

**TOPIC PAPER I:  
Recent practice and the evolution  
of Landscape Character Assessment**

***An explanation of the development of Landscape Character Assessment, together with details of national approaches and other recent initiatives.***

## EVOLUTION

1.1 Given the importance of landscape to society it is not surprising that the need to incorporate landscape considerations into environmental decision-making has been recognised for some time. It has, however, grown in importance as the emphasis on sustainability has increased. For many years, and especially in the 1970s at the time of local government reorganisation, the main emphasis was on the idea of **landscape evaluation**, that is on what makes one area of landscape 'better' than another.

1.2 The search for a consensus about such approaches to landscape at this time did not succeed. Emphasis on supposedly objective, scientific, often quantitative approaches to determining landscape value, which was very much the fashion at the time (exemplified by the 'Manchester Landscape Evaluation Study' [1]) led to a considerable degree of disillusionment with this type of work. This was largely because many believed it inappropriate to reduce something as complex, emotional and so intertwined in our culture, as landscape, to a series of numerical values and statistical formulae. As a result, something of a vacuum emerged. Those involved in landscape planning were sometimes reluctant to tackle the visual and perceptual aspects of landscape, as opposed to the specific and often more easily dealt with aspects of land use and management, such as agriculture, forestry, recreation and nature conservation.

1.3 Some of the impetus for change grew from the involvement of the former Countryside Commission in the North Pennines AONB public inquiry - the first ever inquiry into proposals for such an official designation - in which it became clear that there was no widely accepted systematic approach to assessing different landscapes [2]. As a result the approach that became known as **landscape assessment** emerged in the mid-1980s as a different kind of tool. Most importantly it set out clearly to separate the classification and description of landscape character, that is what makes one area 'different' or 'distinct' from another, from the then more usual approach of landscape evaluation, with its concentration on relative value. A study in the Mid Wales Uplands [3] initially explored the approach and it was later developed further in work in the lowlands of England in the Warwickshire Landscapes Project [4]. Further inputs to the emerging method came from a review of the literature relating to both practice and research in landscape assessment [5].

1.4 Landscape assessment developed from these initiatives during the late 1980s and early 1990s as practitioners and policymakers gained practical experience of its use. Guidance on the approach and methods initially appeared in the Countryside Commission's first document on the subject [6] and was followed by a more detailed examination of the principles and practice in a Scottish context [7]. These documents played a key role in drawing the attention of practitioners to the potential of this new tool. Publication of the Countryside Commission's first major guidance document directed at practitioners in the public and private sectors [8] reinforced this message and played an important part in encouraging the use of landscape assessment in a wide range of different applications. Local authorities have been increasingly active, with a 1997 study [9] suggesting that 83 per cent of English counties had by then carried out assessments and that half of these had been completed since 1993 when the guidance was issued. More recent unpublished research by the Countryside Agency [10] suggests that the proportion is now much higher, although the quality of the assessments is variable.

### The Emergence of Landscape Character Assessment

1.5 Since 1993 increasing emphasis has been placed on landscape character as a concept central to landscape assessment. As a result, the tool has now come to be widely described as **Landscape Character Assessment** in order to reflect this. Although the idea of character underpinned much of the previous work on landscape assessment, this was often implicit rather than explicit. Its role in assessment work was first set out explicitly in the Warwickshire Landscapes Project

### Links to Historic Landscape Character Assessment

1.6 As Landscape Character Assessment has emerged over the past decade it has been accompanied by a growing

emphasis on historic landscape (or land use) characterisation as a parallel freestanding tool for exploring the historic or 'time-depth' dimension of the landscape. In England the method of Historic Landscape Characterisation has been developed by English Heritage and in Scotland the method of Historic Landuse Assessment has been adopted by Historic Scotland (see main guidance and **Topic Paper 5** for further details). Such work can be carried out either before or alongside a Landscape Character Assessment, but increasingly the benefits of integrating the two approaches are being realised. There is no doubt that where resources and time constraints allow, work which combines the two approaches is likely to produce the most satisfactory results.

