

1.0 INTRODUCTION

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1.1 Background and Study Area

1.1.1 In October 2005 Braintree District Council, Brentwood Borough Council, Chelmsford Borough Council, Maldon District Council and Uttlesford District Council jointly commissioned Chris Blandford Associates (CBA) to undertake Landscape Character Assessments of their respective areas.

1.1.2 The Study Area is shown on Figure 1.1. Situated in the County of Essex, the Study Area comprises the following administrative areas:

- Braintree District
- Brentwood Borough
- Chelmsford Borough
- Maldon District
- Uttlesford District

1.1.3 The areas characterised by this Study include all the rural area up to and including the urban edge and, where they exist, river valleys and other green corridors extending into urban areas.

1.1.4 The Study Area borders Babergh District and St Edmundsbury District in Suffolk, and South Cambridgeshire District in Cambridgeshire to the north; the Districts of North and East Hertfordshire and Epping Forest District in Essex to the west; the Borough of Havering in Greater London, and Thurrock and the Districts of Basildon and Rochford in Essex which form the southern border of the Study Area. The eastern border of the Study Area is provided by the North Sea and by Colchester Borough in Essex.

1.2 Study Aims and Objectives

1.2.1 The aim of the Study is to provide a comprehensive Borough/District-wide assessment of landscape character within the Study Area to inform land use planning and land management decisions.

1.2.2 The Landscape Character Assessment will be specifically used to inform the Local Development Frameworks currently being prepared by the respective local planning authorities.

1.2.3 The key objectives of the Study are to:

- Provide a baseline inventory and description of landscape character by Type and Area at a scale of 1:25,000.
- Identify key issues, sensitivities to change and management strategy objectives/guidelines for each Character Area.
- Ensure that Landscape Character Areas and Types join up seamlessly across administrative boundaries, including with existing character assessment studies carried out by neighbouring authorities outside of the Study Area.
- To liaise with and understand the issues and concerns of the key stakeholder organisations in relation to the landscape characterisation process.

1.3 The Importance of Landscape Character

1.3.1 The UK Government signed the European Landscape Convention¹ on the 24 February 2006. The Convention aims to encourage public authorities within member states to adopt policies and measures for the protection, management and planning of all landscapes, both outstanding and ordinary, that determine the quality of people's living environment. The Convention specially encourages local authorities to introduce exemplary and long lasting policies or measures to protect, manage and plan landscapes.

1.3.2 The European Landscape Convention defines landscape as:

'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.'

1.3.3 The term landscape is typically synonymous with the countryside; however, landscape is everywhere and may comprise rural landscapes, urban landscapes or townscapes, urban fringe landscapes, coastal landscapes or seascapes, etc.

1.3.4 The European Landscape Convention defines 'landscape character' as:

'a distinct and recognisable pattern of elements that occur consistently in a particular type of landscape.'

1.3.5 In England and Scotland, Landscape Character Assessment² is a tool that allows landscape character to be understood, explained and described in a transparent and robust way. It does this by mapping and describing the variations in physical, natural and cultural attributes and experiential characteristics that make one area distinctive from another at a range of spatial scales. Landscape Character Assessment also recognises how landscapes have changed over time, and acknowledges the changing influences of human activities and the impacts of economic development.

1.3.6 The overall aim of landscape planning, design and management should be to achieve *sustainable landscapes* that are as visually, biodiverse and culturally rich as possible to meet all of society's social, economic and environmental needs. A better understanding of landscapes provided by Landscape Character Assessments – their diversity, character and distinctiveness, evolution, sensitivity to change and their management needs – is essential to help to work towards this goal.

1.4 Planning Policy Framework

1.4.1 National Planning Policy relating to landscape character is contained in PPS1³ and PPS7⁴.

Planning Policy Statement 1 : Delivering Sustainable Development

1.4.2 PPS1 sets out the Government's overarching planning policies on the delivery of sustainable development through the planning system. It states that one of the Government's objectives for the planning system is that planning should facilitate and promote sustainable urban and rural development by protecting and enhancing the natural and historic environment and the quality and character of the countryside (para 5). In its key principles, PPS1 states that 'a

¹ The European Landscape Convention opened for signature in Florence on 20 October 2000. Jim Knight, Minister for Rural Affairs, Landscape and Biodiversity announced the UK signing of the European Landscape Convention on 24 February 2006.

² Landscape Character Assessment: Guidance for England and Scotland (Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage, 2002).

³ Planning Policy Statement 1 : Delivering Sustainable Development (ODPM, 2005).

