

# Introduction



## A Nationally Important Landscape

The Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is a nationally important landscape. It is part of a family of protected landscapes that includes 49 AONBs and 12 National Parks in the U.K. Its special qualities include its dramatic landform and views, rich habitats, a spectacular coastline (most of which is designated as a World Heritage Site), mixed farmland, a rich historic and built heritage, tranquillity and a sense of remoteness.

The primary purpose of the AONB designation is the 'conservation and enhancement of natural beauty'.

Within its 1129km<sup>2</sup>, the AONB shows a considerable variation in landscape character that encompasses broad open chalk downland, intimate river valleys, pastoral farmland vales, and internationally important heathland. The Dorset AONB is also a capital resource that underpins much economic activity in Dorset. Its high quality environment helps to attract businesses, contributes to the quality of life that people in the county value so highly and supports a substantial visitor economy.

The status of AONBs has been enhanced through measures introduced in the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, which give greater support to their planning and management. These measures include a duty on relevant authorities, public bodies and statutory undertakers to take account of the need to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of AONB landscapes when carrying out their statutory functions.

This guidance will help support and guide activities in the AONB, providing an understanding of the qualities that make each area special and measures required to conserve and enhance landscape character.

## A Changing Landscape

The beautiful landscapes we see today have been shaped by thousands of years

of human activity with the environment. Impressive geological formations and natural processes have created landforms which people have helped shape into distinctive landscapes. Farming, forestry, and local industries have all left their mark, giving a unique sense of place and character to our countryside.

Many of the patterns and features of past use have survived through centuries of change. Into the 21st century, the pace of social, economic and environmental change is increasing. We all have a part to play in influencing how our landscapes should evolve, what they need to provide, and how this change should be managed.

Ultimately, the challenge is to balance the needs of modern day society whilst protecting the unique cultural and natural heritage of the AONB. Along with a host of other AONB projects, this Landscape Character Assessment and Management Guidance is intended to do just that.

## A Landscape Approach

The United Kingdom Government recently ratified the European Landscape Convention, reinforcing the approach to Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) and forward landscape planning and management. The Convention defines 'landscape' as:

*'An area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors'*

The concept of landscape is centred around the interaction of place and people, the meeting point between the actions of man within the environment. It is shaped by a whole host of factors from geology to settlement patterns with a range of perceptual and aesthetic qualities.

(Diagram adapted from LCA Guidance, Countryside Agency, 2002)



## Landscape Character Assessment

Within this understanding of landscape, Landscape Character Assessment is a tool for:

**Identifying the distinct and recognisable patterns of elements in the landscape that give a locality its sense of place, describing what makes it different from its neighbouring areas.**

Through understanding what is present and what is distinct in the landscape, future management can be guided to conserve or enhance local character, and even change it if that is what is desired.

In addition to adding further understanding to what makes the AONB special, Landscape Character Assessment helps to incorporate the concept of 'landscape' where local landscape designations do not exist under the planning system.

## Threats to Character

Whilst the special character and unique landscape quality of the AONB remains largely intact, the landscape is under a host of social, economic and environmental pressures. The result can be poor location and design of new development, unsympathetic improvements to the boundaries of properties, creeping urbanisation, growth in new uses for land such as equestrian management and a decline in traditional land management. There is also pressure from traffic growth and related infrastructure, off-road activity by motor vehicles, noise and light pollution, as well as illegal activities such as fly tipping.

The implications of climate change present significant challenges to the character of the landscape. Changes in crop types, particularly biomass plants could dramatically alter the character of the chalk downlands for example. Changes in habitats and the need to manage species migration all need to be taken into account. With rising sea levels, changes along the coast will need to be managed effectively.

## Purpose of this Guidance

The purpose of this guidance is to provide practical, readily accessible management guidance to contribute to the conservation and enhancement of the special characteristics of the AONB as a whole, and the distinctiveness of its individual character areas. It identifies the broad landscape types and local character areas, describes the characteristic features and presents broad guidelines on how to manage change relevant to each character type.

Landscape strategies to 'conserve', 'enhance', 'restore' or 'create' are presented for each landscape character area and type.

These strategies are intended to set a framework for guiding landscape change in the AONB for the next twenty years. The is to manage the requirement to conserve the landscape qualities which define the AONB whilst balancing the needs of agricultural, wider economic and environmental change.

## Who is the document for?

The information in this document is aimed at the public bodies, organisations and groups that play a key role in the planning and management of the AONB. Many of these organisations are represented on the Dorset AONB Partnership and have a statutory duty to take into account the purposes of the designation. Additionally, developers, architects, community groups and anyone that has an interest in the protection of the AONB will find aspects of this work relevant to theirs.

