

## BRECKLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Report of:** Rob Walker, Assistant Director of Commissioning

**To:** Local Plan Working Group, 11<sup>th</sup> February 2014

**Author:** Sarah Robertson, Planning Policy Officer (Capita)

**Subject:** Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks Landscape Character Assessment

**Purpose:** The purpose of this report is to update Members on the Norfolk and Suffolk Landscape Character Assessment.

### **Recommendation(s):**

**It is recommended that the Local Plan Working Group accept the Norfolk and Suffolk Landscape Character Assessment as evidence base to inform the preparation of the Local Plan.**

### **1.0 BACKGROUND**

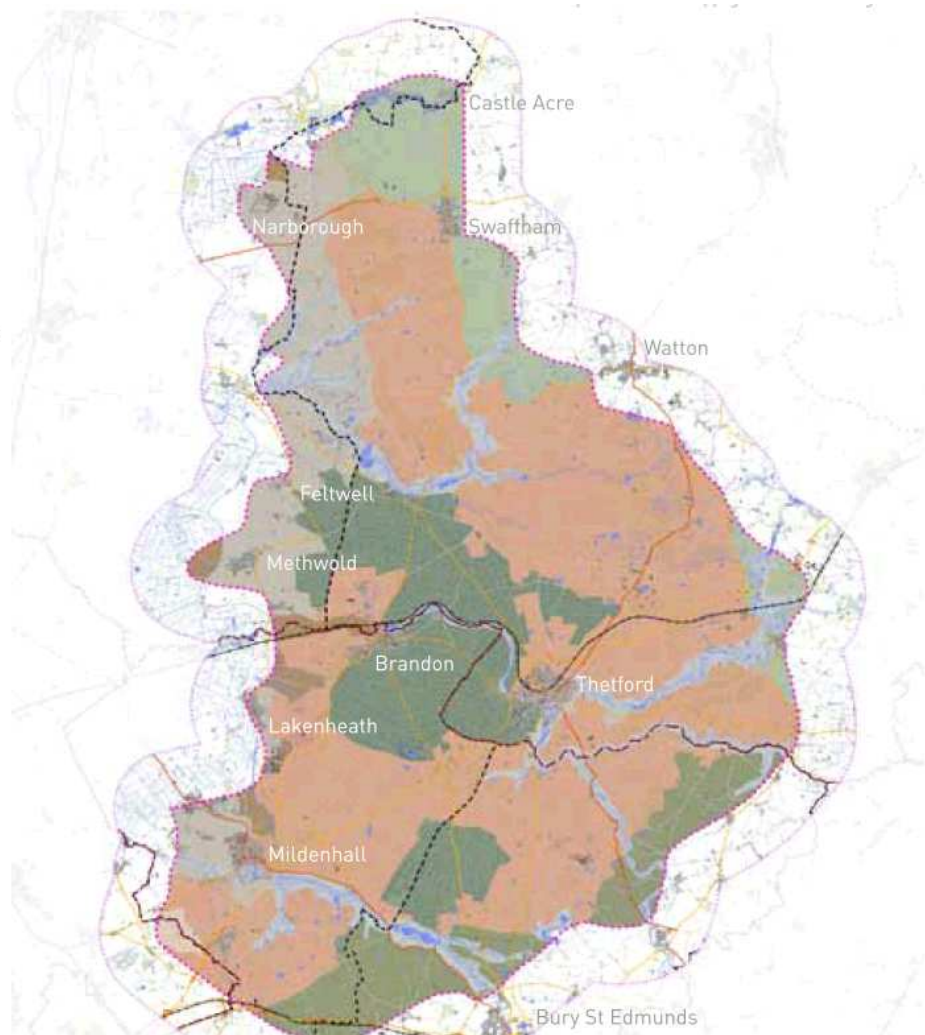
- 1.1 In 2013 the Brecks Partnership commissioned consultants Sheils Flynn to prepare a dedicated Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) for the Brecks. The work was partly funded as part of the Breaking New Ground bid from the Heritage Lottery Fund and also by Norfolk County Council and Suffolk County Council. The Landscape Character Assessment covers the whole of the National Character Area defined as the Brecks, and includes land within the following Local Authority areas: Breckland, Kings Lynn and West Norfolk, Forest Heath, St Edmundsbury and East Cambridgeshire. The Brecks Partnership is shortly due to be decommissioned and this study is one its last final projects.
- 1.2 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) confirms that Local Plans and planning policies should be based upon up-to-date information on the characteristics of the area. The NPPF also states that the planning system should protect and enhance valued landscapes.
- 1.3 The LCA has been developed as a means of identifying what it is that makes a landscape special and distinctive. The Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks Landscape Character Assessment was developed with twin objectives:
  - 1) to provide a technical assessment of the area through developing landscape typologies and descriptions. It also aimed to provide guidelines for the future management of these areas.
  - 2) to develop a public facing narrative that tells the story of the landscape, defining landscape areas that make sense locally and with which people can associate. Importantly it is the intention of this LCA to improve peoples understanding of the Brecks and build their sense of place.
- 1.4 This LCA builds on the existing work which has been undertaken within the individual Local Authorities, this includes reviewing Breckland's own LCA which was completed in 2007. Importantly it seeks to create a uniform series of character types across the whole of the National Character Area. This has seen 39 character types across the five Local Authorities reduced to eight. This LCA has been informed by stakeholder workshops which have

