

Landscape Character Assessment

Guidance for England and Scotland



CHAPTER 7

MAKING JUDGEMENTS BASED ON LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

INTRODUCTION

7.1 The use of Landscape Character Assessment in making judgements is a fast-moving scene amongst practitioners. This chapter sets out some main principles on the subject. **Topic Paper 6, *Techniques and criteria for judging capacity and sensitivity***, will be issued in the Summer of 2002 to address one of the key areas where practitioners need to make judgements on this topic.

7.2 The main value of having a Landscape Character Assessment is to help in the process of managing change in a particular place. All sorts of change will shape future landscapes, and by applying this tool in an appropriate way, alongside other tools, we can help to ensure that such changes make a 'positive' contribution.

7.3 For this reason, most assessments will usually move beyond the characterisation stage to the stage of making judgements to inform particular decisions. Making judgements as part of an assessment should not concentrate only on the maintenance of existing character. This may be one part of the judgements made. The focus should be on ensuring that land use change or development proposals are planned and designed to achieve an appropriate relationship (and most often a 'fit') with their surroundings, and wherever possible contribute to enhancement of the landscape, in

some cases by creating a new character.

7.4 Judgements based on landscape character need to take account of several factors. Most importantly it is vital to decide who is going to be involved in making the judgements. For practical reasons some assessments may still rely mainly on judgements made by professionals. It is nevertheless important to involve stakeholders in this part of the process if the judgements are to command wide support and are to be as fully informed as possible. Many different stakeholder groups need to be given opportunities to contribute, especially:

- those who manage the land, especially farmers and foresters;
- local residents and community groups;
- other users of the land, including visitors and those who take part in recreational activities.

7.5 An historical perspective is important to help understand the way in which a landscape has evolved over time to take on its present character, and how both natural forces and human intervention have contributed to its evolution. With such understanding, decisions about future change can be placed in an historical context and ideas about, for example, restoration of some earlier historic character can be

well-informed and based on a sound historical rationale (see **Topic Paper 5**).

WHAT TYPES OF JUDGEMENTS ?

7.6 Ways of making judgements based on character will vary depending upon the particular issue that is being addressed. This in turn will reflect the purpose of the assessment and the type of judgements that are required. As set out in **Chapter 2 (para 2.10)**, these judgements will either:

- be specifically related to decision-making based on landscape character; or
- be designed to contribute to wider environmental decision-making tools where landscape is only one of several topics to be addressed.

7.7 A number of such environmental and sustainability decision-making tools now exist. Some, like Environmental Impact Assessment and landscape capacity studies, are well established. Others, like the Natural Heritage Futures programme (used in Scotland), and Quality of Life Capital (in England) are newer and still emerging. Landscape Character Assessment links to these tools in different ways. **Topic Paper 2** provides information about these tools. It particularly highlights the way that

these tools and initiatives can be informed by Landscape Character Assessment.

MAIN CONSIDERATIONS IN MAKING JUDGEMENTS

7.8 Approaches to making judgements that are focused on landscape character, as distinct from these broader environmental tools, have continued to evolve particularly over the last ten years as practitioners have gained more experience in the practical application of techniques. These approaches are generally based on one or more of the following considerations, namely the character, quality (condition of features), value of the landscape, and its sensitivity to change. These terms need to be understood if there is to be consistency in approaches taken. The definitions recommended by the Agencies are as follows:

- **Landscape character** means the distinct and recognisable pattern of elements that occurs consistently in a particular type of landscape, and how these are perceived by people. It reflects particular combinations of geology, landform, soils, vegetation, land use and human settlement. It creates the particular sense of place of different areas of the landscape.
- **Landscape quality (or condition)** is based on judgements about the physical state of the landscape, and about its intactness, from visual, functional, and ecological perspectives. It also reflects the state of repair of individual features and elements which make up the character in any one place.
- **Landscape value** is concerned with the relative value that is

attached to different landscapes. In a policy context the usual basis for recognising certain highly valued landscapes is through the application of a local or national landscape designation. Yet a landscape may be valued by different communities of interest for many different reasons without any formal designation, recognising, for example, perceptual aspects such as scenic beauty, tranquillity or wildness; special cultural associations; the influence and presence of other conservation interests; or the existence of a consensus about importance, either nationally or locally.

