

## Landscape and Townscape

### Background

With a greater knowledge and understanding of the landscapes in the county, there is an opportunity to seek high quality developments that can protect, conserve and enhance the character of these landscapes both in terms of historical urban townscapes and the landscape of Herefordshire's open countryside. The aim of seeking high quality development should extend further than just the designated landscapes of the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty but other distinctive places with local specific character.

The following sets out how landscape is addressed through the County Plan and the Local Plan's new vision and objectives.

### Herefordshire County Plan

The [County Plan](#) highlights the environment as one of the top priorities and key area of focus for the county. It recognises the importance of Herefordshire's biodiversity and its contribution to the economy in particular tourism and in supporting the health and wellbeing of communities.

As part of the council's ambition is to '*seek strong stewardship of the county's natural resources*' and '*to protect and enhance the county's biodiversity, value nature and uphold environmental standards*'.

### Local Plan Draft Vision

The draft vision indicates that by 2041 Herefordshire will be a place where planning has helped to create an environment where all of its residents have an '*exceptional quality of life and are able to live and travel in a more sustainable way*'.

In addressing the climate and ecological emergency, the county will be carbon neutral, and biodiversity here will be thriving. The rich landscape and cultural heritage will continue to be protected and valued for all to enjoy.

### Local Plan Draft Objectives

The Local Plan 2021-2041 have environmental objectives which are of particular relevance to Landscape and Townscape policy:

- To protect the natural environment and heritage of the county, having particular regard to its characteristic features, including; retaining traditional orchards and woodlands as well as restoring its rivers to a good quality;
- To pay special regard to protected areas of the county, including the Wye Valley and Malvern Hills Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), whilst at the same time, valuing its ecology and landscape;
- To ensure high-quality design of buildings and spaces that takes into account local character and heritage, in order to create attractive and inclusive places.

## National Guidance

The [NPPF](#) is clear that plans should recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and that strategic policies should provide for the conservation and enhancement of landscapes. This can include nationally and locally-designated landscapes but also the wider countryside.

National policy states that planning policies and decisions should ensure developments are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change (such as increased densities).

Local Plans should take a proactive approach to mitigating and adapting to climate change, taking into account the long-term implications for flood risk, coastal change, water supply, biodiversity and landscapes, and the risk of overheating from rising temperatures.

There is particular emphasis on protecting the valued AONB landscapes. A wider approach should be take the elements that contribute to its environment and character. Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in the areas with the highest status of protection including AONBs.

Major development is discouraged in these areas other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest. National Policy emphasises the need to limit the impact of light pollution from artificial light on local amenity, to safeguard intrinsically dark landscapes and the natural environment.

The Planning Practice Guidance on the [Natural environment](#) provides a broad framework for assessing landscapes as well as how development within designated AONBs should be looked at in relation to planning proposals. There is reference to AONB management plans and the part they play. Such management plans can help to formulate policy as well as providing evidence to enhance proposals where needed.

Where landscapes have a particular local value, it is important for policies to identify their special characteristics and be supported by proportionate evidence. Policies may set out criteria against which proposals for development affecting these areas will be assessed. Plans can also include policies to avoid adverse impacts on landscapes and to set out necessary mitigation measures, such as appropriate design principles and visual screening, where necessary. The cumulative impacts of development on the landscape need to be considered carefully.

## Local Considerations

The landscape of Herefordshire is a key environmental and economic asset creating not only an attractive place to live and work but also contributes significantly to supporting the quality of life of local communities as well as the tourism sector. Herefordshire's Landscape is rich and diverse, large tracts of this landscape are of high quality with the Wye Valley and Malvern Hills having the national, AONB designation. The area along the western boundary with the Brecon Beacons National Park is also of the highest quality although it lacks any national designation. The west of the county in the Kington area is situated in beautiful countryside that is part of an area accepted by Natural England as a strong candidate for designation as an AONB.

Herefordshire is predominately rural in nature and its landscape, townscape and settlement patterns characterise the area's local distinctiveness. There are many different-sized settlements and towns that exist within Herefordshire, varying in context, form, size, layout and pattern. Townscape is primarily a form of urban landscape, formed of a composition of structures and buildings within towns that determine its distinctive character and sense of place. Similarly to landscape, townscape is reflective of the relationship between people and place, and form the setting of our everyday lives.

As all landscapes and townscapes in Herefordshire are important, the approach is to ensure that they are not harmed by development that would detract from their character and visual quality. In assessing harm to landscapes, there is a need to consider any direct, indirect and cumulative impacts. The landscape of Herefordshire is a mix of rural and urban areas, woodlands, wildlife habitats, farmland, water features and other land forms. Many ancient local landscapes continue to survive intact in the face of development pressures and the county's more remote areas often possess a continuity and tranquillity that is increasingly scarce.

It is crucial that action is taken to ensure that Herefordshire's sense of place and distinctive natural and urban landscape is enhanced and preserved. The pattern of human and land development across Herefordshire will evidently have significant impacts on the built and natural landscape, therefore it is central that the planning policy ensures any impact or change to Herefordshire's distinct landscape and townscapes are avoided and opportunities to enhance and improve these are maximised.

