THE COUNTY DURHAM
LANDSCAPE
Character Assessment

Making a difference where you live

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

FOREWORD

The landscape of County Durham is one of great contrast and diversity. From the North Pennines in the west to the Durham Coast in the east it contains landscapes of outstanding quality as well as those recovering from the legacies of an industrial past.

The landscape is both a natural resource, on which we depend for our food and water, and a cultural resource that evokes feelings, memories, associations and attachments. Its beauty and diversity are important both to the quality of life of local communities and the economic prosperity of the region.

The *County Durham Landscape Character Assessment* classifies and describes the wealth of diversity in the Durham landscape. Together with the *County Durham Landscape Strategy* and *Landscape Guidelines* it will be of great service in informing decisions about how we manage the landscape in the future, helping us conserve what we value most about the countryside while accommodating growth and change.

I commend this document to all those who have an interest in the Durham landscape, and particularly those involved in planning, development, land management and regeneration work.

My thanks to all those who have been involved in its production.

Councillor Bob Pendlebury OBE
Cabinet member for Transport, Sustainability and Tourism

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Landscape Character Assessment

Landscape character is the recognisable pattern of elements that makes one landscape different from another. Variations in geology and soils, landform, land use and vegetation, field boundaries, settlement patterns and building styles, give rise to different landscapes each with its own distinctive character and unique sense of place.

The Durham landscape is one of enormous contrast and diversity. From its western boundary high in the summit ridges of the North Pennines, to the limestone cliffs of the North Sea coast, remote moorlands and pastoral dales give way to fertile settled farmlands. This diversity is a product of both natural and human influences. The varied rocks, landforms and soils of the county, and differences in climate between the exposed uplands and sheltered lowlands, have influenced both the natural flora and fauna of the landscape, and the way it has been populated, managed and exploited by its people over the centuries.

Landscape Character Assessment involves mapping, classifying and describing these variations in landscape character. It also involves making judgements about the character and quality of the landscape, and analysing forces for change, to help us make informed decisions about how we should manage change in the future. In classifying the landscape two types of units are identified:

Landscape Character Types are landscapes with broadly similar patterns of geology, soils, vegetation, land use, settlement and field patterns. Landscapes belonging to a particular type – for example an 'upper dale' landscape - may be found in many different places.

Landscape Character Areas are unique areas - geographically discrete examples of a particular landscape type. For example 'Upper Teesdale' is a character area belonging to the 'Upper Dale' type. Character Areas share common characteristics with other landscapes belonging to the same type, but each has its own individual identity and sense of place.

International context: The European Landscape Convention

The United Kingdom is a signatory to The European Landscape Convention which 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.*' It is based on the premise that landscape is universal: it occurs everywhere and everyone has a stake in it. The convention's provisions cover all landscapes of whatever quality, whether rural or urban, built or natural. It aims to ensure the proper protection, management and planning of landscapes throughout Europe.

The European Landscape Convention

National context: Countryside Character

In the mid 1990s the Countryside Commission and English Nature (now merged to form Natural England) developed a joint project to map variations in the landscape and ecological characteristics of the English Countryside. The result of this collaboration was a joint map, called '*The Character of England: landscape, wildlife and natural features*'.

This identified 181 Countryside Character Areas and 120 Natural Areas. Natural areas are broad bio-geographic zones. Countryside Character Areas are broad regional landscapes. Together (Joint Character Areas) they form a national framework for decision-making about landscape and biodiversity. The Agencies have published Natural Area Profiles which describe the ecology of Natural Areas, and Character Area Descriptions, which describe landscape characteristics, in several regional volumes. There are six Countryside Character Areas in County Durham and five Natural Areas.

Joint Character Areas

The County Durham Landscape Character Assessment

The County Durham Landscape Character Assessment is a detailed assessment of the character of the county. It works within the framework of Countryside Character Areas and Natural Areas, identifying variations in landscape character at a sub-regional and local level. It was undertaken by the Council's Landscape Section between 2000 and 2003 with the assistance of the Countryside Agency and consultants Shiels Flynn and was formally adopted by the Council in April 2008.

The assessment is based on a detailed GIS (Geographical Information System) database of landscape elements which was used to identify landscape types and character areas at a number of levels from regional landscapes, like the North Pennines or the West Durham Coalfield, to local landscapes like historic parklands and wooded denes. These landscapes are mapped and described in the following pages.

