

Introduction

Strategic objective 8 of the LDF Core Strategy for Merton promotes a high quality urban and suburban environment, where development is well designed and contributes to the function and character of the borough.

In order to deliver quality change through the development process that safeguards the best of the borough's character and secures positive improvements elsewhere, we need an initial clear understanding of the borough's existing character.

The existing design SPG which was adopted in 2004, is being replaced by a new Design SPD to support the LDF Core Strategy and sites and policies DPD.

The Borough Character Study supports and reinforces the new Design SPD and Sites and Policies DPD by highlighting Merton's specific local characteristics and local issues that may be addressed through the development process. The revised SPG will be written to respond to the locally distinctive characteristics of Merton highlighted within the study. From this analysis, guidance will be formulated that has local significance

and will help to preserve existing character where appropriate, enhance existing character where it has deteriorated and establish a new identity in areas where the sense of place has broken down.

The study will examine the features of each of the 36 defined Neighbourhoods and smaller scale character areas that contribute towards their individual character. This information will contribute towards guiding future change in the borough to ensure that local distinctiveness is preserved and that regeneration occurs in areas that would benefit from well-designed new development to reinforce their existing character. The study will set a cohesive framework for the future development of the borough.

The study will give equal consideration to the distinctiveness of all areas of the borough regardless of existing designations.

For areas of the borough that are designated Conservation Areas, the study should be read in association with the published conservation area character appraisal.

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Method

The study will establish a hierarchy of areas of the borough starting with the sub areas identified in the LDF

