

# Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Supplementary Planning Document

## Consultee submission

### Grand Western Canal Joint Advisory Committee JAC

Meeting the demands for new employment and sustaining natural resources, providing sustainable transport solutions and responding to new land management support mechanisms are challenges that the new planning system is obligated to address. To deal with them, the planning system needs to understand the landscape in all its complexities.

This approach should try to place a value on different landscapes and seek to establish the capacity of the landscape to accommodate development, be it renewable energy or any other change. It is about measuring the sensitivity of many themes, including historic environment, biodiversity, aesthetic attributes, the way that they interact and the level to which they define landscape character and are influenced by land management. The aim of the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) should be to ensure that inherent landscape sensitivity is protected in an acceptable, measurable and comparable way and is not just value based.

Landscape sensitivity also relates to the stability of character and it's capacity to sustain change but must address, the degree to which that character is robust enough to continue and to be able to recuperate from loss or damage. A landscape with a character of high sensitivity which we consider the canal and environs to be, is one that, once lost would be difficult if not impossible to restore, and must be afforded particular care, consideration and protection in order for it to survive.

The components, or themes, of landscape are in the view of the JAC highly significant and must be taken into consideration:

- The physical landscape, covering soils, land form and land cover;
- The experiential landscape, covering tranquillity and countryside access;
- Biodiversity, with reference to both common and rare habitats, species and their designations;
- Historic environment, addressing archaeology, built environment and historic landscape; all of which contribute to landscape character sensitivity, and
- Visibility, covering physical prominence, enclosure or openness, zones of visual influence and types of view.

Each of these must be assessed against benchmarks to establish the extent to which they are inherently sensitive within a landscape character area, and the individual findings aggregated up to establish a level of sensitivity. It is hoped the intention of this SPD is that the components of landscape are considered in an integrated and equitable way, and where there is a need to make decisions about comparative importance that these are based on sound evidence.

The canal along it's entire length is sensitive to industrialisation of the countryside and must be avoided.

## Physical landscape

- Western end steeply wooded which alters to low-lying gently undulating landscape, rising slightly again to the south east termination on the canal at the Somerset border.
- Varied geology, consisting of clay with areas of limestone, sand and alluvium.
- Predominantly heavy clay soils with areas of lighter soils to the north and south of the area, mainly of poor agricultural quality. Pocket of high quality grade land to the East of Tiverton.
- A generally well drained landscape, with ponds, springs and a network of minor streams
- A complex mosaic of land cover, with large blocks of plantation woodland and smaller irregular areas of ancient woodland linked by mature hedges. These form the boundaries of small, irregular fields given over mainly to pasture, with areas of arable cultivation on the slightly lighter soils.

## Experiential landscape

- Although close to extensive urban areas to the west and east, the north western part of this landscape has a strong sense of tranquillity. The landscape is protected from the south by the Blackdown Hills (AONB).
- The area has two long-distance trails and a higher than average rights of way density, DEFRA Stewardship sites and cycle routes making this a valuable recreational resource. This is reinforced by the public access provision and an extensive area of woodland.

## Biodiversity

- Diverse range of habitats including ancient semi-natural woodlands, ancient hedgerows and hedge banks, and wetland habitats.
- High cover of semi-natural habitats, including an extensive complex of neutral meadows, remnants of heathland, neutral-acid grassland and marsh, wood pasture and "species rich" ancient semi natural woodland.

## Historic environment

- Historically associated in part, the historic landscape is resonant of the forest origins of the area. It is a largely intact landscape of assart woodland and fields except to the north where more formal enclosures have replaced earlier field patterns, although still on a small scale.
- Generally ancient landscape with small or medium-sized irregular field pattern; also numerous areas throughout with small or medium-sized regular field pattern, including examples with low, well-trimmed oak hedgerows.
- Sites and monuments of significant archaeological interest include the priory at Burlescombe / Abbey Canonsleigh
  
- There are a number of pottery production sites, from the Roman period onwards, within the area.
- The changing landscape in the mediaeval period is reflected in the number of deserted medieval sites.
- Low-lying gently undulating landscape
- Heavy clay soils with areas of lighter soils to the north and south of the area.
- Complex mosaic of land cover: plantation woodland, smaller irregular areas of ancient woodland, mature hedges, small irregular pasture fields, arable on the lighter soils. Some market gardening.

