

# 1 Landscape Character Assessment in Ireland. Update on baseline audit and evaluation, November 2009

## 1.1 Introduction

Minogue and Associates were commissioned by the Heritage Council to update the Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) Baseline Audit and Evaluation report published in September 2006 by Julie Martin and Associates (thereafter referred to as the '2006 Baseline Report'). The aim of this report is to provide a factual update of research set out in Section 3 of the 2006 Baseline Report (only). The same full and detailed review, consultation and analysis undertaken for the Baseline Report has not been undertaken for this research.

The key objectives are as follows, to:

- Update the evaluation of LCAs carried out in Ireland since the 2006 study;
- Evaluate how LCAs have been incorporated into recently adopted County Development Plans; and
- Consult with Senior Planners in Local Authorities that have completed the County Development Plan (CDP) process to ascertain how they utilise the LCA on a regular basis in policy formulation and development management and control.

## 1.2 Methodology

The methodology adopted for the report is as follows, to:

- Collate and describe the content of LCAs prepared in Ireland since the 2006 study (Section Two);
- Review status of all LCAs in relation to the County Development Plans (CDPs) (Section Three); and
- Interview and record comments of Senior Planners in Local Authorities, particularly in relation to applications and utility of LCA (Section Four).

The research has been based on desk study and email/telephone interviews.

## 2 Description of Landscape Character Assessments (LCAs) carried out in Ireland since 2006.

### 2.1 Introduction

This section summarises the new/revised, or substantially revised, LCAs that have been carried out since 2006 in Ireland. Unless stated, no historical landscape characterisation (HLC) has been undertaken. For descriptions of other LCAs assessed in the Baseline Report, please refer to *Table 3.2* in that document<sup>1</sup>. *Figure 2.1* shows the updated LCA map in terms of consistency between county boundaries.

**Table 2.1: Summary of recent or substantially revised LCAs in Ireland**

<b>Carlow</b>	Commissioned by Carlow County Council and undertaken by Michael Cregan and Loci. The GIS elements were undertaken by Compass Informatics. Consultation took the form of letters seeking submissions from a number of government and local agencies. This LCA was completed in 2008. The LCA is very detailed and provides an overview of key landscape resources in the county including geology, soils, landcover, topography, drainage, landuse, settlement and infrastructure, tourism and natural heritage designations. LCTs are briefly discussed but the principal focus is on LCAs. Forces for change are identified and described for each LCA and recommendations provided for the enhancement and conservation of landscape character. Landscape sensitivity and landscape capacity are clearly differentiated and the methodology used to identify both issues is presented. Strategic policy recommendations are provided for infrastructure and industry, tourism, rivers, farming and forestry. This well laid out and clear LCA that is well illustrated through photographs and maps.
<b>Cavan</b>	No LCA has been undertaken by the Local Authority for this county.
<b>Cork</b>	The LCA has been substantially revised since the 2003 work and has been undertaken by the same consultants, Mosart. Consultation was undertaken but not much detail is provided on the process or consultees. GIS has been utilised and the updated work was completed in 2007. Methodologies used to identify value, sensitivity and importance are outlined in the introductory section. . Landscape Sensitivity is defined in line with the Draft Guidelines ie; ability of landscape to accommodate change without adverse impact on its character. Landscape types remain the principal focus with each type described in terms of scenic routes, natural heritage designations, number of LCAs, key characteristics, pressure for change and recommendations to enhance and conserve the character of the LCT.. This LCA is now referred to as a Draft Landscape Strategy and is well illustrated though photographs and maps.
<b>Donegal</b>	The LCA is currently being prepared in house by Donegal County Council. Survey work has commenced and GIS is being utilised and includes the Corine datasets and aerial photography. Donegal County Council will be considering the LCA of Northern Ireland due to the shared border.