- **Landscape capacity** refers to the degree to which a particular landscape character type or area is able to accommodate change without significant effects on its character, or overall change of landscape character type. Capacity is likely to vary according to the type and nature of change being proposed.

7.9 In deciding on the approach to making judgements there must be a clear rationale which is explained to the assessment's users. This will help make the assessment and its application more robust and accountable.

DEFINING OBJECTIVES

7.10 The rationale for judgements will need to establish the balance between the following objectives for landscape types and areas:

- **Conservation and maintenance** of existing character;
- **Enhancement** of existing character through the introduction of new elements and features or different management of existing ones;

- **Restoration** of character, where this is appropriate to current land use activities and stakeholders' preferences, and is economically viable through either public or private money or a mix of both;
- **Creation** of or accelerating change towards a new character; or
- **Some combination of these options**, especially where regeneration activity is occurring, involving much development and change.

7.11 Developing such a rationale will require careful thought about the overall character and key characteristics of the landscape today, and the dynamics of the landscape, in terms of recent change, current trends and future forces. This will help to determine both the desirability and practicability of maintaining current character.

APPROACHES TO MAKING JUDGEMENTS

7.12 The approach taken to making judgements will usually vary depending on the particular applications for which the assessment is to be used. One of the following four approaches is usually adopted.

i. Landscape strategies

7.13 A Landscape Character Assessment may lead to a strategy for the landscape based on what change, if any, is thought to be desirable for a particular landscape character type (or area) as a whole. The judgements underpinning such strategies need to be transparent but not overly complex, and will usually relate in some way to the objectives set out in **para 7.10**. To ensure they are widely owned and can be implemented, they should be devised and tested through stakeholder involvement where possible.

7.14 To date, practitioners have used landscape strategies to guide thinking on the desirability of: maintaining the existing landscape character; enhancing character; restoring some former landscape, or creating a new one.

7.15 When used in the field of planning policy, for example as a basis for structure or local plan policies, the strategy approach may be used to indicate the preferred approach for each policy zone within the plan and to provide a basis for landscape and development policies. In other circumstances, aspects of landscape value (**paras 7.21 - 7.23**) may help to identify areas for some form of landscape status or designation.

ii. Landscape guidelines

7.16 A Landscape Character Assessment will normally identify the character of an area and those factors that are particularly important in creating that character, usually referred to as key characteristics. If the distinctive character of a certain landscape is to be maintained, the assumption must be that its positive key characteristics should be protected from adverse change and, conversely, that the effects of negative characteristics will be overcome by some form of enhancement. This assumption provides the basis for judgements about the actions necessary to achieve this (**Box 7.1**).

7.17 Field survey should identify the physical state of individual elements and features, and, in combination with consultation and additional research, should indicate the probability of future change, and its nature and direction (trends or 'forces for change'). Considering all this information together should then reveal opportunities either to

Box 7.1: Steps in developing landscape guidelines

Review from field survey

- key characteristics of the landscape;
- current state of landscape - condition of features and elements and overall intactness;
- evidence of landscape change and of its consequences.

Identify by research and consultation

- trends in land use that may cause future change;
- potential development pressures.

Predict

- consequences of land use trends and development pressures for the landscape;
- effects of predicted change on key characteristics, both negative and positive.

Define

- threats to key characteristics as a result of adverse consequences of change;
- opportunities for enhancement where scope for beneficial change;
- guidelines on intervention required for different land uses to counter threats and realise opportunities;
- priorities for action and methods of implementation.

