Aberdeenshire COUNCIL

Landscape Character Advice for Small Scale Development

Planning advice PA2023-07

September 2023

Purpose of this Planning Advice

This Planning Advice provides guidance to help planning applicants understand what is meant by landscape character, and how to avoid eroding the characteristics of Landscape Character Types as defined by the Landscape Character Assessment produced by NatureScot (2019)[1].

In support of Policy E2 Landscape of the Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan (LDP) 2023 this Planning Advice describes the character of different landscape types across Aberdeenshire, explaining what makes each landscape distinctive.   Although targeted at small-scale development, the guidance has relevance to all scales of development. Design guidelines are provided to help applicants minimise landscape impact, and maintain and enhance landscape character through appropriate location, siting and design.

Under National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), landscape-specific policies are in relation to designated areas only. For proposals affecting landscape designations identified in the LDP, NPF4 Policy 4 establishes that development will not have significant adverse effects on the integrity of the designation or the qualities for which it has been identified. In this regard, Aberdeenshire Special Landscape Areas are a key sensitivity to take into account.

More broadly under NPF4 Policy 4, the landscape can be considered a 'natural asset'. In this context proposals which by virtue of type, location or scale have an unacceptable impact on the natural environment are not supported (NPF4 Policy 4(a)). This Planning Advice should assist in understanding broad principles to consider in helping to avoid erosion of the landscape character of Aberdeenshire.

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[1] See https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/landscape/landscape-character-assessment/scottish-landscape-character-types-map-and-descriptions

Contents

1.   Introduction

Aberdeenshire has a particularly diverse and high quality landscape which is a valuable asset vulnerable to the effects of insensitive development. Whether alone or cumulatively, new development risks eroding the characteristics that create the landscape's distinctive and special qualities which need to be maintained and enhanced. This applies to all landscapes, not just areas of exceptional quality.

Landscape character is created by the way the landscape's physical components come together. This can be defined as "a distinct, recognizable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another"[2]. Landscape Character Assessment is a systematic way of describing and mapping variation in landscape character. It is widely recognized and accepted as a tool for landscape impact assessments, for identifying landscape sensitivities and for planning and management policy for landscape change.

2.   Landscape Character Assessment

The Landscape Character Assessment 2019 produced by NatureScot is a classification system that consists of mapping and associated descriptions of 'Landscape Character Types', of which there are 24 covering the whole of

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[2] See https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/landscape/landscape-character-assessment

Aberdeenshire. The landscape characteristics for each landscape type, as described by the Landscape Character Assessment 2019 and summarized within this Planning Advice, help us distinguish one landscape from another.

The Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) 2019 is a revision of the former suite of assessments from the 1990s. The revised LCA 2019 creates a single dataset in a digital version that builds on the former system. Whereby the 1990s version was a two-tier classification of landscape character 'types' with nested, geographical 'areas', the new version is at Landscape Character 'Type' level only. Landscape Character Type is defined as groups of similar mapped units that share common characteristics. These comprise the 'units' for analysis when assessing landscape impact.

The revised Landscape Character Assessment 2019 provides descriptions of landscape character only, and no longer includes 'forces for change' and 'guidelines' sections.   The new descriptions provide location and context information, and they list and describe the key characteristics of each Landscape Character Type (LCT). Some relevant information from the previous Landscape Character Areas that were 'nested' within the LCTs has been incorporated. NatureScot states that the new format builds on the original 1990s Landscape Character Assessments rather than replacing them, since much of the information, including boundaries and descriptions, remains valid.[3]

3.   How to use this Planning Advice

Section 4 of this Planning Advice provides 24 hyperlinked pdf documents, one for each of the Landscape Character Types (LCT) in Aberdeenshire. These documents summarise the key characteristics of each landscape type in line with the descriptions by NatureScot. This information should be used as a basis for making judgements on the potential for adverse landscape impacts from proposed development.

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[3] See https://www.nature.scot/national-lca-introduction-and-review-methodology

It should be noted that the boundaries of each LCT are not rigid, and a development in one landscape type may have an impact on another. A Landscape Character Type may also be in close proximity to, or overlap with, a Special Landscape Area designation.

