

## The Landscape Character Assessment Process

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) has developed from the pseudo-scientific studies of the 1970s and early 1980s and is now a powerful decision support tool for policy makers, planners and land managers. The methods now in use are all broadly similar, being strongly influenced by two pioneering studies initiated by the Countryside Commission in the late 1980s - The Mid Wales Uplands landscape assessment and The Warwickshire Landscapes Project – which led to the development of the Countryside Character approach in the early 1990s and the publication of The Character of England Map (<http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Landscape/CC/jca.asp>) in 1996.

The LCA process describes the characteristic patterns and features of our countryside, and explains how an area has developed over time. It does not judge or rank the character of a place – it simply records it in a systematic way.

The current nationally recognised LCA guidelines have been published by Natural England and Scottish Natural Heritage and set out a series of stages and steps to be undertaken during the LCA process. In summary, these are:

**Stage 1: Characterisation** - The process of identifying areas of similar character, classifying and mapping them and describing their character.

Step 1: Defining the Scope - This will depend on the purpose for which the LCA is designed.

Step 2: Desk Study - Review of reports, input of available data and/or mapped information.

Step 3: Field Survey - Collected in a consistent and rigorous way to test and refine the desk study results and to identify aesthetic and perceptual qualities; also to identify the current condition of the landscape elements.)

Step 4: Classification and Description - Classifies the results into landscape character areas and/or types, maps their extent, sets out precise descriptions of character and components; may recognise forces for change.

**Stage 2: Making Judgements** - These will depend on the purposes of the assessment.

Step 5: Deciding the approach to the judgements - Decision on whether more specialist field work is needed, inputs from stakeholders and other evidence.

Step 6: Making the judgements - Depending on the purpose of the assessment; main uses are for the determination of landscape strategies, landscape guidelines, attaching status or value to landscapes; landscape capacity.

Landscape Character Assessment is not a tool designed to resist changes that may influence the landscape. Rather it is an aid to decision-making - a tool to help understand what the landscape is like today, how it came to be like it is, and how it may change in the future. Its role is to help ensure that change and development does not undermine what is characteristic or valued about any particular landscape, and that ways of improving the character of a place can be considered. It can be a powerful tool to aid the planning, design and management of landscapes.

This interest comes at a time of considerable concern about the costs and environmental sustainability of farming, the loss of habitats and species in agricultural landscapes and the pressures for new development in the countryside. It is, in part, a recognition of the need to treat the countryside as an integrated whole and a recognition that this can only be achieved within a spatial framework that reflects and captures the richness and diversity of different landscapes. There is a growing realisation that the countryside cannot be protected by simply focusing on the 'best' bits, and increasingly it is being recognised that it is not enough to protect only our most valued landscapes (even if there was a consensus as to which these

are), but that every landscape makes a contribution – no matter how small - to the overall picture.