



# UNDERSTANDING NEIGHBOURHOOD CHARACTER

*This practice note provides guidance for applicants, the community and responsible authorities about:*

- *understanding what is meant by neighbourhood character*
- *preparing or assessing a proposed residential development so that it meets the neighbourhood character requirements of the residential development provisions in planning schemes.*

## What role does neighbourhood character play in preparing or assessing a proposed residential development?

Designing and siting new dwellings to respect neighbourhood character is a fundamental objective of the residential development provisions in planning schemes.

It is important that both the applicant and council have a common understanding about the key features of neighbourhood character so that:

- a satisfactory neighbourhood and site description, including the identification of the key features of the neighbourhood, is provided
- the design response derives from and responds to the key features identified in the neighbourhood and site description
- the residential development proposal respects the existing or preferred neighbourhood character and satisfies all the neighbourhood character requirements of the residential development provisions in planning schemes.

## What is neighbourhood character?

Neighbourhood character is essentially the combination of the public and private realms. Every property, public place or piece of infrastructure makes a contribution, whether great or small. It is the cumulative impact of all these contributions that establishes neighbourhood character.

The key to understanding character is being able to describe how the features of an area come together to give that area its own particular character. Breaking up character into discrete features and characteristics misses out on the relationships between these features and characteristics. Understanding how these relationships physically appear on the ground is usually the most important aspect in establishing the character of the area.

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## Do all areas have neighbourhood character?

It is common for some areas to be described as having 'little or no character', and other areas as having 'lots of character'. These sorts of descriptions confuse neighbourhood character with attractiveness. All areas have a character in the same way that all people have a personality. In some areas the character may be more obvious, more unusual, or more attractive, but no area can be described as having no character.

The character of all areas is to be respected (even areas that planners or designers might not think to be attractive). If, for a broader range of considerations, a change in the character of an area is sought, then this must be achieved by setting out a preferred future character statement in the planning scheme.

## Character is not heritage

In defining neighbourhood character, it is important to understand the differences between neighbourhood character and heritage.

While all areas have a history or a heritage, not all areas are historically significant. Heritage significance is determined by recognised criteria set by Commonwealth, State and local agencies, with reference to the Burra Charter. Cultural heritage is largely embodied in the fabric and setting of a building and place. It is important to manage and retain this fabric and setting to retain the cultural significance of a place. Heritage significance can't be improved, but the fabric of a place can be improved, restored or reinterpreted.

In many areas building style is important to setting the character of the area. This includes not just typical form and massing, but may also include details, materials and colours. Buildings do not need to be old or historically significant to have a character that is important to people's understanding and enjoyment of an area.

## Character and amenity

Amenity is about the pleasantness and good functioning of an area. Neighbourhood character is about its sense of place and community meaning. Regardless of the character of an area there are standards of residential amenity that apply to all residential development. These basic amenity standards include overlooking, overshadowing and solar access. Sometimes, these amenity standards can have an effect on neighbourhood character, but as a general principle, neighbourhood character and amenity should be treated separately.

## The role of the neighbourhood and site description

A planning application for a dwelling in a residential zone must be accompanied by a neighbourhood and site description. The purpose of the neighbourhood and site description is to accurately describe the features or characteristics of the neighbourhood and the site.

A neighbourhood and site description is not a justification for a preconceived design. It is a factual record of the physical aspects of the neighbourhood and the site that are likely to affect the design response.

The neighbourhood and site description requires the following matters to be considered in relation to the neighbourhood:

- the pattern of development of the neighbourhood (only for permit applications for two or more dwellings on a lot)
- the built form, scale and character of surrounding development including front fencing
- architectural and roof styles
- any other notable features or characteristics of the neighbourhood.

## Identifying the features and characteristics of the neighbourhood

Identifying the features and characteristics of the neighbourhood required by the neighbourhood and site description does not mean producing an exhaustive list of features in the neighbourhood.

Listing discrete features and characteristics of an area is not an adequate description of the character of a place. Understanding the relationship between the features and characteristics of a neighbourhood is important to describing the character of the area.

The key is to consider the **interaction** between features and characteristics. A decision needs to be made about which of the features and characteristics are important and then explain how they interact to contribute to the character of the neighbourhood.

## What features and characteristics should be considered?

Describing neighbourhood character requires a qualitative assessment and the exercise of judgement about which features and characteristics determine the neighbourhood character of an area.

The following table sets out one process that could be used to identify the most important features and characteristics of the neighbourhood that will influence the design response.

The table is not an exhaustive list of either the questions that might be asked or the features that

might be identified to assist in determining the character of an area. Describing the character of an area will also depend on the extent of neighbourhood character analysis already undertaken by the relevant council and the particular characteristics of the neighbourhood in question.

The table is a prompt to identify and describe the key features and characteristics that will influence the design response rather than an exhaustive list of features to be considered.

Any assessment that takes a 'tick-a-box' approach to identifying the features and characteristics of the neighbourhood is not sufficient.

