



Local Development Plan

Addendum to Landscape Character Assessment Review.

March 2021

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to address some of the comments contained within a representation made by NIEA to the Mid Ulster draft Plan Strategy 2030 (DPS). These comments were critical of the Councils Landscape Character Assessment Review (LCAR).
- 1.2 The draft Plan Strategy introduced a range of strategic environmental designations. These consisted of a Special Countryside Area (SCA) along the Lough shore, in the high Sperrins and Slieve Beagh to protect them from unnecessary development. Areas of Constraint on Wind Turbines and High Structures (AOCWTHS) and Areas of Constraint on Mineral Development (ACMD) in the Sperrins, the Clogher Valley and at Slieve Beagh were also included.
- 1.3 The designations referred to above were informed by the Councils Landscape Character Assessment Review (LCAR), published on 22nd February 2019. Following the initial publication of the DPS and associated documents, including the Landscape Character Review, the Council received comments from DAERA, NIEA that highlighted criticisms of its LCAR methodology. This paper will consider the comments received by DAERA, NIEA and seek to demonstrate the overall soundness of the Councils LCA Review.

2.0 Background of LCA Review and Key Findings

- 2.1 Mid Ulster District Council conducted a review and update of current LCA for the District. This LCA review established if there were any changes in landscape character or modern development pressures within the local landscape. The assessment examined the Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment (NICLA) 2000 and assessed how landscapes have evolved and been altered since inception. Additional examinations included, the Regional Landscape Character Areas, the Regional Development Strategy (RDS), Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) for Northern Ireland, SPG Wind Energy Guidance, Planning Policy Statements (PPSs), and the legacy LDPs of Cookstown, Dungannon and Magherafelt. The results of the assessment enabled an analysis of the robustness of current approaches to landscape planning at protecting and enhancing important landscapes within the District. The LCA review was prepared in association with respected landscape consultants - GM Design Associates.
- 2.2 The LCAR found that since the publication of the original LCA in 2000, the main drivers of change across the Mid Ulster landscape were in the form of single dwellings, improvements to road networks, increased quarrying activity and increased pressure from wind farms and single wind turbines. Of the 22 Landscape Character Areas, 11 of these were considered to have experienced key changes in the form of those factors outlined above. Although many of these changes have had a substantial localised impact, it was considered that

the overall character and inherent sensitivities of individual LCA's, as defined in NILCA 2000, have not been significantly affected. Having said that, it was recognised that if the trends were to continue unchecked then there was a serious potential for harm to be caused to the value and merit of the landscape in these areas. To that end, action points were included as to how to arrest the impact of these changes in the future.

3.0 Criticisms of LCAR

3.1 In its representation to Mid Ulster's Draft Plan Strategy NIEA raised the following concerns in relation the Councils Landscape Character Assessment Review:

- (i) The LCA Review does not follow either the Landscape Institute or DAERA NIEA's best practice guidelines as indicated in the recommended document, '*An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment*' (Natural England, 2014). Whilst the LCA Review states that it has taken the above mentioned 2014 document into consideration, it does not explain how.
- (ii) There is no reference to the 'Landscape Wheel': Figure 1 in the 2014 document. NIEA note the importance of the Landscape Wheel as it represents the multi faceted influences / factors that go to make up what we term as 'Landscape.' NIEA state that as a result the cultural and heritage qualities of landscape are largely missing in the Assessment.
- (iii) Concern expressed of the acceptability of the Council relying on and updating the Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment (NILCA).
- (iv) The LCA Review highlights changes in development since the NILCA 1999 series but there is little analysis and assessment of how these changes have affected 'landscape' in its broadest definition and the landscape character of the area.

4.0 Consideration of NIEA Criticisms

4.1 Each of the criticisms of the LCAR by NIEA have been taken in turn and are considered below.

(i) Failure to consider best practice guidance

4.2 Para. 19.0 of the LCAR clearly states that the best practice document as put forward by NIEA has been considered as part of the review and we are satisfied that adequate consideration has been given to the document, as explained in paragraphs 19.0 - 24.0 of the LCAR.

