

# PART ONE

## STUDY CONTEXT

## Background

Over recent years, there has been growing recognition of the role of landscape assessment as a basis for countryside planning and management. In particular, the use of landscape assessment as a tool for describing the character of our landscapes is increasingly recognised as an important first step in conserving and enhancing them, and for planning for sustainable development in rural areas.

The impetus for landscape assessment at a district level has come from two main directions:

- the Countryside Commission actively encourages local planning authorities to undertake district-wide assessments to provide an informed background for policy and development control decisions and for countryside management. It has published detailed guidance on landscape assessment [1] and has recently produced a 'New Map of England' which provides a broad context for defining landscape character at a local level. It also promotes the concept of local distinctiveness through its 'Design in the Countryside' initiative.
- Government advice contained within the revised PPG7 (February 1997) [2] takes forward these approaches and encourages planning authorities to undertake comprehensive landscape assessments as part of the local plan review process. The extent and effectiveness of local landscape designations is to be given particular consideration in such reviews.

In response to this background, South Oxfordshire District Council commissioned Atlantic Consultants to prepare a District-wide landscape assessment. Its main objective is to increase understanding of the landscape resources of the District, to assist with policy formulation and development control and to assist with the targeting of resources for enhancement and management.

Whilst the assessment is primarily intended to assist the District Council, it is also considered to be of relevance to a wide range of organisations and individuals whose activities may have an effect upon the landscape of South Oxfordshire. These will include landowners, farmers, private developers, community organisations and other local interest groups.

The brief outlined the following main requirements of the study:

- to provide a breakdown of the district into areas of distinctive landscape character;
- to analyse and describe the components of the landscape that contribute to local distinctiveness;
- to identify variations in landscape quality and condition across the District and its sensitivity to change;
- to identify key landscape management and enhancement priorities, and to advise the council on the appropriateness of new development within different parts of the district.

## Structure of the document

This document is divided into two main parts:

- **Part One** provides the overall background and context to the study, including an explanation of the approach and methodology employed and a brief overview of the District landscape, its formative influences and overall character;
- **Part Two** deals with the individual Character Areas, describing in detail their landscape and settlement character together with appropriate guidelines for landscape enhancement, planning and development.

# APPROACH AND RATIONALE

## Landscape character assessment

Over recent years, there has been a general trend away from quantitative systems of landscape evaluation towards an approach based upon understanding the intrinsic character of a locality and its distinctive features, allowing land use planning and management to respond to the local 'landscape vernacular'. This approach is explained within the landscape assessment guidance published by the Countryside Commission (CCP423) [1], which forms the basis for this study.

The approach recognises that the character of the landscape is not simply a scenic or visual phenomenon but is the product of its physiography, history and land management. It recognises that factors such as ecology, history and culture, can have a bearing upon the way landscape is experienced and valued and that these factors should also be taken into account within the assessment process. Overall, the approach relies upon a mix of objective recording and subjective judgement, used in a systematic and iterative way.

The assessment process involves the following main stages of work:

- **Desk study** - this stage involved the collation of a wide range of existing information on the physical and human influences that have shaped the landscape of the District. The process involved 'overlay mapping' of key factors (eg. geology, topography, drainage, woodland cover, and sites of ecological/historical importance etc.) as well as detailed examination of other documentary, map-based or photographic evidence. Other landscape assessments (eg. the New Map of England and Chilterns AONB assessment) were also consulted to provide context and consistency.

**Field survey** - this part of the study involved travelling extensively throughout the District, recording detailed variations in landscape character and key features onto 1:25,000 base maps. Other factors, such as evidence of pressures on the landscape and key management or enhancement needs, were also recorded during the field survey.

- **Analysis** - this stage involved combining the results of the desk and field studies to produce a breakdown of the District into areas of distinctive character.

The assessment examines landscape character at two levels. At the first level, it looks at the way in which particular landform and landcover elements combine to produce distinctive **landscape types**. These are generic descriptions and the types can repeat across the District without necessarily being related to geographical location.