Matters to be considered	Questions that might help in the preparation of the neighbourhood and site description	Terms/features that might help to describe this aspect of neighbourhood character	Your response
The pattern of development of the neighbourhood (only required where more than one dwelling on a lot is proposed)	<p>Is the neighbourhood typical of a particular form or pattern of development?</p> <p>Are there any patterns in building form, height, setbacks or rhythm?</p> <p>How do these relate to topography, natural features and street network?</p> <p>Is there any pattern in relation to any particular feature or characteristic?</p> <p>What is the pattern of landscape and street tree planting?</p> <p>How do buildings and private open spaces relate to each other or to the public realm?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topography</li> <li>• Street block length</li> <li>• Street alignment, type and proportions</li> <li>• Extent of rear gardens and private open space</li> <li>• Landscaping and vegetation in the neighbourhood</li> <li>• Patterns of use and occupation</li> <li>• Diversity of housing</li> </ul>	
The built form, scale and character of surrounding development including front fencing	<p>What is the predominant form of development?</p> <p>Is the neighbourhood homogenous or diverse in terms of the built form, scale and character?</p> <p>What sort of front fences are there?</p> <p>How is parking and access arranged?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building mass and height</li> <li>• Setbacks</li> <li>• Space around properties and site coverage</li> <li>• Car parking</li> <li>• Fences (style and height)</li> </ul>	
Architectural and roof styles	<p>What architectural styles are typical in the neighbourhood?</p> <p>What levels of articulation and detail are typical in the neighbourhood?</p> <p>How do roof patterns relate to built form?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Architectural rhythm of street</li> <li>• Porches and verandahs</li> <li>• Architectural consistency</li> <li>• Roof form</li> </ul>	
Any other notable features or characteristics of the neighbourhood	<p>Are there any other notable features that have not been picked up through the consideration of the above matters?</p> <p>Are there any significant street trees or vegetation that would affect the design response?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waterways</li> <li>• Street trees</li> <li>• Details of the footpath and street</li> <li>• Landscaping and vegetation on private lots</li> <li>• Nearby historic buildings or features</li> </ul>	

## How far should the neighbourhood and site description extend?

Council and the applicant need to resolve the area of the neighbourhood that needs to be described. The area of the neighbourhood provides the context for decisions about the design response.

In most cases, about five sites or buildings up and down the street, across the street and behind the site in question should be sufficient to identify the features of the neighbourhood that should influence the design. However, sometimes it may be necessary to look further than this, depending upon the individual circumstances of the site and the neighbourhood.

## The role of the design response

All applications must be accompanied by a design response. The design response must explain how the proposed design:

- derives from and responds to the features of the neighbourhood and the site described in the neighbourhood and site description. The design response should therefore include an evaluation of how the features or characteristics of the neighbourhood identified in the neighbourhood and site description influence the design
- meets the objectives of the residential development provisions in the planning scheme. However, this does not mean that the applicant must provide a detailed written explanation of how each objective is met. In most cases, brief notes on the plan indicating how the design response achieves the objectives will suffice
- has responded to the neighbourhood character features identified in any local planning policy or Neighbourhood Character Overlay for the area.

The design response can generally be presented as a plan with notations that show how the proposed design clearly relates to any other dwelling on the site and to the surrounding development and neighbourhood. It may also include a written statement. The design response must include correctly proportioned street elevations or photographs showing the development in the context of adjacent buildings.

## Key steps in developing the design response

When preparing a design response, follow these steps:

- decide what features of neighbourhood character should be responded to
- decide what features of the site and neighbouring sites should be responded to

- decide how to respond to these features and any other issues that have been identified, taking into account the objectives of the residential development provisions and any relevant local planning policies in the planning scheme
- test the design response against the neighbourhood and site description and any features identified in a local planning policy or a Neighbourhood Character Overlay for the area. Does the design adequately respond to the key features? How?
- test the design response against the objectives of the residential development provisions in the planning scheme. Have the objectives been met? How?
- discuss the design response and its implications with council before starting the detailed design.

## Satisfying the neighbourhood character standard

A residential development must meet the objectives of the residential development provisions. The first objective that must be met is the neighbourhood character objective. The standard for this objective requires the design response to:

- respect the existing neighbourhood character or contribute to a preferred neighbourhood character
- respond to the features of the site and surrounding area.

## What does 'respect' mean?

Respecting character does not mean preventing change. The neighbourhood character standard is not intended to result in the replication of existing building stock or stop change.

Neighbourhood character is one of many objectives that must be met. Some areas will see significant changes as a result of new social and economic conditions, changing housing preferences and explicit housing policies. In these areas, it is important that respecting character is not taken too literally, as a new character will emerge in response to these new social and economic conditions.

In simple terms, respect for the character of a neighbourhood means that the development should try to 'fit in'. Depending on the neighbourhood, there are two broad approaches to respecting character:

- respecting the scale and form of surrounding development
- respecting the architectural style of surrounding development.

Determining whether either or both approaches should influence the design response will depend on the features and characteristics identified in the neighbourhood and site description.



Respecting neighbourhood character does not mean limiting the scope of design interpretation and innovation, or mimicry or pattern book design. Instead, it means designing the development to respond to the features and characteristics identified in the neighbourhood.

### Assessing the impact of the design response

Deciding whether a development respects the neighbourhood character is ultimately a subjective decision that depends on the interpretation of the features and characteristics of the neighbourhood identified in the neighbourhood and site description.

The impact of any design response depends on:

- the physical impact of the proposed development
- the sensitivity of the area that the proposed development impacts on
- the planning objectives that deal with those impacts.

In deciding whether or not the design response respects the character of the neighbourhood, consider:

- the extent to which it reinforces existing patterns and interactions of elements
- the sensitivity of the character of the neighbourhood to changes in those patterns
- the planning objectives to deal with those changes.

If the change undermines a key feature or characteristic of the neighbourhood without some policy basis, then a strong case can be made that the development does not respect the character of the neighbourhood. If the change is supported by local character objectives in the planning scheme, then the development can be considered to respect preferred character.

Once the neighbourhood character standard is satisfied, an assessment can be undertaken against the remaining objectives and standards in the planning scheme.

### Where can you get more information?

More information about making a planning application is available in *Planning: a Short Guide*, available from your council, the DOI web site or the Planning Information Centre.

General Practice Notes are also available about:

- *Making a planning application for a dwelling in a residential zone*
- *Assessing a planning application for a dwelling in a residential zone*

Planning Practice Notes provide practical advice on planning and urban design matters.

For copies of other planning practice notes in the series contact:

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