⁴ Planning Policy Statement 7 : Sustainable Development in Rural Areas (ODPM, 2004).

spatial planning approach should be at the heart of planning for sustainable development (para 13.iii) and *'design which fails to take the opportunities for improving the character and quality of an area should not be accepted'* (para 13.iv). When preparing development plans *'planning authorities should seek to enhance as well as protect biodiversity, natural habitats, the historic environment and landscape and townscape character'* (para 27). PPS1 also requires new design to be integrated into the existing urban form and natural and built environments (para 35).

Planning Policy Statement 7 : Sustainable Development in Rural Areas

- 1.4.3 Landscape Character Assessment, along with Village or Town Design Statements and Village or Parish Plans, is recommended by PPS7 as a tool to assist Local Authorities in the preparation of policies and guidance that encourages good quality design throughout rural areas (para 13). Landscape Character Assessment is also recommended by PPS7 as a tool for creating carefully drafted, criteria-based policies in Local Development Documents to protect valued landscapes outside nationally designated areas without the need for rigid local designations, which may restrict sustainable development and the economic vitality of rural areas. PPS7 advises that local landscape designations should only be maintained or, exceptionally, extended where it can be clearly shown that criteria-based policies cannot provide the necessary protection (paras 24 and 25).

The East of England Regional Spatial Strategy

- 1.4.4 The East of England Plan : Draft Revision to the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for the East of England was published by the East of England Regional Assembly for consultation in December 2004. An Examination in Public (EIP) into the draft RSS was held between November 2005 and March 2006. The EIP Panel Report was published in June 2006, which included recommended changes to the draft RSS.
- 1.4.5 The Draft RSS is based on the principles of sustainable development and specifically identifies landscape character as a key consideration in the spatial development of the region. Taking into account the recommended changes of the EIP Panel, draft Policy ENV2 Landscape Conservation states:

'Planning authorities and other agencies in their plans, policies and programmes and decision-making will, in accordance with statutory requirements, afford the highest status of protection to the East of England's nationally designated landscapes – the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads (having status equal to a National Park) and the Chilterns, Norfolk Coast, Dedham Vale and Suffolk Coast and Heaths Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)s. Within the Broads priority will be given to the statutory purposes of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, promoting public enjoyment and protecting the interests of navigation. Within the AONBs priority over other considerations will be given to conservation of the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage.

Throughout the East of England planning authorities and other agencies in their plans, policies, programmes and decision-making will aim to recognise, protect and enhance the diversity and local distinctiveness of the countryside character areas indicated on Map 9.1 by:

- *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;*

- *developing criteria-based policies, informed by the area-wide strategies and landscape character assessments, to ensure that all development, wherever possible respects and enhances local landscape character; and*
- *providing/requiring appropriate mitigation measures where avoidance of damage to local landscape character is unavoidable.'*

The Essex Structure Plan

- 1.4.6 The Essex and Southend on Sea Replacement Structure Plan was adopted in April 2001. Under the *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004*, the Structure Plan will remain the operative development plan for Essex from 2004-2007. The Structure Plan and its policies are therefore saved for three years, unless the East of England Regional Spatial Strategy is adopted sooner. Once the East of England Plan is adopted, the Structure Plan policies will be repealed and will have no effect.
- 1.4.7 The need to protect landscape character has been recognised by Essex County Council, and policies to protect the distinctive character of the towns, villages, countryside and coast of the County is set out in the Structure Plan. The Structure Plan specifically encourages District and Borough Councils in Essex to prepare Landscape Character Assessments to inform land use planning and land management in their areas.

Local Planning Context

- 1.4.8 The five local planning authorities within the Study Area have prepared and adopted Local Plans for the whole of their areas to guide development and to protect and enhance the environment. These will eventually be replaced by Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) under the arrangements set out in the *Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004*. LDFs comprise a series of Local Development Documents (LDDs) that will set out proposals for the future development use and conservation of land and buildings.
- 1.4.9 The new LDFs will normally comprise the following main LDDs of relevance to landscape planning objectives:
- *Statement of Community Involvement* – sets out how the community will be consulted during the production of LDDs and in development control.
 - *Core Strategy* – establishes the overarching vision for development in local authority areas and sets out the key planning objectives as a basis for policies. It contains a spatial strategy, strategic policies and proposals for promoting and controlling development in accordance with the principles of sustainable development, and includes a monitoring and implementation framework.
 - *Development Control Policies* – comprise a suite of policies to be used in development control to ensure that all development meets the vision and strategy set out in the Core Strategy.
 - *Site Specific Allocations* – this identifies site-specific land allocations for different types of development, and land to which specific policies apply.
 - *Area Action Plans* – are developed, where necessary, for particular sites or areas identified for significant change or conservation. They focus on implementation, setting out the measures needed to deliver development or conservation initiatives.

