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## PREVIOUS LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENTS AND STUDY METHODS

High Street Furlong – footpath near Butleigh

## 2.0 PREVIOUS LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENTS - PREVIOUS LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENTS AND STUDY METHODS

### 2.1 STUDY METHODS

2.1.1 The 1996 AONB and 1997 Landscape Assessment of Mendip District studies were undertaken following the relevant guidance of the time provided by the Countryside Commission (predecessor to Natural England) dating from 1993. The work included a literature review, site visits mapping of physical features and designations followed by more extensive field work.

2.1.2 The analysis work included identification of landscape types at 1:25,000 scale based on physical attributes such as landform, geology, vegetation and settlement and overall visual qualities. From this work some areas such as the Mendip plateau were seen as distinct homogenous units but others were deemed to complex with overlapping mosaics of land use and settlement pattern. Although a map was prepared it was concluded it was not helpful in describing and analysing the landscape any further.

2.1.3 The work then concentrated on the identification of the landscape character areas. These were defined as a series of broad-scale principle character areas with subdivisions at a smaller scale. The areas were mapped at 1:50,000 scale but not GIS digitised.

2.1.4 At around the same time the Countryside Commission produced the Character Programme classification of the English landscape into regional character areas. This was the early forerunner to the 2014 National Landscape Character Areas project. The broad character areas identified in this region are essentially the same, but with more detail provided

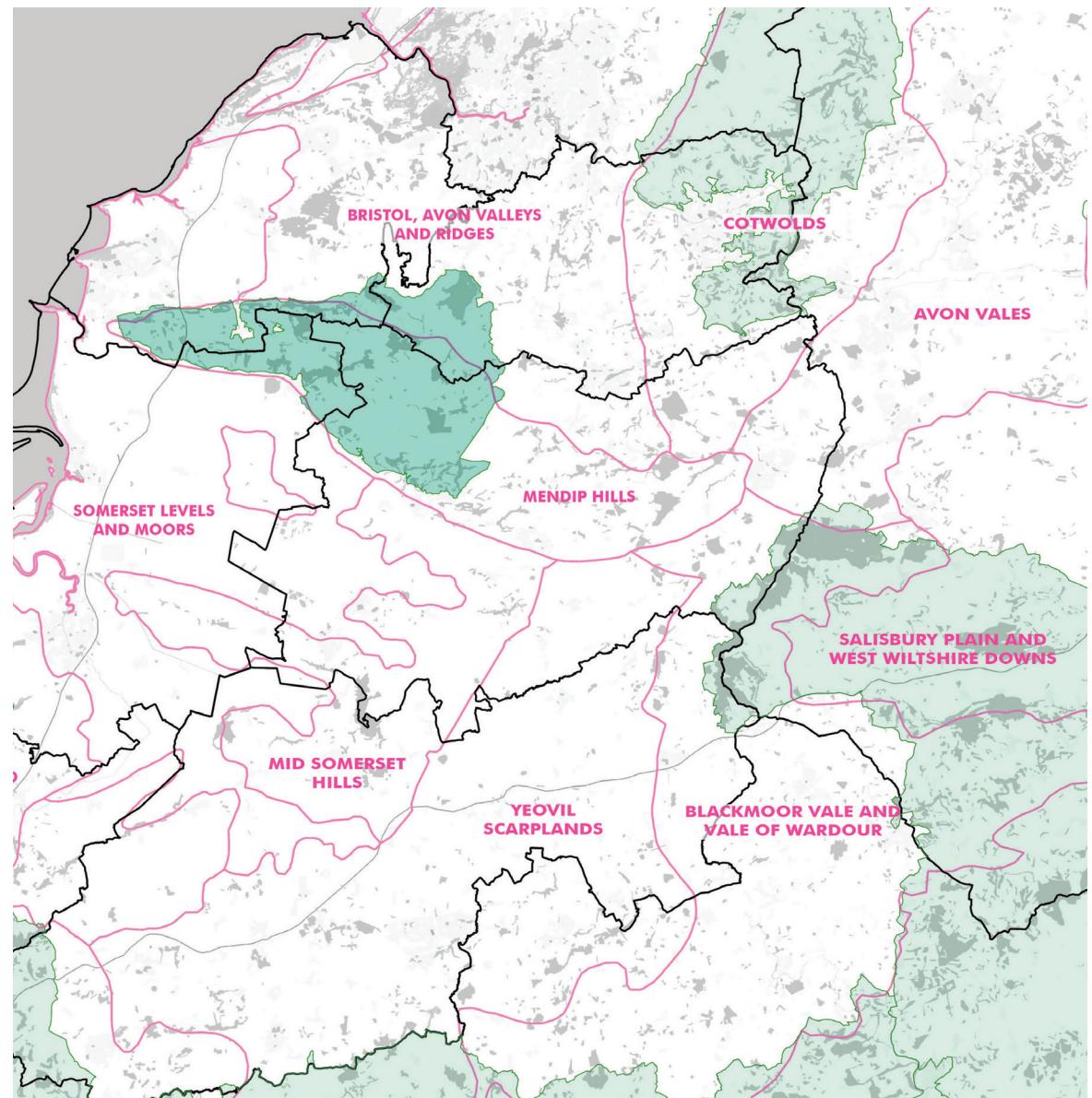
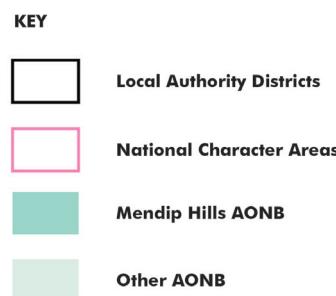
in the later NCA. The principle character areas from the 96/97 work were noted as being broadly compatible with the regional character areas. Eight of these areas overlap with the MDC area.

