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# Methodology for local communities to assess landscape and townscape character

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HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

To accompany the Landscape and Townscape Supplementary Planning Document 2022

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## Introduction

This methodology is for local communities who wish to produce their own landscape and townscape character assessment for their particular settlement. Such assessments are primarily used to support a neighbourhood plan and can be used as an evidence document to support policies relating to design, conservation, heritage and landscape.

The following methodology has been adapted from guidance produced by:

- Historic England '[Understanding Place: Historic Area Assessments](#)' (April 2017)
- Natural England '[An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment](#)' (October 2014)
- Landscape Institute's '[Townscape Character Assessment: Technical Information Note 05/2017](#)' (April 2018)

For Huntingdonshire specifically, a Landscape and Townscape Assessment SPD was adopted in 2007. This has been revised and expanded in the Landscape and Townscape SPD: Consultation Draft 2021. It will assist in the implementation of policies within the Huntingdonshire Local Plan to 2036 as well as be a valuable resource for neighbourhood planning.

Before undertaking the methodology within this paper, it is recommended the revised SPD is read as this provides a guide on the layout, content and structure of such an assessment and provides detailed guidance relating to:

- Understanding character (chapter 2) which sets out the key principles and consideration of landscape and townscape character and how these are related to one another. Within this chapter is a section on building types where common types of structures, materials, uses and styles of building found across Huntingdonshire with photos.
- Landscape character areas (chapter 3) which detail the nine landscape character areas found within Huntingdonshire.
- Townscape assessments for the spatial planning areas and key service centres of Huntingdonshire, these can be found in chapters 5-15.

An [interactive map](#) has been produced to accompany the revised SPD and provide further support for those wishing to undertake a landscape and townscape character assessment. A user guide for it has also been produced. The map shows:

- Landscape character areas
- Character areas for settlements within spatial planning areas and key service centres
- Heritage assets – conservations areas, listed buildings, scheduled monuments and registered parks and gardens
- Nature sites including internally, nationally and locally designated sites and ancient woodland
- Green infrastructure priority areas and projects
- Agricultural land class

Other key documents to review while undertaking a landscape and character assessment are the Huntingdonshire Design Guide (2017) and the relevant Conservation Area statement (if applicable). These should also be used when assessing character particularly when considering design elements and historical appraisals of an area.

## Assessing Character

Landscape character can be defined as the distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that make one area different from another. The approach encompasses physical landscape factors such as geology and ecology, cultural factors such as archaeology and settlement patterns, and perceptual factors such as tranquillity. Landscape character areas reflect a unique combination of these factors in a discrete geographical area; this local distinctiveness contributes to the special character and sense of place of a community or area.

A landscape character area assessment identifies and describes variations in the character of the landscape recognising the combination of factors that make an individual landscape distinctive. Not all areas within a landscape character area exhibit all the characteristics of that area and it is common for some parts to have few distinctive features often due to changes in land use. The proximity of the built environment often affects the condition of the landscape, particularly on the edges of the built environment where pressures are greatest.

Townscape is defined by the Landscape Institute as 'the landscape within the built-up area, including the buildings, the relationship between them, the different types of urban open spaces, including green spaces and the relationship between buildings and open spaces'. Townscape character identifies the distinct and recognisable pattern of features that occur consistently in a particular area. Townscape character areas vary significantly in size but each has a distinct and recognisable identity. These provide a basis for promoting the integration of sensitively designed buildings and spaces which reflect the distinctive traits of the surrounding area.