4.3 The Natural England 2014 document sets out the four main steps, which should be taken in conducting a Landscape Character Assessment and these, are listed below. It is worth noting at this stage that the Natural England 2014

document is not formally adopted in Northern Ireland and is not referred to as a best practice document in any regional planning policy.

- a) Define the purpose and scope of the LCA e.g. the area it will cover, its scale, level of details and resources available to carry out the work.
- b) Conduct a desk study – collect, review and analyse data and documentation and speak to stakeholders involved with the landscape
- c) Conduct a field survey – test, refine, and add to the outputs from the desk study, capturing aesthetic, perceptual and experiential qualities of the landscape.
- d) Classify, map and describe the landscapes character areas, types and characteristics including geological, other physical and socio – cultural influences.

4.4 The Council considers that all of the above points have been considered and implemented in the LCAR but is mindful that in relation to point (b) of the above guidance, it may be argued that opinions of stakeholders and the general public have not been sought in the preparation of the LCAR. In this regard it should be noted, that the original NILCA was carried out before the European Landscape Convention of 2006 which concluded that people and local stakeholders should be at the heart of landscape policy.

4.5 However, in relation to involvement of the community and local stakeholders, MUDC published its LCA review in February of 2019, as supporting documentation to the draft Plan Strategy. The Council received a significant number of representations containing positive responses relating to landscape and they were received from a wide range of sources including those from central and local government as well as those from the local community groups and concerned individuals who hold a stake in our precious landscapes.

4.6 A summary of those representations are received below.

Ref: MUDPS 73 / 88 / 121 / 122 / 163 – Shores of Traad Community Group

This community group welcomes the Councils approach to introduce a Special Countryside Area and introduce a bespoke policy to afford protection to places, such as Traad. The group also welcomes the suite of Natural Heritage policies (NH1 – NH4) introduced to protect and enhance our natural heritage.

Ref: MUDPS 141 – Standing Our Ground Women of the Sperrins

This community group states that it is very appropriate that provision has been made by MUDC's LDP to protect and preserve the qualities and characteristics of vulnerable and distinctive landscapes, such as within

the Broughderg region, which are particularly sensitive to renewable energy development, especially development consisting of wind turbines.

They go onto state that they particularly welcome the introduction of Special Countryside Areas and Areas of Constraint on Wind Turbines and High Structures.

They end their representation by stating that they hope the Council's positive policies, which include the proposed designations, restrictions, protections, public safety, human health, residential amenity, archaeological heritage and high scenic value, will be implemented.

Ref: MUDPS 162 – Protect Slieve Gallion

The Protect Slieve Gallion community group stated that they were pleased that the Council is committed to the preservation and promotion of the landscape character and the biodiversity of the area through its strategic approach.

Ref: MUDPS 181 / 182 - Concerned Broughderg Residents Association

The comments of this particular community group reflected the comments of MUDPS 141 and praised the Council's positive policies, which include the proposed designations, restrictions, protections, public safety, human health, residential amenity, archaeological heritage and high scenic value.

Ref: MUDPS 70 / 144 / 194 / 195 / 196 / 197 / 198 / 199 / 200 / 201 / 202

In addition a number representations were received from concerned individuals. These representations welcomed the provision to protect and preserve the districts vulnerable and distinctive landscapes and these representations particularly welcomed the introduction of the SCA and AoCWTHS designations.

- 4.7 Whilst the argument may be put forward that the chronology of these representations (i.e. the fact they were received after the LCAR was carried out) does not support our position that views of the public have been adequately considered in the completion of the LCAR, this is not an argument that the Council accepts. The LCAR was carried out to inform the draft Plan Strategy and the two documents were published alongside each other. Therefore, in considering views put forward which related to public perceptions of the landscape in mid Ulster, we have addressed and considered viewpoints from stakeholders in this regard. There was a considerable degree of support for our proposals to protect the most vulnerable landscapes and these have been fully taken on board in our decision to move forward with our strategic approach to landscapes.
- 4.8 If indeed the public had rejected our strategic approach to landscapes, then the option was / is open to the Council to review our approach and indeed carry out

a new LCAR to further explore any negative public opinion which was expressed. However, the fact this negative stakeholder feedback did not occur, in our opinion negates the need for this approach.