- *Proposals Map* - expresses geographically the adopted development plan policies, including locations and sites for particular land use and development proposals, and areas of protection.
- *Supplementary Planning Documents* – provide detailed guidance to elaborate upon the core policies and proposals, e.g. design guides, site development briefs or topic based guidance. SPDs are capable of being updated regularly making them more able to respond to changing circumstances. They do not have Development Plan Document status, but are a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

1.4.10 The Core Strategy, Development Control Policies, Site Specific Allocations, Proposals Map and any Area Action Plans, together with the RSS, comprise the statutory Development Plan Documents against which all planning decisions will normally need to be made. It is intended that this Landscape Character Assessment will be used as part of the evidence base of technical studies to inform the preparation of the LDFs within the Study Area.

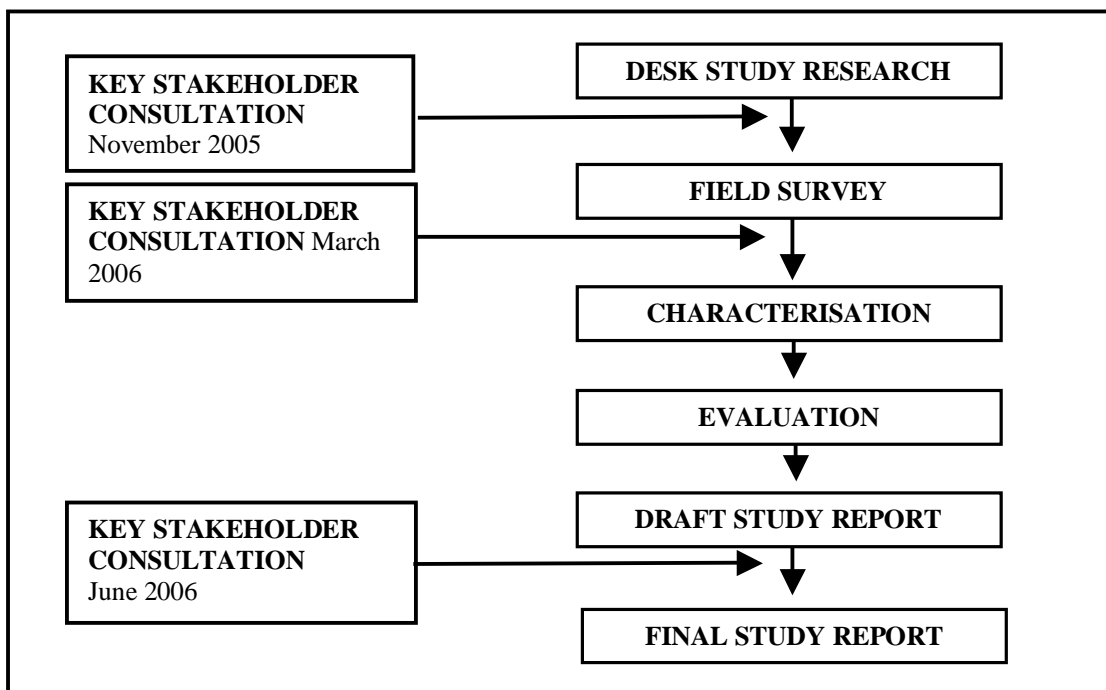
1.4.11 The current local planning situation in each of the respective authority areas is set out in Appendix E.

1.5 Approach and Methodology

1.5.1 The overall approach for undertaking the Landscape Character Assessment is based on the latest guidance published by the Countryside Agency⁵, taking into account current best practice. Landscape Character Assessment addresses both the relatively objective process of landscape characterisation, which involves identifying, mapping, classifying and describing 'landscape character', and the more subjective process of evaluating landscape character to inform planning and land management decisions.

1.5.2 The study process is illustrated in Box 1, and described below.

Box 1 – Landscape Character Assessment Process



⁵ Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland (Countryside Agency/Scottish Natural Heritage, 2002).