**Involving the Stakeholders**

1.7 In the early stages of its evolution landscape assessment was primarily seen as a professional process with the work carried out by professionals for use by professionals. Over the years, however, there has been growing recognition of the need to involve the much wider constituency of people who have a particular interest in the landscape, often now referred to as the stakeholders. This approach is particularly important given the new emphasis in Government on community planning, cultural strategies and Best Value performance plans and indicators. Practitioners are still learning about the best ways of engaging stakeholders in the process of Landscape Character Assessment but it is widely recognised that investment in this area is likely to produce both better informed assessments and greater ownership of the results when they are applied in practice. **Topic Paper 3** looks at this subject in more detail.

1.8 **Figure 1** summarises the key differences that have emerged as approaches to the assessment of landscape have evolved over the last three decades.

**Figure 1 : The evolution of Landscape Character Assessment**

Landscape Evaluation	Landscape Assessment	Landscape Character Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on landscape value</li> <li>• Claimed to be an objective process</li> <li>• Compared value of one landscape with another</li> <li>• Relied on quantitative measurement of landscape elements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognised role for both subjectivity and objectivity</li> <li>• Stressed differences between inventory, classification and evaluation of landscape</li> <li>• Provided scope for incorporating other people's perceptions of the landscape</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on landscape character</li> <li>• Divides process of characterisation from making judgements</li> <li>• Stresses potential for use at different scales</li> <li>• Links to Historic Landscape Characterisation</li> <li>• More recent emphasis on need for stakeholders to be involved</li> </ul>
<p><b>Early 1970s</b></p> <p>➔</p>	<p><b>Mid 1980s</b></p> <p>➔</p>	<p><b>Mid 1990s</b></p> <p>➔</p>

**NATIONAL APPROACHES TO LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT**

1.9 The main guidance describes the approaches that have been taken to Landscape Character Assessment in England and Scotland. The paragraphs below provide some additional detail of the background to this work and the approaches adopted.

## England

1.10 In the early 1990s the then Countryside Commission reached a stage in its strategic thinking where it needed to look beyond the system of protected landscapes, reflecting a general move away from concentrating on the special landscapes to a more general concern for the wider countryside. This new emphasis brought into focus the lack of a comprehensive and consistent analysis of the character of the English landscape [11]. This led the Commission to begin its innovative work on the Countryside Character Programme. The programme flowed directly from the work on landscape assessment briefly outlined above and had the twin objectives of: firstly identifying, describing and analysing the character of the English landscape; and, secondly, identifying specific opportunities to conserve or enhance this character. The Countryside Character initiative has now become the umbrella term for all character based work in England, subsuming Landscape Character Assessment within it.

### Approaches to large scale characterisation

1.11 A pilot study, under the title of the New Map of England, was originally carried out in the South West region of England in 1993/94. This developed a robust methodology for large-scale character assessment, combining map analysis of the different variables that give the landscape its character at this large-scale, with GIS data handling and computer classification methods and with more traditional techniques of landscape description [12]. This work resulted in the identification of what were then referred to as regional landscape types and regional character areas (see **Figure 2**) While the Countryside Commission was piloting this large-scale character assessment approach, English Nature independently launched its own Natural Areas programme to provide a similar national framework for setting nature conservation objectives. The 1994 Government organisational review of both the Countryside Commission and English Nature resulted in encouragement for the two organisations to work jointly to produce a single national map that would underpin both landscape and nature conservation measures in future.

1.12 The concept of Countryside Character finally found expression in the production, by the Countryside Agency and English Nature with support from English Heritage, of *The Character of England* map [13], sometimes referred to as the Joint Map (see **Figure 6.3** of main guidance). This combined English Nature's Natural Areas and the Countryside Commission's Countryside Character Areas, derived from the National Mapping project, into a map of Joint Character Areas for the whole of England. The map is accompanied by descriptions of the character of each of the 159 character areas, the influences determining that character and the pressures for change, described in eight regional volumes [13].

