



1.0 Introduction





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1.1 The Study Brief

1.1.1 This report is a response to the first section of a brief produced by Christchurch Borough Council in December 2001 (1). The brief called for a Borough-wide Character Assessment to help identify and protect the identity of the Borough. Specific objectives required of the study included the need to:

- Obtain a comprehensive understanding of the quality, diversity and sensitivity of the environmental character by reference to ‘Character Areas’.
- Identify the most important Borough-wide characteristics that contribute to the Borough’s unique and distinctive character, sense of place and identity.
- Set down guidance on the capacity of each area to accommodate new development or other forms of environmental change, along with advice on the characteristics that new development would need to successfully integrate with its location.

1.2 Character Assessment Background

1.2.1 With the development of the planning system and radical changes to the landscapes and townscapes of post-war Britain, the need for a comprehensive approach to understanding the environment has emerged. The English landscape is renowned for its rich and diverse patterns. These give rise to the strong regional diversity that makes Britain so distinctive and gives many local areas a real sense of place. These contrasts of regional diversity and local identity are a resource recognised within the concepts of sustainable development and National Planning Guidance.

1.2.2 ‘Landscape’ is concerned with the many different relationships between people and place. It is not simply a rural phenomenon. The environmental quality of the places where people live and work is often related to an underlying continuity of character. The physical settings of towns and cities, characteristic patterns of development, the scale of civic spaces or streets, buildings styles and local materials

and the predominance of particular trees or other vegetation can all contribute to a sense of place. Distinctive character can be found even within modern or intensely urban centres.

1.2.3 The concept of Landscape Character Assessment has evolved with the work of the Countryside Commission (Countryside Agency). This has led to a National Character Assessment of the whole of England, published in 1999 (Countryside Character : The Character of England’s Natural and Man Made Landscape Volumes 1-8)(2). In addition, many County and District authorities have also undertaken their own assessment projects.

1.2.4 The assessment of urban areas has evolved with the interest in good urban design. The protection given to historic townscapes under Conservation Area status has relied on the concept of the preservation of character as a key test for acceptability of new development proposals. More recently the need to consider increased residential densities as an objective of sustainable development has also highlighted the need to assess the character and condition of urban landscapes.

1.2.5 The area of Christchurch Borough has been included in two main landscape assessments to date. Within the very broad Borough assessments of the Countryside Agency’s Character Map of England approximately half the Borough is included within the descriptions of the New Forest (Character Area 131). The remaining western part of the Borough falls within the Dorset Heaths Character Area (Area No. 135). The dividing line roughly follows the line between St. Catherine’s Hill and the A338 dual carriageway. The Heathlands of Town Common sit on the boundary of the two areas and the River Avon and the eastern side of Christchurch Harbour fall within the New Forest.

1.2.6 Dorset County have undertaken a Countywide Landscape Assessment published in 1993 (3). This divided the county into broad landscape character areas which included Christchurch within ‘The Landscapes of East Dorset’. Five main landscape types were described for this overall area:

- East Dorset Woods and Farmland
- Valley Pastures
- Heathland
- Heathland/scrub mosaic
- Conifer plantations



Assessments undertaken by Hampshire County Council (The Hampshire Landscape – A Strategy for the Future) and New Forest District Council (New Forest District Landscape Character Assessment : July 2000) (5) are also of interest to this study.

1.2.7 Within the urban areas detailed character assessment work on the Borough's 12 Conservation Areas is currently ongoing. The assessment work for this study has been progressed alongside the assessment for the main Town Centre Conservation Area.

1.3 Assessment Approach

1.3.1 Landscape Character Assessment is a process of identifying, analysing, describing and mapping the landscape (or townscape) in a consistent and systematic manner. The character of many areas is often directly related to the underlying geology and physical geography of an area. Natural vegetation patterns and habitat can be related to soil types, drainage or climatic conditions. The influence of human activity is a fundamental part of landscape character, archaeological interest, patterns of agricultural use and settlement are inter-related with physical geography but are also part of the resultant landscape character. The physical influences on settlement are also an integral part of townscape development. Reference to historic mapping helps explain how earlier settlement patterns were influenced by physical conditions.

1.3.2 The assessments of both town and country start with survey and analysis of the physical structure of the area. This includes reference to geomorphology, topography, drainage, land use, boundaries, vegetation, settlement (historic and modern) and transport patterns.

1.3.3 Specific types of landscapes are identified along with outlines of those areas which share a similar character or combine into one recognisable geographical place. The character assessment for each area requires a descriptive analysis of the physical make-up of the area. This would identify characteristic features or common patterns that unify an area.

1.3.4 In addition the more subjective aspects of how a landscape may be perceived are also considered and judgements made. Issues such as scale, harmony, pleasing patterns or pictures, degrees of intrusion or isolation are all relevant to how character may be perceived.

1.3.5 Some landscapes may not have a particularly distinctive sense

of place in themselves, but may still offer important contributions to the wider perception of settings or be valued as simple open space or accessible landscape. This assessment has therefore considered the role of all areas in terms of the identity of the Borough as an accessible or inviting environment as a whole.

1.3.7 This assessment is also unusual in that both rural and townscape (and indeed coastal) areas are all included within the study of the whole Borough. With large parts of the Borough having been developed as modern suburbs, in considering townscape character, it is often relevant to consider not what makes an area unique, but simply what makes it a pleasant and habitable place to live. The approach to this assessment has therefore taken criteria from current best practice for urban capacity and design studies to help broaden the assessment approach. A key guide to such best practice is found within By Design (Urban design in the planning system towards better practice :DETR) (6).

