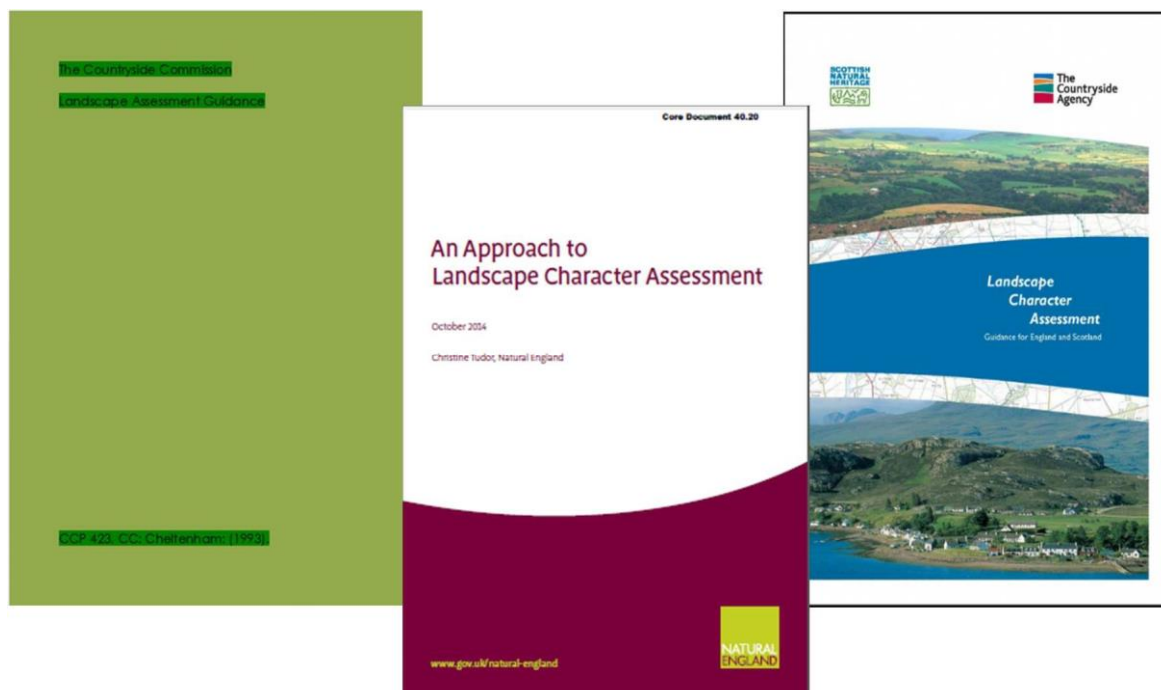


Landscape Character Assessment



Why has this guidance been prepared?

It is timely that this Guidance Note has been produced given that Councils and other bodies such as Landscape Partnerships within Northern Ireland are in the process of considering the production of their own Landscape Character Assessments (LCAs) for their particular area. The intention is to set out clearly the 'best practice' steps that should be followed in relation to the process of LCA.

What is Landscape Character Assessment?

The character of our landscapes varies because of, for example, their underlying geology, soils, topography, land cover, hydrology, historic development, cultural associations and climatic considerations. The combination of characteristics arising from these physical and socio - economic influences, and their often complex interrelationships, makes one landscape different from another.

Landscape Character is defined as, *"A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another, rather than better or worse."*¹

Landscape Character Assessment is defined as:-

“the process of identifying and describing variation in the character of the landscape. It seeks to identify and explain the unique combination of elements and features (characteristics) that make landscapes distinctive. This process results in the production of a Landscape Character Assessment.” ²

Background within the UK

Landscape Character Assessment emerged in the UK in the 1980s when the then Countryside Commission became concerned about the need for a consistent and comprehensive understanding of what gave the countryside of England its character. This led to the publication of ‘Landscape Assessment Guidance’, CCP 423, CC: Cheltenham: (1993). The Countryside Commission and Scottish Natural Heritage subsequently published ‘Landscape Character Assessment: Guidance for England and Scotland’: CC /SNH: (2002). Christine Tudor of Natural England was the author of the current LCA publication ‘**An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment**’ in October 2014 and this is seen by many as a ‘best practice’ guide to characterising the landscape, informing planning and management decisions and monitoring of landscape change over time.