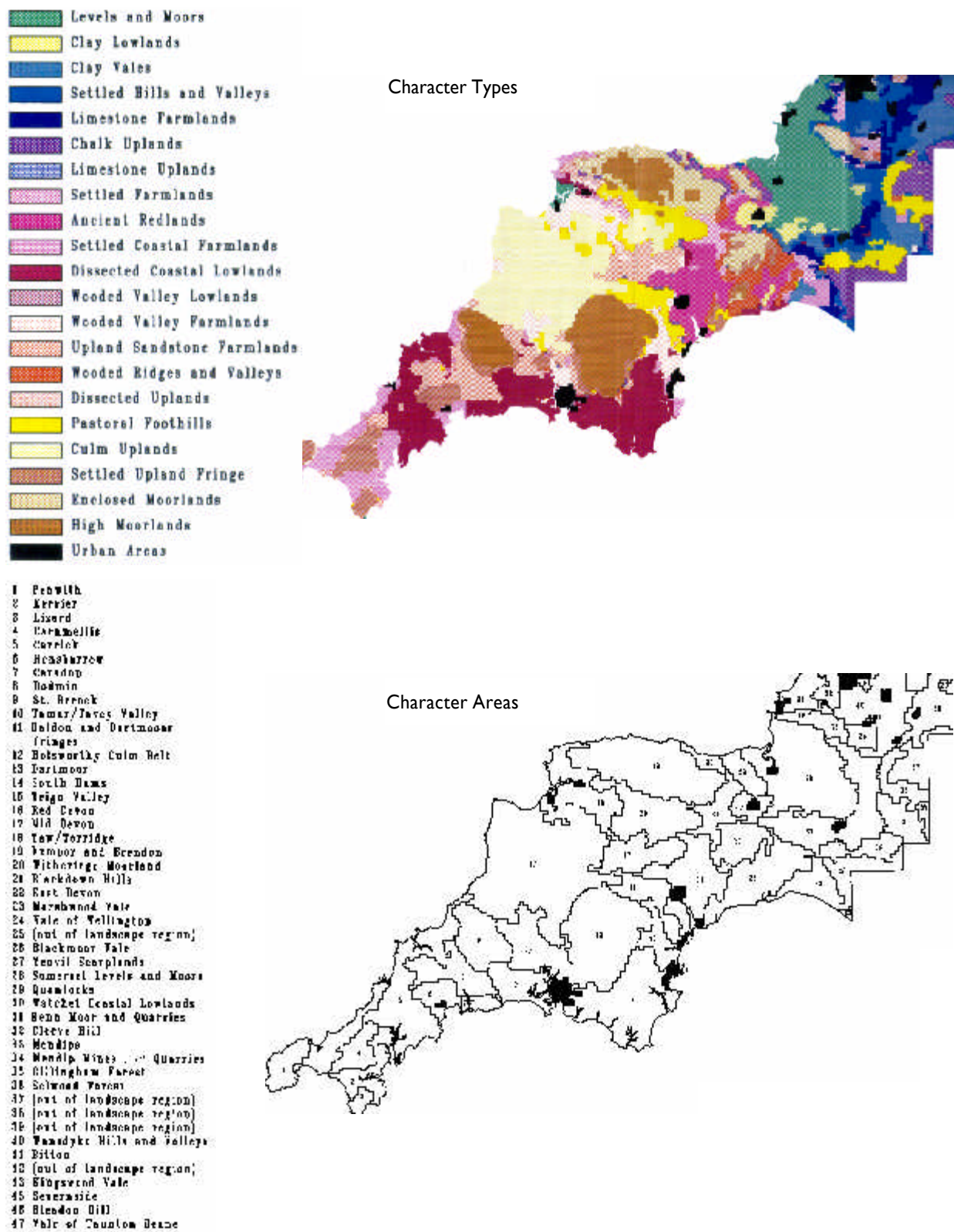
1.15 The Countryside Character component of the Joint Map was prepared by a combination of professional judgement, based on a large body of existing landscape assessment work, literature review and field work, and computer analysis of a series of attribute maps covering physical, natural and cultural influences on character (see examples in **Figure 3**). The outputs from this were validated by a national programme of consultation, to help to build a consensus around the work. Although map analysis and computer classification played its part, particular emphasis was placed on the **perception** of distinctive character areas (e.g. the Cotswolds and the Somerset Levels) to provide a national reporting framework.