## How should this document be used?

The guidelines aim to provide a framework and information base from which sympathetic planning and management can be developed, whilst not inhibiting innovative and contemporary design. Any changes in the landscape should seek to conserve and enhance the characteristic patterns of landscape elements and encourage the use of sustainable materials which themselves support landscape management, e.g. sourcing timber from well managed local woodlands and forests.

The Character Type/Area Objectives indicate the desired state of the landscape. The Planning and Landscape Management Guidelines set out measures which should be taken to achieve the desired state. Any change which contradicts the guidelines may not be appropriate; similarly any change should seek to positively address some of the recommendations set out.

The information on landscape character and the associated landscape strategies should be taken into account when any proposals for planning or management are being formulated. If further assistance is required on implementing the guidelines, please contact the AONB Team who will be happy to help.

## Links to Land Management

Changes in farming and forestry practices can potentially have a big impact on the character of the AONB. This guidance is intended to add further detail to the existing Joint Character Area descriptions and inform targeting strategies for environmental land management schemes, as well as the associated land management agreements. This will help ensure that any funding to manage environmental features helps to conserve local character. The work will also help to steer the location and nature of woodland felling and planting proposals administered by the Forestry Commission.

## Links to Planning Policy

Policies as set out within the emerging Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for the South West and Local Plans/Local Development Documents for the area are designed to 'ensure that the Dorset AONB is protected and enhanced'. The draft RSS states that:

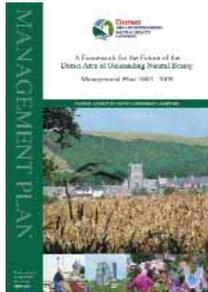
**“The distinctive qualities and features of the South West’s landscape character areas will be sustained and enhanced by Local Planning Authorities undertaking assessments of landscape character at a strategic level and in partnership with adjoining authorities (where landscape character areas cross administrative boundaries) in order to identify priority areas for the maintenance, enhancement and/or restoration of that character and provide an appropriate policy framework in LDDs for each area.”**

This document, along with the wider work currently being completed for the non AONB parts of the County, will provide the framework for planning policy considerations.

### Links to the development control process

This guidance provides advice on the particular qualities of the Dorset AONB landscape and can be used in conjunction with other guidance as available, such as Built Environment Character Assessments and Conservation Area Appraisals. Much of the guidance given in this document refers to broad management guidelines which provide a context for development proposals. This is not intended to provide detailed design considerations, and more work at a local level may need to take place to help ensure the broad objectives as set out in this document are translated to site specific considerations and the conservation of local distinctiveness.

### Links to the Dorset AONB Management Plan



The CRoW Act requires AONB management plans to be produced, published and regularly revised by local authorities. By providing landscape management guidance, this handbook contributes to the implementation of the management plan objectives and policies. In particular, this guidance adds a further spatial dimension to the largely generic Aims and Objectives as set out in the Management Plan. Copies of the Management Plan are available from the Dorset AONB Team.

### Previous Dorset Landscape Character Assessments

In describing and understanding the diverse landscape character of the Dorset AONB, this document has built on some excellent previous studies. After the publication of recent guidance on producing LCAs, ‘Landscape Character Assessment: Guidance for England and Scotland’ (Countryside Agency, 2002), there was a need to update this previous work. However, it still provides a valuable resource in understanding the evolution and character of the Dorset landscape. The following documents have been particularly useful:

- **Dorset Landscape Character Assessment** (Landscape Design Associates, 1993)  
This describes in detail the landscape character and qualities of 23 landscape types and areas around the county.
- **The Dorset Downs, Heaths and Coast Landscape** (Countryside Commission, 1993)  
This describes the character of 15 landscape types across the AONB with a good overview on the evolution and perceptions of the landscape.
- **A New View of Dorset** (Burden & Le Pard, 1995)  
This work adds further depth to the 1993 county assessment along with management guidance.
- **West Dorset 2000** (West Dorset District Council, 2000)  
This describes the local character of 22 types and areas across West Dorset. It provides a detailed record of the features and landscape elements present in each character area.
- **South Wessex Downs Environmentally Sensitive Area Landscape Assessment** (DEFRA, 1994) Covering the northern part of the AONB, this describes 6 landscape types across the ESA.

At a national level, the character of the English countryside has been described and mapped into 159 character areas. These are commonly referred to as ‘Joint Character Areas’ through a joint project between the Countryside Agency and English Nature (now Natural England).

