

## **BRECKLAND COUNCIL**

### **POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW PANEL 1 - 5 FEBRUARY 2008**

#### **REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR (BUSINESS TRANSFORMATION)**

**(Author: David Spencer – Principal Planning Policy Officer)**

### **BRECKLAND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK** **LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT**

**Summary:** National and Regional Planning Policy requires Local Planning Authorities to undertake comprehensive assessments of the landscape character of their areas.

This report informs Members of two studies which collectively provide a detailed Landscape Character Assessment of the District. Volume one is a District-wide Landscape Character Assessment of the rural landscapes across Breckland. Volume two is a supplementary Settlement Fringe Study which assesses in detail the landscape at the edge of the five towns and 12 candidate Local Service Centre villages. The two studies form part of the evidence base for the Local Development Framework and should be considered as key information for developers and planning officers in terms of the location, scale and design of new development.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 Protecting and where possible enhancing the landscape has been a long standing strand of planning policy and tools to date have included national designations such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and green belts. At the local level, the Breckland Local Plan and Norfolk Structure Plan both included a local landscape designation known as “Area of Important Landscape Quality” (AILQ) and a number of policies in the Local Plan sought to restrict the scope and scale of development in these areas. The AILQ in Breckland principally followed the river valleys and the Brecks in the south-west of the District. Recently it has been difficult to justify the delineation of the AILQ as there is a lack of detail in how it was drawn up and a general absence of the precise reasoning behind the boundary it follows.
- 1.2 This localised approach of elevating parts of the landscape as being more important than others is no longer endorsed by national planning policy. Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7) recognises that there are many landscape types across the country and that the key is to understand what makes each part of the landscape distinct and gives each area its particular sense of place rather than promoting one type of landscape as being better or more important than another. National and regional planning policy both advises local planning authorities to undertake Landscape Character Assessments to better understand the landscape distinctiveness and sense of place at the local level.
- 1.3 In September 2006 this Policy Development and Review Panel recommended to Cabinet that further work be undertaken to support the re-drafting of the Local Development Framework Core Strategy and Development Control Policies document. One of the areas of evidence base that the Panel recognised needed to be undertaken was a comprehensive Landscape Character Assessment. In October 2006 the Council appointed Land Use Consultants to undertake a two stage Landscape Character Assessment of the District including a comprehensive district-wide landscape study and a more detailed assessment of the landscape at the edge of the towns and local service centre villages. These studies were completed in May 2007 and July 2007 respectively.

## **2. KEY DECISION**

2.1 This is / is not a key decision.

## **3. COUNCIL PRIORITIES**

3.1 The matter raised in this report falls within the following Council priorities:

- A well planned place to live which encourages vibrant communities

## **4. LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT**

### **Volume 1 – District Landscape Character Assessment**

4.1 The Breckland District Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is a 350 page report which has been prepared in accordance with best practice guidance (Countryside Agency, 2002). The LCA describes and classifies the distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern elements that make one landscape different from another. The approach of the LCA is to consider that all landscapes are valuable and seeks to identify and protect their essential character. The LCA is an important tool in helping to ensure that change and development does not undermine what ever is characteristic or valued about a particular place, and that ways of improving the character of a place can be considered.

4.2 In preparing the LCA, the consultants examined a variety of sources to compile the first comprehensive assessment of the 131,000 hectares of Breckland District. These sources included:

- Geological mapping
- topography/landform
- Historical mapping (Faden's 1797 Map of Norfolk)
- Extensive site surveys across the District
- Ecological mapping
- Historical Landscape Characterisation
- Current landscape initiatives
- Consultation with stakeholders

4.3 The Breckland LCA has identified 6 broad landscape types in the District where there are physical (i.e. geology, topography) and cultural (human activity) similarities. The 6 broad landscape types are identified in Appendix A as follows: (1) River Valleys; (2) Settled Tributary Farmland; (3) The Brecks Plantations; (4) The Brecks Heathland with Plantations; (5) Plateau Farmland; and (6) Chalk Rivers.

4.4 The LCA then subdivides these landscape types into component landscape character areas. These are discrete geographic areas that possess the common characteristics described in the landscape type. There are 27 character areas in Breckland each with a distinct and recognisable local identity and these are identified in Appendix A. The character areas form the fundamental unit for assessment and for each area there is a detailed description and evaluation.

4.5 An example of a detailed assessment of a Character area is provided for Swaffham Heath at Appendix B. Members will note that the assessment contains a description which outlines the key characteristics in terms of the physical/natural character, the historic character, settlement and built character and the perceptual visual character. Importantly, the assessment contains an evaluation in terms of the summarising positive landscape features of significance and inherent landscape sensitivities or visual sensitivities. The evaluation also assesses the current state of the landscape and concludes with an overall landscape strategy followed by detailed guidelines for both landscape management and in relation to new development.

