

Neighbourhood plan update – the value of a good landscape character assessment

The Neighbourhood Plan (NP) steering group has recently met for the first time with its external support consultants from Cambridgeshire ACRE. Preparing a NP, which once approved attains the same legal status as a local plan, is not a simple matter, so it is par for the course to employ the assistance of planning consultants and grant funding is available towards this.

At our workshop it was very reassuring to hear Cambs ACRE praise the outcomes and interpretation of the initial public opinion survey we conducted in spring 2022. Combined with other data which we already have courtesy of work done by a previous iteration of the NP steering group from 2016-19, we are in a very good position to now start drafting a vision for our NP, plus policy themes and objectives.

Perhaps the most significant piece of work that we ‘inherited’ from the previous steering group is a Landscape Character Assessment (LCA), which was commissioned from landscape planner Sophie Smith. An LCA is a tool for identifying the patterns and individual combinations of features – such as hedgerows, field shapes, woodland, land use, patterns of settlements and dwellings – that make each type of landscape distinct and often special to those who live and work in it. These special qualities and distinctive characteristics can be protected, and potentially also enhanced, by planning policies created as part of the NP process.

Our initial public opinion survey clearly showed the high value placed by residents on our landscape setting, so it is critical that this is reflected in our NP. Our landscape is the backbone of our rural, village identity; it helps to protect us and separate us from Greater Cambridge urban sprawl; living in a green setting makes us feel better and we’d like more of it and wider access to it; and finally, in the face of increasing development and climate change pressures, we want to protect it for wildlife and future generations.

Stapleford and Great Shelford’s LCA divides our NP area into 10 different character types and provides recommendations for how we can protect and enhance each of them: arable hills; arable lowland; golf courses; historic country parks; settled hilltop estates; enclosed farmland pastures; sports fields; woodlands; campsites; the River Granta, water meadows and riverside pastures. The following graphic is rather too detailed to read in this format, but it gives you an idea of how these character types map to areas with which you will be familiar.

Title: landscape character types and areas in Stapleford and Great Shelford

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It’s too soon to say which aspects of Stapleford and Great Shelford’s LCA will be translated into policies in our NP but work on this will start early in the new year. In the meantime, here are some examples of what other NPs have done:

- “Development will be supported where it...safeguards open countryside and cherished public views from inside and outside of the parish as defined in the LCA” (Whiteshill and Ruscombe NP, adopted 2016)
- Development proposals will only be supported if they do not jeopardise the status of Long Compton’s dark skies site. Any applications for new development that requires a lighting scheme should show how the status of dark skies will be protected (Long Compton NP, adopted 2016).

I look forward to continuing to report on the NP’s progress through 2023.

Our Landscape Character Assessment is currently hosted on Stapleford Parish Council’s website and is available for all to view at <https://staplefordparishcouncil.gov.uk/landscape-character-assessment/>.

Jenny Flynn

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