The European Landscape Convention

Landscape Character Assessment gained greater significance within the UK when the Government signed up to the **European Landscape Convention (ELC)** in 2006 - see link below:

[CETS 176 - European Landscape Convention as amended by the 2016 Protocol \(coe.int\)](https://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Html/176.htm)



The strength of the ELC is that it provides a shared and universally accepted definition of ‘landscape’ that encompasses character, as well as a commitment by signatories to ‘identify and assess’ landscapes.

The ELC defines landscape as follows:-

“ ‘Landscape’ means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.” ³

The scope of the ELC applies equally to natural, man-made, rural and urban areas and includes land, inland water and marine areas.

As the ELC acknowledges, “*the landscape is an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere: in urban areas and in the countryside, in degraded areas as well as in areas of high quality, in areas recognised as being of outstanding beauty as well as everyday areas*”⁴

The ‘*Landscape Wheel*’⁵ below serves as a useful guide to the definition of **landscape** showing the natural, cultural and aesthetic/perceptual factors that go to make up the term. It is this composite nature of landscape that is the most important factor that informs the LCA process.



Under **Article 5** (General measures) of the terms of the ELC each party undertakes to:

- (a) *recognise landscapes in law as an essential component of people’s surroundings, an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage, and a foundation of their identity;*
- (b) *establish and implement landscape policies aimed at landscape protection, management and planning through the adoption of the specific measures set out in Article 6;*
- (c) *establish procedures for the participation of the general public, local and regional authorities, and other parties with an interest in the definition and implementation of the landscape policies mentioned in paragraph b above; and*

(d) *integrate landscape into its regional and town planning policies and in its cultural, environmental, agricultural, social and economic policies, as well as in any other policies with possible direct or indirect impact on landscape.*

Under **Article 6 Specific Measures** each party undertakes :-

C. Identification and assessment

(a) :- (i) *to identify its own landscapes throughout its territory (ii) to analyse their characteristics and the forces and pressures transforming them; (iii) to take note of changes;*

(b) :- *to assess the landscapes thus identified, taking into account the particular values assigned to them by the interested parties and the population concerned; and*

E. Implementation

To put landscape policies into effect, each Party undertakes to introduce instruments aimed at protecting, managing and/or planning the landscape.⁶

Planning Policy Context within Northern Ireland

The **Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035** directs policy to **“Recognise and promote the conservation of local identity and distinctive landscape character.** *Landscape character is what makes an area unique. It is defined as a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements, be it natural (soil, landform) and/or human (for example settlement and development) in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another, rather than better or worse. We can only make informed and responsible decisions on the management and planning of sustainable future landscapes if we pay proper regard to their existing character.”⁷*

The **Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (SPPS): 2015** states that *“ The Local Development Plan (LDP) process will play an important role for Councils in identifying key features and assets of the countryside and balancing the needs of rural areas and communities with the protection of the environment. This should include an environmental assets appraisal and landscape assessment which will provide the evidence base for the purposes of bringing forward an appropriate policy approach to development in the countryside. This should take into account Landscape Character Assessments.”⁸*

It also states that:-

“In plan-making councils should take full account of the implications of proposed land use zonings, locations for development and settlement limits on natural heritage features and landscape character within or adjoining the plan area.”⁹

Why carry out a Landscape Character Assessment?

Landscape Character Assessment is relevant to a wide range of users including landscape professionals, local authorities, planning departments, community groups, consultants, developers, private practices, landowners and the voluntary sector.