Landscape types are particularly useful as a tool for understanding the detailed pattern of landscape variation that occurs across the District as a whole. However, in planning and management terms, it is often more important to understand the landscape character and qualities of particular places or areas, so that appropriate policies and action can be applied at a local level. Therefore, at the second level, it is common practice to define **landscape character areas**. These are units of landscape which may embrace a number of different landscape types but which in some way have a coherent and recognisable 'sense of place' or local identity.

It is important to stress that the boundaries between landscape types or between character areas are rarely distinct. Instead, the boundaries tend to be best approximations of a gradual but discernible change in character. It is also important to stress that landscape character rarely stops at the District boundary and will usually extend beyond into neighbouring Districts.

The basis for the division of South Oxfordshire District into distinctive landscape types and character areas, is explained in the 'landscape overview' section.

## Guidelines for landscape enhancement

### *Approach to evaluation*

The second part of the study involves identifying variations in **landscape quality and condition** across the District, primarily to allow appropriate guidelines for landscape conservation, management and enhancement to be defined. South Oxfordshire remains a predominantly rural District with a high proportion of attractive countryside and large areas lying within nationally designated AONB landscapes. Even in these areas, however, there are local differences in landscape quality and condition which may require different enhancement strategies.

The aim is, therefore, not to identify the 'best' or 'worst' quality landscapes within the District but to examine the intrinsic quality and condition of individual landscape types so that enhancement can be targeted to the most needy areas. This approach has therefore been applied across the whole of the District landscape irrespective of the presence of existing landscape designations.

Using the experience and judgement of the study team, each landscape type was assessed in terms of the following attributes (based upon Countryside Commission guidelines):

- **Scenic quality** - the degree to which the landscape is attractive with pleasing patterns and combinations of landscape features;
- **Sense of place** - the extent to which the landscape has a distinctive character and a 'sense of place';
- **Unspoilt character** - the degree to which landscape structure is 'intact' and the extent to which the landscape is affected by intrusive or detracting influences;
- **Landscape as a resource** - whether the landscape type represents a scarce or especially fragile landscape resource;
- **Conservation interests** - whether there are other notable conservation interests that contribute to landscape quality and value.

The landscape types were then assigned one of the following enhancement strategies:

- **Conserve** - this strategy applies where the landscape is of particularly high scenic quality, is unspoilt, retains a strong, intact landscape structure and sense of place, and often contains areas or features of ecological or cultural heritage significance. In these landscapes, conservation is an overwhelming priority in order to maintain landscape character and quality.
- **Repair** - this strategy applies to those landscapes which have a positive rural character, attractive qualities and where character, landscape structure and sense of place are still comparatively strong but which are not 'special' or distinctive to quite the same degree as those in the above category. These landscapes are also important to conserve but would benefit from some enhancement, in order to repair slightly weakened landscape structure and quality, and to reinforce and strengthen local distinctiveness.
- **Restore** - this strategy applies to those landscapes which retain a rural and essentially attractive character but where landscape elements and structure are in decline, largely through intensive farming practices. Field enlargement, removal or deterioration of boundary walls and hedges, and the loss of trees, woodlands and other vegetation have substantially weakened landscape structure and sense of place. The priority in these landscapes is to restore landscape structure and diversity and to strengthen local distinctiveness.
- **Reconstruct** - this strategy applies in those areas where the character and quality of the landscape has been substantially modified by poor land management, non-agricultural land uses, or intrusive features, eg. airfields, built development, mineral extraction, roads, power lines etc. They require more significant intervention to mitigate the influence of detracting land uses or features, to raise landscape quality and to reconstruct landscape character and identity.

It is important to stress that these strategies do not equate with any nationally established system or yardstick but are adapted from Countryside Commission guidance to suit the particular

circumstances of South Oxfordshire District. They should therefore be regarded as indicative of differences in quality and condition which occur within the context of the District and comparisons should not be made with similar strategies applied elsewhere. The variations in landscape quality and the application of enhancement strategies across the District are explained on page 14.