included representatives from Breckland as well as the other Local Authorities whose administrative areas include parts of the Brecks.

### **Study Methodology and Findings**

- 1.5 The methodology for the work has been carried out in accordance with national guidance, and has been used to identify landscape character types. The landscape character types identified have all been assessed to consider three key impacts:
- **Landscape character sensitivity** – this considers the degree to which the landscape is robust and able to accommodate change without adverse impacts on its character.
  - **Visual sensitivity** – this considers the general visibility of the landscape, the number of people likely to perceive any changes that occur and the potential to mitigate the visual effects of landscape change that may occur.
  - **Landscape value** – areas of land that are recognised for their biodiversity, heritage or possibly literary or artistic importance by designations or other published material such as guides or promoted walks.
- 1.6 Importantly the assessment includes guidance for land management decisions within the different character areas. The LCA identified eight distinct character areas within the Brecks with the core landscape types being the Brecks Arable Heathland Mosaic, the Brecks Plantation and the River Valleys. A brief summary of each of the character areas identified within the LCA is included below along with a diagram of the location of each of these character types. The full LCA is included at Appendix A.
- 1.7 The assessment has been carried at a scale of 1:10,000, as opposed to Breckland's own LCA which was carried out at a scale of 1:25,000. This has therefore provided a greater level of detail and assessment on the individual character areas within the Brecks than was possible through Breckland's original LCA.

- Study Area (NCA 85)
- Study Area Buffer
- County Boundary
- District Boundary
- Main Road
- Railway
- River
- Water bodies
- Urban Area
- Brecks Arable Heathland Mosaic
- Brecks Plantations
- Low Chalk Farmland
- Rolling Clay Farmland
- Plateau Estate Farmland
- Rolling Estate Chalklands
- Settled Fen
- River Valleys
- Chalk River Valleys



- 1.7 **Brecks Arable Heathland Mosaic** – This is the main character area within the Brecks and it is characterised by the flat and gently sloping plateaux. The character area includes much of the south west of Breckland. It is a large scale mosaic of lowland heath, mixed farmland and conifer plantations. Particularly sensitive landscape features within this character area include the pine lines and fluctuating meres. The overall principle should be to conserve the natural, wild character of the heathland landscape.
- 1.8 **Brecks Plantation** – This incorporates Thetford Forest. It is a simple large scale landscape pattern with homogeneous geometric plantation blocks. The framed vistas and skylines are particularly sensitive to change.
- 1.9 **Low Chalk Farmland** – This character area is located to the west of Breckland and incorporates Narborough. Located on the western edge of the Brecks, it forms the transition between the Brecks and the Fens. It is characterised by a patchwork of arable fields and blocks of mixed woodland. In this area there is often a need to enhance village gateways.
- 1.10 **Rolling Clay Farmland** – It is located to the north east of the Brecks, and includes Swaffham and South Acre. It forms the most elevated landscape within the Brecks. It is characterised by long relatively open views. The area has a rural character, with small clustered hamlets and villages. Particularly distinctive and sensitive features include the hedged rural lanes.