- 4.9 In addition to this, public perceptions and views were sought on our landscape approach as part of the extensive community consultation carried out via the Preferred Options Paper (POP). Our preferred option for protecting landscapes was put forward to the public between November 2016 – January 2017.
- 4.10 We specifically asked the question in the POP “*Do you agree with the preferred approach to the protection of our most vulnerable landscapes?*” The public consultation report into representations received to the POP details how there was general agreement to the approach from the consultation bodies as well as agreement from the public. In addition to the questions asked in the POP, the document also included a growth strategy map, which displayed the location of the proposed vulnerable landscapes. There was no objection from the public in relation to this map with views from the public expressing direct support for the preferred option and stating that it was important for the Council to protect the vulnerable landscapes identified.
- 4.11 We are therefore satisfied that adequate consideration has been given to the views of the public in relation to landscape and that accordingly, the four main steps which should be taken into account in conducting a Landscape Character Assessment, as prescribed by the best practice document have been considered.
- ii) Failure to consider the Landscape Wheel and in particular NIEA state that as a result, the cultural and heritage qualities of landscape are largely missing in the Assessment
- 4.12 The Landscape Wheel illustrates the component parts of landscape in its broadest sense. NIEA are of the opinion that the Council have not adequately considered all of these aspects when carrying out the LCAR and that we have focussed almost exclusively on the physical characteristics of the landscape and paid insufficient attention to the experiential factors in the landscape. In particular, they have made the assertion that “cultural and heritage elements (of the landscape) have been overlooked.”
- 4.13 The Council would argue that the absence of the Landscape Wheel does not mean that the LCAR is unsound. Guidance from DAERA suggests that the Landscape Wheel can serve as a useful guide and therefore it does not follow that the use of the wheel is a hard and fast blueprint that all planning authorities must follow when conducting an LCAR. It is imperative instead that the Council must have had due regard to the layers of component parts which contribute to landscape in its broadest sense.
- 4.14 In relation to the criticism that the Council through the LCAR has not considered the cultural and heritage aspects of the landscape, we again would argue that

this is an incorrect and indeed unfair assertion. Cultural and heritage factors have been considered as important factors in the landscape and references to such are made throughout the summaries of various LCA's, as demonstrated below. The extracts from the LCA below show how cultural and heritage factors ranging from land historical use/ownership trends, farming patterns and the historical/cultural importance of the landscape have all be considered in our review of the LCA;

i) LCA 16 – Brougher Mountain; *“The character of the area has also been eroded in parts by neglect of traditional stone buildings and walls”*

ii) LCA 18 – Slieve Beagh: *“The legacy of forestry and peat cutting and abandoned farms however remains evident”*

iii) LCA 25 – Beaghmore Moors and Marsh: *“The effects of farm abandonment remains evident in the form of derelict buildings and neglected field boundaries”*

iv) LCA 46 – Blackwater Valley; *“The landscape is in good condition with excellent examples of wetland and parkland which have both ecological and historical value.”*

v) LCA 52 – Lower Bann Valley; *Strong perceptual influences have also emerged in recent years of this area which is increasingly being referred to as ‘Heaney Country’. Seamus Heaney’s poetry was strongly influenced by his childhood experiences of this area, including the peat bogs, which form the subject matter for some of his best-known works.*

4.15 Part of the process of identifying settlement limits as part of the Local Policies Plan will involve local landscape appraisals. These will be carried out with the aim of designating Local Landscape Policy Areas (LLPA's) that will reflect the surrounding landscape and the historic features, which contribute to the setting of each settlement. In designating these LLPA's the draft Plan Strategy has set out the criteria for including LLPA designations;

- archaeological sites and monuments and their surroundings
- listed and other locally important buildings and their surroundings
- river banks and shore lines and associated public access
- attractive vistas, localised hills, and other areas of local amenity importance; and
- areas of local nature conservation interest, including areas of woodland and important tree groups.

