Braintree District Settlement Fringes

for Braintree District Council

September 2015

User Guide for:

Landscape Character Assessment

and

Landscape Capacity Analyses

thelandscapepartnership

Contents

Landscape

The importance of landscape to society has long been recognised, and the need to consider a landscape's character when making planning decisions has gained increasing weight over recent years.

The European Landscape Convention defines landscape as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors". It is a natural resource that supports our education, economy, health and wellbeing; it plays a key role in climate change; it helps define our cultural identity, and it provides the setting for our social interaction and day to day life. It is a resource that changes with time and as a result of our interactions with it. Although the term landscape is usually associated with the countryside it encompasses rural landscapes, urban landscape or townscapes, coastal landscapes and seascapes.

Given the importance of landscape, it is essential that it is a primary consideration when planning for new development.

Braintree District Council has prepared a suite of documents, including a Landscape Character Assessment and a Landscape Capacity Analysis, to ensure that the key components of the landscape are taken into account and properly addressed during the decision making process for future growth, and in the delivery of development.

This user guide is designed to assist Local Planning Authority Members, planning officers, developers and their consultants, local community groups, and the general public in understanding and applying the findings of the Landscape Character Assessment and the Landscape Capacity Analyses.

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA)

Landscape Character Assessment is a method that enables landscapes to be described and understood. It does this by mapping natural, physical and cultural features in order to define different landscapes and demonstrate what makes them special. Landscape Character Assessments can be used to show how landscapes have changed over time and how human activity has shaped their past and how it might influence their future.

In 2007, a Landscape Character Assessment was prepared that encompassed Braintree District. It divided the landscape of the District into 22 different areas with common landscape characteristics known as 'Landscape Character Areas'. The characteristics that were taken into account when defining the Landscape Character Areas included: underlying geology and soil type, topography and landform, the pattern and type of land/field enclosure, historic land use, the pattern of settlements and types of building that these comprise, tree and woodland cover and the general visual experience of the area.

Each Landscape Character Area includes notes describing:

- the key features and special qualities of the landscape character area,
- visual characteristics – key views, land marks and focal points,
- historical landuses,
- wildlife features,
- key planning and land management issues that might arise from new development, e.g. "new buildings on the top of the hill could be conspicuous on the skyline",
- sensitivities to change – features of the, landscape that might be particularly sensitive to change, e.g. "the introduction of a busy road to an isolated and tranquil area",

- landscape planning guidance to assist in the layout of new development, e.g. "maintain views to the valley side",
- land management guidance to promote the special qualities of the landscape, e.g. "conserve and enhance the existing hedgerow pattern".

The boundaries of the different Landscape Character Areas are shown on a map. The Landscape Character Assessment does not need to be read from cover to cover. The sections on any particular Landscape Character Area can be read independently; however, it is important to remember that the boundaries between areas are not exact, and that a development site close to the edge of a Character Area may display some of the characteristics and sensitivities of both Character Areas.

In 2015, the Landscape Character Assessment for Braintree District was updated to take account of changes in planning policy since 2007.

Landscape Capacity Appraisals

- WHY are they carried out?
- HOW are they carried out?
- WHAT are the end results?

WHY are they carried out?

In 2012, the Government published the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) with a view to making the planning system clearer and less complex. It incorporates a number of previous planning policies to create a much shorter document that seeks to protect the environment and to promote sustainable growth.

The NPPF has put a duty on local authorities, such as Braintree District, to identify the 'objectively assessed housing need' in their area or the number of new homes that will be required in the future. Forecasts show that the level of growth now required exceeds that previously calculated.

Local authorities prepare 'local plans' in order to plan the future development of their area, and these are drawn up in consultation with those that have a 'stake' in the area, including the community.

Braintree is currently preparing a new local plan that will guide development within the District up to 2033. This new local plan will need to demonstrate how the required housing growth will be delivered. There is little opportunity to meet the new housing needs using only brownfield sites (land that is or was previously occupied by permanent structures) within towns and villages in the District, and so it is likely that greenfield sites (ie previously undeveloped land) will have to be used. It is important that any new development is sustainable with appropriate services and facilities.