All landscapes matter to someone. The publication of a robust, auditable and transparent, baseline Landscape Character Assessment can not only help us to understand our landscapes but it can also assist in informing judgements and decisions concerning the management of change. Landscape Character Assessments can help influence the planning, management and protection of our landscape and environment. Landscape Character Assessment may inform, for example:

Planning – development management decisions, place-making and master planning including the siting, design and massing of development, Environmental Impact Assessment, Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, development plan decisions that involve designations, planning policy, Strategic Environmental Assessment, minerals constraints planning, renewable energy strategies, landscape sensitivity, capacity and cumulative impact studies, monitoring of changes in the landscape over time etc.

Management – Green Infrastructure and other relevant plans and programmes such as agri-environment schemes, woodland strategies, waterways strategies etc.

Protection (conserve and maintain) – Local Development Plan landscape designations.

As highlighted above there is scope for Landscape Character Assessments to assist with the production of Local Development Plans and to inform land use designations and policy, and as described later they can be applied at a variety of scales including district wide, settlement or site specific scale.

Landscape character assessments could therefore be used to help inform the identification of special countryside areas, areas of high scenic quality, local landscape policy areas, sensitive or vulnerable areas, areas of degradation, areas under significant development pressure and inform capacity studies etc.

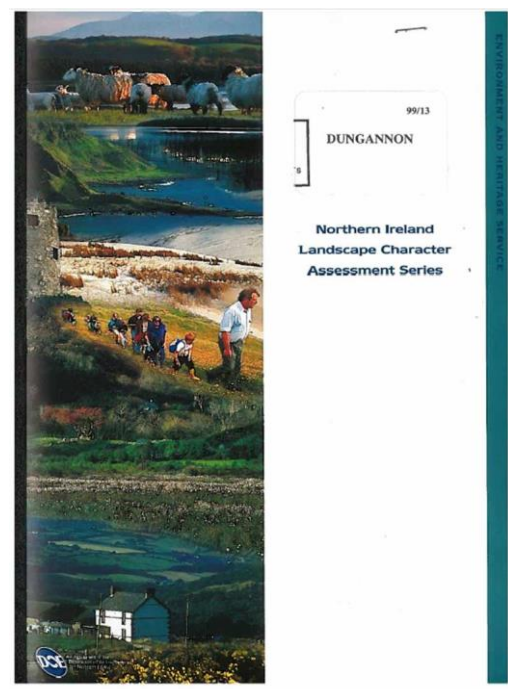
Landscape Character Assessment in Northern Ireland

The following assessments represent the development of landscape and seascape character assessment in Northern Ireland in chronological order:-

The '**Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment Series**' (NILCA Series) was published in July 1999. It recognises the inherent diversity of the landscape character in Northern Ireland and identifies 130 landscape character areas (LCAs) within 26 reports, one for each of the former council areas. Each character area contains a list of the key characteristics for the area, a landscape description, commentary on the landscape condition, sensitivity to change and principles for landscape management and accommodating new development. This assessment has not been reviewed or updated. There has been a substantial amount of development since the publication of this assessment and aspects of the recommendations and comments may not currently apply.

The information on the landscape profiles for each of the 130 LCAs is available on the DAERA website along with added biodiversity and geodiversity profiles for each LCA in the NILCA series (see link below):-

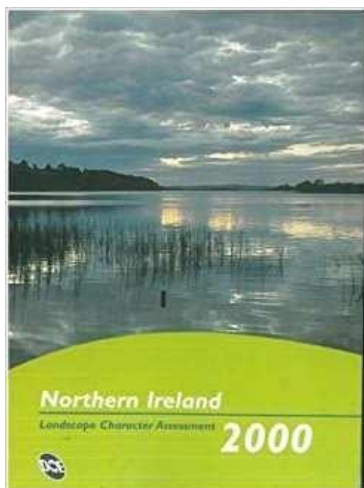
[Search | DAERA \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](https://daera-ni.gov.uk)



The biodiversity profiles list the key characteristics of each LCA, describe the key biodiversity components, consider the issues and suggest actions to improve biodiversity. The geodiversity profiles outline the geomorphology and landscape setting of each LCA and list the key elements present. It is essential when considering the geodiversity of an individual character area that regard is given to adjacent character areas and to the larger regions within which they are located.