The Planning Advice makes reference to Appendix 13 of the LDP 2023 Aberdeenshire Special Landscape Areas (SLA). These are non-statutory designations that tell us which areas of landscape are of local importance and particularly sensitive to development on account of their special qualities. There is overlap between SLA and Landscape Character Assessment information, and each provide key considerations for meeting the provisions of LDP 2023 Policy E2 Landscape.

Each of the 24 Landscape Character Type documents within this Planning Advice includes a 'Specific Guidance' section. This sets out design considerations specific to that landscape type.

Appendix 1 provides further general design guidance relevant to all landscape types, giving broad principles and considerations in relation to the location, siting and design of small-scale development in the landscape.

Appendix 2 provides a summary checklist of key considerations. This provides a logical process for applicants to follow in order to assess the impact of a development proposal on landscape character, and so help determine an appropriate design solution.

4.   Landscape Character Advice (by Type)

Each of the 24 hyperlinked pdf documents listed and referenced in Table 1 and Figure 1 below provide mapped information and descriptions of each Landscape Character Type (LCT). The information should enable a planning applicant to identify which LCT (or often, more than one) is most relevant to their proposed development.

The maps[4] help locate the LCT, whilst the overview summary of the landscape with its list of key landscape characteristics and design guidance help the applicant use the landscape character information to assess their site.

For ease of use, and for the purposes of this Planning Advice, the 24 Landscape Character Types listed in Table 1, are grouped together in four classifications according to whether they are broadly 'Coastal', 'Farmland and Lowland', 'Woodlands and Valleys' or 'Upland' landscapes[5]. Each individual LCT has an identification number associated with it. These numbers correspond with the map overview of Aberdeenshire's Landscape Character Assessment provided in Figure 1. This illustrates where each LCT is located.

In some instances a Landscape Character Type may be located geographically within Aberdeenshire in more than one place. This is because the Landscape Character Assessment by NatureScot identifies landscape character by 'type' and not 'area'. For example 'Fragmented Rocky Coast' comprises two different coasts - one extending from Peterhead to Collieston, the other from Aberdeen to Kinneff. Thus, these two separate coasts are of the same landscape 'type' but in two different locations.

Each of the documents listed in Table 1 below also cross reference directly with the NatureScot website information to allow applicants to view a more comprehensive description of each Landscape Character Type at source.

Table 1 Landscape Character Types in Aberdeenshire

Name of Landscape Character Type	NatureScot 2019 national dataset reference number (refer to map in Figure 1)[6]
Coastal types:	n/a
Cliffs and Rocky Coast - Aberdeenshire	10

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[4] A graphical interactive interface to support the user in navigating this material may be added to this Planning Advice in future.
[5] Refer to four supporting pdf document sets: 'Coastal', 'Farmland and Lowland' 'Woodlands and Valleys' and 'Upland' Landscape Character Types

Name of Landscape Character Type	NatureScot 2019 national dataset reference number (refer to map in Figure 1)[6]
Fragmented Rocky Coast	11
Beaches, Dunes and Links - Aberdeenshire	12
Raised Beach Coast - Aberdeenshire	13
Farmland and Lowland types:	n/a
Gently Undulating Coastal Farmland	14
Coastal Farmland with Ridges and Valleys	16
Coastal Agricultural Plain - Aberdeenshire	17
Low Hills and Basins	18
Farmed Rolling Ridges and Hills	19
Undulating Agricultural Heartland	20
Farmland and Wooded Policies	21
Farmed Basin - Aberdeenshire	23
Coastal Farmed Ridges and Hills - Aberdeenshire	24
Farmed Strath - Aberdeenshire	25
Farmed Moorland Edge - Aberdeenshire	27
Woodland and Valley types:	n/a
Broad Ridges and Valleys	15
Broad Valley Lowlands - Aberdeenshire	22
Wooded Estates - Aberdeenshire	26
Narrow Winding Farmed Valley	30