In order to help Braintree District Council prepare its new local plan, it has commissioned the preparation of a series of landscape capacity appraisals of some of the key settlements within the District. These studies look at the character of the landscapes around the towns and villages and identify what makes them special. They then assess whether new development can be absorbed into the landscape, and if so, what measures would need to be put in place so that there would be no unreasonable effect on the landscape.

HOW are they carried out?

The appraisals, called 'Landscape Capacity Analyses' looked at the following nine settlements:

- Braintree (together with the various satellite settlements and surrounding smaller villages)
- Coggeshall
- Earls Colne
- Halstead
- Hatfield Peverel
- Kelvedon and Feering
- Sible Hedingham
- Silver End
- Witham

The appraisals build on work undertaken in 2007, when Braintree District Council published a set of documents called 'Landscape Capacity Analyses'. These documents identified broad swathes of land around each of the settlements, which they called 'Landscape Setting Areas'.

Each Landscape Setting Area was assessed for its ability to absorb residential or commercial development without harming its character. To do this, the following tasks were undertaken:

- a review of the relevant landscape character assessments to identify particular sensitivities and vulnerabilities to change,
- mapping of landscape features, including landform, woodland, water courses and key heritage features,
- recording key views into and out of the Landscape Setting Areas,
- identifying positive and negative features within the landscape, including ridgelines, landmarks, prominent woodlands, tranquil areas, urban edges, distinctive gateways to settlements, and urban fringe land uses.

These factors were analysed and compared, and each Landscape Setting Area was graded as having a Low, or a Low to Medium, or a Medium, or a Medium to High, or a High ability (or capacity) to absorb development.
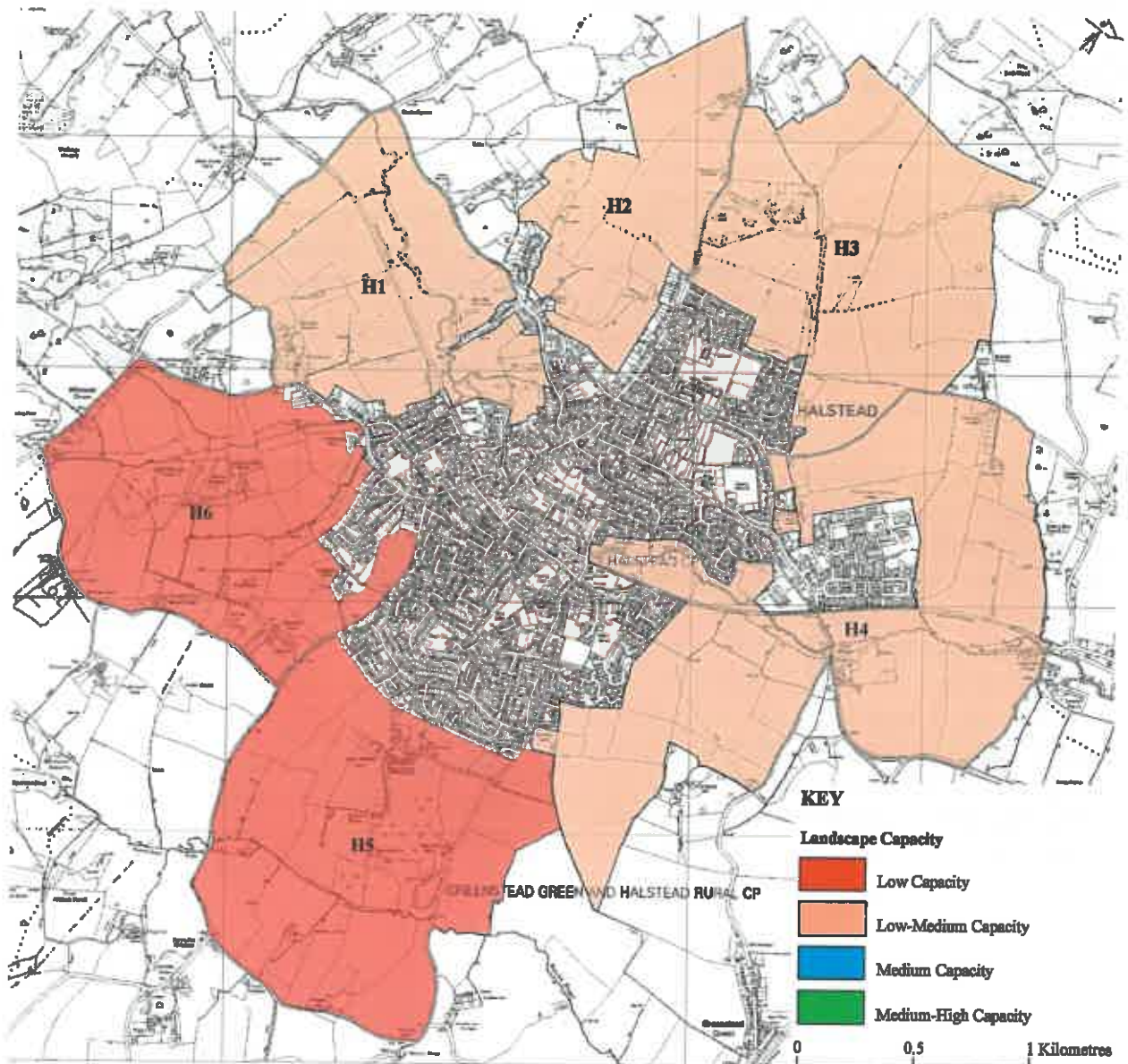
WHAT are the end results?