It is helpful to think of townscape as an evolution of the natural landscape, both bring with them cultural influences and perceptions that have shaped how people interact and perceive the natural and built environment. These are continually changing, some areas at a faster rate than others. Each townscape and its unique interaction with its surrounding landscape bring varying opportunities for development, enhancement and preservation. Some of these factors have been summarised in Figure 1 and listed below:

### **Factors of key importance for landscape are consideration of:**

- the existing landscape character within and around the area/site reflecting landform, soils and geology, land cover, water features and the pattern of built and natural features
- the visual character of the landscape and views to, from and across the area/site
- how the landscape has shaped local communities and is used by them
- opportunities to strengthen visual and physical linkages between the area/site and its surroundings, including opportunities for linkage of natural habitat

### **Factors of key importance for townscape are consideration of:**

- the character of key features such as land use, layout, density, plot size, massing and permeability the presence of local landmarks, memorable places, cultural assets and vistas
- historic street patterns
- vernacular architectural styles, materials, design and detailing that provide local distinctiveness
- the character of boundary treatments such as walls, hedges and hedgerows
- the character of open spaces and their relationship to built development

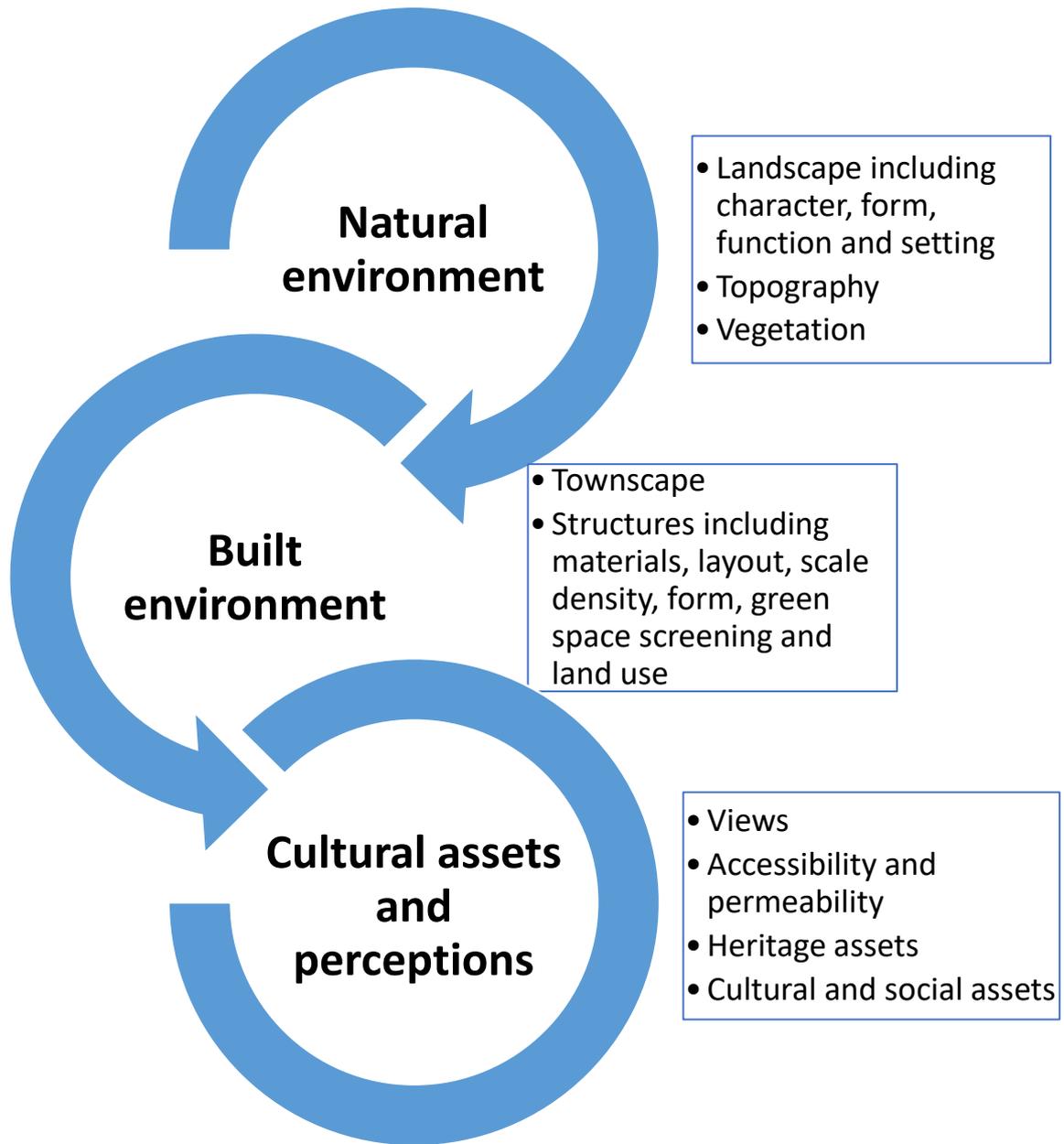
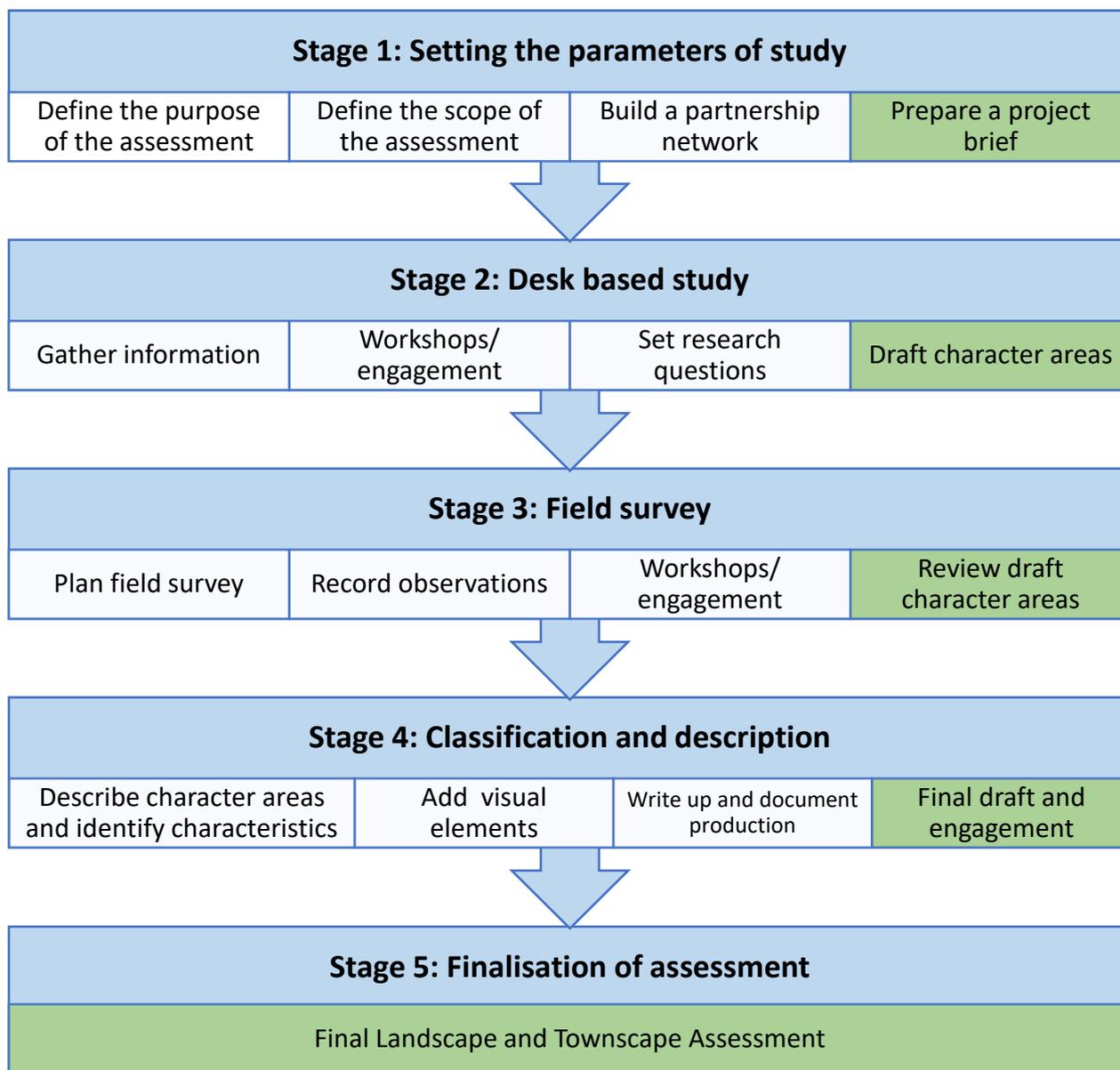