1.16 Character area descriptions are in a standard format, which includes key characteristics, a succinct statement of overall character, and descriptions of the physical influences, historical and cultural influences, buildings and settlement, and land cover which shape that character. The descriptive and analytical information from the Countryside Character initiative provides a consistent overview of the English landscape and a wealth of supporting information about it. It provides a common framework within which both the Countryside Agency and other organisations can work in developing policy and practical initiatives.

### A National Typology

1.17 The published national map of *The Character of England*, together with the accompanying descriptions, now provides the top tier of the hierarchy of Landscape Character Assessment in England. However, they deal only with character areas at this scale and do not define landscape character types. This framework has now been further strengthened by the development of a national landscape typology. The typology has been devised by the Countryside Agency in collaboration with English Nature and English Heritage (with support from DEFRA) [14], and

**Figure 2: Character types and character areas in South West England**



Source: New Map Consortium (1993), New Map of England Pilot Project. Technical Report 1, Regional Landscape Classification, (unpublished report to the Countryside Commission).

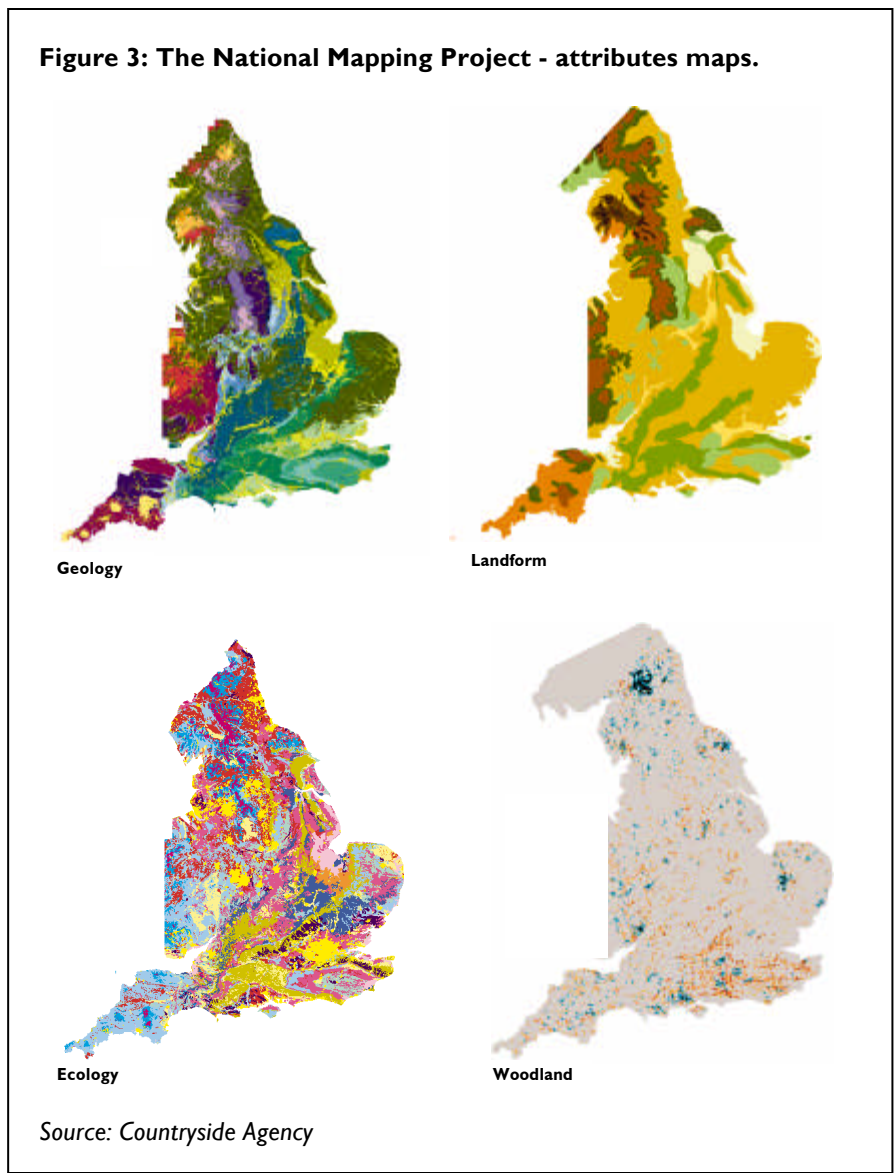
takes forward and develops the original approach used in the National Mapping Project. This time, however, there is greater emphasis on professional judgement rather than use of computer classification, although the typology is still based on use of a GIS database of information about the main attributes which shape the character of landscape at this large-scale.