<sup>1</sup> The *Baseline Report (2006)* is available from the Heritage Council website, [www.heritagecouncil.ie](http://www.heritagecouncil.ie)

<p><b>Kildare</b></p>	<p>The LCA appears to have been updated as it presents further detail on the methodology used in identifying landscape sensitivity and a matrix is provided that shows potential development impacts on the sensitivity of LCAs. The matrix combines development impact potential and landscape area sensitivity. The LCA sensitivity is described as being informed by vulnerability and landscape factors in the LCA descriptions. The matrix presents this assessment against development activities including wind energy, forestry, roads and rural housing. This process and accompanying matrix is confusing and does not provide clarity for landscape management. A number of special landscape areas are identified and specific policy statements are provided only for these areas. The LCA as an appendix is well illustrated overall</p>
<p><b>Laois</b></p>	<p>No LCA has been undertaken for this county.</p>
<p><b>Longford</b></p>	<p>This LCA closely follows the draft DoEHLG guidelines. Due to the small size of the county, the LCTS are found to correlate closely to LCAs and therefore the concept of landscape unit as defined in the guidelines is utilized throughout. LCTS are listed but not described instead the focus is on describing the landscape units in terms of landcover, topography, geology and soil, drainage, settlement, transport and communications, agriculture, industry and services, history, archaeology, cultural, recreation and amenity. The landscape sensitivity of each unit is discussed along with threats, opportunities, and policy responses. Landscape Sensitivity is defined in line with the Draft Guidelines. Consultation was undertaken as part of the CDP process. A brief discussion of visual units and image units is presented but none are identified and the complexity in this area is recognized in this study. The LCA makes good use of maps and photographs.</p>
<p><b>Meath</b></p>	<p>Commissioned by Meath County Council, prepared by Solty Brewster Consulting and completed in 2007. This LCA broadly adheres to the Draft Guidelines and has regard to neighbouring counties LCAs. It describes the landscapes character types, and areas and identifies forces for change. The LCAs are evaluated in terms of sensitivity, values, capacity and importance and recommendations are presented for each LCA. Consultation was confined to state and semi state organisations, whilst wider consultation was incorporated into the County Development Plan preparation process.</p> <p>This is a well laid out LCA that makes good use of photographs and maps. It makes a clear distinction between sensitivity, values and capacity and advances recommendations and policies derived from the identification of landscape trends.</p>
<p><b>Monaghan</b></p>	<p>Commissioned by Monaghan County Council, undertaken by ERM Ireland and completed in August 2008. GIS work was undertaken by ERA and a number of workshops formed part of the consultation process. This is a comprehensive LCA which identifies and describes LCTs and LCAs. LCTs are described in terms of physical data (such as elevation range), key characteristics and forces for change.</p> <p>Each LCA includes a list of LCTS, natural heritage designations, scenic designations, and known archeological sites. LCA condition and sensitivity is described, and principles for landscape management and principles for accommodating new development are presented. Thereafter the LCA is described in terms of geology and landform, landcover and ecology and landuse and human influences. LCAs key characteristics are described in addition to development management principles including:</p> <p>Forestry design/felling, peat extraction, grazing, agri environment, housing, river/drainage systems, tourism, wind turbines and communications masts.</p>