Figure 1: The evolution of townscape character from the natural landscape

## Methodology to assess landscape and townscape character

The following methodology consists of five key stages with the steps and outputs (the green boxes) within each stage summarised in Figure 2 and detailed over the next few pages. It details the outputs that should be produced at the end of each stage as these will direct the next stage of work. The methodology provides flexibility so that depending on the scope and focus of the assessment, the depth and breadth of assessment at each step can be tailored to the individual project.



*Figure 2: Summary of the key stages, steps and outputs of undertaking a landscape and townscape character assessment*

## Stage 1: Setting the parameters of study

This stage consists of the following steps:

- Define the purpose of the assessment
- Define the scope of the project
- Build a partnership network

At the end of this stage, the following output should be delivered:

- Prepare a project brief

### Step 1: Define the purpose of the assessment

Having a clear direction and aim for the assessment is fundamental for it to run smoothly. It is a good idea to start this process with a group of core individuals who will be the key people carrying out and managing the assessment. A consensus can be reached with varying thoughts and opinions considered.

In setting a purpose, consider what the assessment is seeking to achieve. For example, is it to support landscape and design policies for a neighbourhood plan, or is it looking particularly at heritage assets or landscape?

From this, consider what other supporting documents or documents that the assessment could complement. These could include:

- The local planning authority's development plan including the local plan or area action plans
- Any development management documents or supplementary planning documents/guidance
- Conservation area statements and assessments
- Any neighbouring parish/town council neighbourhood plans
- Other parish council projects or parish plans

Identifying these will help set the context to the study and offer a guide to what documentation is already available that can be utilised to save time and resources.

It is important to keep in mind that your assessment should be looking to guide future development proposals in your settlement in much greater detail than policies in the Local Plan.

### Step 2: Define the scope of the project

Once the purpose and wider context of the assessment is known, define the scope of the assessment. To do this, within the core group tasked with producing the assessment, consider the following questions as early as possible in the process:

- What is the emphasis of the assessment?
- What skills and specialisms are available to those undertaking the assessment?
- What will the geographic extent be?
- What level of detail is sought?

- Will further assistance be needed?
- What information has already been published?

It is important to be realistic at this stage. Practical elements like what resources, timescales and people power are available and needed should be considered. This is key to do as early in the process as possible to ensure the project runs smoothly and that volunteers do not get fatigued with the process or take on too much work. It is also an opportunity to recruit people to the project if people power is identified as being an issue.

There is not a set amount of time that can or should be spent on any of the stages or steps within this methodology as this will vary group to group and project to project. It is most important that the evidence is robust and the assessment thorough.

Taking into consideration the local resources and scale of the assessment, a rough timeline of when to achieve certain milestones should be devised. This is to ensure the project has an end date and stays to a reasonable time. If the document is being prepared as part of a neighbourhood plan, then there may be some outside pressure in terms of timelines to get aspects of the assessment done, these should be considered here too. If forming part of a neighbourhood plan evidence base, additional considerations around consultation events and what aspects of the neighbourhood plan the assessment will feed into should also be taken into account so that the undertaking of the assessment is placed within its full context and to avoid unnecessary delays.