4.16 In terms of major areas of historical importance within our landscape, the draft Plan Strategy has introduced two Areas of Special Archaeological Interest (ASAI's) at Beaghmore and Tullaghoge, which are mostly all within our district and one at Creggandeveskey, which is mostly within the Fermanagh Omagh

District. Policies HE 1, HE 2 and HE 3 apply to Beaghmore ASAI, Creggandeveskey ASAI and Tullaghoge ASAI respectively and each policy includes the wording that

“development that would adversely impact on the distinctive heritage values and historic landscape of this designated area, will conflict with the Plan.”

- 4.17 The Council has therefore made provision for the consideration of any potential impact upon the historic landscape surrounding these areas via plan policies contained within the draft Plan Strategy. This is also the case when it comes to areas of archaeological remains of regional importance and local importance, which are located outside of an ASAI. Such considerations are addressed in the draft Strategy through policies HE 4 & HE 5 respectively.
- 4.18 In response to the criticism therefore that the LCAR does not adequately consider the cultural and heritage importance of the Mid Ulster landscape, the Council would refute this by stating that there is evidence of consideration being given to the cultural and historical aspects of the various LCA's where this is a relevant and obvious consideration.
- 4.19 In terms of regionally and strategically important historical landscapes, it is considered that policies included in the draft Plan Strategy will ensure that all development proposals which would impact upon these landscapes will be adequately considered. The fact that this Strategy has been informed by the LCAR is evidence that these aspects of landscape in its broadest sense have been considered.

iii) Acceptability of relying on updating NILCA

- 4.20 The document held up by NIEA, “An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment” (Natural England 2014) has expressly stated that using and updating existing Landscape Assessments can be an acceptable course of action. This is exact course of action that the Council has followed, having used primarily the NILCA 2000 as our baseline from which to produce the LCAR, which has been used to inform the draft Strategy.
- 4.21 In addition to the NILCA 2000, we have also relied upon other baseline data sources such as the *Northern Ireland Regional Landscape Character Assessment (NIRLCA)*, *Supplementary Planning Guidance on Wind Energy Development in Northern Ireland's Landscapes* and The Land Cover Atlas of the UK (CORINE). We have then proceeded to “determine key development changes since the publication of NILCA 2000.” Using both desktop and field surveys we have identified any key intervening changes and then developed a series of action points to be factored into the LDP process.
- 4.22 We consider this approach to be entirely in keeping with the guidance in the best practice document which enables a local authority to update existing baseline studies which already exist for their jurisdiction.

iv) there is little analysis and assessment of how these changes have affected 'landscape' in its broadest definition

- 4.23 Fieldwork was an intrinsic component of the Councils LCA Review. Data collection occurred in the field to help verify, add and refine information to the key characteristics and qualities of the appraisal of the desk based study. The field study enabled the attributes of the landscape to be assessed on location capturing aesthetic and perceptual qualities of each LCA. This fieldwork also included the noting of some of the key experiential qualities of each of the LCAs and there are numerous examples of this throughout the LCA Review.
- 4.24 The Council considers NIEA statement that there has been little analysis and assessment of how intervening changes have affected 'landscape' to be unfair and unjustified. There has been a clear assessment of the changes on the landscape and these have been demonstrated within the specific tables dealing with each LCA including action points suggested (Appendix 1 of LCA Review).

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 The Council considers that the approach taken to its LCA Review is sound. The Council has relied on the robust pre-existing data sources which have been updated as necessary and the Council considers this is an approach which has been relied on elsewhere with success. Furthermore GM Design Associates, a well respected consultancy, were employed by the Council to carry out an audit of the LCA Review. GM Design Associates and the Council planning department are content that the issues identified throughout their audit process resulted in appropriate amendments and that the resulting LCA Review is a more comprehensive and sound document.