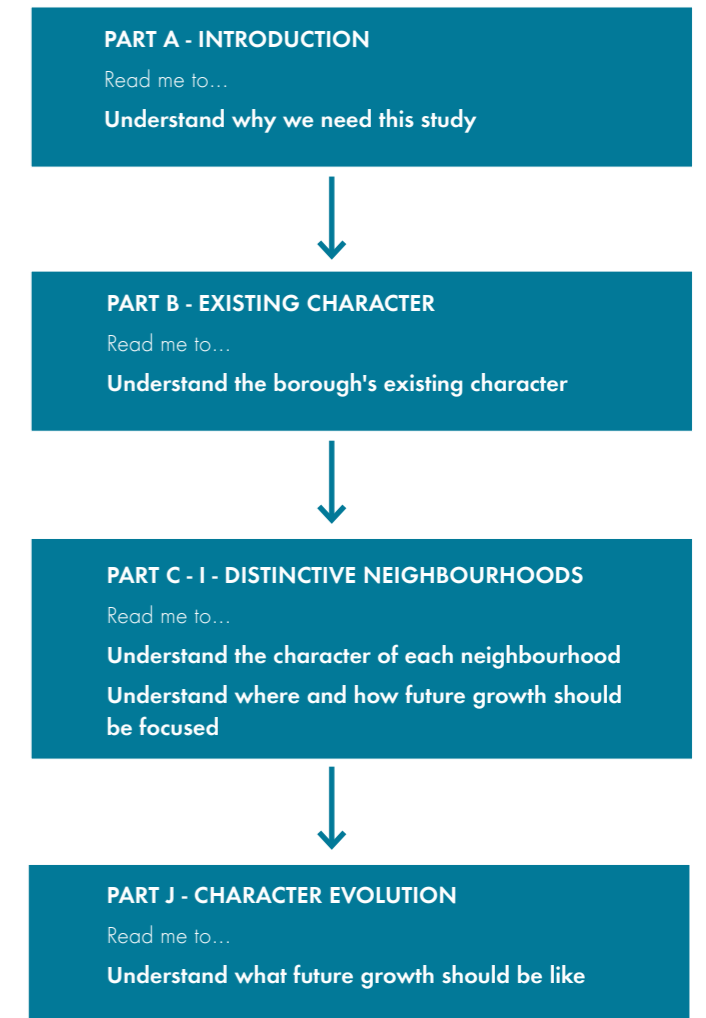
Character is present at multiple scales and at different levels of resolution, hence distinctions can be made between the general character of London and that of specific boroughs, neighbourhoods or streets, while recognising that all of these categories overlap and inform each other.

Character is also inextricably linked to time; it is not static but dynamic, and it may change suddenly or gradually over decades as layers of urban fabric are introduced, adapted or even erased. Present character is the product of successive past generations' interactions with the place they themselves inherited, using and modifying it to fulfil their needs, styles and aspirations.

The study of character is a means to engage with the story of a place. It allows us to connect with the humanity of each place and understand how people's lives, thoughts and actions have left their imprint. Making sense of Merton's complex evolution allows designers and planners to make more informed decisions about how the borough's neighbourhoods ought to grow in the future. This helps to write the next chapter in the story of each place, keeping the thread of history alive.

A.3 HOW DO I USE THIS DOCUMENT?

The following flow-chart illustrates the structure of this report and the purpose of each section:

PART A - INTRODUCTION
Read me to...
Understand why we need this study

PART B - EXISTING CHARACTER
Read me to...
Understand the borough's existing character

PART C - I - DISTINCTIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS
Read me to...
Understand the character of each neighbourhood
Understand where and how future growth should be focused

PART J - CHARACTER EVOLUTION
Read me to...
Understand what future growth should be like

A.4 WHAT DID YOU TELL US?

Merton Council was very keen that this Character Study had an extensive programme of engagement to help test the emerging ideas and ensure that local residents were happy with the way their neighbourhoods were represented. Covid 19 hit shortly after this study was commissioned which has meant that the plans for consultation have needed to be adapted and evolved to take an online and digital form. Over 450 people have contributed to the engagement process which is an incredible achievement given the recent challenging context.

Quotes from all of the engagement events help to illustrate this report and ensure the voice of local residents is recognised within this study.

Online public survey

A digital survey was designed and went live online between 7 September and 5 October 2020. 416 people responded to this from within all areas of the borough. The survey was designed to test the proposed neighbourhoods and review their boundaries. We also wanted to understand what people valued about each neighbourhood and better understand what could be changed and improved.

Community groups survey

Within the report we wanted to reflect the diverse and rich community that Merton has, and that is an important part of its character. We also wanted to understand the networks, reach and spread of groups and organisations across the borough. A short survey was designed to share with a representative cross section of groups to help convey this message within the report.