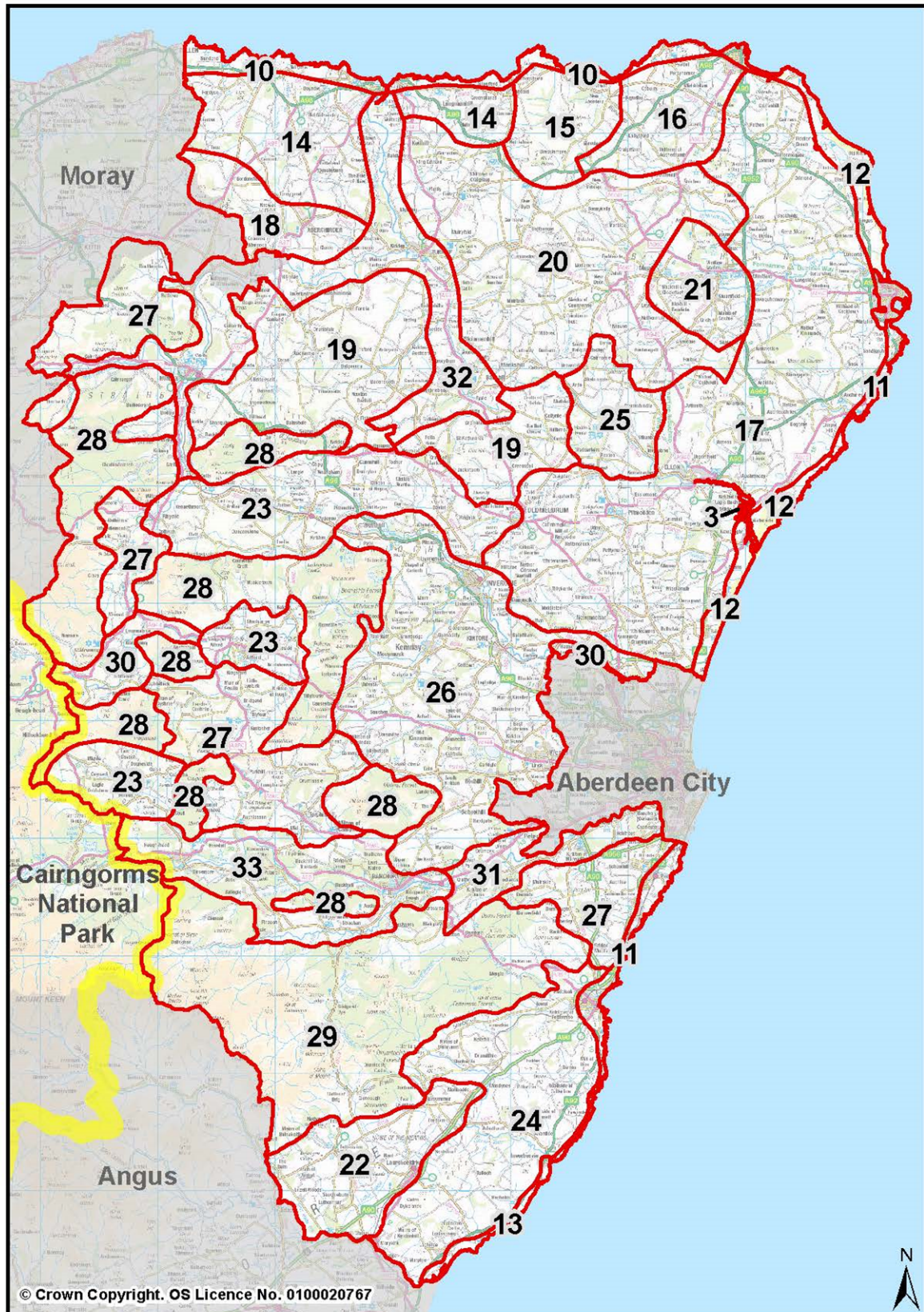| Name of Landscape Character Type	NatureScot 2019 national dataset reference number (refer to map in Figure 1)[6]
Broad Wooded and Farmed Valley	31
Farmed and Wooded River Valleys	32
Broad Wooded Valley with Estates	33
Upland types:	n/a
Outlying Hills & Ridges	28
Summits and Plateaux - Aberdeenshire	29

Figure 1 Map of Landscape Character Types (LCTs) in Aberdeenshire based on the NatureScot 2019 national dataset.[7]

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[7] LCT no. 3 identified on Figure 1 map is *Coastal Farmed Plain* and pertains to Aberdeen City.