1.18 The typology has been derived by map analysis of the main physical, biological and cultural factors that determine landscape character using GIS manipulation of digital data sets. Three key determinants of character that can be derived from national data sets - namely physiography, ground type and cultural pattern - are mapped on the basis of manual interpretation and combination of a variety of national data sets. Physiography, for example, is derived from interpretation of the relationship between geological and contour data; ground types are derived from a combination of geological, soils and agricultural census information; and cultural attributes through analysis of data such as ancient woodland maps, common land information and maps of historical settlement and land use patterns. The individual mapping units created by overlaying and digitally combining all these map layers are then classified, on the basis of shared common characteristics, into landscape types.

1.19 The resulting national typology lies at an intermediate level between the higher level national characterisation of *The Character of England* map, and the more detailed characterisation usually carried out at the local authority level. It can inform work at both these levels. Firstly, it can help to refine the boundaries of character areas by allowing them to be related more clearly to changes from one landscape type to another. Secondly, it can provide a valuable starting point for more detailed local authority assessments.

**Scotland**

1.20 When Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) was established through the merger, in 1992, of the Countryside Commission for Scotland and the Nature Conservancy Council for Scotland, it became apparent that the information available on Scotland's landscape resources was insignificant when compared to other aspects of the natural heritage, such as habitats and species. This imbalance made it difficult for SNH staff to advise planning authorities comprehensively on development control cases and strategic planning issues. It quickly became apparent that SNH needed to develop its understanding of the landscape resource. As a result, in 1994, SNH embarked upon the national



Landscape Character Assessment Programme. This was carried out with the co-operation of local planning authorities, and also involved other organisations such as the Forestry Authority, Forest Enterprise, Historic Scotland, Scottish Enterprise, the Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Division, as well as some local groups. These various parties were involved either through consultation, or by membership of project steering groups.

I.21 Since the national programme began the whole land area of Scotland has been covered. The programme is now complete and comprises 29 regional studies. Most of them cover the Scottish Unitary Local Authority areas, but others cover districts, areas around cities (such as Aberdeen), or special areas like the proposed Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park area. Each study has been carried out to a broadly similar brief to ensure a degree of consistency, but the assessments also vary to reflect the diversity of uses for which they are intended as well as the aspirations of individual project steering groups. The scale and level of detail of individual assessments, for example, may vary to reflect the requirements of particular project partners and particularly the needs of local planning authorities. Most are carried out at 1:50,000 scale but in some cases at 1:25,000 scale where there is a need for more detailed information.