	This is a well illustrated LCA with clear descriptions, maps and tables.
<b>North Tipperary</b>	Commissioned by North Tipperary, undertaken by ERM and completed in 2005. GIS was utilised and consultation in the form of workshops was undertaken. The LCA describes and maps LCTs, and LCAs. Each LCA is described in terms of key characteristics, geology, natural heritage, human influences, landscape condition, and sensitivity. Forces for change and recommendations are provided for each LCA. In addition, capacity studies are developed in relation to wind energy and forestry. This LCA is clearly presented and makes good use of maps and photographs.
<b>Roscommon</b>	Commissioned by Roscommon County Council, prepared by Mosart and completed in 2008. This LCA identifies LCTs, LCAs and Historical Landscape Types. GIS was used and consultation took the form of focus groups. Although LCTs are listed, the focus of the work is on LCAs. Each LCA is described in terms of key characteristics, landscape value, forces for change and recommendations. The methodology used to identify landscape value is explained. Forces for change (termed trends in the LCA) are identified and recommendations developed for each. Finally, scenic routes and views are addressed in the report. . Good use is made of maps and photographs in the LCA.
<b>South Tipperary</b>	Phase One only (addressing upland areas) has been completed to date.
<b>Waterford</b>	Commissioned by Waterford County Council, undertaken by MosArt and completed in 2007. This work is essentially a capacity study for wind energy development within the County. It combines LCTs identified in the 2006 Planning Guidelines for Wind Energy Development with wind energy resources and defines capacity areas for wind energy developments. It does not provide detail on landscape character areas or address other policy areas.
<b>Westmeath</b>	Commissioned by Westmeath County Council, and undertaken in-house by Heritage Officer and Planning Officer with no dedicated budget. This was completed in 2006 and due to time and budget constraints stakeholder consultation was not undertaken. Part of the LCA is available as an extract to the County Development Plan. This LCA does not describe landscape character types but focuses on 11 LCAs. A paragraph synopsis is provided in the CDP that outlines topography, landuse, natural heritage designations, key historical features, settlements, and scenic quality and preserved views. The methodology was guided by the draft LCA guidelines. There is no clear description of forces for change, sensitivities and capacity. However, each LCA has a number of policy formulations that reflect various forces for change on landscape resources and /or highlight sensitivities. Wind Energy development policies are the only policies that make specific reference to landscape capacity. Whilst mention is made of historic landscapes, there is no historic landscape characterization.
<b>Wexford</b>	Commissioned by Wexford County Council and undertaken by CAAS, following their earlier involvement in landscape appraisal work for the local authority, it is unclear when this LCA was completed but it is included as an appendix to the CDP 2007 to 2013. It follows the Draft Guidelines and identifies landscape character units, determines landscape sensitivities (using Corine and topography), generates principal policy areas (by grouping units that share landscape types) and provides policy responses to these principal policy areas.. Landscape sensitivity is defined and landscapes are ranked from degraded to vulnerable. Corine is the principal dataset used to define most of the sensitivities.  This LCA is not illustrated and there is no reference to consultation carried out; it does not convey the distinctiveness of different character areas.

<b>Wicklow</b>	The LCA as described in the 2006 Baseline Report does not appear to be available. Extracts of the LCA as described are available in the existing CDP.



## 2.2 Discussion

The following section highlights the key issues arising from the summary evaluation of LCAs carried out or substantially revised since 2005/early 2006.

- As *Figure 1* shows, the LCA coverage has been extended since the 2006 Baseline Report, with only two counties not currently covered by a full or partial LCA. .
- There has been some progress also in the quality of the LCAs with a number of reports now making a clear distinction between landscape sensitivity, value and capacity (e.g. Carlow).
- The quality of presentation has also improved in some instances with good examples of mapping and photographs evident in the *Cork Landscape Strategy* and *Monaghan LCA*.
- There remains, however, considerable variation and inconsistency in terms used in LCAs eg: landscape character units, image units, character types.
- The application of consultation in Ireland to inform landscape character assessment remains variable and overall is quite poor; where consultation is undertaken at all, it is commonly through the wider County Development Plan Review process. Nonetheless, a limited number of good examples are identified, e.g. Roscommon.
- A small number of the recent LCAs state that regard has been had to neighbouring counties' landscape character assessments.
- The consistency between county boundaries remains highly variable. Good consistency in terminology and boundaries are found for Roscommon and Leitrim. However, Galway and Roscommon present poor consistency as east Galway is identified as one LCA whilst the neighbouring parts of Roscommon are identified through 6 LCAs.
- The names used for LCAs are also variable, and do not always convey the local distinctiveness of the area. Again, good and poor examples are found around the country, with counties Clare, Roscommon and North Tipperary identifying LCA names that refer to local landscapes; conversely other counties name the LCAs in very generic terms, examples being the southwest lowlands (Meath) and northern lowlands (Kildare).
- There remains significant variety in the methods adapted for evaluation and for determining the values, sensitivity and capacity of the landscape for development. In some instances, a clear explanation and methodology is presented (Cork, Carlow), in others the evaluation process is poorly explained and difficult to understand (Kildare)
- The recent LCAs all make reference to the *European Landscape Convention* (ELC) and the *Draft DoEHLG LCA Guidelines*.