### Step 3: Build a partnership network

Following the identification of parameters to the assessment and its scope, links with local community networks will need to be made as early as possible. Often the most important groups will be your parish council or your local residents' or community association. You should discuss the assessment process with these groups and ensure they are committed to taking the project forward. A diverse range of groups should also be included to accurately reflect the whole community. The wider you consult, the broader your support will be. The best way to ensure everyone is aware of the project is a leaflet drop to every home and put information on any local websites/ social media platforms. Groups within a community to involve can include:

- Local residents
- Farmers and landowners
- Local businesses
- Local churches and faith groups
- Local environmental organisations
- Local sports clubs and interest groups
- Neighbourhood watch groups
- The Local Authority

Output: Prepare a project brief

At this stage, a project brief should be prepared. This should be a document setting out what the purpose and scope of the assessment will be. It should also include what resources, budget and projected timescales are required.

This document should be circulated to all those involved in the project. A brief bulletin or note on any parish or village website or in a parish newsletter could be published setting out the key points and timelines for the rest of the community.

## Stage 2: Desk based study

This stage consists of the following steps:

- Gather information
- Workshops/ engagement
- Set research questions

At the end of this stage, the following output should be delivered:

- Draft landscape and townscape character areas

### Step 1: Gather information

It is important that plenty of time is dedicated to this stage. Do not rush this part of the process as having a thorough understanding of the documented local area and context in addition to the local knowledge available is crucial when going into the field work stage. It also adds robustness to the conclusions of the assessment. A wide range of resources can be used at this stage to provide both high level and detailed level assessments of the area, including:

- Maps
- Historical and geographical texts and records
- Local libraries and archives
- Local knowledge
- Photographs
- Parish/ Town Council records
- Church records and institutional records
- Planning permissions and history
- Other landscape and townscape studies
- Conservation area statements and assessments
- Building types from the Huntingdonshire Landscape and Townscape SPD

It is important to get the local community involved at this stage. Ask for resources, there may be members of the community who have private collections of old OS maps, photos and memoirs that can provide added value and insight into the meaning and direction of how the area has evolved over time. The more involvement there is from the local community, a better understanding of what

is needed in the area and what is important to the local community can be achieved thus adding extra value to the assessment. Try to cross check information from individuals to enhance accuracy.

The data and information gathered at this stage is useful in developing an initial understanding of the form and character of the settlement, its relationship with the immediate landscape edge and the wider landscape setting.

### Step 2: Workshops/ engagement

At these workshops, it would be useful to split the group into several smaller groups for discussion and thought mapping. Each group could have a large-scale map of the area (mapping services are available from HDC upon request) and annotate it using post-it notes, highlighters etc. to identify the indicative character areas, key changes and record ideas. To get the discussion going aspects to consider can include:

- What are the key landscape features?
- What shape and direction has the settlement developed in?
- What traditional industries are there?
- How can character areas be distinguished?
- What are the key buildings and styles?
- What drivers and pressures has the settlement and surrounding landscape faced over time and how have they shaped them?
- What can be done to manage these drivers and pressures? For example, what planning, conservation, landscape management and enhancement priorities are there?

The gathering information step and workshops should now be starting to highlight what character areas are present in the settlement. These can be broad areas outlined on a map, with bullet points of key features and characteristics. To assist in separating character areas, you can use the identified building types in the Huntingdonshire Landscape and Townscape SPD as a starting point.

### Step 3: Set research questions

Afterwards, consider what research questions could be set to assist in further directing research and field study. This will also help in ensuring that the aims of the project are met and helps guide the assessment by bringing meaning to the findings as the information gathered can be shaped to answer specific questions. When creating these research questions consider what information has already been collected and what further information will be needed through the field survey. Consider how these questions and the information gained can be categorised and analysed.