The results were published on a set of maps, such as the one below for the town of Halstead.

The Landscape Capacity Analyses documents are available to download on the Braintree District Council website.

The Landscape Capacity Analysis included the proviso that levels of capacity may not be uniform across any one Landscape Setting Area. For example, a Setting Area with a Low to Medium capacity may include specific locations therein that are more suitable for development in landscape or visual terms, particularly when they are small in scale and relatively well screened from view.

KEY

Landscape Capacity

🟥	Low Capacity
🟧	Low-Medium Capacity
🟦	Medium Capacity
🟩	Medium-High Capacity

0   0.5   1 Kilometres

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SEPTEMBER 2007

Evaluation of Landscape Capacity Analysis

WHY are they carried out?

Because the Landscape Capacity Analyses took a broad brush approach, they did not identify many areas with the potential to absorb new development. The Analyses were not able to pick up on the subtleties of each of the Landscape Setting Areas; whilst the greater portion of a particular Setting Area might have had a Low to Medium capacity to absorb development, specific areas within might have had a Medium capacity or higher.

The Government is directing the planning system to increase the rate of new housing development, therefore Braintree District Council commissioned the preparation of a series of documents that evaluate the findings of the Landscape Capacity Analyses for each of the settlements in a bid to try to identify more areas with the potential to accommodate development. These were called 'Evaluation of Landscape Capacity Analyses' and are referred to here as 'Evaluation Studies'. They are available to download from the Braintree District Council website.

HOW are they carried out?

The Evaluations followed guidance prepared by the former Countryside Agency (the Government's statutory advisor on landscape matters).

The landscape of each of the Landscape Setting Areas identified in 2007 was refined to create a series of sub areas, termed 'Parcels', with common characteristics. Factors used to define the Parcels included landform, the scale of the field patterns, land uses, amount and type of vegetation present, settlement pattern and presence of water courses. Physical boundaries, such as roads, field boundaries, etc. were used to define the edges of the Parcels. Typically, each Setting Area was divided into four to seven Parcels.

Only those Landscape Setting Areas with a Low or Low to Medium capacity were included in the Evaluation Studies. Setting Areas with a Medium capacity to accommodate additional development were not assessed further due to their higher overall potential to accommodate development already being established.

In order to undertake the Evaluation, it was assumed that development would be mainly two or two and a half storey high residential units with commercial units of a similar height.

Each of the Parcels was assessed against the following criteria using a five point scale from most suitable (A) to least suitable (E). The results were recorded on a set of forms that can be found at the back of the Evaluation Studies.