### *Landscape enhancement principles*

The guidelines for landscape enhancement are intended to provide advice on the most appropriate type of management or enhancement needed to maintain or raise landscape quality within each character area. As a general rule, they are aimed at reinforcing or strengthening existing characteristics in the landscape rather than promoting widespread landscape change. Specific guidelines on enhancement priorities are set out for each character area but a number of more general principles are outlined opposite.

### *Mechanisms*

Clearly, most of these objectives can only be achieved through voluntary co-operation. However, there are a number of potential ways in which the guidelines can be taken forward, including:

- through various initiatives, grants and incentive schemes operated by local authorities and other statutory agencies;
- through the work of countryside management services (eg. in the Chilterns AONB);
- through the work of voluntary bodies and community groups involved in local environmental or landscape projects;
- through the activities of farmers and other private landowners;
- through development control and the use of landscape conditions, legal agreements and planning gain.

### General principles for enhancement:

- management or enhancement should aim to reinforce or restore the local landscape 'vernacular', ie. those characteristics which contribute to local distinctiveness;
- in general, intervention should aim to restore diversity and structure to the landscape (eg. through hedgerow, tree planting, habitat creation etc);
- the more 'intact' examples of landscape types described within this assessment, and historical maps and records, can be used as a guide to the most appropriate form of enhancement;
- new planting and habitat creation should also reflect the ecological character of the local area to reinforce local distinctiveness and maximise wildlife benefits;
- particular priority should be given to the mitigation of intrusive features or influences which detract from the rural character of the landscape (eg. hard urban edges, unsightly buildings or structures, poorly managed or degraded land on the fringes of settlements or associated with quarrying or landfill activities, insensitive highway improvements etc.);
- special attention should also be given to the enhancement of settlement fringes and road corridors to reduce their impact and to provide a clear definition between built areas and open countryside;
- strong landscape frameworks should be an integral part of any new development.

## Guidelines for planning and development

The third part of the study focuses on the inherent characteristics and qualities of the landscape that will determine its sensitivity to change and, in particular, its ability to accommodate new development.

### *Policy context*

Current Government advice contained within **PPG7** (revised February 1997) [2] places a firm emphasis on protection of the countryside for its own sake, even in areas of no special designation, and advises that development in the countryside should maintain and enhance the environment. This advice is reflected in policies contained within the **Oxfordshire County Structure Plan** [3] and the **South Oxfordshire Local Plan** (adopted in April 1997) [4].

The Structure Plan and the Local Plan are the starting point for the consideration of any new development proposal and contain a number of policies which specifically seek to protect the character and quality of the landscape from potentially adverse impacts of development. The importance of protecting all landscapes, including non-designated areas is recognised although emphasis is also placed upon the protection of statutorily designated areas, ie. the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (see Figure 1). The policy framework also recognises the need to protect the landscape setting of settlements or otherwise safeguard the landscape from adverse impacts of development.

Generally, development in the countryside will be restrained but where development is permitted the aim is to ensure that it can be integrated sensitively without adverse impact on the landscape. This landscape assessment aims to provide as much information as possible to enable the local authority and others to make such judgements. Although it will clearly be too coarse a tool to deal with many site-specific issues, the principles and considerations outlined within the assessment can equally be applied at a more local level.

### *Ability to accommodate development*

The effect of development proposals on the landscape is only one of many factors to be taken into account in dealing with planning applications. The comments in this assessment are made purely on the basis of the likely ability of the landscape to accommodate development and do not imply that a particular proposal may be acceptable in planning terms.