It is recommended the assessment takes a holistic look assessing the following strands and how they relate to one another:

- Natural environment
- Built environment
- Cultural assets and perceptions

Consider what themes you wish to assess within each of these, for example within the landscape strand you can assess character, form, function, setting, topography and vegetation. For the buildings strand you can assess materials, layout, scale, density, form, integral green space, screening and land use. For the cultural assets and perceptions strand you can assess views, accessibility and permeability, heritage assets, cultural and social assets. These are suggestions to

help you get started; there may be more you wish to research or specific ones depending on the nature, scope and purpose of the assessment.

The workshop should provide some direction on these research questions. However when they have been drafted, it may be worthwhile holding an additional workshop so that the whole group and or wider community can review them before going out on field surveys. It also keeps the local community involved in the process and shows their input is shaping the assessment.

To assist in assessing these strands and themes, a series of example research questions have been devised in the below table. These can be adapted and added to depending on the focus and scope of each assessment.

|  |
|--|
| <b>Landscape</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does the area relate to the wider countryside? Has it features in common with the surrounding landscape?</li> <li>• Is the area part of a larger landscape feature such as a ridge or field pattern that is characteristic of the wider area?</li> <li>• Are there distinctive features that contribute to the character of the local area?</li> <li>• What is the current use of the area?</li> <li>• What function does the area serve in the wider landscape? For example, is it part of the countryside setting of a built-up area, or does it bring views of the countryside landscape into a settlement?</li> </ul> |
| <b>Topography</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the area situated within a distinct topographical feature such as a river valley or hill?</li> <li>• Is the area flat, sloping or undulating?</li> <li>• Are there any permanent or seasonal watercourses or ponds within or on the boundaries of the area?</li> <li>• How does the topography affect the area's sense of enclosure or openness?</li> <li>• Can the whole area be seen as one entity or are there parts of it hidden behind higher land or built structures?</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Vegetation</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there individual trees within the area which make a significant contribution to the appearance of the locality?</li> <li>• Are there indications of historic planting such as historic hedgerows, specimen trees or formal planting?</li> <li>• Does existing vegetation include locally characteristic, native species?</li> <li>• What natural habitats are provided by existing vegetation?</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Townscape</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is it contained within well-defined boundaries?</li> <li>• What is the current use of the area?</li> <li>• Are there important buildings, structures or boundary treatments?</li> <li>• What function does the area serve in the wider townscape? For example, is it part of an area of similar developments or does it provide a contrast?</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Structures</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the screening includes walls or fencing, is it typical of the landscape and/ or townscape character area? is it important to the area's historic character?</li> </ul>   |

|   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What examples of green space or public space are there? How do they sit within the townscape?</li> <li>• Are there any individual structures which stand out as significantly contributing or detracting from the character of the area?</li> <li>• What contribution do these make to the landscape or townscape? Do they enhance or detract from its quality and character?</li> <li>• How do the height, materials, style and uses of nearby buildings relate to the area?</li> <li>• Do nearby buildings and structures display features that are typical of the townscape character area?</li> <li>• Is there a clear pattern or structure to the surrounding buildings and streets?</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Views and vistas</b></p>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the area provide an interesting or significant skyline?</li> <li>• Do the views to/ from the area include heritage assets whose setting needs to be safeguarded?</li> <li>• Do any views provide a valuable setting to existing buildings or landscape features?</li> <li>• Does the area terminate a view or vista within the townscape?</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Accessibility and permeability</b></p>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What physical access links the area to existing facilities and communities? Are there any obstacles which hinder access?</li> <li>• What level of physical connectivity does the landscape and/or townscape character area benefit from?</li> <li>• What physical access connections does the site or area currently have?</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Historical, cultural and social assets</b></p>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do vehicles, moving or parked, have an impact on the ambience of the area?</li> <li>• What are the activity levels like in the area? Is the area busy? Are there clusters of particular activities?</li> <li>• Is the area associated with particular cultural uses? For example, does it contain a museum or cemetery?</li> <li>• Are there features which may provoke memories? For example, does the area include an old school or hospital?</li> <li>• Are there any known associations with famous people or events?</li> <li>• Is the area of high archaeological potential?</li> <li>• Are there known designated or non-designated heritage assets within the area? How do these contribute to the character of the area?</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Light and noise</b></p>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the existing levels of artificial illumination in the area?</li> </ul>  |