It is often helpful to prepare guidelines at several different levels - for the whole of a study area where they are common, for each landscape character type and for individual landscape character areas where there are specific requirements for action.

prevent those changes which may have adverse consequences for landscape character, or to maximise opportunities for enhancement. This requires careful thought about the importance attached to characteristic features and about the likelihood of either 'positive' or 'negative' change.

7.18 This type of analysis usually results in the drawing up of **landscape guidelines** to indicate the actions required to ensure that distinctive character is maintained or, if appropriate, enhanced. This approach has been adopted in the majority of published assessments

in England and Scotland. Such guidelines are often produced in written form, and are sub-divided according to both the landscape type in question and the main pressures likely to result in landscape change, namely agriculture, forestry, settlement and built development, mineral working, tourism and recreation, and infrastructure (**Box 7.2**).

7.19 Guidelines can also be presented graphically. This is particularly useful when dealing with design issues. In the Sussex Downs AONB graphic guidelines are available in a loose-leaf folder designed

Box 7.2: Example of landscape guidelines

Fife Landscape Character Assessment **Landscape character type: Lowland Dens**

Agriculture

- Encourage maintenance of the relatively small-scale irregular field pattern.
- Where land is taken out of arable use encourage permanent woodland planting.
- Improving grasslands and drainage schemes could disturb the characteristic land cover and vegetation patterns and adversely affect the contours and textures of the landscape and its ecological value.

Forestry

- Encourage the planting of broadleaved trees along the river and burns to link existing woodlands and other habitats and to reinforce the semi-natural patterns of drainage and riparian vegetation and habitats.
- Encourage new planting to enhance the interlinking of new woodlands to existing plantations and semi-natural woodlands on the hills and in the lowlands.

Settlement and built development

- Concentrate new built development in the form of well landscaped extensions to existing settlements well-related to landform and of a scale appropriate to the size of the settlement.
- Encourage the use of existing building styles and materials such as grey stone with grey or dark blue slate-like roofs.

Mineral workings

- Mineral extraction in this landscape type would be inappropriate owing to its potentially adverse effects on the character of the landscape and the potential for the workings to be conspicuous bearing in mind that any effective, large-scale screening measures themselves would be inappropriate features.

Other development and structures in the landscape

- Avoid locating any high or bulky new structures in this landscape type or, where essential, they should be subject to rigorous landscape and visual impact assessment and should be sited carefully and designed to minimise their impact.

Source: David Tyldesley and Associates (1999) *Fife Landscape Character Assessment*, Scottish Natural Heritage, Edinburgh.

to assist in communicating ideas to farmers and land managers (**Figure 7.1**). The Skye and Lochalsh character assessment in Scotland has also taken a highly graphic approach to both the descriptions of landscape character and to the guidelines (**Figure 7.2**).

7.20 As guidelines are designed to influence the way in which landscapes are managed it is highly desirable that the many stakeholders involved in day-to-day

management are actively involved in the process. This will help to ensure that the guidelines are based on a good understanding of 'real world' land uses and land management practices, and that there will be a good prospect that they can be practically implemented.