2.1.5 Other landscape assessments undertaken within the district include the Fringes of Mendip's Towns 1996 and the districts internal Assessment of Special Landscape Features (November 2012). [2.4]

2.1.6 The fuller National Landscape Character Profiles for each of the eight areas that overlap the district were then published in 2014 [2.1] These include;

- The Mendip Hills
- Bristol Avon Valleys and Ridges
- The Cotswolds
- Avon Valleys
- Blackmoor Vale and the Vale of Wardour
- The Yeovil Scarplands
- The Mid Somerset Hills
- Somerset Levels and Moors

2.1.7 These still generally correlate with the 1996 principle character areas. Two subtle differences are noted in relation to the coverage. Around Frome the NCA has a split between the Avon Vales that extend into Wiltshire and the Blackmoor Vale that extends into South Somerset. In the 1996 assessment (and this study) the area is treated as one following the River Frome catchment to the north east corner of the district (LCA areas B1 – B3 Section 6.3). West of Wells a line of small hills at the foot of the Mendip scarp is on the boundary between the NCA Mendip and Levels Areas. As the area is distinct from both these wider landscapes it is identified within the 1996 study (and again here) as a separate principle character area, the Wookey Islands (LCA areas G1 – G3 Section 6.8).



## 2.2 STUDY APPROACH

2.2.1 The approach taken for this work follows the well-established best practice guidance. This is in the form of two main publications;

- Landscape Character Assessment guidance for England and Scotland. Published jointly by the Countryside Agency (now NE) and Scottish Natural Heritage in 2002 [2.5]
- An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment. Published by Natural England in 2014 [2.6]

2.2.2 The later guidance cross refers to the earlier document and both remain current. A third publication, The Landscape Institute Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact (GLVIA3) is also relevant and has been referred to in this study. [2.7]

2.2.3 The basic premise of these recommendations is for assessments to gain an understanding of the character of the landscape across broad areas rather than simply focus on issues of quality and designations. The 2014 guide includes a helpful explanation of landscape character and the assessment process.

*"Our landscapes vary because of, amongst other variables, their underlying geology, soils, topography, land cover, hydrology, historic and cultural development, and climatic considerations. The combination of characteristics arising from these physical and socio economic influences, and their often complex interrelationships, makes one landscape different from another. Landscape character may be defined as a distinct and recognisable pattern of elements, or characteristics, in the landscape that make one landscape different from another, rather than better or worse. Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is the process of identifying and describing variation in the character of the landscape. It seeks to identify and explain the unique combination of elements and features (characteristics) that make landscapes distinctive (Fig. 1\*. What is Landscape?). This process results in the production of a Landscape Character Assessment.*