### National Assessment of Countryside Character (Joint Character Areas) Joint Character Areas within the Dorset AONB



Eight character areas are wholly or partly within the Dorset AONB which provide a context in which to examine landscape character at a more local level. The following describes the key characteristics of the Joint Character Areas within the Dorset AONB (as stated within 'Countryside Character, vol 8, Countryside Agency, 1999):

### South Purbeck

- An exceptionally diverse landscape with sharp contrasts within a small area; strongly influenced by its underlying chalk, limestone, shale and clay rocks.
- High historical interest, including early settlements, medieval industrial sites and dramatically-sited Corfe Castle.
- Outstanding and diverse coastline encompassing chalk, limestone and shale cliffs and sheltered bays.
- Open, windswept chalk ridge and limestone plateau.
- Sheltered central valley and steep-sided minor valleys.
- Abrupt transition to heathland to the north.

### Dorset Heaths

- Open, exposed and broad scale with sharp contrast to surrounding character areas.
- Undulating lowland heath with tracts of heather, mires, marshes, stunted pines and gorse scrub.
- Blocks of conifers forming locally prominent landmarks.
- Mosaics of heathland, farmland, woodland and scrub.
- Sparsely populated with scattered villages.
- Flat-bottomed open valleys with floodplain pastures and willows.

### Dorset Downs

- A rolling, chalk landscape with dramatic scarps and steep-sided, sheltered valleys.
- Scarp slopes with species-rich grassland, complex coombes and valleys, spectacular views, prominent hillforts and other prehistoric features.
- Open, mainly arable downland on the dip slope with isolated farmsteads and few trees.
- Varied valleys with woodlands, hedged fields, flood meadows and villages in flint and thatch.
- Distinctive woodlands and historic parkland.

### Marshwood Vale

- Bowl-shaped clay vale surrounded by irregular ridges and hills of upper greensand with deeply incised valleys.
- Pasture vale landscape with ribbons of woodland, regular field pattern and abundant hedgerow oaks.
- Scattered hamlets and farms linked by narrow, winding lanes in the clay vale with many compact villages on the valley floors. Wooded and heathland slopes.
- Upper greensand summits and conical hills with patches of heathland.
- Distinctive coastline with undulating farmland to cliff edge; slumped, mobile cliffs are punctuated by prominent headlands.
- Attractive stone buildings built of limestone and Ham Hill Stone.
- Prominent hillforts overlooking the vale.

### Blackdowns

- Contrast between open, heathy windswept plateau and ridges, and sheltered lush valleys.
- High ground with rectangular field patterns and straight roads.
- Slopes and vales with strong patterns of small irregular fields and sunken lanes.
- Wooded scarps and slopes.
- Beech shelterbelts and avenues on high ground.
- Hamlets and villages mainly in the valleys with buildings of chert, cob and thatch.
- Distinctive coastal landscape of unstable undercliffs, irregular headlands and valley salt marshes.
- Several coastal settlements with remote inland areas.

### Blackmore Vale

- Complex mosaic of farmland, lush clay vales and scarps.
- Small rectangular fields with hedgerow oak trees and scattered small broad-leaved woodlands.
- Many streams and waterside trees.
- Small villages and hamlets using local greensand.
- Broken ridges and shallow valleys.
- Patchwork of fields, hedges and trees.

### Weymouth Lowlands

- Varied area united by underlying broad ridge and valley pattern and spectacular coastline.
- Open, largely treeless ridge tops with large, commonly arable fields.
- Valleys with villages, mixed farming and valley side woodlands.
- Exposed, windswept coastal grassland.
- Distinctive coastline of Chesil Beach enclosing the brackish lagoon of The Fleet.
- Extensive urban and urban fringe land use around Weymouth.

### Yeovil Scarplands

- A varied landscape of hills, wide valley bottoms, ridge tops and coombes united by scarps of limestone.
- Mainly a remote rural area with villages and high church towers.
- Wide variety of local building materials including Ham Hill Stone.
- Small manor houses and large mansions with landscaped parks.
- Varied land use: arable on the better low-lying land, woodland on steep ridges and dry coombes.

This revised assessment of the Dorset AONB adds further detail to the information presented for each Joint Character Area listed above. This means the work is at a more appropriate scale for conserving the local distinctiveness of the AONB and with the provision of landscape management objectives, more relevant to land management and planning considerations. The JCA descriptions provide a good understanding of broad landscape character but further detail at the local level is needed through this work to define local character.