In addition to the information on the DAERA website, the hard copy 26 reports also included two further analysis sections which did not form part of the baseline LCA, namely:-

- A Landscape Analysis and Settlement Settings Map and
- An analysis of principal settlements including their landscape setting and the principles for the siting and design of new development.



The following year a regional report covering the whole of Northern Ireland was published, the '**Northern Ireland Landscape Assessment 2000**. An Appreciation and Analysis of the Landscapes of the Region'. This report addressed the diversity of local landscape character, key components and forces for change and included strategic advice on how to tackle the effects of development and land use change both in the countryside and in the urban fringe (the report and map of the 130 LCAs are available in the following link below):-

[An Appreciation and Analysis of the Landscapes of the Region - LCA | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](http://daera-ni.gov.uk)

A further study which used the NILCA series as its basis was the Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) "**Wind energy development in Northern Ireland's landscapes**" published in August 2010:

[Wind Energy Development in Northern Ireland Landscapes | Department for Infrastructure \(infrastructure-ni.gov.uk\)](http://infrastructure-ni.gov.uk)

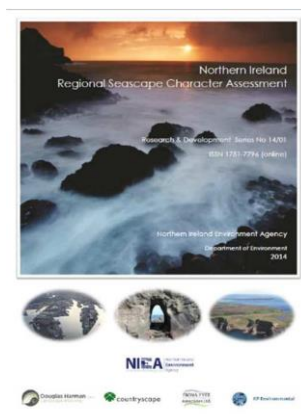
The guidance is based on the sensitivity of Northern Ireland's landscapes to wind energy development and contains an assessment of each of the 130 LCAs by referencing the characteristics and values associated with each character area, providing broad strategic guidance in relation to the landscape and visual impacts of wind energy development. It recognises, however, that every development proposal is unique and there remains a need for detailed consideration of the landscape and visual impacts of individual applications on a case by case basis, as well as for consideration of PPS18 and other regional policy.



As a natural progression in the NILCA series, the ' **Northern Ireland Regional Seascape Character Assessment** ' was published in 2014.

[Northern Ireland Regional Seascape Character Assessment | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](http://daera-ni.gov.uk)

This was based on the best practice guidance "An Approach to Seascape Character Assessment" by Natural England, published in October 2012

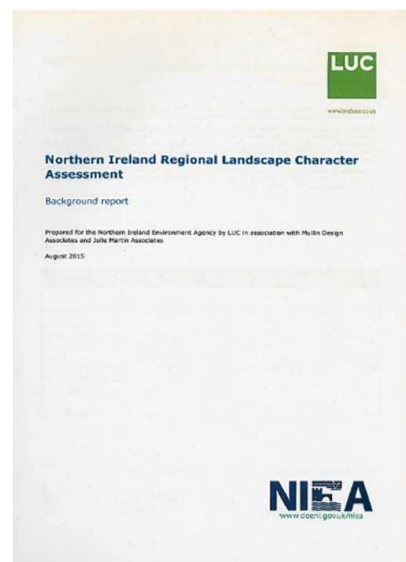


The aim of the study is to provide a strategic understanding of different areas of regional seascape character along the Northern Ireland coast, complementing similar assessments undertaken elsewhere in the UK and further contribute to promoting the protection, management and planning of the seascape and support European co-operation on landscape issues.