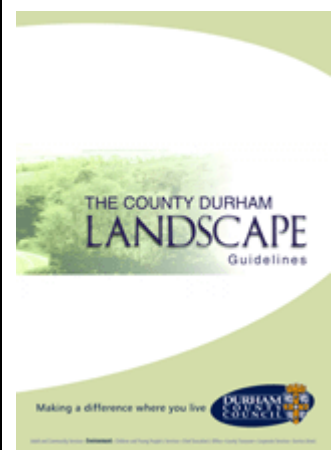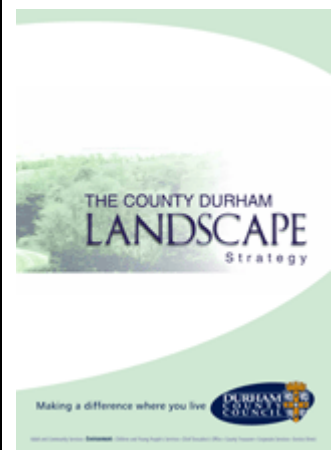## The County Durham Landscape Strategy and Guidelines

The landscape character assessment is part of a suite of documents that includes the County Durham Landscape Strategy and County Durham Landscape Guidelines. The Landscape Strategy identifies key issues and objectives for the conservation, restoration and enhancement of the County's varied landscapes. It is intended to act as a guide to planners, developers and land managers, indeed all who are involved in the changing landscape, providing an integrated and co-ordinated framework for action. The Landscape Guidelines provide technical guidance on a range of landscape issues like the protection of trees on development sites or the selection of species for new planting.

The Benefits of Landscape Character Assessment

Landscape Character Assessment can help us protect the environment while accommodating and influencing change. The English landscape has evolved over centuries, created as much by the activities of farmers and foresters, builders and miners as by the underlying physical forces of geology, soils and climate that shaped their work. It is both a natural resource, on which we depend for our food and water, a cultural resource that evokes feelings, memories, associations and attachments, and a place we continue to live in, and to change and adapt to our needs. Landscape character assessment can tell us what the landscape is like today, how it came to be the way it is, and how it may change in the future. It helps us understand the sensitivity of different landscapes to development, or to changes in the way they are managed, and so informs the decisions we make about them.

Landscape Character Assessment can contribute to the sustainability of new development by informing planning policies for developments like housing, minerals or wind energy. It can help us decide where new development should go and how it should be designed if it is to conserve what we value about our environment. An understanding of landscape character can help individual developers assess the impacts of their proposals through the Environmental Assessment process, and design them to be in keeping with the character of the locality.

Landscape Character Assessment can help inform the way land management initiatives and agri-environmental schemes like DEFRA's Environmental Stewardship and local initiatives like the County Durham Hedgerow Partnership's Field Boundary Restoration Grant, are targeted. An understanding of landscape character can also inform the day-to-day decisions of individual land managers, farmers and foresters, helping them take account of landscape issues.

Landscape Character Assessment can help us identify priorities for conservation, enhancement, renewal or restoration in the landscape. It informs environmental improvement initiatives like the county's Urban and Rural Renaissance Programme, as well as strategies for the development and management of Green Infrastructure, and the mapping of opportunities for the creation or restoration of Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitats.

Landscape Character, Biodiversity and Geodiversity

The character and biodiversity of the landscape are closely linked. Many of the features that contribute most to the character and distinctiveness of the landscape – trees and hedges, ancient woodlands, the flowers of old meadows, pastures and heaths – are also of great importance to its nature conservation value. The Landscape Assessment, Strategy and Guidelines are designed to be used alongside the Durham Biodiversity Action Plan (DBAP), the County Durham Geodiversity Audit and the proposed Geodiversity Action Plan.

Landscape Character And Cultural Heritage

The landscape is a cultural artefact, a living record of the activities of our ancestors. The historical dimension to the landscape – its time-depth and cultural continuity – has played an important role in the Landscape Character Assessment. The County Durham and Darlington Historic Landscape Character Assessment, currently (2008) underway with the support of English Heritage, will explore and map in greater detail the historical elements of the Durham landscape.

Further Information

For further information visit the Durham Landscape pages hosted by Durham County Council on its website (www.durham.gov.uk/durhamlandscape).