### 3 Status of LCAs in relation to County Development Plans (CDPs)

#### 3.1 Introduction:

This section summarises the existing status of all LCAs in relation to forward planning in the form of County Development Plans (CDPs). It also comments on the availability or otherwise of LCA reports on the web, etc.

**Table 3.1:** The Current Status of LCAs in relation to County Development Plans (CDPs)

<b>Local Authority Area</b>	<b>County Development Plan and LCA Status</b>
<b>Carlow</b>	The LCA is available as an appendix to the CDP 2009 to 2015 and specific landscape policies are provided in the CDP.
<b>Cavan</b>	No LCA completed but the CDP 2008 to 2014 refers to landscape categorisation and presents outline LCAs that may be used. It is intended that a full LCA be undertaken over the lifetime of the plan.
<b>Cork</b>	The <i>Draft Landscape Strategy</i> is identified as a key supporting document to the CDP 2009 to 2015 and the CDP states the intention to adopt the strategy as a variation to the CDP. Specific landscape policies and reference to landscape character are provided in the CDP. The draft Landscape Strategy is available as an appendix to the CDP.
<b>Clare</b>	The <i>Clare CDP 2005 -2011</i> is under review and it is understood that landscape policies are under consideration. The existing CDP 2005 to 2011 merged the LCA report with a more detailed sensitivity assessment and is presented in Appendix Seven of the existing CDP. The LCA has been partly used for wind energy strategies, rural design guidelines, village design statements and Local Area Plans. The LCA is available separately to the CDP on the council website.
<b>Donegal</b>	It is intended that the County LCA will be published in tandem with the draft CDP currently under review.
<b>Dun Laoghaire Rathdown</b>	The LCA carried out in 2001 in house has been updated in terms of any significant changes in the intervening period since the last CDP. A policy states the intention to preserve the character of the identified LCAs and a further policy has regard for the five historical landscape character assessments that have been undertaken to date in the local authority area. The LCA is included as an Appendix to the Draft CDP 2010 – 2016.
<b>Fingal</b>	The LCA is partly available as an appendix to the CDP 2009 to 2015. The full LCA is available on the council website. Principles for development are presented for each LCA whilst sensitivity to development types are given for landscape groups.
<b>Galway</b>	The LCA completed in 2002 has been incorporated into the new CDP 2009 – 2015 as an appendix. There are specific policy objectives relating to sensitivity and value ratings arising from the LCA in the CDP that relate to conservation of landscape character and advice in relation to forestry and wind energy developments.
<b>Kerry</b>	Although a LCA was undertaken and is described in the 2006 LCA Baseline Audit and Evaluation it has not been included in the Kerry