I.22 All the assessments identify landscape character types and geographically distinct landscape character areas. Some 3,967 individual character areas have been digitised from the 1:50,000 (and occasionally) 1:25,000 maps produced by the 29 assessments. These areas are grouped into 366 landscape character types in the original assessments, ranging for example from 30 types in Borders Region to only three in Clackmannanshire. A separate study has investigated common features between the types and as a result grouped them together into higher order types. The original 366 landscape character types have, as a result, been grouped into 106 more generalised categories known as Level 2 types and then again into 52 higher level categories known as Level 3 types (see **Figure 6.4** in main guidance). The types at each level are an amalgamation of the types below and so the full range of three different levels represents the hierarchy of landscape character in Scotland, but based on bottom-up grouping, rather than top-down division.

I.23 Most of the descriptive work in the assessments, including definition of key characteristics, overall character and aesthetic and perceptual qualities, is focused on the original landscape character types rather than individual character areas. Information from these descriptions has been analysed in a standard way, covering context, geology, landform, water, land use, land cover, settlement, other features, landscape experience and pressures for change and the information added to the GIS database. A separate but linked 'Notepad' file has also been created from each type containing a word picture describing the key characteristics, and also containing pressures for change. The complete GIS database of mapped landscape areas and character types at the three different levels, together with the associated descriptive information, now provides an invaluable data source which can be manipulated and interrogated in many different ways and linked to other data sets.

I.24 The Scottish programme does not have the same emphasis on high level character areas as the Countryside Character initiative in England. The Level 3 landscape types are the highest level in the hierarchy but have not been interpreted into individual character areas. The National Heritage Futures (see **Figure 6.1** of main guidance) provide the nearest equivalent to a national reporting framework, but are based on all aspects of the natural heritage, including landscape character.

## **OTHER INITIATIVES**

I.25 Other agencies in England and Scotland have developed Landscape Character Assessment initiatives that have much in common with the approach adopted by the Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage but are tailored to a specific application. For example, the Forestry Commission has developed the method of Landscape Character Assessment described here for use specifically in the preparation of Indicative Forestry Strategies or similar strategic approaches [15]. Other important parallel initiatives are outlined below.

I.26 The **Environment Agency**, and previously the **National Rivers Authority**, developed a closely related approach for the landscape assessment of river corridors [16]. It involves assessment of both the wider river valley, referred to as 'macro' scale assessment, and the immediate corridor of the river itself, referred to as 'micro' scale

assessment. The first of these applies the same general approach to character assessment as the one described in the main guidance. The method has also been extended to assessing the landscape of river catchments and there are now many examples of assessments of both river corridors and river catchments, especially in the Thames and Midland regions.