- 1.11 **Plateau Estate Farmlands** – Gentle rolling plateau farmland landscape that forms the transition between the Heathlands of the Brecks and the clay farmland to the south and east. This character area is not included within Breckland. This is a large scale landscape with long open views across the plateau farmland. A key priority for the area is to reinforce the historic pattern of regular, rectilinear boundaries.
- 1.12 **Settled Fen** – This forms a very small character area, however within Breckland there are examples of it adjoining the River Nar to the north of the District. This is a flat, low lying landscape which is unsettled. It is often fringed by settlement on the more elevated margins of the Brecks. There is very limited scope to accommodate landscape change in this area without fundamentally changing the proportion and scale of the landscape pattern.
- 1.13 **River Valleys** – This is a lush, small scale landscape defined by shallow river valleys. It includes all river valleys in the Brecks with the exception of the River Nar. It is a small scale diverse mosaic of riparian and wetland habitats which contrast with the surrounding large scale landscapes.
- 1.14 **Chalk River Valley** – The River Nar is classified separately from other River Valleys with the Brecks as it is fed by springs arising from the underlying chalk. It has a distinctive landform and an exceptionally high biodiversity. The river valley is vulnerable to change.
- 1.15 The Brecks LCA provides an additional level of detailed assessment of one of the District's most sensitive and valued areas. The information contained within the report reaffirms the approach adopted within the Council's existing Policy on landscape (namely CP11), but also builds upon the existing District-wide LCA (2007). The Brecks LCA will also provide robust background evidence for any future policy the Council may wish to develop for this specific character area. The study also provides helpful guidance for managing change in will also have relevance to development management decisions in the area.

## 2.0 **OPTIONS**

- 2.1 There are two options available to Members:

Option 1 – Accept the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks Landscape Character Assessment as evidence base to inform policies and proposals within the Local Plan.

Option 2 – Do not accept the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks Landscape Character Assessment as evidence base for the Local Plan. Instead rely solely on the districts own Landscape Character Assessment completed in 2007.

## 3.0 **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)**

- 3.1 It is recommended that Members endorse option 1 and include the Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks Landscape Character Assessment as part of the evidence base for the Local Plan. The work builds on the individual Districts Landscape Character Assessment and reaffirms the landscape types of high importance which had been included within the Core Strategy.

## 4.0 **EXPECTED BENEFITS**

- 4.1 The study will be used to inform the drafting of policies and proposals within the District's emerging Local Plan. It will also be used to inform decisions on planning applications.

## 5.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 **Carbon Footprint / Environmental Issues**

5.1.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 5.2 **Constitution & Legal**

5.2.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 5.3 **Contracts**

5.3.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 5.4 **Corporate Priorities**

5.4.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 5.5 **Crime and Disorder**

5.5.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 5.6 **Equality and Diversity / Human Rights**

5.6.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 5.7 **Financial**

5.7.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 5.8 **Risk Management**

5.8.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 5.9 **Staffing**

5.9.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 5.10 **Stakeholders / Consultation / Timescales**

5.10.1 *It is the opinion of the Report Author that there are no implications.*

## 6.0 **WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED**

6.1 Nar Valley Ward, Swaffham, Mid-Forest Ward, Conifer Ward, Wayland Ward, Harling and Heathlands Ward, Weeting Ward, Thetford-Abbey Ward. Thetford Castle Ward, Thetford Guildhall Ward and Thetford Saxon Ward.

## 7.0 **ACRONYMS**

7.1 LCA: Landscape Character Assessment

7.2 NPPF: National Planning Policy Framework

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Background papers:-

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**Director / Officer who will be attending the Meeting** Sarah Robertson, Planning Policy Officer (Capita)

**Key Decision:** No

**Exempt Decision:** No

**Appendices attached to this report:**

Appendix A: Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks Landscape Character Assessment