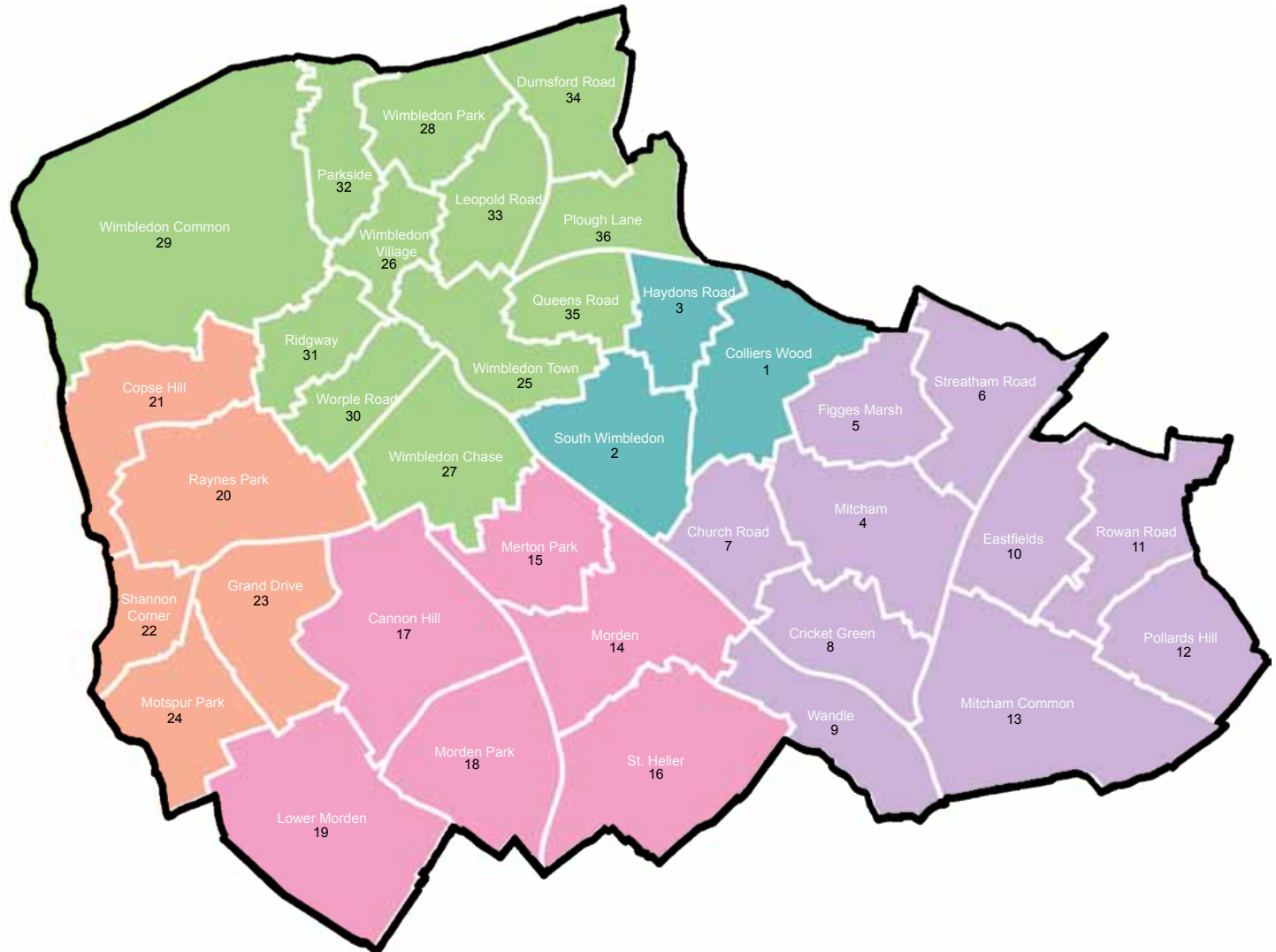


Map showing LDF Sub Areas

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The LDF Sub Areas have been further subdivided into 36 Local Neighbourhoods.



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Defining the Neighbourhoods

Local Neighbourhoods have been defined on the basis of local associations; areas of the borough that people recognise, refer to and identify with. They are not meant to relate to administrative boundaries. These Local Neighbourhoods often relate to the physical characteristics of the urban environment, with these physical features influencing whether people feel that they are in one particular place or another.

Therefore some physical features have been used to define both the edges and content of these neighbourhoods. These range in form and scale and may include any of the following features:

- **Town centres**
- **Local shopping areas**
- **Concentrations of similar activity (eg. industrial uses)**
- **Different land uses**
- **Changes in topography & landscape**
- **Open spaces**
- **Urban edges with open space**
- **Major roads (generally without frontages)**
- **Railway lines**
- **Changes in building typology or architectural character**
- **Boundaries of developments that don't link with other developments**



Neighbourhood Analysis

For each neighbourhood, the origins and general character, land use, built form, open space and movement are briefly described. This is followed by a plan that identifies the key characteristics of each neighbourhood and includes features such as; significant views and areas of landscape, landmarks, gateways and areas for potential enhancement projects.



Example of neighbourhood analysis plan

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Defining the Character Areas

Within each neighbourhood, the area has been further subdivided into character areas. These areas are more locally significant areas within the larger neighbourhood. They have been defined on the basis of identifiable typological features and characteristics such as:



- Building form, age and height
- Street pattern
- Density
- Land use
- Vitality and tranquillity
- Open space
- Trees
- Features, landmarks and views



The study examines the features of each area that contribute towards their essential character.

Character Area

Assessment

Each character area is assessed using the following two approaches:

1 Character Statement

For each character area a character statement is prepared. This is a visual analysis of the area, identifying the key characteristics and features of note.

2 Criteria based assessment

This section scores each character area against a set of assessment criteria. The criteria are intended to give an indication of the relative “quality” of the area based on principles of good urban design. These criteria have been developed with reference to CABE’s “By Design” and “Building for Life: Delivering Great Places to Live” and are intended to give a numerical value to the “quality” of the character area. A table showing definitions of the assessment criteria used is on the following page.