	CDP 2009 to 2015. Landscape policies are presented but landscape sensitivity and capacity is only mentioned briefly. There is no reference to landscape character generally or the LCA work in particular.
<b>Kildare</b>	The LCA is available as an appendix to the CDP 2005 to 2011. The key guidance relates to the matrix that shows potential development impacts on the sensitivity of LCAs.
<b>Kilkenny</b>	The LCA is available as an appendix to the CDP 2008 – 2014. Specific policies are contained in the new CDP relating to landscape character and in the CDP it is considered that LCA will be the main guiding force in assessing development applications in the county. Reference is made to the policies prepared for the LCAs but only policies relating to upland LCAs are provided in the CDP.
<b>Laois</b>	No LCA has been prepared to date for Laois. Landscape as such is discussed in Chapter 8 of the County Development Plan 2006 to 2012. This is not a LCA but deals with landscape and its threats from housing development, windfarms and communications. The Council has designated Special Areas for Development Control. LCTs or LCAs are not identified.
<b>Leitrim</b>	The LCA has only been partly adopted into the CDP 2009 to 2015 in terms of landscape capacity guidance on wind energy, forestry and visual amenity. Some of the wind energy areas previously identified in the LCA as having high capacity have been reduced to medium capacity in light of recent designations for natural heritage.
<b>Limerick</b>	The LCAs identified are listed in the CDP 2005 to 2011 (currently under review) and the intention to advance landscape characterization through Local Area Plans is stated. The LCA information is only briefly presented in the CDP.
<b>Longford</b>	A list of landscape elements that are considered sensitive in the county is presented; specific policies relating to sensitive landscapes and the enhancement and retention of landscape character as defined in the LCA are included. The LCA is available as an appendix to the CDP 2009 to 2015.
<b>Louth</b>	The draft CDP 2009-2011 ranks LCAs in terms of importance (international to local). Whilst the 2002 LCA provides guidance in terms of the LCAs identified, this is not carried into the draft CDP which details policies that afford protection to the landscapes of the county by only permitting developments that are sustainable and do not detract from the landscape character. The LCA in its entirety does not appear to be included as an appendix to the Draft CDP.
<b>Mayo</b>	The LCA is included in its entirety as a supporting document to the CDP 2008 to 2014 and landscape policies are included in the main CDP.
<b>Offaly</b>	The LCA appears to have been carried into the recent CDP 2009 to 2015 and is only available within the CDP itself.

<b>Roscommon</b>	The LCA is available as an appendix to the CDP 2008 to 2014. Reference is made to the LCA and it is recommended that the CDP be read in conjunction with the LCA.
<b>Sligo</b>	In the recent CDP 2005 to 2011 the resulting map from the LCA has been modified in light of development control experience since 1999 but otherwise no changes have been made to the LCA
<b>South Dublin</b>	The CDP is currently under review (2010 to 2016) and the LCA descriptions and strategy objectives are presented as a schedule to the draft CDP.
<b>North Tipperary</b>	The LCA is mentioned in the introductory section of the Draft CDP 2010 – 2016 and the wind energy policies refer to the LCA, it does not appear to be available as an appendix to the Draft CDP currently.
<b>South Tipperary</b>	In the new CDP 2009 to 2015, reference is made to a Phase 2 LCA but this has not been undertaken to date.
<b>Wexford.</b>	This LCA is available as an appendix to the CDP 2007 to 2013. Specific policy is given in relation to landscape character and regard must be had to the LCA.
<b>Wicklow</b>	The LCA is not available on the website or appended to the existing CDP 2004 to 2010. Reference is only made to the landscape categorization and it is stated that landscape has been categorized into development control landscape zones with regard to vulnerability, assimilative capacity and development pressures.

### 3.2 Discussion

As can be seen from the above table, many of the LCAs are only available as extracts or appendices to the County Development Plans (CDPs). In some instances, it is quite difficult to find the location of the LCA and they are not always available in their entirety.

Key issues arising from the above table are, as follows:

- The wide variation in evaluation methods previously identified carries through into forward planning policy. There is a considerable variation in landscape policies, enhancement, conservation and designation of landscape areas. These range from areas being identified as 'degraded' (e.g. Mayo) to areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONB, as used in Wicklow and not having any basis in Irish Planning Legislation);
- The policy outputs or recommendations vary according to the level of detail provided in the baseline landscape characterisation. The *Cork Landscape Strategy* contains a significant amount of detail and this in turn provides for more detailed and nuanced recommendations. Where other counties provide less detail, it is difficult to relate subsequent designations and policies to landscape character and there can be a disjuncture between landscape character and subsequent policy recommendations, eg: Mayo; and
- As the *Baseline Report* (2006) stated, the accessibility and usefulness of LCA information to those outside the planning and landscape professions appears to

be limited. The full baseline landscape character assessments are not easily available and this limits their wider utility.

