

CHAPTER 6 - Landscape

Aims:

- Create an attractive, diverse and well-wooded landscape offering a wide range of benefits to local people.
- Protect and enhance wildlife and nature conservation areas.
- Use woodland planting to reduce the impact of visually intrusive elements.
- Protect and enhance historic parks and landscapes.
- Recognise and strengthen local identity and character.

- 6.1 An analysis of the existing landscape using the Countryside Commission's methodology identified eight broad landscape character zones and 32 subzones on the basis of physical characteristics, current and past land uses and management plans. The zones are described in more detail in Chapter 3.
- 6.2 The landscape assessment revealed how the complex geology of the area has resulted in a very rich, varied landscape, albeit one that has an absence of large bodies of fresh water. It also gave an insight into how today's landscape is a reflection of the dynamic nature of landform being moulded by geographical and climatic forces and vegetation patterns through ecological succession. The effects of mankind are superimposed on the natural cycle; many of the most attractive landscapes were a direct result of past management practices and low-intensity farming, creating a rich landscape with a wide range of habitats. Archaeological remains such as hill forts and earthworks remains also add diversity and interest to the landscape.
- 6.3 The landscape is continually evolving but still contains valuable areas of historic landscapes containing not only the remains of historic parks and gardens but also evidence of earlier settlement patterns, cultivation systems and early industrial remains. Although difficult to appraise, it is these remnants which give even small areas a strong local identity. How the landscape is perceived is part of the local culture, emphasising the need to involve local people in developing proposals for their area. Countryside Character Assessment work is being undertaken by partners to quantify character, in order to better inform future land use strategies.

It will encompass local identity and reflect the diversity of local landscapes. Proposals for Forest implementation will need to respect this work as it is assimilated into local plans and supplementary planning guidance.

- 6.4 The landscape assessment indicated that features such as hedges, stone walls and orchards were very important, giving detailed interest and being capable of dramatically influencing the character of an area. Strong, tall hedgerows can make an area appear much more wooded than it really is. The Forest area once contained large numbers of orchards and the few that remain are in urgent need of management and restocking. These features also have great value in increasing biodiversity. Hedgerows are particularly valuable in establishing wildlife corridors across the countryside, especially in areas where farming has been intensified.
- 6.5 Creating the Community Forest will involve major landscape change. The creation of a new, well-wooded countryside over the next 40-50 years will require sensitive handling to retain and conserve key elements of existing wooded and non-wooded character and to restore valued features which are in decline, whilst developing new landscapes that are attractive, robust and well suited to their new roles.
- 6.6 Of all vegetation types, trees have the greatest visual impact and are a powerful tool in changing a landscape. As well as taking into account how design can best accommodate the needs of wildlife and local history, it will be important to ensure woods are well designed and enhance the existing landscape. The Forestry Commission has published guidelines advising on detailed assessment of the implications of planting new woodland in the landscape and its long-term impact; these include the effect on existing views and how the size of woodlands, the species used and the ratio of woodland to open land can affect the landscape. The integration of large woodlands, of 20 ha and above will need particular care and will be a topic for further work.
- 6.7 The potential scale of woodland planting makes it an ideal tool for reducing the impact of negative landscape elements, including harsh urban edges adjacent to the countryside, major roads, industrial development and pylon lines. On sites lacking significant natural features, the incorporation of imaginative new elements to provide local character will be an objective.

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- 6.8** Some of the most discordant elements found in the existing countryside include poorly designed golf courses, sports facilities, road schemes, warehousing, new crematoria and farm buildings with little or no associated structure planting.
- 6.9** The Community Forest will need to be perceived as providing enjoyable and safe recreational environments. Principal factors in achieving this are good visibility, clear waymarks and other people using the wood. Some of these requirements can be addressed by good design and management, others by promotion.



New planting on landfill, Yanley (Photo: Forest of Avon)

- 6.10** Throughout the Community Forest area there are few local design guidelines for recreational facilities. The Forestry Commission publishes guidelines on recreation, community woodland design and lowland landscape design (see Bibliography). Design guidelines have a great value in establishing suitable standards without being so prescriptive as to be inflexible to local identity. Village Design Statements will help involve local people in identifying the local character and distinctiveness of their villages and play an important role in helping influence development and future change.
- 6.11** Road and rail corridors are the source of many people's perceptions of an area, and qualitative improvement of key routes in and out of the Forest would assist in raising feelings and expectations. The landscape assessment suggested that a detailed study should be carried out of all transport corridors, to determine how they could best be assimilated into the landscape and how the user's experience could be improved. New planting in relation to the Second Severn Crossing approaches has been achieved and a similar approach is needed with existing motorways. This will be particularly important on the edge of and into the city. Consultation also revealed a desire to see more open water in the landscape.

- 6.12** Evidence in the Forest emphasises the need to ensure that all Community Forest woodland and related facilities include suitable management arrangements, so that, for example, a picnic area provided in year one is not overgrown and unusable by year five. Similarly, not only is a well-managed woodland more productive and of greater wildlife value, it is also more attractive and a more stable element in the landscape. Management will change the appearance of woodland and other sites in the short term and people will need to be helped to understand the processes that are needed and their long-term aims.

Proposals

6.13 The Forest partners will aim to:

- reduce the impact of existing and proposed development through proactive landscape strategies, linked to the planning system, involving on-and off-site woodland planting, including co-operation with local industry, house builders and commerce;
- promote new woodland planting in association with all recreational facilities, existing and proposed;
- enhance the existing landscape by additional tree and woodland planting where this is compatible with wildlife, historic sites and local distinctiveness, ensuring that landscape change reflects the historical development of local landscape character in order to achieve both integration and identity throughout the Forest area;
- achieve a diverse landscape structure of habitats, creating a rich and varied environment for wildlife and helping to promote less-intensive agriculture;
- protect areas of historical landscape interest through the existing consultation process developed by the local authorities and the Forestry Commission;
- promote the restoration of historic landscapes, particularly in registered historic parks and gardens where the preparation of restoration plans will be encouraged;
- promote the management and enhancement of landscape features, such as hedgerows, walls, orchards and traditional landscape patterns, and provide advice and training on how this can be best achieved;

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New off-road cycle route adjacent to Ring Road (Photo: Forest of Avon)

- investigate opportunities to create more areas of open water in the landscape where this is compatible with other considerations;
- ensure all landscape change is of a consistently high quality by developing guidelines on good design practice; schemes likely to have a major landscape impact or high public profile, such as gateway sites, will need to be professionally designed;
- carry out a landscape assessment to determine how transport corridors, particularly motorways, can be enhanced and work with the Highways Agency and local authorities;
- ensure the design and management of all woodlands with access and open spaces will reflect the need to reduce fear and provide a safe, enjoyable environment for all sections of the community;
- ensure landscape proposals give as much consideration and commitment to future management and maintenance as to the original design.