Key to information[8]

For each of the 24 Landscape Character Type (LCT) summary pdf documents the following is provided on the first page:

Hyperlink to NatureScot's website for a more comprehensive description of this LCT

Snapshot summary overview of the key characteristics of the Landscape Character Type, together with contextual information.

Thumbnail map showing location of this LCT

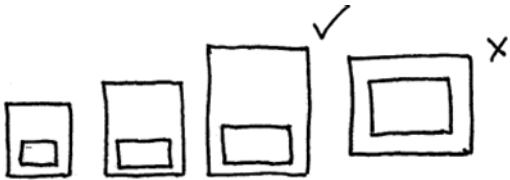Adjacent or nearby LCTs are referred to in *italics.*

Special Landscape Areas (SLA) are indicated by the hatched area/s.

Red line boundaries mark the Landscape Character Type e.g. *Gently Undulating Coastal Farmland.* (Note: one LCT may occur in more than one location)

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[8] Refer to four supporting pdf sets: 'Coastal', 'Farmland and Lowland' 'Woodlands and Valleys' and 'Upland' Landscape Character Types

Appendix 1: General Design Guidance

(A) The general advice below sets out broad principles that should be considered for the location, siting and design of small-scale development.

1. Working with the landform		
Aim to nestle into the landscape	• Sit low in the landscape avoiding prominent positions, such as hilltops and ridges. • Work with contours for shelter. • Site buildings in the natural lie of the land. • Working against contours can mean significant ground levelling is necessary.	
Use the slope of the site	• Avoid mounding as this can make buildings unduly prominent. • Balance cutting and filling if groundworks are essential.	
2. Consider local development patterns		
Consider the relationships of existing buildings to each other and the surroundings	• Follow the established pattern for the area. • Assess proximity and relationship of buildings to the road e.g., close or set back, parallel or perpendicular. • Assess the spacing between existing buildings. • Assess the orientation and building lines. • Avoid anonymous suburban patterns.	
Ensure the building fits well within the plot	• Take account of how adjacent properties occupy their plots. • Avoid dominating a plot by ensuring there is sufficient space around the building. • Provide sufficient open garden space in	

	proportion to house size.	

3. Respond to local characteristics

Consider massing, proportion and scale	• Consider shape and proportions characteristic of the landscape type. • Break up the mass of the house. • Reducing the gable width can help reduce the scale of the building. • Size should be relative to the landscape – often large buildings are not compatible with small, enclosed landscapes.	
Ensure access and parking do not dominate proposals	• Create access from existing entrance points. • Avoid long or sweeping lengths of new road. • Lower the visual impact of parking - position it to the rear or side of the building. • Avoid hard surfaces dominating the plot.	
Ensure boundaries are sensitive and in keeping	• Take account of how adjacent buildings are bounded. • Avoid high fences or concrete block walls. • Retain existing boundaries where possible. • Enhance biodiversity in hedges/boundary planting with appropriate native species.	

(B) The advice below highlights more detailed design advice applicable to all 24 Landscape Character Types under the 'Specific Guidance' section:

Specific Guidance		
Land Use - Residential	• Homes are generally in the form of single and 1½ storey farmsteads and cottages. Contemporary interpretations can be incorporated without affecting the landscape character if it is of an appropriate scale. • Where groups of housing are a feature, adding to existing groups of houses is a successful way of accommodating new development within the countryside. • New housing should be sensitively located, corresponding to traditional patterns.	
Siting	• Development should seek to retain woodland where it exists. Where trees are grouped around buildings, this should be continued. • New planting should reflect the variety of species characterizing that landscape, and where possible new planting (screening, shelterbelts etc.) should aim to link up to existing woodland or plantations. • New housing in prominent locations, such as on dunes or in the middle of large flat fields should be avoided. • Urbanising elements such as excessive signage, excessive lighting and	