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Criteria Based Assessment : Definitions

IDENTITY: Clearly identifiable “edges” that distinguish it from the surrounding development:

- Clear change in building type, style, landscape features or use between one area and another
- Edge defined by other barrier such as roads, railway lines or landscape edges

ARCHITECTURAL INTEREST: Area containing buildings of architectural or historic interest:

- Listed building or Locally Listed
- Buildings / Conservation Area
- Other buildings of local significance in terms of their architectural or historic qualities

TREES: Significant trees or shrubs that make a positive contribution to the identity of the area:

- Trees or shrubs within the public realm
- Trees or shrubs within private gardens

ECONOMIC VITALITY: Area with few vacant or underused sites which affect the character:

- Empty units
- Underused buildings that detract from the area
- Vacant sites

URBAN LAYOUT: Strong street pattern or road layout with well defined public spaces:

- Clearly defined and identifiable street layout, either planned or organic
- Clear hierarchy of streets and public spaces

BUILT FORM: Buildings with cohesive scale, massing and details:

- Buildings of broadly the same height
- Buildings of similar form
- Similarity of plot widths, lengths and building lines
- Use of cohesive palette of materials
- Similar detailing e.g. Windows, brick detailing, roof details etc.

LANDSCAPE: Green open spaces or riverside areas that make a positive contribution to the identity of the area:

- Open space or riverside within or visible from an area
- Landscape in front or rear gardens that contributes to the street
- Grassed or landscaped verges or open spaces



MOVEMENT: Building and street layout that is easy to find your way around with good connections to the surrounding streets:

- Clearly identifiable routes around the area
- Clear hierarchy of routes for both pedestrians and vehicles
- A street layout that is well connected with the surrounding area by a variety of alternative routes

PUBLIC REALM: High quality public realm and or generally consistent boundary treatments:

- Public realm that contributes to rather than detracts from identity
- Public Realm with a clear relationship with building frontages
- Broadly consistent front garden boundary treatment e.g. Walls, hedges, fences
- Active edges overlooking the public realm

FEATURES: Topography, significant views or landmarks that contribute to the experience of being within the area:

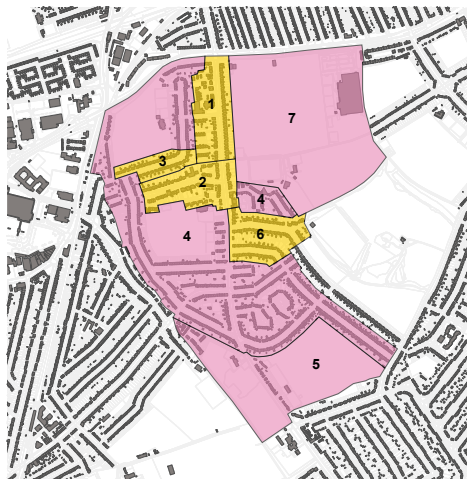
- Significant gradients
- Long distance views to open space, landmarks or landscape features
- Views to buildings or landscape features
- Individual buildings that contribute significantly to the identity of the area
- Identifiable “gateways” or entry points into an area