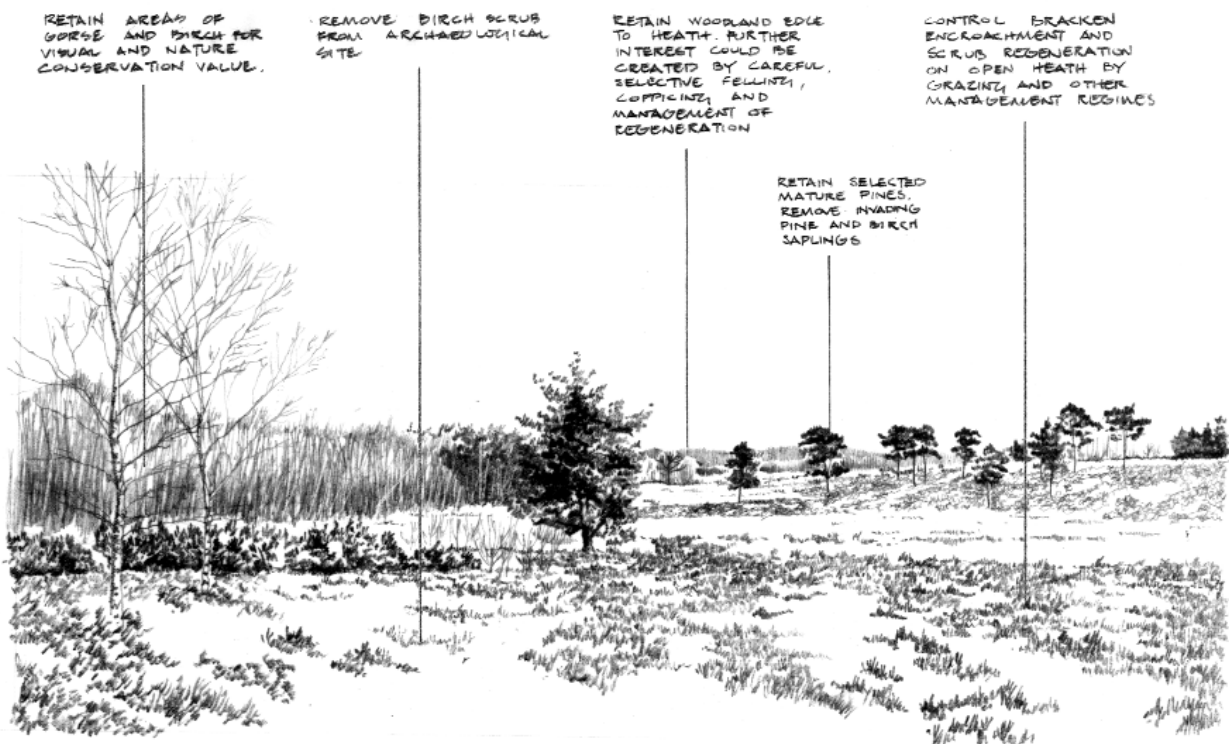
iii. Attaching status to landscapes

7.21 Where a tract of landscape is selected for special recognition, judgements need to be based on a

range of different considerations. National landscape designations in England and Scotland are based on criteria that encompass much more than landscape alone. The key considerations are:

- **natural beauty:** encompasses flora, fauna, geological and physiographical features and is the term that has been used in defining AONBs and National Parks in England;

Fig 7.1 Sussex Downs AONB Landscape Design Guidelines



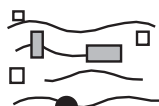
Source: Landscape Design Associates (1997) *Sussex Downs AONB Landscape Design Guidelines*. Countryside Commission and Sussex Downs Conservation Board, Cheltenham.

Figure 7.2: Skye and Lochalsh landscape guidelines

Rocky moorland landscape character type

- The introduction of **numerous elements** within this landscape character type often results in visual confusion, due to the difficulty in creating any kind of order and sense of relationship between elements upon a variable landform; each element, even if part of a collective group, tends to have a different relationship with the landscape.

As a result of this landscape having no distinct pattern or edges, new elements can often appear most appropriate where they either have a **direct relationship to a specific landscape characteristic**, or are **concentrated and ordered as a group**, although the latter may collectively create a dominant focus, contrasting to the undifferentiated character of this landscape.



confusion of
collective
elements



related to a
common
characteristic



distinct order and
relationship of
elements



dispersed elements
can appear as
sprawl, affecting
entire area



concentration
allows retention of
surrounding open
space

Source: Stanton, C. (1996) *Skye and Lochalsh Landscape Assessment*. No 71. Scottish Natural Heritage, Edinburgh.

- **recreational opportunity:** opportunities afforded for open-air recreation, having regard both to landscape character and position in relation to centres of population. (Also used in defining National Parks in England);
- **natural beauty and amenity:** a composite term, used in the founding legislation of SNH contained with The Natural Heritage (Scotland) Act 1991. The Act defines the natural heritage as including the physical elements of flora, fauna, geology, physiographic features and natural beauty and amenity. This combination of terms covers the physical landscape, but also the less tangible aspects such as remoteness or tranquillity, and aspects of landscape experience which appeal to senses other than sight, such as the sound or smell of the sea.

