

## LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

Planning Advisory Committee - 17 January 2017

Report of Chief Planning Officer

Status: For Consideration

Key Decision: No

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**Executive Summary:** Sevenoaks District Council commissioned Land Use Consultants (LUC) to review and update the existing landscape character evidence base. The updated Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is intended to provide context for policies and proposals within the emerging Local Plan, inform the determination of planning applications, and inform the management of future change.

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**Portfolio Holder** Cllr Piper

**Contact Officer** Hannah Gooden, Planning Policy Team Leader, Ext.7178

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**Recommendation to Planning Advisory Committee:** To support the findings of the Sevenoaks Landscape Character Assessment, which will inform the initial 'issues and options' consultation on the Local Plan in 2017 and assist in development management decision-making.

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**Reason for recommendation:** In order to enable discussion and advise on progress with the evidence base documents which will inform the preparation of the new Local Plan 2015-35.

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### Introduction

- 1 This report provides an overview of the findings of an evidence base document which will help inform the production of the new Local Plan for the period 2015-35.
- 2 The existing Sevenoaks Countryside Assessment (SCA) was carried out by Jacobs on behalf of Kent County Council, Sevenoaks District Council and Natural England in 2004. The work was carried out in accordance with the guidance "Landscape Character Assessment Guidance", as published by Natural England in 2002. The document was subject to a light touch review and adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in 2011. The review updated policy and contextual information but the landscape

assessment, objectives and mapping sections remained unchanged since 2004.

- 3 The new Sevenoaks Landscape Character Assessment (2017) has therefore revisited each of the landscape types and character areas, to provide a comprehensive update. The format of the document and associated mapping has also been revised to make it more useable and accessible.

## Background

- 4 The quality of the landscape across the whole District is high with much of it very high, and has been identified by residents as one of its main assets. Its national importance is recognised by the fact that around 60% of the District is designated as part of the Kent Downs and High Weald Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- 5 Key changes since the publication of the previous iteration of this document include the introduction of the NPPF and the issue of ‘valued’ (or ‘cherished’) landscapes and the update of the national Character Area profiles. One of the core principles in the NPPF is that planning should recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside. Local plans should include strategic policies for the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment, including landscape. This includes designated landscapes but also the wider countryside. The associated National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) states that :

*‘where appropriate, landscape character assessments should be prepared to complement Natural England’s National Character Area profiles. Landscape Character Assessment is a tool to help understand the character and local distinctiveness of the landscape and identify the features that give it a sense of place. It can help to inform, plan and manage change and may be undertaken at a scale appropriate to local and neighbourhood plan-making’.*

## Method

- 6 Landscape Character Assessment is a tool to identify what makes a place unique, and can serve as a framework for decision making that respects local distinctiveness. It emerged in the 1980s as a process by which to define the character of the landscape - i.e. what makes one area distinct or different from another. The techniques and methodology have been refined, culminating in the publication of “An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment” (Natural England, October 2014), which forms the basis for the methodology for this Assessment.
- 7 The process for undertaking the study involved four main stages, described below, namely:
  - A. Desk study and classification - this stage involved the collation of a wide range of mapped information to ‘sense-check’ the existing landscape classification (e.g. geology, PROW, river features, biodiversity, historic mapping, dark skies mapping)

- B. Field survey - A field survey was undertaken to check the classification. This specifically focussed on:
- verifying and fine-tuning the classification of the landscape types and areas identified;
  - recording information on landscape character and characteristics and noting local variations in character;
  - identifying key sensitivities and valued attributes; and
  - assessing landscape quality (condition) i.e. the physical state of the landscape and its intactness.
- C. Description - For each landscape character type a map, photos and key characteristics are provided, along with information about which national character area the type falls within and brief information on geology, soils, landform and component historic landscape types.
- D. Evaluation - The evaluation covers:
- landscape condition i.e. the physical state of the landscape and its intactness (from visual, functional and ecological perspectives), as well as the presence of any detractors;
  - key sensitivities and valued attributes i.e. the features and characteristics that are particularly valued for their contribution to character and for the ecosystem services they provide (i.e. those things that if lost would change the character to the detriment of the landscape);
  - a vision for the landscape;
  - guidance to conserve and enhance character and achieve vision.

## Consultation

- 8 A workshop was held on 29th September 2016 to present the work being undertaken and to gather views on area boundaries and names, what is valued in the landscape, cultural associations (people, events, art, literature, myths or music that relate to the area), and pressures affecting the landscape. It is acknowledged that gaining a comprehensive picture of what residents value about their landscape could be a project within itself, but the purpose of the consultation was to assist the consultants' professional judgement about what is of value and why. The contributions from this workshop are set out in the LUC report.