Character Area Assessment Map

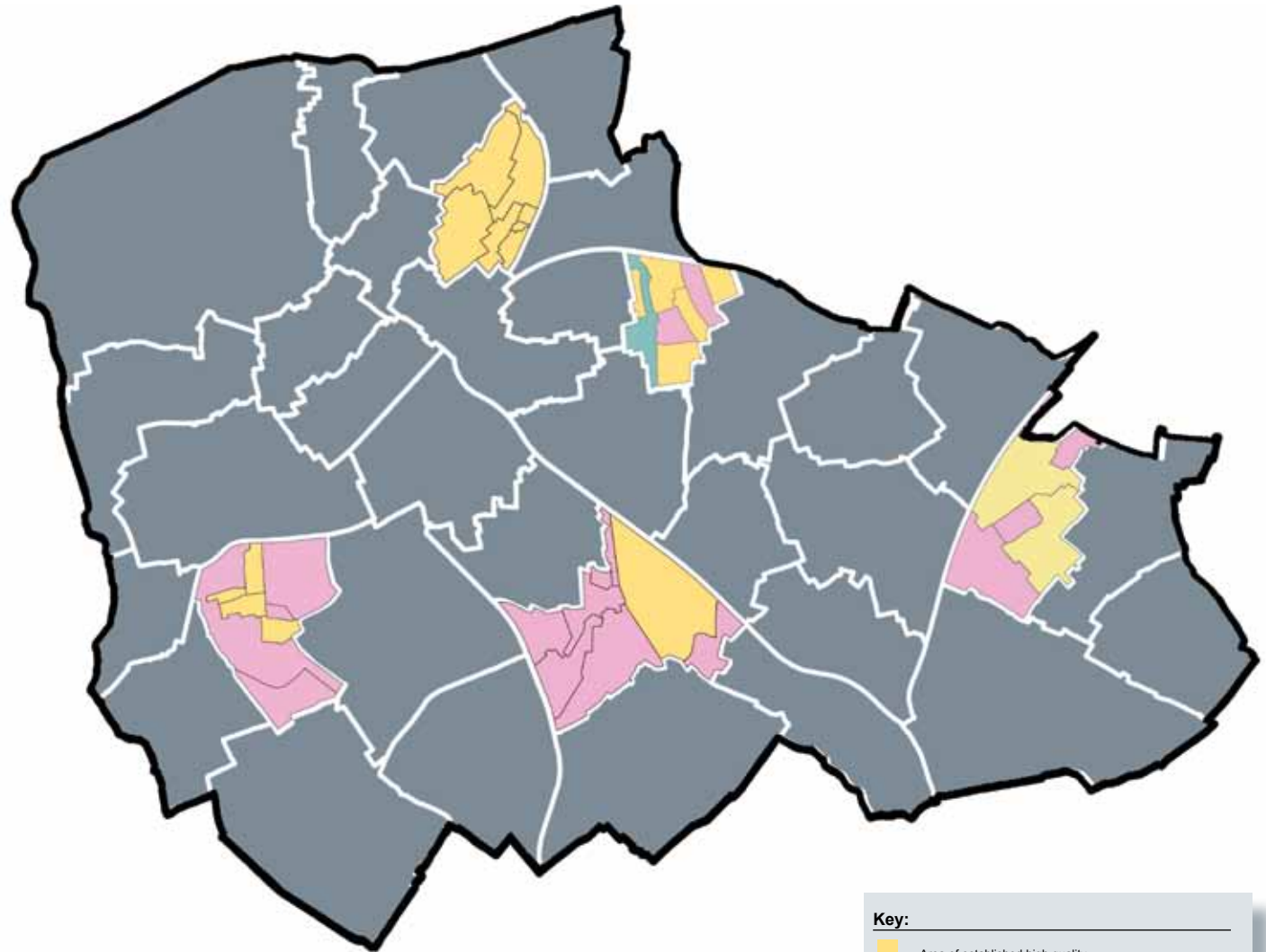
The extent to which the areas satisfy the assessment criteria has been scored to enable each area to be allocated to one of the following three categories of quality.

- 1) A score of 75 or more indicates an **area of established high quality.**
- 2) A score of between 55 and 70 indicates an **area with scope to reinforce the existing character.**
- 3) A score of 50 or less indicates an **area requiring enhancement to reinforce identity.**

These categories will be identified on the character area assessment map.






Example of character area assessment map



Borough wide character area assessment map

Key:

-  Area of established high quality
-  Area with scope to reinforce the existing character
-  Area requiring enhancement to reinforce identity

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Character Area Issues and Guidance

Following the allocation of the area into one of three area types:

- 1) Area of Established high quality
 - 2) Area with scope to reinforce the existing character
 - 3) Area requiring enhancement to reinforce identity,
- the character area Issues, Guidance and potential enhancement projects are identified for each area.

Images of common built form and public realm issues encountered during the study



St. Georges Road: Potential to improve the visual appearance of traffic calming scheme



Buckfast Road: Loss of front boundaries and planting in front gardens



Haydon's Road: Unsympathetic alterations to a former shop unit



Spencer Road: Pebbledashing or painting facades and replacement windows can harm the unity of the street.



Acacia Road: Planter in need of upgrading



Garfield Road: Oversized front dormer destroys the lines of the original roofs