

## **Report to the Local Development Framework Cabinet Committee**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Report reference:** LDF-001-2010/11  
**Date of meeting:** 27 May 2010

**Portfolio:** Leader

**Subject:** Landscape Character Assessment - Evidence Base Study

**Responsible Officer:** Ian White (01992 564066).

**Democratic Services Officer:** Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

### **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**To provisionally “sign off” the content of the Landscape Character Assessment Study as part of the Local Development Framework Evidence Base.**

### **Executive Summary:**

The landscape is a key part of the attractiveness of the District and is highly valued by residents and visitors. The Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) identifies the different character types within the District, and provides a better understanding of how this landscape has been formed, its diversity and distinctiveness, its sensitivity to change and management needs

The resulting assessment will help guide decision making that will better take into account the landscape character of the District. In particular the LCA will enable the Council to adopt detailed policy which seeks to conserve and enhance the landscapes of the District. Such policy will ensure that the landscape of the District continues to be as rich as possible visually, ecologically and culturally and better able to meet the current and future needs and interests of the community. There are also strong links with Biodiversity Action plans and some of their targets.

### **Reasons for Proposed Decision:**

To ensure that full account is given to the protection and enhancement of landscapes in policy formulation, decisions on planning applications and the management of land.

### **Other Options for Action:**

Not to include the Study as part of the Evidence Base.

### **Report:**

#### Context for Study

1. PPS7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas (2004) advises that carefully drafted, criteria-based policies in local development documents, utilising tools such as landscape character assessments, should provide sufficient protection for rural areas which are not included in national designations (eg Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty). PPS7 (para 24)

also warns against “rigid local designations” that may unduly restrict acceptable sustainable development and the economic activity that underpins the vitality of rural areas.

2. The East of England Plan identifies 20 “Countryside Character Areas” in the region and policy ENV2 (Landscape Conservation) advises that “Planning authorities and other agencies should recognise and aim to protect and enhance the diversity and local distinctiveness of the countryside character areas by:

(a) developing area-wide strategies, based on landscape character assessments, setting long-term goals for landscape change, targeting planning and land management tools and resources to influence that change, and giving priority to those areas subject to most growth and change;

(b) developing criteria-based policies, informed by the area-wide strategies and landscape character assessments, to ensure all development respects and enhances local landscape character; and

(c) securing mitigation measures where, in exceptional circumstances, damage to local landscape character is unavoidable.”

3. In April 2009 the Council commissioned Chris Blandford Associates (CBA) to undertake a Landscape Character Assessment of the District. The brief required that the study should be (a) in accordance with “Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland” (Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage 2002), and subsequent topic papers on best practice and methodologies as published by national bodies; and (b) broadly informed by historic patterns of land use change and methods and nature of enclosure.

4. CBA completed a County-level study of landscape character in 2002, and a “Harlow Area Landscape and Environment Study” (2004) as part of the Evidence Base for the East of England Plan Examination in Public. They have also prepared character assessments in other Essex districts including some neighbouring authorities, so their appointment ensured that there would be a significant level of consistency in approach and analysis across council boundaries.

### The Study

5. The study is in 4 sections:

(i) an introduction which lists the aims and objectives and describes the methodology;

(ii) an overview of the District, outlining the physical and historical influences which have shaped the present-day landscape, and identifying key forces for change;

(iii) the “meat” of the document – the identification of 7 Landscape Character Types, within which are 33 distinct Landscape Character Areas; and

(iv) recommendations for taking the study forward – these include:

(a) applications of the assessment, incorporating Landscape Character, into the Local Development Framework;

(b) monitoring landscape change; and

(c) enhancing the Evidence Base.

6. The development of the LCA was carefully monitored primarily by the Principal Officer (Landscape and Trees) with assistance from the Forward Planning Manager; all drafts were subject to modifications and improvements, and as now presented the Assessment is considered “fit for purpose”.

7. The 7 Landscape Character Types (see map at Appendix 1) identified by the consultants are briefly described below:

(i) River Valley Floodplain – the Lea Valley running south from Roydon to Sewardstone with 4 Character Areas described;

(ii) River Valley – 4 Character Areas again, one being the River Stort at Lower Sheering, and the others covering the River Roding from Berners Roding south-west to Buckhurst Hill;

(iii) Farmland Plateau – 9 Character Areas are identified in 3 distinct sections, the first from Sheering to Abbess Roding and Fyfield (3 Areas). The second comprises Berners Roding, Willingale, Norton Heath and Nine Ashes (2 Areas). The third (4 Areas) is in the north-west of the District, including Roydon, Nazeing, Epping Green and Thornwood Common;

(iv) Woodland Ridges – there are 2 distinct Character Areas, the first being immediately north and east of Epping, and the second being the main Epping Forest ridge running south-west from Epping to the District boundary with Chingford;