### Evidence Base

- The existing [Landscape Character Assessment](#) (2009) promotes the use of landscape assessment and defines 22 character areas across Herefordshire. An update is needed to bring it in line with current guidance by Natural England and best practice in Landscape Character Assessment methodology.
- The 2010 [Urban Fringe Sensitivity analysis assessment](#) classifies the level of landscape sensitivity on the edges of Hereford and its five market towns.
- The AONB Management Plans for the [Wye Valley](#) and [Malvern Hills](#) are reviewed every five years and set out priority for their management over that period.
- [Rapid Townscape Assessments](#) assessed Hereford city and the market towns of Ledbury and Ross. It identifies areas of local interest, sites of potential development and enhancement, and factors that contribute to loss of character.
- A characterisation of the [Historic Townscape of Central Hereford report](#) examines the townscape of central Hereford from an archaeological perspective. The emerging Hereford Design Guide will revise this document, this is anticipated to be published in summer 2022.
- [West Midland Farmstead and Landscape Project](#) undertaken by English Heritage in 2010, this project mapped the locations and characteristics of historic farmsteads. Herefordshire was divided into 6 character areas. The study provided local context which can help evaluate what future uses farmsteads should be based on their character and significance within the local setting.

## Existing Policy

There is one main policy in the existing Core Strategy that deals with landscape and townscape issues.

LD1– Landscape and townscape, positively influences developments ensuring protection and enhancement of the built and natural environment. The policy requires proposals to demonstrate how the character of the landscape and townscape has positively influenced the design, scale, nature, site selection, protection and enhancement of the setting of settlements and designated areas. The policy ensures proposals conserve and enhance the natural, historic and scenic beauty of important landscapes and features.

Feedback from the parish questionnaire in February as well as from internal departments indicate there are parts of our current landscape and townscape policy that need strengthening.

The townscape element of the policy does not go far enough to include the built form in the rural areas. A definition of the ‘built form’ within the text could help to guide where the landscape/townscape applies. Built form is used in the current Core Strategy Policy RA2 in the absence of a settlement boundaries and applies to settlements in that regard. However, Farmsteads, additional farm buildings or other rural development also make up the character of rural areas. This will help to better demonstrate that character of the landscape and townscape has positively influenced the design, scale, nature and site selection, protection and enhancement of the setting of settlements and designated areas. There is a close connection to the existing ‘Historic environment and heritage assets’ policy known as LD4.

Previous development plans have included policies regarding the setting of settlements. A similar policy approach could be useful in identifying specific features such as views, green corridors and ridgelines where built form meets natural form. This could then be linked to design codes which can identify distinctive features of places.

There is a need for the cumulative impact of development across the landscape as this is currently not addressed in the policy. Design coding can pick up on related matters such as respecting local design materials as well as the use of a colour palette.

Dark night skies are a key characteristic of our rural setting which helps to contribute to the sense of tranquillity and sense of place by minimising light pollution. They are also a key aspect in the county’s biodiversity, as it helps to protect bats and other light-sensitive species habitats.

## Neighbourhood Planning

On a local level, there are already local dark skies policies featured in Neighbourhood Plans, suggesting there is strong support in the local community to protect and enhance the air quality in the natural and built environment. A dark skies policy could help to minimise light pollution at night, protecting and enhancing the night sky-scape and thus retaining the rural character and sense of place.

## Landscape and Townscape Policy Options

### Option LT1- Amend the current policy approach and add to the supporting text

Amend the current policy and supporting text to include more reference to the linkages between this topic and others such as the historic landscape. The aim is to help ensure the landscape is taken into account in a clearly holistic way. An explanation of townscape would also help to allow mutual understanding of where there are certain expectations.

The landscape and other policies in the current Local Plan do not currently enable the decision-maker to balance the level of harm/adverse impact against the public benefits of the development to be in line with national policy, to determine whether or not the proposal constitutes major development. Additional supporting text could be added to make it clear that policy should consider further 'exceptional circumstances', including climate change and the ecological emergency, when considering planning proposals.

### Option LT2- Include separate Townscape policy and Landscape Policy

This option would separate the landscape and townscape into two separate policy areas. It would allow the townscape policy to include further and more detailed criteria specific to the built form that will help to ensure the built landscape is protected and where possible enhanced. This could address the setting of settlements and link to design coding.

### Option LT3: Integrate townscape into the overarching design policy

This policy will integrate the townscape element into the overarching design policy. This is reflective of how the [National Model Design Code](#) and [Guide](#) are structured. This will help contain design and the form of the built environment into one main policy, this may help with clarity and implications of this policy.

### Option LT4: Include a dark skies policy to retain and enhance the landscape and light quality in the countryside

This will add an individual policy to enhance light quality in Herefordshire and minimise light pollution. Following feedback from our parishes and internal departments as well as reflecting on locally developed policy, the inclusion of Dark skies policies within NDPs has demonstrated that it is any locally important issue to many parishes. Dark skies are a key characteristic of Herefordshire countryside which helps retain its character and sense of place. There are further opportunities within the built form to address this better through the use of improved technology and attention to street lighting.