

## **Maidstone Landscape Character Assessment 2012**

Appraisal of Landscape Value

Pilot Study: Medway Valley (Laddingford-Tovil)

### **Draft Scoping Report**

#### **Background**

The Maidstone Landscape Character Assessment 2012 was published in March 2012. This document provides an update of knowledge and understanding of the range and variety of landscape character throughout the Borough and how these landscapes function and relate to each other. Whilst current best practice has been adopted and a finer grained study achieved than the Maidstone Borough Landscape Character Assessment and Landscape Guidelines 2000, the purpose of the assessment was to provide a robust and widely accepted evidence base for each character area. This means that it is relatively free from judgements based on value or the capacity of a landscape to accommodate change.

The NPPF 2012 clearly indicates that in order to contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment Councils should be protecting and enhancing 'valued' landscapes (although there is no explicit support for the use of local landscape designations to achieve this). In the context of historic environment they should also, where appropriate, make an assessment of landscape sensitivity where there are major expansion options.

Public consultation exercises have now been completed on the Core Strategy 2011 and the Core Strategy Strategic Site Allocations 2012. This has resulted in the need for further landscape value assessment work in specific locations across the Borough.

In terms of valuing landscapes, views on what is important in a particular local landscape will vary and reflect personal responses as well as more objective assessments. All these views should be respected and be used to inform the appraisal process.

#### **Purpose**

This supplement aims to identify within the selected pilot study area the specific character and qualities of the landscape considered to be of particular value in the local context. Landscape value is not considered to be a constraint to development. Information pertaining to landscape value will be used to inform the planning and management of local landscapes, as well as feed into development briefs to ensure that any future proposals are designed to fit well within, and enhance, the distinctive character of the area.

## Policy Context

*National Planning Policy* NPPF 2012

*Regional Planning Policy:* South East Plan 2009

*Local Planning Policy:* Draft Core Strategy etc.

*Landscape and Visual Assessment Guidance:* Guidelines For Landscape And Visual Impact Assessment, Second Edition 2002 (NB. The Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Third Edition is currently subject to consultation and is expected to be published in 2013)

## Selection of Pilot Study Area

In order to test the robustness and appropriateness of the landscape value appraisal methodology, a pilot study will be undertaken. A number of potential study areas around Maidstone were identified through a desk top exercise undertaken by officers, and their suitability broadly assessed using the following criteria:

- The level of development pressure being experienced in the area;
- the presence of one or more strategic approaches and gateways;
- the range of landscape character issues identified in study area;
- any other issues of relevance (community/ Member interest); and
- the geographical scale of the study area.

A summary of this exercise is attached as Appendix 1. The outcome of the selection process was the identification of the Medway Valley between Laddingford and Tovil as the most suitable pilot study area. Whilst other areas met at least one of the above criteria, none except the Medway Valley area met all the criteria so definitively. The scale of the area is large enough to encompass a range of landscape character areas, encompassing both rural and urban fringe locations, and issues facing those areas. Significant proportions of the study valley have been and continue to be under a high level of development pressure from a range of development types. The Medway Valley encompasses navigable stretches of the River Medway together with the A26, the Maidstone-Tonbridge railway, and the Medway Valley long distance path, all considered to be strategic approaches to the south west of Maidstone.

## Methodology

The proposed appraisal of the Medway Valley will involve:

- an objective assessment of the development area through an evaluation of landscape character, landscape designations including recognised natural assets, historic records, ecological information....
- comprehensive site surveys

- identifying and mapping key characteristics using GIS techniques
- engagement of local stakeholders including elected Members of the Borough Council, Parish Councils, representative groups and other parties such as the MKDAONB, KWT, KCC (heritage and ecology) together with feedback from the Kent Landscape Group on the robustness of this pilot study. Stakeholder involvement will take the form of a questionnaire and group walkabouts (focus groups would also be helpful in a wider landscape value study).

The proposed steps are set out below in chronological order (dates to be completed):-

- Draft scoping report
- Reinstated Cabinet Member report seeking approval of LCA together with Supplement 1 (landscape guidelines 2000) and Supplement 2 (pilot study)
- Seek Member endorsement of methodology/timescales
- Desktop research
- Seek detailed information from other parties
- Seek views of Ward Members and Parish Councils
- Arrange walkabout
- Compile data
- Circulate draft
- Revise document

The initial approach to Ward Members and Parish Councils will include a brief questionnaire to ascertain what are locally the most valued landscape qualities associated with the sites. This will include the following:

- Views in and out
- Receptors of these views
- Key positive features, for example:
  - Open countryside
  - Wildlife
  - Historic context
  - PRow
  - Public recreation
  - Tranquillity
  - Memories/associations
- Detracting features

The key issues coming out of this exercise can be considered in more detail at the proposed walkabout.

## **Considerations**

An appraisal of the sensitivity of any site to development proposals will usually include consideration of the following:

- the individual components of the landscape - the elements and landscape features which make up the study area;
- the aesthetic and perceptual aspects of the landscape - such as, for example, its scale, complexity, openness, tranquillity or wildness;
- the character of the landscape created by particular combinations of these elements, features and aesthetic and perceptual aspects in particular places;
- particularly valued parts of the landscape, whether individual components or areas and the special qualities that contribute to this value.