Output: Draft landscape and townscape character areas

Following the desk based research and community engagement, a list of draft landscape and townscape character areas should have been identified with a list of key characteristics and features. These can be loosely drawn on a map. These areas can then be tested and assessed further during the field survey. You may find that some boundaries need to be changed, additional character areas identified, or some should have sub-character areas whereby they share similar characteristics/ features but are also distinct.

### Stage 3: Field survey

This stage consists of the following steps:

- Plan the field survey
- Record observations
- Workshops/ engagement

At the end of this stage, the following output should be delivered:

- Review draft landscape and townscape character areas

#### Step 1: Plan the field survey

Following the identification of the draft landscape and townscape character areas and research questions, planning the field survey to assess these needs to be undertaken. When planning the field survey, consider the following:

- Where and how far will the survey go?
- How long do you expect it to take?
- How many people will do this?
- Providing guidance on how and what to assess to ensure consistency in the conclusions made if going out in several groups
- Taking photos and drawing on maps

It is useful to go out on site visits in at least pairs. This allows for discussion and different insights to be identified. It also allows for greater discussion after the field surveys on what was seen and experienced.

#### Step 2: Record observations

To record information and observations, you can use the field survey template on the next page as a guide to the survey. This will help to provide more consistency between assessments if done by multiple groups of people. It has scope to be adapted to the specific requirements of the study, particularly if there is a strong local knowledge base or if additional information comes to light.

In addition to completing the field survey form, ensure that photographs and possibly sketches are made throughout. These can be used later in the final document.



## Huntingdonshire Landscape and Townscape Character Area Assessment Field Survey

The assessor should be familiar with any survey guidance and follow any relevant health and safety guidance. Remember to take photos and maps to assist in the identification and assessment process.

**Character Area:**

**Assessor(s):**

**Date of survey:**

### NATURAL ENVIRONMENT STRAND

Think about the character, form, function and setting of the local landscape, how it interacts with the edge of the townscape and with the wider landscape setting, topography and vegetation.

### BUILT ENVIRONMENT STRAND

Think about the structures, materials, layout, scale, density, form, green spaces, screening and land uses within the townscape.

### CULTURAL ASSETS AND PERCEPTIONS STRAND

Think about the views into and out of the settlement, the accessibility and movability within the built form and what historic, cultural and social assets there are.

Once out on the field survey, keep the following in mind (in addition to the research questions):

- How do design features create a broader sense of place?
- Are there certain streets/areas that have a different design and feel about them that make them distinct from other streets/ areas?
- How do the landscape and townscape edges respond to each other and has this impacted the location and direction of development?
- Are there particular areas that can be improved? Start to think about design principles or what development proposals should seek to do to conserve or enhance an area.

In terms of analysing information, consider how hard copies of field surveys will be stored and who can access these to enable them to be referred to later. Also consider how they will be analysed and by whom. When starting to analyse the observations, it may be useful to start identifying key themes or categorise by strand so trends across the character areas can be more easily identified. Think about how coding and using different colours can be used to illustrate similarities and differences more easily. These findings should also be recorded electronically to enable them to be shared easily with group members.