1.3.8 A final key part of the area assessments is the consideration of how each area contributes to any Borough-wide sense of place or sense of Christchurch as an entity on its own right.

1.4 Structure of the Report

1.4.1 The project was specifically established as a Borough-wide Character Assessment. This has encompassed the full range of environments from open countryside to extensive suburbs, historic town centre, harbour and coast. The Borough as a whole has been influenced by the basic physical geography of the area. The overall identity of the Borough is also inter-related with these very different kinds of environment.

1.4.2 This report is structured to give an initial overview of Christchurch Borough, followed by detailed character assessment sections for each main type of environment encountered. For ease of presentation the assessments are divided into the following sections:

- The Rural Landscape
- Urban Edges and Enclaves
- The Built Up Area
- Coastal and Inter-tidal Areas

1.4.3 As part of the assessment process each main section provides an analysis of the capacity of the different character areas to accommodate future change.



1.5 Borough Council Policy

1.5.1 Christchurch Borough Council's Corporate plan sets out the Council's objectives. Seven key themes have been identified, for which key objectives have been set as follows:

Transportation

TR1 Develop a comprehensive car parking strategy to balance the needs of residents, visitors and the business community.

TR2 Reduce congestion and improve road safety.

Community Safety

CS1 Reduce burglary and vehicle crime

CS2 Reduce the fear of crime

CS3 Reduce anti-social behaviour and criminal damage

CS4 Increase awareness of drugs mis-use

Balancing Housing Needs

HO1 Eliminate the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for Homeless people except in emergencies.

HO2 Increase provision of affordable, temporary and permanent accommodation

HO3 Maximise the use of private sector accommodation

HO4 Improve housing advice services

HO5 Improve the targeting of renewal grants

Improving the Environment

IE1 A cleaner and greener Christchurch

IE2 A Christchurch with pride

Investing in Youth

YO1 Develop a variety of social and recreational facilities for young people

YO2 Assist local schools in promoting good citizenship

YO3 Celebrate the achievements of young people in Christchurch

A Well Managed Council

WM1 Improve access to services for all Members of the Community

WM2 Improve Standards of Customer Care

WM3 Manage the Council's performance more effectively

Improving Prosperity

IP1 Maintain and enhance a diverse local economy

IP2 Increase inward investment through promotion of external funding opportunities

IP3 Improve town centres as places to live, work and visit

IP4 Increase the number of tourists visiting or staying in the Borough

1.5.2 In addition the Borough Council in its aim towards promoting sustainability has adopted an Environmental Management Policy. The Council recognises that there is a need to enhance its positive environmental impacts and mitigate its negative ones.

1.5.3 With this in mind, the Borough of Christchurch Local Plan has as its core principal that of sustainable development, delivering this through the implementation of land use policies and proposals.

1.5.4 A number of associated policy documents have influenced the Local Plan. The Local Plan conforms to the more strategic Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole Structure Plan and the South West Regional Plan. The Council's Economic Development Strategy is reflected through Local Plan policies and proposals. Transport policies are included in the Local Plan reflecting the County Council's proposals in the Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch Local Transport Plan. Affordable housing policy is developed in the Council's Affordable Housing Strategy. The Local Plan aims to guide development in a sensitive manner, in particular this Character Assessment will be utilised as a tool to establish the likely impact, and the suitability of development proposals across the Borough.

This assessment supplements the Local Plan as Supplementary Planning Guidance.

1.5.5 Due to pressures exerted along the coastal zone the Council has adopted management plans for Mudeford Quay and Mudeford Sandbank and is developing a management plan for Christchurch Quay. A Shoreline Management Plan prepared by operating coastal authorities is aimed at co-ordinating coastal defence. The Dorset Coast Management Plan has been prepared by the Dorset Coast Forum which guides development and uses across the coast. A number of Management Plans have also been adopted, or are being drafted, for sensitive nature conservation sites namely, Stanpit Marsh, St Catherine's Hill, Steamer Point and Purewell.

1.5.6 The Council in its role of leisure provider has adopted a number of policies to assist this function, namely: Use of Open Spaces Policy, Sports Strategy, Arts Policy and Play Space Policy. The Borough is a popular tourist destination, the Borough Tourism Strategy aims to promote this.

1.5.7 Conservation Area Appraisals are presently being prepared by the Council. Priority has been given to the production of the Christchurch Central Conservation Area Appraisal. This is to be followed by a Conservation Area strategy for Christchurch which will highlight such issues as the opportunity for Article 4 directions and detail any work which could be undertaken to enhance the character of the Conservation Area. These documents will be integrated into the local plan review and will also take into account recommendations emanating from the Character assessment.

1.5.8 The remaining eleven Conservation Area appraisals will be undertaken in a rolling programme. Priority will be determined by development pressure and time constraints. However, commitments in the Local Plan will also be given a priority.

1.5.9 The Authority are also adopting the advice from By Design - the DTLR companion guide to PPG3. This is reflected in an emerging residential Design Guide to become Supplementary Planning Guidance for the Authority. Other important references to urban design and heritage include:

- Building in Context: New development in Historic Areas published by English Heritage and CABE
- Better Civic Buildings and Spaces published by CABE
- Going to Town : Improving Town Centre Access - A Companion Guide to PPG 6.
- People and Places : Social Inclusion policy for the Built and Historic Environment