Evaluation Study criteria

Slope analysis

Flat or gently rolling landforms (so scoring A or B) were considered to have more potential to absorb development than valley side slopes (scoring C) and valley floors (scoring D), where built form would interrupt the shape of the landscape. Prominent ridgelines (scoring E), although rare in the Braintree District, were considered to be the most sensitive to change due their visibility in the landscape.

Enclosure by vegetation

Parcels with a good woodland or hedge structure (A or B) were considered to provide a framework in which new development could be assimilated and so accommodated by the landscape. In contrast, development within Parcels with a poor or absent hedgerow pattern (D or E) would be exposed and less well integrated.

Complexity/scale

A landscape with a single landuse and with larger sized field pattern (A) is considered to have more potential to absorb development than one with an intricate field pattern with a variety of landuses, patterns and textures (E).

Landscape character – quality/condition

Parcels without the typical features that make a specific landscape special ('weak' character) and have been subject to poor management ('poor' condition) score A, as they are considered to have less potential to be adversely affected by development and may be enhanced on the back of it, than landscapes with a 'strong' character and in a 'good' condition (E). The majority of Parcels score C, falling in the medium category, e.g. they have a good character but poor condition, or moderate character and moderate condition.

Openness to public view

Parcels where development would be well screened from public views (e.g. roads, railways, public open space and particularly footpaths and bridleways) score A, in contrast to Parcels very open to public views (E). The assessment was based on winter views i.e. when trees were not in full leaf.

Openness to private view

Parcels where development would be well screened from private views (e.g. residential properties) score A, in contrast to those that are very open to private view (E). The assessment was based on winter views, i.e. when trees were not in full leaf.

Relationship with existing urban conurbations

Locations where development would form an obvious extension to an existing settlement edge score A; those where development would have a loose connection score C; and locations where development is isolated from the existing settlement edge, e.g. in open countryside, score E.

Prevention of settlement coalescence

Maintaining the separation and individual characteristics of settlements is much valued in planning terms. Parcels where development would have no effect on separation (or coalescence) score A, in contrast to locations where development would have the effect of linking two settlements score E.

Scope to mitigate

The purpose of mitigation measures (e g. providing screen planting) is to overcome an adverse effect or to reduce it to an acceptable level. As a starting point for the assessment, Parcels scored a default medium score of C. Parcels where any adverse effects could be fairly easily mitigated, e.g. where views from a public footpath could be screened by planting scored higher; and Parcels where adverse effects could be less easily mitigated, e.g. where development would have a significant effect on separation of settlements, scored lower.

Landscape value

The value placed on a landscape by the community and other users is an important consideration in assessing landscape capacity. As no survey of the views of the local community or other stakeholders was available for this Evaluation, the landscape value score was determined by the presence or otherwise of landscape planning designations in the Parcel. All landscapes are considered to have some value and so each Parcel was assumed to have an initial 'middle ground' C score, and this was amended in line with any designations that might be present. For example the presence of a Conservation Area might change this score to a D rating, and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to an E rating.

WHAT are the end results?

The scores were added up, with extra weighting given to those factors that were more permanent or which would take many years to change, such as landform or woodland cover. The total score was used to give each Parcel one of the following 'Overall Capacity Profiles':

Overall Capacity Profiles

Total score

27 - 33.5 Low Landscape Capacity

34 - 40.5 Medium-Low Landscape Capacity

41 - 47.5 Medium Landscape Capacity

48 - 54.5 Medium-High Landscape Capacity

55 - 61.5 High Landscape Capacity

It is important to note that the scores should not be regarded as precise and definitive, but merely provide a means to compare the capacity of different Parcels to absorb development. Also, the Evaluations only take into account aspects relating to landscape character and visual amenity; development of specific Parcels may not be feasible for other reasons, for example an inability to provide suitable access arrangements or the presence of protected wildlife.

For each Parcel, notes are provided to describe its key characteristics and distinctive features. Parcels that have a Medium, Medium-High or High landscape capacity are considered to be the most likely to be suitable as a potential location for development. For these Parcels, recommendations are made as to appropriate mitigation measures to offset or minimise to within acceptable levels any adverse effects. Where appropriate, further detail regarding the type, nature and principles for development are described within each Parcel to help provide guidance in identifying the most suitable locations and/or layouts for future development.