7.22 In considering natural beauty and amenity, and in any other situation which requires that a landscape be identified as requiring special attention, judgements must be based at least in part on the concept of **landscape value (para 7.8)**. This refers to the relative value or importance that stakeholders attach to different landscapes and their reasons for valuing them. The reasons may be set out according to a range of more detailed criteria that may include the following:

- **landscape quality:** the intactness of the landscape and the condition of features and elements (**para 7.8**);
- **scenic quality:** the term that is used to describe landscapes which appeal primarily to the visual senses;
- **rarity:** the presence of rare features and elements in the

landscape, or the presence of a rare landscape character type;

- **representativeness:** whether the landscape contains a particular character, and/or features and elements, which is felt by stakeholders to be worthy of representing;
- **conservation interests:** the presence of features of particular wildlife, earth science or archaeological, historical and cultural interest can add to the value of a landscape as well as having value in their own right;
- **wildness:** the presence of wild (or relatively wild) character in the landscape which makes a particular contribution to sense of place;
- **associations** with particular people, artists, writers, or other media, or events in history.

There may often be a consensus of opinion about the value of an area encompassing one or more of these criteria, which can be traced over time from the views expressed by different stakeholders.

7.23 Tranquillity: In addition to these landscape-related criteria there is another criterion, 'tranquillity', that is a composite feature related to low levels of built development, traffic, noise and artificial lighting. Authors of Landscape Character Assessments must state their criteria for 'low levels' clearly and should also consider whether one or more of the factors needs to be addressed individually, rather than in combination. Policy makers and practitioners may find it useful to refer to the Tranquil Areas maps [54]. Tranquil area mapping is currently underway in Scotland, as is the identification of core wild land areas.

7.24 The full range of criteria set out above may be used to identify valued landscapes that merit some form of designation or recognition. They can be used, either individually or in combination, to assist the definition of nationally important areas throughout England and Scotland. These include National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Scenic Areas, and equivalent areas.

7.25 The criteria of 'natural beauty', 'recreational opportunity' and 'natural beauty and amenity' can be the starting points for selecting the broad area of search for designation or recognition of special areas. The criteria listed in **paras 7.22 and 7.23** could be used to provide a supporting statement about why a particular area is valued. Boundaries can then be determined by assessing the character and quality of the landscapes within the area of search to determine whether or not they should be included (see **Chapter 9** for further detail).

iv. Landscape capacity

7.26 Many Landscape Character Assessments will be used to help in decisions about the ability of an area to accommodate change, either as a result of new development, or some other form of land use change, such as the introduction of new features, or major change in land cover such as new woodland planting. In these circumstances judgements must be based on an understanding of the ability of the landscape to accommodate change without significant effects on its character. Criteria for what constitutes significant change need to be identified in planning policies or landscape strategies, and will usually be informed by potential effects on character and/or particular features and elements.

GOOD PRACTICE POINTERS

- It is particularly important to find ways of involving stakeholders in this part of the process if the judgements made are to command wide support.
- The approach taken to making judgements based on character will vary depending upon the issue being addressed and must be designed to meet the particular circumstances.
- Some approaches to making judgements are an integral part of the Landscape Character Assessment process. Others are wider environmental evaluation processes to which Landscape Character Assessment can make a valuable contribution.
- There must be a clear rationale behind the approach to making judgements, which will help to determine the eventual outcome. This will require careful thought about the overall character and key characteristics of the landscape, its history and origins, and the opportunities that may exist to create new landscapes to meet the emerging social, economic and environmental needs of stakeholders.
- It is particularly important that:
 - the reasons for adopting a particular approach to making judgements are made clear;
 - the approach (or combination of approaches) used must be clearly explained and transparent;
 - the extent and nature of stakeholder involvement should be made clear.