Desk Study Research

- 1.5.3 This stage involved desk-based research to identify physical and historical factors that have influenced the shape and use of the landscape. This work drew on a variety of documents and maps that describe the physical geography and cultural history of the Study Area (see Appendix C for details). The desk research also identified the forces for change affecting the character of the landscape within the Study Area.
- 1.5.4 In summary, the desk work involved:
- A review of existing national and local character assessments relating to the Study Area, including the Countryside Agency's Character of England Map/Countryside Character descriptions and National Landscape Typology; Essex Landscape Character Assessment; and existing assessments for neighbouring areas in Essex, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire and Thurrock.
 - Production and analysis of map overlays of surface geology, landform and drainage, and nature conservation designations.
 - Analysis of air photos.
 - Identification of draft Landscape Character Types and draft Landscape Character Areas.
- 1.5.5 In recognition of the important contribution that historic patterns and features make to the character of the current landscape in this part of Essex, information from the Essex Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) Study dataset was incorporated into the Landscape Character Assessment using a methodology developed and agreed with Essex County Council Historic Environment Unit and English Heritage (see Appendix D for details). 'Historic Landscape Character Areas' were derived from amalgamation of the HLC typology, and used to (i) inform the definition of the Landscape Character Areas defined in this report, and (ii) to identify the key historic land use features in the present-day landscape (see the Landscape Character Area profiles in Sections 3.0 to 7.0).

Field Survey

- 1.5.6 Field surveys were undertaken between November 2005 and April 2006 to allow consideration of seasonal variations. The aim of the surveys was to undertake a visual analysis of how different features and elements combined to create distinctive patterns in the landscape. The surveys were undertaken from key viewpoints within each draft Landscape Character Area by a team of field assessors. The checklist included:
- Landform
 - Rivers/drainage
 - Land cover
 - Field pattern and field boundaries
 - Communication routes
 - Settlement form/pattern
 - Building styles
 - Scale
 - Texture
 - Enclosure
 - Stimuli
 - Sense of tranquillity
 - Movement

- View types and composition
- Landmarks

1.5.7 The survey information (including photographs) was used to (i) inform the descriptions of landscape character and (ii) to test and refine the draft Landscape Character Area boundaries.

Characterisation

1.5.8 The characterisation stage involved the combination of the desk study research and field survey analysis to identify and map generic Landscape Character Types and geographically unique Landscape Character Areas at 1:25,000 scale (see Section 2.5 for details).

1.5.9 For each generic Landscape Character Type, its boundaries were mapped and its key characteristics described. For each unique Landscape Character Area, its boundaries were mapped and the following characterisation information was recorded:

- Key Characteristics
- Overall Character Description
- Visual Characteristics
- Historic Land Use
- Ecological Features

Evaluation

1.5.10 This stage involved making the following judgements about each Landscape Character Area:

- Key Planning and Land Management Issues
- Sensitivities to Change
- Proposed landscape Strategy Objectives
- Suggested Landscape Planning Guidelines
- Suggested Land Management Guidelines

Evaluation of Landscape Sensitivity

1.5.11 The methodology for evaluating the intrinsic sensitivities of each Landscape Character Area to change is based on the criteria for judging sensitivity set out in an accompanying paper to the *Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland*⁶, taking into account current best practice.

1.5.12 It should be noted that the evaluation is based on the relatively broad-brush analysis undertaken at 1:25,000 scale for this Study. The degree of sensitivity is not absolute. It is likely to vary according to the nature of change under consideration, and is therefore only indicative. This evaluation should be read in conjunction with the more strategic evaluation of landscape sensitivity set out in the Essex Landscape Character Assessment⁷.

1.5.13 The criteria used to evaluate the relative sensitivities of each Landscape Character Area are defined in Box 2.

⁶ Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland : Topic Paper 8 – Techniques and Criteria for Judging Capacity and Sensitivity (Swanwick, 2004).

⁷ Essex County Council and Southend-on-Sea Borough Council (July 2002).

Box 2 - Landscape Sensitivity Evaluation Criteria

Intrinsic Landscape Qualities

- The number and contribution of positive visual qualities/characteristics to landscape value/sense of place.

Biodiversity Value

- The contribution of positive ecological elements or features to landscape value/sense of place.

Visual Characteristics (Intervisibility and Visual Prominence)

- The degree to which an area is widely visible from, and positively influences the character of, surrounding areas.

Historic Integrity

- The contribution of positive visible historic elements within the area, taking into account the intactness and integrity of historic landscape patterns and the presence of valued historic features within the area.

Re-creatability

- The degree to which the *intrinsic landscape qualities*, *biodiversity value* and *historic integrity* of an area can be re-created if eroded or lost.

Landscape Strategy Objectives and Guidelines

1.5.14 This stage also involved identifying proposed broad strategy objectives and suggested guidelines for each Landscape Character Area. Taking into account the condition and sensitivities of the particular Landscape Character Area, one or more of the following strategy objectives was identified:

- **Conserve** - seek to protect and enhance positive features that are essential in contributing to local distinctiveness and sense of place through effective planning and positive land management measures.
- **Enhance** - seek to improve the integrity of the landscape, and reinforce its character, by introducing new elements where distinctive features or characteristics are absent.
- **Restore** - seek to reinforce and/or reinstate historic landscape patterns and features that contribute to sense of place and time depth, by repairing distinctive elements that have been lost or degraded.