The results were published on a set of maps, such as the one below for the village of Silver End.

Landscape Capacity:

- Low Landscape Capacity
- Medium - Low Landscape Capacity
- Medium Landscape Capacity
- Medium - High Landscape Capacity
- High Landscape Capacity
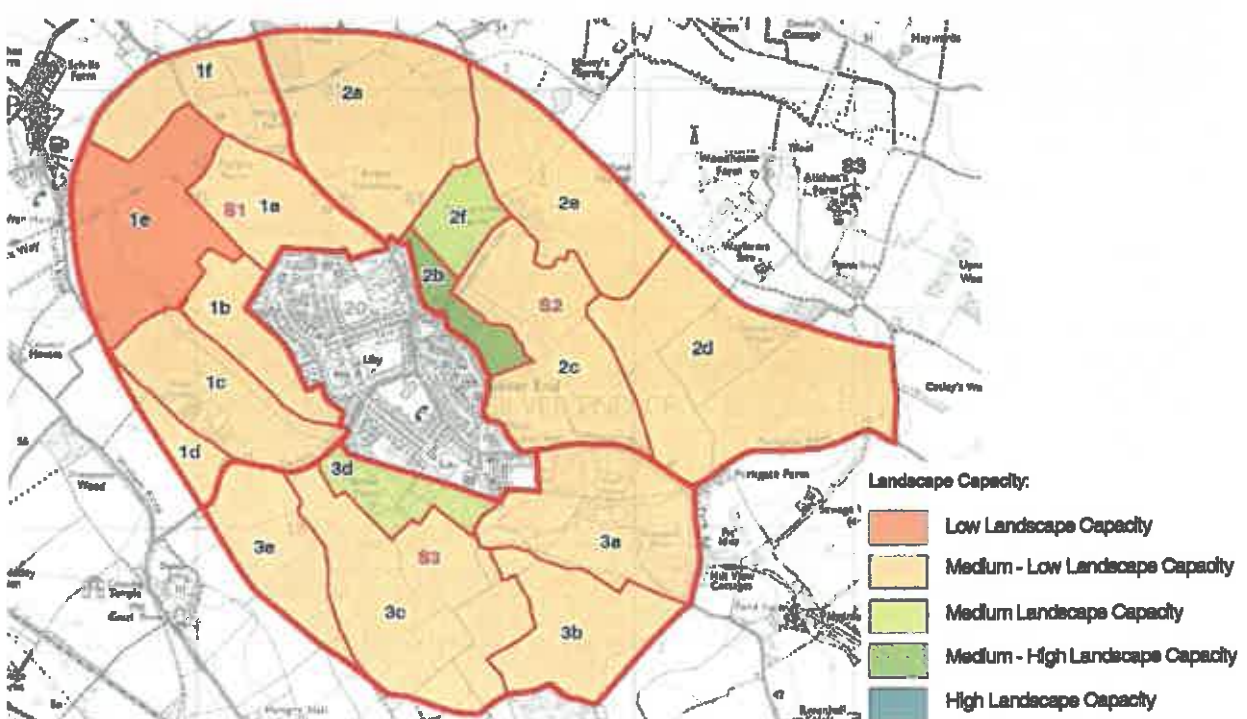
WHO should use these documents?

Landowners, to understand the constraints and opportunities that their land has in absorbing new development.

Developers when considering where future development might be appropriate and when composing the brief for their design team for settlement expansion.

Design teams responsible for delivering future development, to ensure it is of an appropriate scale and the subtleties and special qualities of the landscape are maintained and enhanced.

Statutory bodies seeking to safeguard and buffer important features, landscapes, and habitats within the setting of the settlements.

Local Planning Authority Members and planning officers during the decision making process when planning the direction of future growth in the District, when appraising the merits of specific planning applications, and when offering guidance on landscape mitigation.

Community and local groups such as parish councils, to inform them when composing their consultation responses to proposed patterns of growth and specific developments, and to assist them in protecting the key characteristics of their towns and villages, whilst accommodating the required growth.

Individuals, to keep informed of Braintree District's future growth plans.