Stakeholder workshop

Around 30 people attended the Character Study Workshop – both residents and representatives from local groups and organisations. Attendees were organised into groups to discuss the parts of the borough that they were most interested in.

The agenda for the evening was as follows:
18:00 Introductory presentation
18:20 Discussion 1 - the neighbourhood boundaries
18:30 Presentation - existing character and opportunities for each borough area
19:00 Discussion 2 - area ideas and opportunities
19:30 Next steps and close

Attendees were asked to comment on the draft neighbourhood areas which had been identified and ratify the changes made as a result of the online survey. A further round of amendments were made as a result of these conversations.

During the second discussion, attendees were asked to consider the following questions within their discussion groups which related to a section of the borough;
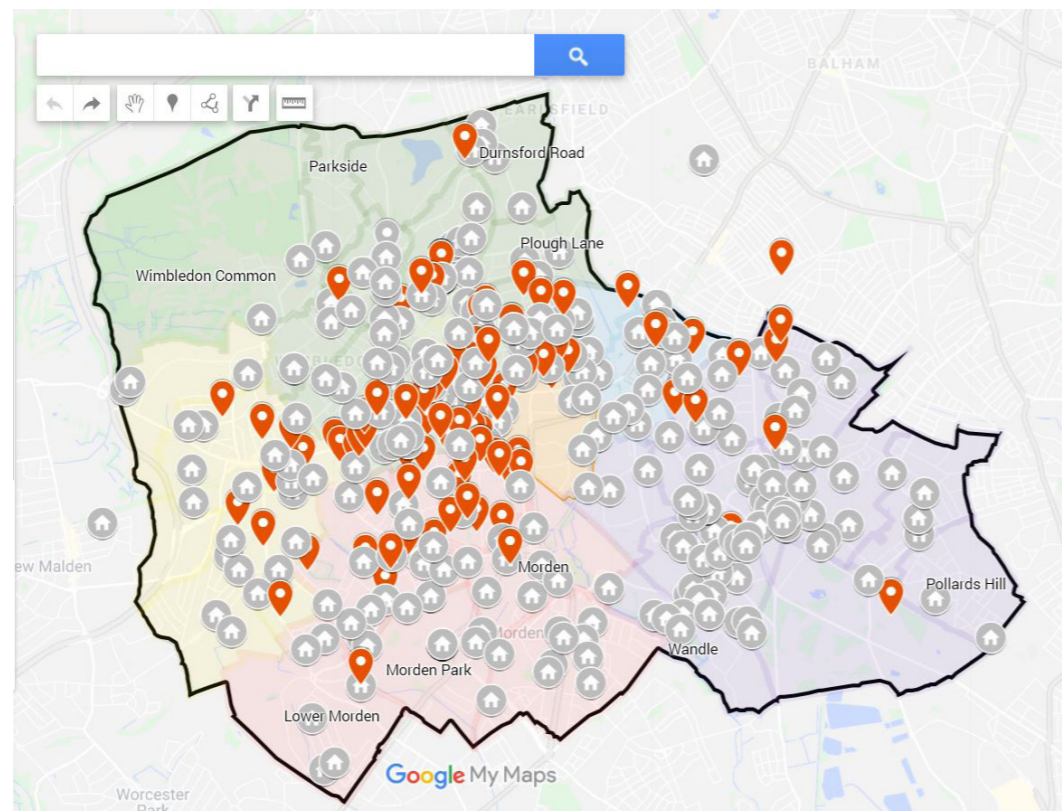• What are the areas key assets? How would you describe its character?
• What are the key issues for the area?
• What are the key opportunities for the areas continued evolution?

Attendees were split into groups according to their geographical area of interest and discussions were really useful to explore ideas about growth and development and what was important to protect in terms of the character of each area.

Next steps

The engagement process on this project will continue. The council plans to adopt this report as a Supplementary Planning Document. This will involve a six week consultation period in early 2021 to give everyone a chance to review all the ideas in this report in more detail.

Appendix X contains a detailed summary of all of the comments received through the survey and a write up of the stakeholder workshop.

The adjacent plan illustrates the geographical spread of responses to the online survey. Three quarters of respondents were happy with the way the boundaries had been drawn, the red dots illustrate the clusters of respondents who wished the boundaries to be drawn differently. Their feedback has been used to amend the boundaries within this document

"We're asked what makes Merton.....Merton? In terms of "character" there's little that's distinctively Merton - it is after all just a 50 year old political construct. It is the neighbourhoods within it that have distinct character."

"Lots of green space, kind and humble community, period buildings and features, localised shopping"

Interesting/disturbing to note that the "emerging" character for the different parts of the borough is increasingly similar to each other - variety across the Borough being diluted by most recent changes"