4.6 In using the LCA it should be noted that the assessment is a strategic study rather than

a field by field survey and therefore detailed decisions will need to consider specific local circumstances. The LCA is also a rural study and does not include any assessment of the character of the five towns. Importantly, between each character area there will be a zone of transition and it will be necessary to consider adjoining character areas when assessing peripheral development proposals.

### **Volume 2 – Settlement Fringe Study**

- 4.7 This is a more detailed study providing a characterisation and assessment of the landscape setting of the 5 market towns and 12 proposed Local Service Centre villages. The characterisation process utilised the data and outputs from the District Landscape Character Assessment and was augmented by further field survey work.
- 4.8 A key output of the fringe study has been a more detailed evaluation of the landscape and visual sensitivities. The Landscape Character Sensitivity work looked at the existing landscape quality and condition and the sensitivity of individual elements within the landscape to development. This sensitivity has looked at the natural aspects such as vegetation, cultural aspects such as built vernacular and aesthetic / perceptual factors such as tranquillity and containment. The study has also examined the character of each studied settlement, particularly at the edge of the settlement in terms of the type, density and scale of development. In addition to the character work, the fringe study has also assessed the visual sensitivity which includes general views in and out of the settlement, key landscape features and the mitigation potential should new development take place at the edge of the settlement.
- 4.9 The landscape character sensitivity work and the visual sensitivity work has informed an overall sensitivity judgement for each settlement using a five point scale. A definition of the sensitivity scale is provided at Appendix C and an example of the outputs will be presented to Panel Members at the meeting.
- 4.10 The Fringe Study is a companion volume to the District Landscape Character Assessment and it is important that developers, officers and Members consider both volumes. The Fringe Study will mainly form part of the evidence base for the Site Specific Document but nonetheless has been included on the CD-Rom of evidence as part of the current LDF

### **Consultation**

- 4.11 The preparation of the LCA work has involved the Council's Tree and Landscape Officer and assistance from Norfolk County Council's Landscape Architects. Additionally, the consultants held specific meetings with the Brecks Partnership and the Wensum Valley Project as well as interviews with the Norfolk Biodiversity Partnership and Norfolk Ecological Network Mapping Project.
- 4.12 The LCA has also been informed by two stakeholder workshops held in January 2007 which were attended by a number of District Councillors, Town and Parish Councils and representatives from landowners, adjoining local authorities and environmental groups. These workshops helped confirm, re-draw, describe and name the landscape character areas in the studies.

### **Proposed Landscape Policy in the Local Development Framework**

- 4.13 The outputs from the LCA work have informed the preparation of the Core Strategy and Development Control Policies document currently on consultation. Core Policy 9 deals specifically with Protection and enhancement of the Landscape of the District. Further guidance on landscape assessment is provided in Development Control policy on amenity and Trees/landscape. These policies are reproduced at Appendix D for information

## **Next Steps**

- 4.14 The Landscape Character Assessment and the supplementary Settlement Fringe Study are included on the CD-Rom of supporting evidence that accompanies the Preferred Options Core Strategy and Development Control Policies document which is currently out for consultation. Being part of the supporting evidence, the studies are open to scrutiny through the consultation process and comments can be made on their adequacy as being the basis for landscape planning policy. Any comments made on the Landscape Character Assessment documents will be reported to this Panel as part of the ongoing programme of work on the LDF Core Strategy.
- 4.15 The studies will be used at the Examinations in Public on the LDF for both the Core Strategy & Development Control document as well as the Site Specifics document and Area Action Plans. The evidence in the Landscape Character Assessment should also be used by developers when preparing development proposals in terms of the location, scale and design and the studies should also be used by planning officers in assessing the landscape impact of new developments.
- 4.16 In addition to these Landscape Character Assessment studies, Members are also reminded that the Council has jointly prepared with King's Lynn & West Norfolk Borough Council an award winning "Landscape Evaluation in relation to Wind Turbine Development" document which enables detailed assessments of the landscape capacity to accommodate wind turbines. This study prepared in 2003 by Land Use Consultants is available on-line or as a CD-Rom.

## **5. OPTIONS AVAILABLE**

- 5.1 This Report is for information only and no options are available.

## **6. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 6.1 To allow the successful progression of the Local Development Framework evidence base.

## **7. RISK**

- 7.1 This report does not require a risk assessment because the changes/issues covered by the recommendations are not significant in terms of risk.

## **8. RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 8.1 Members to note the contents of this report for their information

### *Appendices:*

- A – Landscape Classification Map of Breckland
- B – Example Landscape Character Area assessment (Swaffham Heath)
- C – Definitions of Sensitivity from the Settlement Fringe Study
- D – Draft LDF Landscape policies

Where appropriate, this report has taken account of the need for compliance with

- The Council's Equal Opportunities Policies
- Section 17, Crime & Disorder Act 1998
- Human Rights Act 1998
- Section 40, Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006