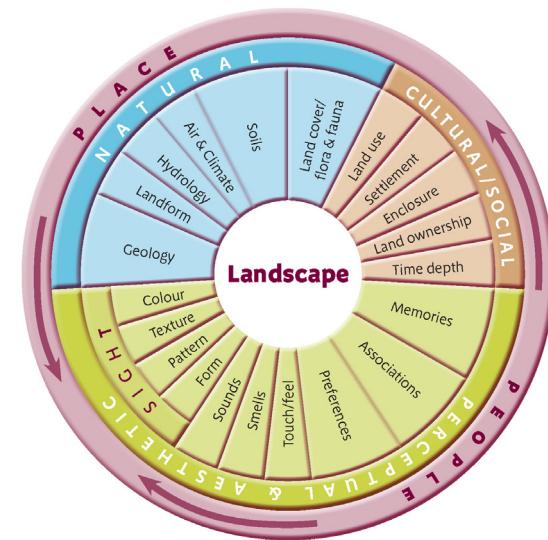
*The Landscape Character Assessment process is used increasingly to inform urban, or townscape, assessments, and Seascapes Character Assessments. The scope of the ELC applies to natural, rural, urban and peri-urban areas and includes land, inland water and marine areas. As the European Landscape Convention acknowledges, "the landscape is an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere: in urban areas and in the countryside, in degraded areas as well as in areas of high quality, in areas recognised as being of outstanding beauty as well as everyday areas."*

*All landscapes matter to someone. By setting down a robust, auditable and transparent, baseline Landscape Character Assessment can not only help us to understand our landscapes, it can also assist in informing judgements and decisions concerning the management of change. The involvement of people in the process of LCA is key. Both communities of place and communities of interest must be engaged in LCA." [2.6]*

[\* Refers to the NE Wheel of Landscape / Ecosystem Services approach – reproduced here]

2.2.4 Landscape character assessments are useful for providing a baseline of existing conditions against which the impact of potential development may be measured against. However, character alone does not fully cover how areas may be used, seen or otherwise valued.

2.2.5 While the complexities of geology or history may be directly connected to appreciable aspects of modern landscapes there may be circumstance where such added interest may not be that apparent but once understood add greatly to the interest or perceived value of a place. The demand for access to recreational green space means that some



What is Landscape - Graphic Extracted from Natural England's Approach to Landscape Character Assessment Oct 2014

areas of quite nondescript character may be highly valued simply by virtue of the access to the outdoors. Mapping of individual character areas can include some reference to the availability of views and distant landmarks; but this can add another layer of complexity over whether the view is from a public place and if it encompasses the landscape of other character areas.

**2.2.6** The availability and sensitivity of views is generally considered as a separate exercise from landscape and landscape character impact assessments (note the Mendip **Hills** AONB Management Plan lists views as one of the special qualities of the AONB although this was not a specific topic covered in the 1996 LCA study. Also, the process of characterisation of landscape down into distinct areas may lead to a degree of compartmentalisation and reduce the appreciation of the value of an area as a collection or as a whole.

**2.2.7** In order to provide a full response to the 'Valued Landscape' issues raised within the MDC brief, this assessment includes reference to these wider points alongside the main character assessment.

## 2.3 PROJECT STAGES

**2.3.1** Following the guidance the project adopted four main work stages.

### Stage 1 Brief, Purpose and scope

In the preparation for this study the project brief was reviewed, and discussion held over the benefits of either an update or an entirely new landscape assessment. The individual character areas were scanned and imported into GIS and overlaid on larger scale maps. The previous work was reviewed in relation to the latest guidance from Natural England [2.6]. From this it was agreed that the previous character area boundaries were an appropriate starting point and the work would concentrate on adding more detail rather than a full review of precise areas. Where obvious discrepancies were found these would be adjusted and the order and area names would be updated as appropriate. The consistency of the overall boundaries of the principle character areas with the National Character Area (NCA) areas assisted in this respect. A comparison between the 1997 and updated boundaries is provided on the website link for this assessment.

**2.3.3** As the work has progressed some generally minor adjustments to area boundaries has been done. In most instances this is more as a result of overlaying the areas on larger scale more definitive mapping.

**2.3.4** The importance of public engagement with the landscape assessment was discussed from the outset of the study. In the circumstance of an update to a long standing assessment it was considered more productive to collate a comprehensive draft document and use this as a vehicle for consultation. As a basic objective for the study it was agreed the team would

consider ways in which the assessment could be made accessible and engaging for the public.

**2.3.5** The agreed brief and detailed methodology was set out and agreed with the Commissioning Officers (Appendix 1).

### Stage 2 Desk study

**2.3.6** This stage involved the review of existing assessments including the National Character Areas work and those of the neighbouring authority areas. An understanding of the wider context of the district was drawn together along with mapping of the different layers of available GIS data sets. These included the Local Plan designations. A background review of reference material on the history and ecological interest was undertaken; along with research into cultural influences and other forms of landscape related events and activities.

**2.3.7** During this stage the extent of renewable energy schemes undertaken in recent years was mapped and locations / extents tabulated. The location, interest and accessibility of all the district's Special Landscape Features (SLF), nature reserves, open access land and accessible woodlands was logged and where possible mapped. A data base of the compiled information and GIS layers are included within the output from this study.