	ornamental planting is best avoided. • Brownfield sites should be utilised.	
Land Use - Agricultural	• Agricultural buildings should be well related to existing farm buildings. • The landform should be used to help screen large buildings and buildings should be tucked into the landform. Where appropriate, farm buildings should be located, designed and engineered to sit as low in the landscape as practical, and they should avoid breaking the skyline. • Screening of buildings with embankments and trees can help where appropriate, if well designed, constructed and maintained. • The colour of cladding on new buildings should be appropriate to the landscape character.	
Boundaries	• Suburban style fencing and wooden ranch fencing should generally be avoided in the countryside as it is not in-keeping with rural characteristics. • Dry stone dykes and post and wire fencing are common boundary treatments in most landscapes. However, towards the north, beech hedging can be more of a feature.	

Trees and Woodland	• New woodland/forest planting should conform with design principles established by Scottish Forestry[9].	

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9 See https://forestry.gov.scot/publications/forests-and-the-environment/landscape

Appendix 2: Landscape Character Impact Checklist

To achieve quality landscape design for any development, it is recommended that the advice of a qualified/experienced landscape designer is sought at an early stage. Such consultants can bring out the best in a development and its landscape setting through detailed survey, analysis and design.

All applicants should consider the following:

1. **Meeting policy requirements**

   - Have you made early engagement with the planning authority? Planning officers can advise on which Landscape Character Type your site lies in and/or adjacent to and advise on any particular landscape sensitivities.
   - Planning officers can also signpost you to the NatureScot website for more comprehensive information on Landscape Character Assessment.

2. **Identify which Landscape Character Type the site lies in**

   - Become familiar with the key characteristics of the landscape type where your development site is located - refer to Section 4 of this Planning Advice.
   - How does your site sit within the wider landscape? Refer to information on adjoining Landscape Character Types (LCT) for wider landscape context. This is particularly relevant if a site is located at or near the boundary of two LCTs.
   - Always consider landscape character at a both wider and localized level together at the same time. One landscape does not suddenly change to another, but merges into the next. There may also be more than one landscape type that provides the background setting for, or influences, your development.
   - Does your site lie within or close to a Special Landscape Area? This will indicate that your site has increased landscape sensitivity, and if so refer to Appendix 13 Aberdeenshire Special Landscape Areas (SLA) to identify the key landscape features and characteristics which make the area sensitive.
   - Development proposals should not unacceptably adversely affect the landscape features identified in the Designation Statement of the Statement of

Importance in a SLA. The Management Recommendations should be considered and incorporated into proposals coming forward. Developers are required to provide a statement of compliance with (SLA) Management Recommendations.

3. **Consider broad principles**

- Refer to Appendix 1 of this Planning Advice to help your understanding of how to best locate and design small-scale development in the landscape.
- Consider how different design responses can respond sensitively to local landscape character and successfully fit with landform and pattern.

4. **Consider landscape impact on site, and within a design statement assess and address:**

- Which key landscape characteristics are discernible on the site and within the surrounding area? Are any of these particularly noticeable?
- What impact will the development have on the key landscape characteristics? Will it remove any? Will it dilute the prevalence of these? Will it have no impact? How significant is the impact? How will this impact on the overall quality of the landscape (not just its beauty or historical value but the integral character of the landscape)?
- Could the scale, layout, siting and/or design be more appropriate to the character type? Have the general principles as set out in Appendix 1 been considered?
- Where the landscape is identified as being sensitive, are any of the sensitivities affected?
- Could any adverse impacts be mitigated? Could landscaping or planting help mitigate impacts?
- Are there opportunities to enhance any of the key landscape characteristics?

5. **Identify the scale of change**

- Identify the scale of change and whether it is appropriate to the landscape character. What is the degree of impact, and could any impact be mitigated?

Consider carefully whether the level of impact is acceptable. Can the landscape accommodate the proposed development without losing its intrinsic character or sense of place and identity? In particular is the scale of the development proportionate and reflective of the local character?