At this point, the additional information and insights from the field survey will start to answer the research questions previously identified in combination with any previously gathered data. Further analysis of the results should be undertaken to tie in with the desk based study and conclude:

- what the key features and characteristics of the area is
- the interaction and relationships between the landscape, landscape edge and townscape
- how the area has changed over time

### Step 3: Workshops/ engagement

At these workshops, discuss the findings of the field surveys. Here it would be useful to have already categorised the findings into strands and themes to aid more structured, focused discussions. These workshops are an opportunity for wider discussion and thought generation on what drivers and pressures have shaped the landscape and townscape of the settlement, what sort of policies can be pursued in a neighbourhood plan, and if further survey or secondary data research is required to fill in any gaps. It also keeps the group and wider community actively involved in the process and checking whether the assessment is answering the scope and purpose first defined. From here the final character areas should be becoming more set.

### Output: Review draft landscape and townscape character areas

The additional information gained from the field survey should spark a review of the original list of landscape and townscape areas. The field survey may have highlighted the boundaries of some of these should be changed. It may be apparent that some character areas should be merged or split up, or there may even be some sub character areas identified within character areas. There may be need for further secondary research.

## Stage 4: Classification and description

This stage consists of the following steps:

- Describe character areas and identify their key characteristics
- Add visual elements
- Write up and document production

At the end of this stage, the following output should be delivered:

- Final draft and engagement

### Step 1: Describe character areas and identify their key characteristics

Following the desk based study and the field survey, the final set of character areas should be identified alongside a description of what they are and a list of each of their key characteristics. Here you need to flesh out the information with the evidence from the secondary research and field survey to draw together a full draft of text to put in the final assessment.

To structure the text within each character area, you could split the text into the three strands and include subheadings relating to the themes assessed. If you are seeking to identify development management principles or 'development proposals should' principles, these may form a nice conclusion to the character area. These can be a series of bullet points that can be used to guide planning proposals and support neighbourhood plan policies, opportunity areas or site allocations. This will provide applicants/ agents/landowners/ developers with a sound starting point from which to shape development proposals on a site and understand its relationship to its setting and locally distinctive features. These are beneficial for successful integration of a development scheme into the surrounding landscape and/ or townscape. It also provides a link between the assessment and any neighbourhood plan policies which can then be used to implement these principles.

### Step 2: Add visual elements

Following the written text of each character area, adding some graphics and visuals is a key part to bringing the assessment to life and illustrating the characteristics that define them. These visuals can include:

- Character area maps
- Historic maps
- Photographs taken from the field survey and historic photographs
- Illustrations and diagrams of architecture, townscape or views
- Aerial photograph with key views indicated, landmarks, key roads etc.

Deciding on what visual aids are most appropriate is something to discuss as a group and may be dependent on the skills and resources available. In any assessment, photographs and a map of character areas must be provided in order for readers to engage and best use the assessment.

These graphics and visuals should tie in with the supporting text and help to bolster the assessment. For example, if a character area had an example of Tudor architecture and a historic market town layout, then a photograph of the market square and an example building from the period would be appropriate.

### Step 3: Write up and document production

Once the draft text and visuals have been put together, final edits and polishing of the document need to be undertaken. It is a good idea to have a dedicated proof-reader in the group, possibly someone who has not undertaken any of the written aspects. This approach will highlight anything that does not quite make sense or flow well and ensure consistency in the level of detail, terminology and formatting throughout.

Output: Final draft and engagement

The key output here is the final draft version of the assessment. Having a final consultation on this final draft is optional but it may be a good idea to have a final engagement opportunity with the local community, particularly if there are any aspects of the assessment that the group feel could be bolstered.

### Stage 5: Finalisation of assessment

This stage, the final output is:

- Final Landscape and Townscape Assessment

Output: Final Landscape and Townscape Assessment

Following the final edits, polishing and any engagement felt necessary, you will have a final Landscape and Townscape Assessment of your settlement. Well done for getting to this stage, don't forget to celebrate this milestone!

This document can now form part of a local evidence base for a neighbourhood plan, be of local interest and be used in the shaping of development proposals and policies in the local area.