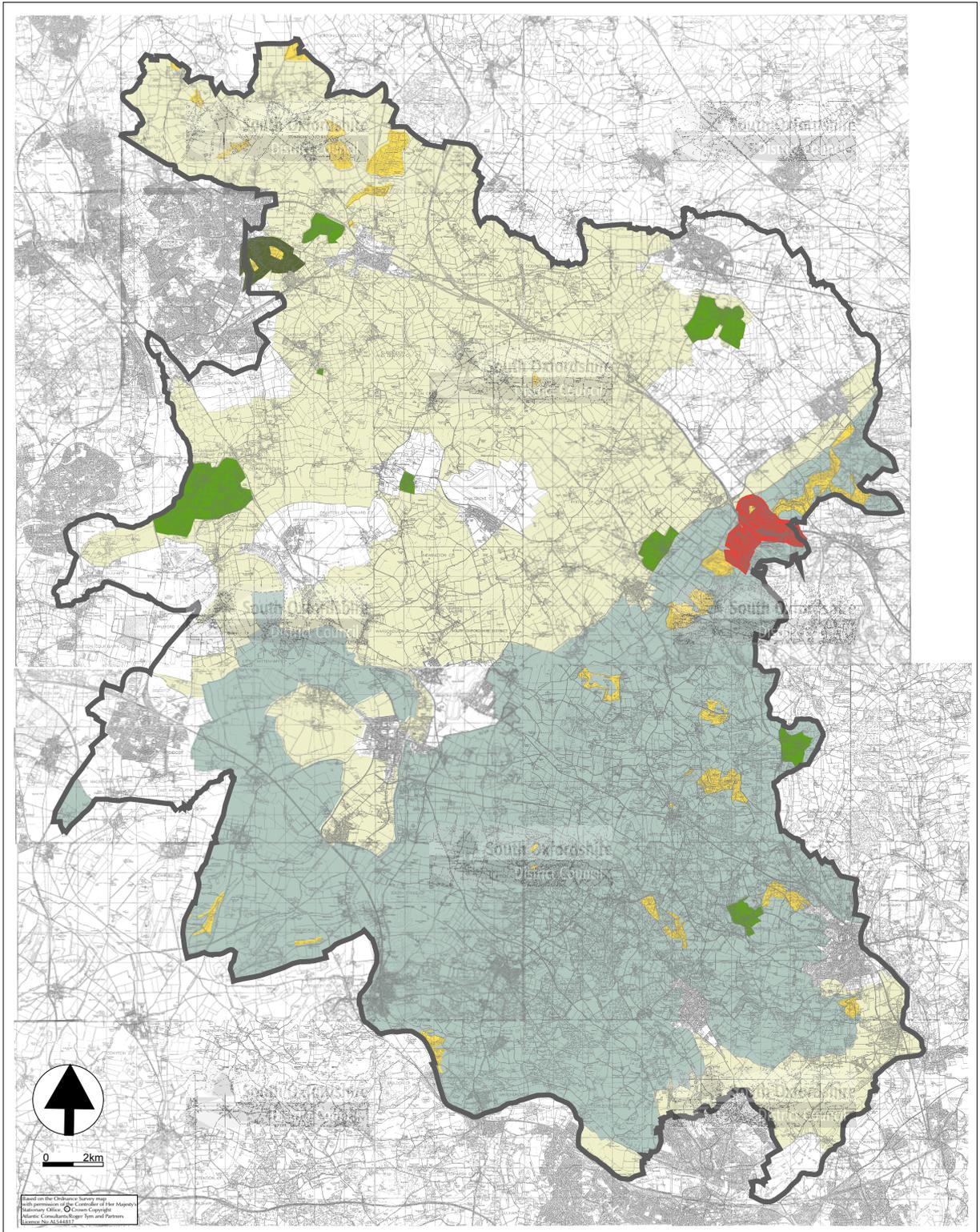
Large-scale development of any kind is likely to be inappropriate within the essentially rural and unspoilt landscape of South Oxfordshire. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-scale development will depend upon a combination of different factors. The nature and scale of the development itself will be crucial, along with:

- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall **sensitivity of the landscape to change**;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the landscape, ie. the degree to which it benefits from screening or filtering of views.