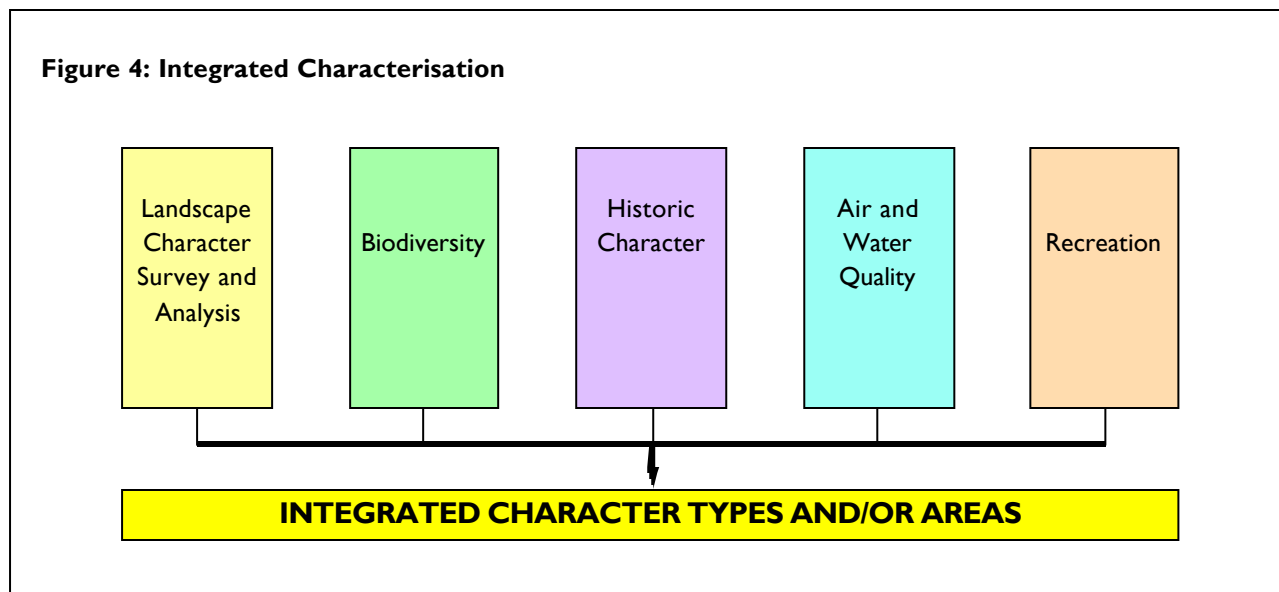
1.27 The Rural Development Service of DEFRA (formerly Farming and Rural Conservation Agency) has carried out landscape assessments for all 22 of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) in England. The ESA landscape assessments focus on the rural environment as created and influenced by agricultural land management. These provide a basis for monitoring by setting the scene and establishing the landscape context for the scheme. This statement of landscape character also forms the baseline document for landscape and integrated land management. Landscape types are identified, mapped and described, with descriptions particularly picking out characteristic or 'key' elements which are the subject of the ESA management prescriptions. The definition of landscape types in these assessments is linked to variations in landform, geology, land cover and the spatial patterns of man-made artefacts. The current monitoring strategy is moving towards a thematic and national programme of work across ESAs rather than assessment at the individual level. In Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage has carried out similar work, using the method described in this report, as a contribution to the ESA monitoring programme.

**Urban characterisation**

1.28 Although the emphasis of this guidance is on rural landscape, the approach to character assessment described here is equally applicable to urban areas, although the elements that make up the townscape are predominantly built. Some recent examples of Landscape Character Assessment, notably Gosport [17] and Fareham [18] in Hampshire, demonstrate how characterisation can be applied to both urban and urban fringe areas, while the Winchester City study [19] has developed the characterisation approach further for an historic city. In these urban assessments a common approach is to identify detailed typologies of built fabric (e.g. Victorian semi-detached terraced housing) and to group these typologies together into broader character areas.

**Integrated characterisation**

1.29 Another development has been that of integrated characterisation, that is characterisation that gives equal weight to landscape character, ecological character (biodiversity), historic character, the resources of air and water, recreational character and accessibility. Such integrated characterisation may also consider the economic characteristics of farming. Integrated characterisation does not supersede Landscape Character Assessment as described here. Rather, landscape characterisation forms one of the 'strands' of an integrated characterisation, where final integrated character types and/or areas will reflect the sum of all the key environmental components, not just landscape character (**Figure 4**). The resultant integrated character types and/or areas therefore are no longer strictly landscape as





they include topics outside the domain of landscape, such as air and water quality and recreation provision. They may therefore more appropriately be referred to as Integrated Character Types or Areas or Environmental Character Types or Areas. There are few completed examples of fully integrated characterisation but a number of recent studies show progress in this direction. Work by Oxfordshire County Council in partnership with English Nature and the Countryside Agency, for example, is developing a method of linking assessment of ecological interest to landscape characteristics. Integrated characterisation can be particularly valuable where an integrated evaluation framework (such as Quality of Life Capital - see **Topic Paper 2**) is being used.

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The full *Landscape Character Assessment: Guidance for England and Scotland* and related topic papers can be viewed and downloaded from [www.countryside.gov.uk/cci/guidance](http://www.countryside.gov.uk/cci/guidance) and [www.snh.org.uk/strategy/LCA](http://www.snh.org.uk/strategy/LCA)

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