## Findings

- 9 The Sevenoaks Landscape Character Assessment is set out at Appendix 1.

- 10 Classification is concerned with dividing the landscape into areas of distinct, recognisable and consistent common character and grouping areas of similar character together.
- 11 Landscape types have been identified that have broadly similar patterns of geology, landform, soils, vegetation, land use, settlement and field pattern in each area in which they occur. This does not mean that they will be identical, but that they have a common pattern of elements.
- 12 Each landscape type is subdivided into a number of geographically specific character areas. They share generic characteristics with other areas of the same type, but have their own particular identity or 'sense of place'.
- 13 13 landscape types and 31 landscape character areas have been identified as listed in the table below.
- 14 The SCA (2004) divided the landscape into 53 landscape character areas. Therefore some landscape character areas have been amalgamated to reduce the overall number of landscape character areas. Some boundaries have also been adjusted to follow more suitable features, for example to follow a contour line rather than field boundaries (as landform is what defines this landscape type). Settlements have been omitted from this assessment.

Number	Type		Area
1	Settled Downs	a	West Kingsdown Settled Downs
		b	Fawkham and Hartley Settled Downs
		c	Ash-cum-Ridley Settled Downs
2	Downs	a	Farningham Downs
		b	Eynsford and Horton Kirby Downs
3	Wooded Downs	a	Knockholt and Halstead Wooded Downs
		b	East Hill Wooded Downs
4	Settled Farmland	a	Hextable Settled Farmland
		b	Crockenhill Settled Farmland
5	Scarp Landscapes	a	Knockholt Scarp

		b	Kemsing Scarp
6	Scarp Foot Farmland	a	Knockholt Scarp Foot Farmland
		b	Kemsing Scarp Foot Farmland
7	Chalk Valleys	a	Darent Valley - South Darenth to Farningham
		b	Darent Valley - Farningham to Otford
8	Clay Valleys	a	Upper Darent Valley - West
		b	Upper Darent Valley - East
9	Greensand Parks & Farmlands	a	Westerham to Sundridge Parks and Farmlands
		b	Seal Parks and Farmlands
		c	Knole Park
10	Charts	a	Westerham and Brasted Chart
		b	Sevenoaks Western Chart
		c	Sevenoaks Eastern Chart
11	Low Weald	a	Sevenoaks Low Weald
		b	Leigh Low Weald
12	Wealden River Valleys	a	Eden Valley
		b	Upper Medway Valley
13	High Weald	a	Cowden to Chiddingstone High Weald
		b	Chiddingstone Hoath Plateau

		c	Penshurst and Leigh High Weald
		d	Fordcombe High Weald / Medway High Weald

- 15 Each of the 31 landscape character areas has a profile (chapter 6 of the LUC report), which reports on key characteristics, description, condition, sensitivities / valued attributes, Vision and landscape guidance.
- 16 A user- guide is also provided within the report, which assists the consideration of landscape character when planning for any type of change. The guide is arranged around a number of key stages, setting out a series of questions as prompts to assist in using available information to shape proposals / assist in planning decisions. The result is a more user-friendly and accessible document, that development management officers will be able to use to assist their decision-making and help them in their consideration of landscape matters.

## Conclusion

- 17 The existing landscape character evidence base has been reviewed and updated to produce the Sevenoaks Landscape Character Assessment (2017), which will provide evidence for the emerging Local Plan, inform the determination of planning applications, and inform the management of future change.

## Other Options Considered and/or Rejected

Preparation of a Local Plan is required by Government. The Council provided a commitment in 2014 (as part of the ADMP public examination) to review the Local Plan within five years. Not preparing a local plan will leave the Council vulnerable to unwanted planning applications and appeal decisions. Recent Government announcements also indicate that the Government will intervene to prepare plans where they are not being prepared in a timely manner locally.

## Key Implications

### Financial

Production of the Local Plan will be funded from the Local Plan reserve.

### Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

Preparation of a Local Plan is a statutory requirement. There are defined legal requirements that must be met in plan making which are considered when the plan is examined by a Government Planning Inspector. Risks associated with Local Plan

making are set out in the Local Development Scheme.

### Equality Assessment.

Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups, and (iii) foster good relations between people from different groups. The preparation and adoption of a Local Plan will directly impact on end users. The impacts will be analysed via an Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) to be prepared alongside each key stage of plan making.

### **Conclusions**

Preparation of a Local Plan is required by Government. This report provides an update on the Sevenoaks Landscape Character Assessment evidence base report.

### **Appendices**

Appendix 1 - Sevenoaks Landscape Character Assessment

**Richard Morris,**  
**Chief Planning Officer**