Much of this information is implicit within the landscape character descriptions and quality evaluations for the individual character areas. However, further assistance is given in the form of a **matrix** for each character area, under the headings of 'landscape character', 'settlement character' and 'landscape quality and sensitivity', which may help to guide the acceptability of development proposals within different parts of the District landscape (see over for explanation of terms). Used in conjunction with the character area descriptions, a range of key characteristics (eg. scale, pattern, boundary types, building materials, visual sensitivity and scenic quality) can be identified for individual landscape types.

While this additional background information should help in assessing the appropriateness of development proposals, it is clearly still too generalised to provide all of the answers. The main purpose of the tables is, therefore, to instil a discipline in the assessment of potential impacts of any development proposal and to enable a degree of transparency to be applied to development control decisions.

# PLANNING CONTEXT



<b>KEY</b>	
 Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty	 Shotover Country Park
 Area of Great Landscape Value	 District Boundary
 National Nature Reserve	
 Site of Special Scientific Interest	
 Historic Park or Garden	

Note: See Local Plan for more detailed boundaries

#### LANDSCAPE CHARACTER:

**Scale** - scale of field pattern and landscape elements, related to proportion and enclosure.

**Diversity** - the number and complexity of components that define landscape character

**Structure** - the condition/strength of structural components, eg hedgerows, trees, walls etc.

**Enclosure** - the degree to which the landscape structure or landform creates visual and physical containment.

**Boundaries** - characteristic field and property boundaries found in open countryside.

#### SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER:

**Location** - the characteristic siting of settlement in the area, usually influenced by physical factors.

**Size** - the scale of settlements found within the area, from towns to individual dwellings.

**Pattern** - the typical pattern of settlement, eg, dispersed or concentrated within one area.

**Form** - typical settlement form, eg, nucleated around a village green or linear along roads.

**Materials** - the building/walling materials which are most characteristic of settlements in the area.

#### LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY:

**Scenic quality** - a subjective judgement of the aesthetic appeal of different landscape types.

**Sense of place** - the strength of the essential character and spirit of a landscape.

**Other heritage values** - the presence of features of archaeological, cultural or ecological value.

**Visual sensitivity** - the degree to which the landscape is exposed to views.

**Sensitivity to change** - a subjective overall assessment of sensitivity based on a combination of the above qualities.

**Management strategy** - the most appropriate type of intervention based on intrinsic landscape quality and condition and enhancement needs.

Importantly, they are also intended to help encourage those proposing development in the countryside to view landscape in a more holistic way and to consider not only the potential visual impacts of a development but also its impact upon the intrinsic character and quality of the receiving landscape.

For further guidance, some general conclusions on the ability of the landscape to accommodate development are summarised for each character area. In addition, a number of broad principles for development in the countryside are given on the following page which apply across the District as a whole.

#### General principles for development:

- as a rule, those landscapes of particularly high quality and unspoilt character (ie those within the conserve and repair categories) are least suitable for new development;
- development should also be avoided in areas of unspoilt countryside (in the conserve, repair and restore categories) which are particularly open and visually exposed especially on prominent ridgelines, hilltops or valley sides/escarpments);
- in other open or visually sensitive landscapes, new development should be closely related to existing built form or well-integrated within existing or new landscape frameworks;
- in visual terms, landscapes enclosed by landform or vegetation are generally more able to absorb new development but can be highly sensitive to change because of their intrinsic landscape quality or their ecological and archaeological value;
- extra care is required to maintain the quality of vulnerable landscapes on the fringes of settlements and along road corridors and to prevent ribbon development and the coalescence of settlements;
- all new development should respond to the characteristics of the landscape and built environment within which it is located, to reinforce local distinctiveness and to minimise any adverse impacts;
- development should not erode the rural character of landscape and settlements (eg. introducing lighting into remote countryside, insensitive/urbanised highway treatments, fencing, signage etc.)