

Date: 31 July 2007

Report LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Purpose of the report

1. To update Members on the development of landscape character guidelines and to advise on adopting the final document as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD).

Strategic Planning Framework

2. The information and recommendation(s) contained in this report are consistent with the Authority's statutory purposes and its approved strategic planning framework:

Best Value Performance Plan objectives

Work with our partners to provide a clear, up-to-date framework for the management of the National Park and develop and publish landscape character guidelines by December 2007.

Background

3. In 2001 the Authority commissioned a Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) of the National Park. The study was prepared by consultants. It represented an objective and independent assessment of the landscape character of the Yorkshire Dales. It provided a baseline factual description at both the Park scale and on a dale-by-dale basis, of distinguishing landscape features at that particular point in time.
4. The LCA was endorsed by the Authority in March 2002, and referred to the Planning Committee to consider the issue of using it as supplementary planning guidance (SPG). While endorsing the document, the Committee decided that it could only consider adopting the document as SPG if it contained landscape guidelines and had been subject to full public consultation.
5. Subsequently, the Landscape Character Assessment has been used in a number of ways:
 - to inform the Authority's position in relation to applications to the Forestry Commission for woodland creation grants and felling licences;
 - to inform the Authority's position in relation to applications to Natural England for Environmental Stewardship;

- to help prepare Farm Environment Plans (for Environmental Stewardship applications);
 - as the starting point for developing the statement of the Park's special qualities in the National Park Management Plan;
 - as evidence to support a wide range of applications for external funding;
 - planning applicants have used it to inform Environmental Impact Assessments;
 - consultants have used it to inform studies of the capacity of the landscape of North Yorkshire to absorb wind power schemes;
 - to undertake visual assessment of the works proposed to the Pennine Bridleway;
 - to inform the National Park boundary review.
6. It was always intended that the LCA would be the first step towards developing a strategy or guidelines to assist the Authority (and others) in the management and enhancement of the Park's landscape. Developing such guidelines would be useful, for example, when dealing with planning applications with a wide scale impact on the landscape, such as large wind turbine schemes. It would also be of use in future Local Development Framework reviews.
 7. The Authority's current Best Value objective is to produce landscape character guidelines by December this year. The work is to be led by the new Landscape Conservation Officer, supported by other specialist officers in conservation and planning. The new officer is due to start work at the beginning of September, which means that there is no possibility of the current deadline being met. A more realistic timetable now would be to develop draft guidelines to go out to consultation around March 2008. They could then be finalised in the summer of 2008.
 8. The Authority has the option of adopting some or all of the guidelines as a supplementary planning document (SPD). SPDs cannot set new planning policy. Their role is to support or inform the use of existing policy. For example, Local Plan Policy GP2 states that "Development will only be permitted if..... i) It is of a kind, scale, siting, density and detailed design which is **sympathetic to or enhances the landscape character**, special qualities and local distinctiveness of the surrounding area". The SPD would define that landscape character and provide guidance as to how new development might maintain or enhance it.
 9. To achieve adoption as SPD, a series of formal steps must be followed. These would include subjecting the guidelines to a Sustainability Appraisal and putting them out to formal consultation in line with Statement of Community Involvement requirements. These requirements would include press notices, consultation with Parish Councils/Meetings, statutory bodies & advertising on the Authority's website.
 10. Adopting landscape character assessments and guidelines as SPDs is common practise among local authorities. All the Cumbrian planning authorities are working on a joint LCA as SPD, and those North Yorkshire authorities that have completed LCAs have adopted them as SPDs.
 11. However, adoption is not a statutory requirement. The Authority has the option of producing guidelines outwith the local development framework. This would allow different approaches to public consultation and the guidelines could still be used to inform the processes described above. This would obviously be quicker & cheaper.

However, the final document would lack the robustness that formal external scrutiny provides.

12. Whichever approach is adopted, it is suggested that the initial development of the guidelines might best be overseen by the new National Park Management Plan steering group. This would have a number of benefits. First, it would tie the guidelines directly to the special qualities, principles and objectives in the Plan, which have already been subject to wide consultation and have been approved by the Authority. Second, it would ensure wider ownership of the eventual guidelines, involving the key partner bodies at both regional and local level. The organisations on the steering group were specifically chosen because they have broad interest in the Authority's statutory purposes, and are able to recognize and understand the wider picture.

Conclusion

13. Putting the guidelines through the SPD process will produce a stronger document, that has been tested through public consultation. It will, therefore, carry more weight. Using the National Park Management Plan steering group to oversee the process would help to ensure wide ownership of the final document amongst the key bodies operating in the Park.

RECOMMENDATION

14. That:
 - a. landscape character guidelines be developed as a Supplementary Planning Document, following the appropriate statutory consultation procedures;
 - b. the National Park Management Plan steering group be asked to oversee the process of producing the guidelines and making final recommendations to the Authority.

Peter Watson
Head of Planning

6 July 2007

Background documents:

Landscape Character Assessment & Quality of Life Capital Assessment of the Yorkshire Dales National Park - 2001