## Experiential landscape summary

- Tranquillity
- High density of rights of way
- 2 long distance paths
- Accessible woodland

## Biodiversity summary

- Ancient semi-natural woodlands
- Ancient hedgerows and hedge banks
- Wetland habitats
- SSSI
- Neutral meadow
- Remnants of heathland
- Neutral-acid grassland and marsh
- Wood pasture
- Arable
- Improved arable grassland
- Fen's (Glebelends)

## Historic environment summary

- Medieval assart landscape (Blackdowns)
- Later informal and parliamentary enclosures
- Priory / Abbey Canonsleigh/Burlescombe
- Historic parks and gardens (Tiverton)
- Roman road
- Iron age earthworks
- Medieval villages

Hydrological – water storage function – considers the soil's ability to store water and feed aquifers and therefore influence water quality and supply to the canal and river tributaries (SSSI sites).

The assessment of a soil's ability to perform the function should be based on soil type mapping, the hydrological character of the different soil types and groundwater vulnerability mapping from the Environment Agency, Natural England or other body.

Aquatic biodiversity has enormous economic and aesthetic value and is largely responsible for maintaining and supporting overall environmental health. Factors including overexploitation of species, the introduction of exotic species, pollution from urban, industrial, and agricultural areas, as well as habitat loss and alteration through damming and water diversion all contribute to the declining levels of aquatic biodiversity in both freshwater and marine environments. As a result, valuable aquatic resources are becoming increasingly susceptible to both natural and artificial environmental changes. Thus, conservation strategies to protect and conserve aquatic life are necessary to maintain the balance of nature and support the availability of resources for future generations.

Aquatic conservation strategies support sustainable development by protecting biological

resources in ways that will preserve habitats and ecosystems. In order for biodiversity conservation to be effective, management measures must be broad based.

Biomass and food production potential – should consider the ability of the soil to produce food and biomass and sustain spreading of by-products from the process. Recent plan submitted analyses only addressed biomass potential, but this was supplemented with Agricultural Land Classification mapping to determine food production potential.

Biodiversity Potentiality – this is an important consideration, as it is often 'poorer' soils that have the highest biodiversity potential. It is based on the soils' ability / potential to support certain BAP (UK Biodiversity Action Plan) priority habitats.

It takes into account a range of factors such as soil type, topography and aspect. Ancient woodland restoration potential is derived from English Nature data which identifies ancient woodland greater than 2ha and whether it is 'replanted ancient woodland' or 'ancient semi natural woodland'.

### Biodiversity Threats

- Pollution
- Highway run-off
- Inappropriate engineering
- Unauthorised earthworks
- Climate change
- Arboreal Diseases (Die back)
- Introduction of exotic species
- Poisonous pollutants (Fertilisers)

### Attributes of physical landscape summary

- Mainly undulating landscape.
- Varied geology of clays and sands
- Soils vary from heavy clays to light sandy.
- Medium to poor agricultural quality, with occasional outcrops of better quality soils.
- Semi drained landscape, with ponds swales, springs, reed-beds and streams.

Great diversity of land cover, with heath and common surrounded by small-scale broad leaf woodlands and fields with irregular boundaries.

Dense woodland is found on the streams and on the headwaters of the canal. Mainly pasture fields. There is growing public recognition and awareness of the importance that perceptual qualities contribute to an appreciation of the landscape. Techniques for evaluating tranquillity and experiential attributes of the landscape are being developed but there is no agreed national guidance on this subject. However, it is essential that landscape sensitivity analysis tackles this area. In the absence of detailed information about what people value in the landscape it is necessary to use proxy indicators for people's associations with the landscape and perceived sensitivity.

### Openness/Enclosure

Based on woodland cover data, the level of openness is judged by comparing the amount of woodland edge to open area as a percentage. This is compared in each character area. Hedgerow information should be included but kept separate from the woodland data set. The opinion of the JAC is that hedgerow data should be categorised using

standards and methodology recommended in DEFRA's Hedgerow Survey Handbook. This publication was drawn up with the assistance of Devon County Council, Somerset County Council, and Devon AONB hedge survey team, setting standard procedures for local surveys in the UK organised by hedgerow height and thickness, and is restricted to type as the tallest and thickest hedgerows have the greatest influence on landscape visibility.

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