1.5.15 The sensitivity analysis, together with the proposed strategy objectives and suggested guidelines for each Landscape Character Area, can be used to inform:

- the identification of spatial development options within the District/Borough Local Development Frameworks.
- Sustainability Appraisal/Strategic Environmental Assessment of Local Development Framework site allocations.

- the highlighting of landscape issues that may need to be considered in greater detail in relation to development control decisions for major schemes.
- the application of criteria-based landscape protection and enhancement policies within Local Development Frameworks.

Key Stakeholder Consultation

- 1.5.16 Consultation with key stakeholder organisations was an important and integral element of the Study. The purpose of the stakeholder consultation was to strengthen the evidence base by gathering opinions about landscape character from the key stakeholders, and to promote the value of the Study as a tool for informing planning and land management decisions in rural areas.
- 1.5.17 The first stage of consultation in November 2005 involved a workshop to explore stakeholder's views on what gives different places within each of the authority areas their local identity and distinctive character (see Appendix A for further details). This information was fed into the desk study research and field survey stages of the Study to refine and validate the preliminary draft mapping of Landscape Character Types and Areas by the Consultant Team.
- 1.5.18 The second stage of consultation in March 2006 involved a further workshop to: explore stakeholder's views on the refined Landscape Character Types and Areas identified following field survey work; identify key threats to valued landscape characteristics/areas; and identify opportunities to enhance landscape character and sense of place (see Appendix A for further details). This information was fed into the characterisation and evaluation stages of the Study to inform: (i) the descriptions of landscape character; (ii) judgements about the sensitivities of different Landscape Character Areas to change; and (iii) the development of strategy objectives and guidelines for guiding change within different areas.
- 1.5.19 The findings of the Draft Report were presented to and discussed with the key stakeholders at a third workshop held in early June 2006, and their comments incorporated into the final version.
- 1.5.20 As a technical study, local community and special interest groups were not consulted on the Study at this preparatory stage. However, it is anticipated (see Section 8.0) that community involvement in the future application of the Landscape Character Assessment will be encouraged through development of character-based design guidance at the local level (e.g. Village Design Statements, Town Design Statements, Parish Plans etc.).

1.6 Structure of the Report

- 1.6.1 The study report is structured as follows.
- 1.6.2 **Section 1.0** sets out the context for the Study. It explains the background to the Study, its aims and objectives, and highlights the importance of landscape character. It also describes the planning policy framework for the Study, and outlines the approach and process behind the assessment methodology.
- 1.6.3 **Section 2.0** provides an overview of the Study Area. It describes the physical and historical influences on the landscape, and identifies the key forces for change affecting landscape character today. This section also provides an overview of landscape character across the Study Area as a whole in its national and county context. The descriptions of individual Landscape Character Areas in Sections 3.0 to 7.0 (see below), should be read in conjunction with this information to ensure that the contextual relationship with the wider landscape is understood.

1.6.4 **Sections 3.0 to 7.0** of the report provide the detailed ‘profiles’ of Landscape Character Areas within Braintree, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Maldon and Uttlesford respectively. The profiles are structured as follows:

- Location of character area (map)
- Boundaries of character area (map)
- Photograph
- Key characteristics
- Overall character description
- Visual characteristics
- Historic land use
- Ecological features
- Key planning and land management issues
- Sensitivities to change
- Proposed landscape strategy objectives
- Suggested landscape planning guidelines
- Suggested land management guidelines

Where Landscape Character Areas fall within two or more adjacent District/Borough areas included within this Study report, the same profile has been included within the respective section. For example, the profile for Landscape Character Area *B16 – Felsted Farmland Plateau* is ‘shared’ by Braintree District (Section 3.0), Chelmsford Borough (Section 5.0) and Uttlesford District (Section 7.0). In such instances, a cross-reference is noted in the respective Character Area profile(s). References to other studies in neighbouring authority areas is facilitated by signposts to relevant documents as appropriate within each Section.

1.6.5 **Section 8.0** sets out the consultant’s recommendations to the commissioning authorities for their consideration and action as appropriate. Recommendations are provided for the application of the Landscape Character Assessment including its use in relation to informing Local Development Framework policies for protecting and enhancing landscape character, and in providing a baseline and framework for monitoring landscape change. Recommendations for further work required to enhance the evidence base on the landscape and settlement character of the Study Area are also included.