For further information on landscape character visit the Landscape Character network www.landscapecharacter.org.uk

Methodology

Information gathering - the Landscape Database

To assist the process of characterisation an integrated GIS (Geographical Information Systems) database was developed in which the landscape of the county was broken down into around 7,000 individual mapping units or *landscape description units* (LDUs). For each of these units information was recorded on a range of attributes that influence landscape character, including:

• Geology: solid	• Field scale	• Origins
• Geology: drift	• Boundary type	• Relics: Prehistoric
• Soils	• Tree cover	• Relics: Roman
• Landform	• Woodland pattern	• Relics: Medieval
• Land use	• Settlement type	• Relics: Post-medieval
• Field pattern	• Settlement pattern	• Wetlands

Data was drawn from a large number or sources including Ordnance Survey data, published maps of geology and soils, satellite data, and archival material such as enclosure awards. Much of the mapping was carried out using aerial photographs.

Classification and description

The landscape database was analysed for patterns of attributes – such as tree cover, boundary types, and the period of origin of field systems – which might influence landscape character at a range of different scales. A hierarchical approach was taken to the classification of the landscape, with *Landscape Character Types* and/or *Landscape Character Areas* identified at three different scales:
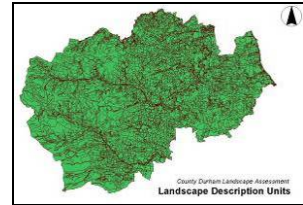
Regional   County Character Areas

Sub regional   Broad Landscape Types and Broad Character Areas

Local   Local Landscape Types and Sub-types

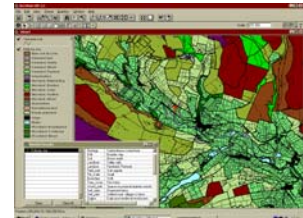For the full classification see page 34.

The classification was checked and revised through a process of field survey carried out partly by consultants *Shiels Flynn* who also recorded subjective, aesthetic or perceptual factors not readily apparent from the mapping exercise.

Descriptions of *County Character Areas*, *Broad Landscape Types*, *Broad Character Areas*, *Local Landscape Types* and Sub-types were written on the basis of field survey and analysis of the attributes recorded in the GIS database.

Both characterisation and description rely heavily on the professional judgements of those involved. A series of workshops with stakeholders was carried out to test the robustness of the classification system and the descriptive material. The assessment was published as a consultation draft on the Councils website in 2003, and feedback from that process informed subsequent revisions. Both the database and the assessment is subject to periodic review and is regularly updated to reflect changes in the landscape, to correct drafting errors, or to add new information as it becomes available.
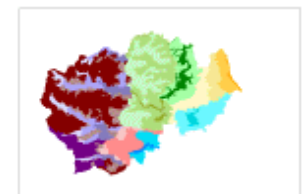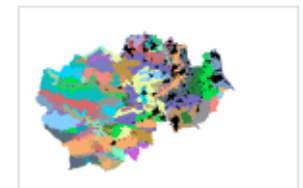

Mapping units - LDUs

A typical screen shot of the database in use.

County Character Areas
↓

Broad landscape Types

Broad Character Areas
↓

Local Landscape Types

How to use this document

The Durham Landscape Website

The County Durham Landscape Character Assessment has been written to be accessed primarily through the Council's website at:

www.durham.gov.uk/durhamlandscape

The County Durham Landscape Strategy and Landscape Guidelines are also available on the website, where map data can be viewed online in an interactive GIS.

The remainder of this document is structured as follows:

The **Durham Landscape** section gives background information on the landscape of the county including the physical and human influences that have shaped it, the patterns of landuse and landscape features present in the modern landscape, the environmental designations affecting the landscape, and current and past perceptions of the landscape.

The **Landscape Character** section gives information on the way the landscape has been classified together with descriptive information on County Character Areas, and descriptive information on Broad Landscape Types, Broad Character Areas, Local Landscape Types and Subtypes, grouped under their respective County Character Areas.

Map data can be obtained in electronic formats by contacting the County Council's Landscape Section (see below).

Feedback

You can let us know your views on the contents of the Landscape Character Assessment and the Landscape Strategy, or on landscapes issues that you consider to be important, by email at zmail_landscape@durham.gov.uk or by post at:

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