## 4 Applications and Utility of LCA

### 4.1 Introduction

All Local Authorities that have adopted County Development Plans since 2005/early 2006 have been contacted by telephone and email. A number of responses are still outstanding, but the following bullet points detail the common themes and issues arising from consultation with Senior Planners in local authorities throughout Ireland.

- The lack of consistency in designations and terms used remains a problem, particularly in terms of large-scale infrastructural development. An example is cited of the planned Cavan - Tyrone and Meath – Cavan 400kv transmission lines that will traverse a number of counties and the variation in landscape character areas, and inconsistency in landscape designations throughout these areas.
- The baseline landscape character assessments are considered useful as a baseline resource and as a means to assess pre-planning applications. The utility of this ultimately depends on the quality of the LCA prepared.
- The applications of LCA in terms of capacity studies are identified as being especially useful, particularly in terms of wind energy and forestry.
- Advice on visual amenity and sensitive landscapes are also considered useful by planners on a daily basis
- There remains considerable wariness on the part of elected members in relation to landscape character assessments (LCAs), as they continue to perceive it as a means of restricting rural housing. In some instances, the LCA was brought into the County Development Plan process only on the understanding that some policies were diluted or the baseline descriptions only were to be incorporated.
- The need for a *National Landscape Classification* to be undertaken remains in order to address consistency in terms of language and boundaries. Whilst a National Landscape Classification would be considered very useful, a number of planners considered that landscape values should be identified at county level.

### 4.2 Recommendations

A number of suggested recommendations arising from this research are detailed below:

- The need for a *National Landscape Character Assessment or Characterisation* remains a key priority. With the exception of two local authorities, all of the country has now been assessed/studied and GIS data is now largely available. It would be feasible to undertake a GIS national study relatively quickly and with a limited budget to identify national level landscapes that could be verified by

targeted fieldwork and externally evaluated/peer reviewed by another EU Member State.

- As landscape character does not adhere to administrative boundaries, a regional approach to landscape characterisation may be more appropriate, using the relevant Regional Planning Authorities as the key driver. This in turn would facilitate a stronger regional approach to landscape planning and management through regional planning guidelines; moreover at a spatial level, this approach may be more appropriate for the Irish context.
- In turn, an all –island approach and recognition of shared landscape resources between the Republic and Northern Ireland has considerable merit and would facilitate an integrated approach to landscape planning particularly in terms of large infrastructure and tourism projects
- There remains a continued need to raise awareness about landscapes and to increase the availability and accessibility of landscape character work to date. The Heritage Council's recently-developed all-island, multi-disciplinary *LCA CDP Training Programme*, (in partnership with 8 no. Professional Institutes and the Landscape Observatory of Catalonia), is fulfilling an important role in training professionals and practitioners involved in landscape management issues, in accordance with Article 6B of the ELC. Wider training and greater awareness within the wider civil society and corporate economy would also be very beneficial. The inclusion of landscape awareness in the Heritage Council's *Heritage in Schools Programme* could be a further means of increasing awareness of landscape management issues.
- Whilst recent LCA work has noted the European Landscape Convention (ELC), the continued association of landscape character assessment with solely local authority planning functions, weakens Irelands overall response to the ELC. Widening the utility and applications of LCA would enhance the national response to the ELC.
- Local Elected Members also require awareness raising and education/training on landscape issues considering their critical function in the planning regime. One comment noted that the elected members now have control of their own training budget and are not obliged to attend training on planning (or landscape). This appears to be a significant weakness as the role elected members play in planning control and policy is critical and to have little or no training in planning must contribute to poor planning outcomes.
- County LCAs could have far wider applications in terms of tourism promotion, recreation, agricultural activities and infrastructural developments. Consideration should be given to increasing its utility by a wider range of users.
- There remains an urgent need to revisit the *Draft Guidelines* and to promote consistency in language and classifications. Further guidance should also be included on how to undertake stakeholder consultation and effective public participation in landscape assessment work, in accordance with the tenets of the European Landscape Convention (ELC).