(v) Farmed Ridges – 1 Character Area running along the south side of Harlow;#

(vi) Ridges and Valleys – 2 distinct sections comprising 6 Character Areas, the first including all the land between Waltham Abbey and Epping, and running south to include Sewardstonebury (4 Character Areas). The second covers the countryside around North Weald, including The Lavers, Moreton and Bobbingworth (2 Character Areas);

(vii) Wooded Ridges and Valleys – 2 sections in the southern half of the District bisected by the River Roding. The first (4 Character Areas) runs south-west from Ongar to Theydon Bois and Loughton, abutting the southern edge of Epping. The second (3 Character Areas) is south of the Roding from Chigwell east to Stapleford Abbots.

8. The study lists the Key Characteristics of the 7 Types and describes in some detail all of the Character Areas, concluding with suggested guidelines for Landscape Planning and Land Management.

#### Applications of the Character Assessment

9. A recent public consultation exercise as part of the preparation of the Sustainable Communities Strategy has highlighted just how important the “greenness” of the District is to local residents. This obviously reflects the success of Green Belt policies over the last 50 or so years, with the rural landscape being the major contributor towards the District’s greenness. The Assessment enables a deeper understanding of the rural landscape by:

(i) identifying and describing what gives places their identity and distinctiveness; and

(ii) helping to guide new development to be sympathetic to those particular qualities by protecting and enhancing valued characteristics.

10. The Core Strategy should therefore include at least one policy dealing with landscape

character – a draft proposed policy is included as Appendix C in the study – to ensure that the implications of different locations and patterns of strategic development are considered. In general terms, this policy approach is supported, however this is subject to detailed consideration of the proposed wording and the outcome of any public consultation. It will be useful to develop more detailed policies for other Development or Supplementary Planning Documents, based on the suggested landscape planning and land management guidelines in the Character Area sections of the study. This will accord with the approach proposed in the East of England Plan as outlined in paragraph 2 of this report. The more detailed policies will be of particular use for taking decisions on planning applications.

11. Landscape character should also feature in other Core Strategy policies – notably those addressing nature and heritage conservation and design. This will ensure that these policies are based upon comprehensive evidence which will help protect the unique features of the District.

12. The Assessment will be used to inform the Sustainability Appraisal of the Core Strategy and other DPDs. It will also provide a baseline for monitoring the impact of new development on landscape character, and the targeting of landscape enhancements in relation to development schemes.

13. There are obvious close links with the Biodiversity Action Plans of both the District and Council Councils, and with the emerging Living Landscapes Strategy which is being drawn up by Essex Wildlife Trust. The Character Assessment may also help to inform National Indicator 197 (management of wildlife sites). There is growing national and regional interest in the preparation of “Green Infrastructure Strategies”. These are intended to bring together consideration of landscape, biodiversity, food production, recreation, education and climate change and to develop links between, and networks of, green spaces to promote appropriate uses for the benefit of local communities in this District. Such a strategy could also encompass the more “traditional” Green Belt issues such as openness and the prevention of urban sprawl or coalescence of settlements. A Green Infrastructure Strategy can be prepared either as an integral part of a Core Strategy or as a stand-alone document. If the Council does adopt such a strategy, this will have very close links with the assessment of the character of the rural landscape.

14. A Landscape Sensitivity Study has also been prepared by CBA. This Study considers the main towns and villages in the District, and the sensitivity of the landscape to change. The outcomes of this Study will be considered at a future meeting of the LDF Cabinet Committee.

15. The consultants suggest how the Character Assessment could be developed or enhanced in the future. Ideas include landscape design guidance, and more detailed studies on local distinctiveness and historic environment.

#### **Resource Implications:**

The study cost £24,745 and was funded from the LDF budget.

#### **Legal and Governance Implications:**

None relevant.

#### **Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:**

The Character Assessment enables a deeper understanding of the rural landscape of the District – a key component of its greenness.

**Consultation Undertaken:**

None at this stage, although the study will be part of the Evidence Base for the Core Strategy and will therefore be subject to public consultation at appropriate times.

**Background Papers:**

PPS7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas (2004)  
East of England Plan (2008)  
Harlow Area Landscape and Environment Study (2004) – CBA  
Essex Landscape Character Assessment (2002) – CBA  
Epping Forest Biodiversity Action Plan 2008 - 2012

**Impact Assessments:**

Risk Management

None.

Equality and Diversity:

Preparation of the Local Development Framework as a whole will be subject to an on-going Equality Impact Assessment, as part of the Sustainability Appraisal.

*Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications?* N/A

*Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken?* N/A

*What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?*  
N/A.

*How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?*  
N/A.