**2.3.8** GIS Data sets mapping the general tranquillity and extent of light pollution were obtained from the CPRE in order to relate these to the mapped character area. In addition the distribution of historic landscapes and scheduled ancient monuments (SAM) were downloaded from Historic England. SUSTRANS provided GIS data on the routes of the national cycleway network and the rights of way data was also obtained.

### Stage 3 Field Survey Work

2.3.9 For this stage the district was broken down into a series of eight field work areas. These were loosely based on the 1997 principle character areas but sized to take account of the relative complexity / size of areas. Some overlap between the main areas was included to help review the respective boundaries. Field work was undertaken mainly on foot or cycle; to properly experience areas. Some areas had to be explored by car with frequent stops and short walks to cover the ground.

2.3.10 A standard proforma was used to record detail of the landscape composition, responses to the perceived character and any sense of tranquillity, isolation or remoteness. The areas were extensively photographed and images geotagged.

### Stage 4 Classification and Description

2.3.11 As the main field work progressed a district wide appraisal section of the study was compiled using the research from Stage 2 and understanding from field work. As this work progressed the connections between different parts of the district became more apparent and some common stories emerged. On completion of areas of field work the corresponding Landscape Character Area descriptions were set down.

2.3.12 For each area the basic physical description of the landscape was up dated from the previous text. For each the physical geography, vegetation pattern and habitat types, human land use and settlement patterns were described. These physical characteristics are described in objective terms followed by the more subjective and aesthetic / perceptual responses. The landscape condition and sense of unspoilt tranquility

or visual / audible intrusion was noted for each area. Key views, viewpoints and landmarks were noted. Within each character area the available network of public rights of way or other open access land was reviewed with reference to mapped routes and available access information.

2.3.13 Specific issues which may present threats to the future condition of the landscape resource was considered. As these were considered to be generic risks across many different areas the review of this aspect was tabulated within its own section.

2.3.14 The final out put of the study is compiled into this report but also provided in web format to allow maximum access to the landscape assessment, findings and data. Wherever possible information is provided in a clear graphic style with high resolution mapping to allow ease of access for external use. The mapped outputs are also provided to the Council as GIS layers.

## 2.4 REPORT FORMAT

- 2.4.1 The main report starts with an overview of the district in its wider context (Section 3). This considers the contrasting distribution of urbanisation within and outside of the MDC boundary and the interrelationships of the LCA areas across the administrative boundaries.
- 2.4.2 **Section 4** titled Mendip by Numbers provides various figures and comparative areas. Provided in part to give an appreciation of the scale of different facets of the district. These can be read alongside the Database provided in Appendix 2. These figures provide a snapshot of key data that could inform a state of the environment assessment and can be updated in future years as part of any monitoring of landscape change.
- 2.4.3 Section 5 provides the District Wide Appraisal. These set out an over view of various topics that relate to the district as a whole.
- 2.4.4 Section 6 is the main Landscape Character Areas descriptions. Each principle character area is set out in a section prefaced with maps of the sub divisions and the interface of the Mendip LCA's with those of the adjoining local authorities.
- 2.4.5 Section 7 presents an analysis of the Valued Landscapes topic within the district and sets out eight special characteristics of the district.
- 2.4.6 Section 8 provides a summary of the key issues facing the district and how these may be managed and monitored in the future.
- 2.4.7 Finally, Section 9 deals with Policy, Strategy and Green Infrastructure

## REFERENCES FOR SECTIONS 1.0 AND 2.0

- [2.1] National Character Area profiles published by Natural England – 2014
- [2.2] NPPF (*National Planning Policy Framework July 2019*)
- [2.3] Mendip Climate and Nature Emergency <https://www.mendip.gov.uk/article/8648/Climate-Emergency-Declaration> <https://www.mendip.gov.uk/article/8342/Mendip-s-Climate-Emergency-Council-plans-moving-forward-for-being-part-of-the-solution>
- [2.4] Landscape Assessment of the Mendip Hills From Steep Holm to Frome - May 1996  
Chris Blandford Associates <https://www.mendip.gov.uk/landscapeassessment1996>
- [2.5] Landscape Character Assessment guidance for England and Scotland. Published jointly by the Countryside Agency (now NE) and Scottish Natural Heritage in 2002
- [2.6] An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment. Published by Natural England in 2014
- [2.7] Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (Edition 3 - 2013) published by the Landscape Institute & IEMA