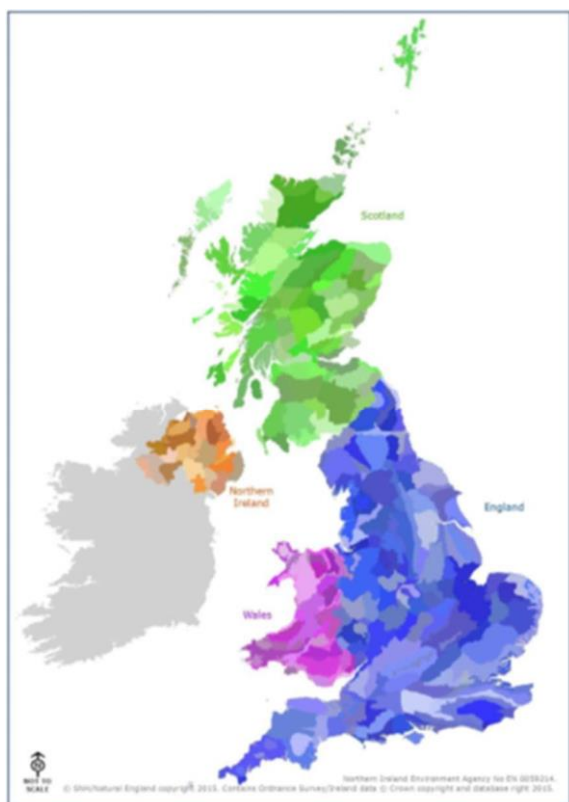
The description of each of the 24 seascape character areas relate to its neighbouring terrestrial LCAs with coastline (as described in the NILCA Series) and takes account of boundaries identified in relation to neighbouring seascape areas for the British and Irish coastline.

Following this the ‘**Northern Ireland Regional Landscape Character Assessment**’ (NIRLCA) was uploaded on to the then DOE (NI) website in February 2016 before being posted on the DAERA website in June 2016. This provides a strategic overview of the landscape within 26 LCAs, setting the context for more detailed local studies to follow in future (see link below)

[Regional Landscape Character Areas map viewer | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs \(daera-ni.gov.uk\)](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/Regional-Landscape-Character-Areas-map-viewer)



Each of these regional LCAs is a recognisable landscape with its own distinct character, identity and sense of place.



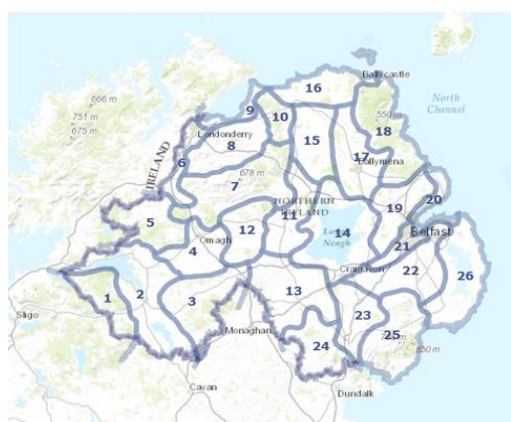
The NIRLCA, which was peer reviewed by Natural England, is, as can be seen in the map adjacent, comparable in scale and grain of assessment with other national assessments carried out in the rest of the UK ie:- National Character Areas of England, Landscapes of Scotland Map and the Landscape Map of Wales. It draws together information on people and place and the combinations of nature, culture and perception which make each part of Northern Ireland’s landscape unique and provides a sound broad evidence base.

The NIRLCA enables informed decisions to be made concerning the planning and management of Northern Ireland’s landscapes, guides policy development and designations, identifies opportunities for local action and is

useful in terms of targeting resources and the monitoring of landscape changes over time. DAERA NIEA intend to reassess this assessment every 5 years, and update it if necessary. The Republic of Ireland are commencing their own regional scale LCA termed the 'National Landscape Character Assessment for Ireland' using the same methodology we have used in the NIRLCA.

The Methodology for carrying out a Landscape Character Assessment

An example of recognised best practice methodology is defined and illustrated in **Natural England's 'An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment'** (2014). Landscape Character



Assessment can be carried out at any scale. The purpose of the assessment will influence choice of scale and methodology used.

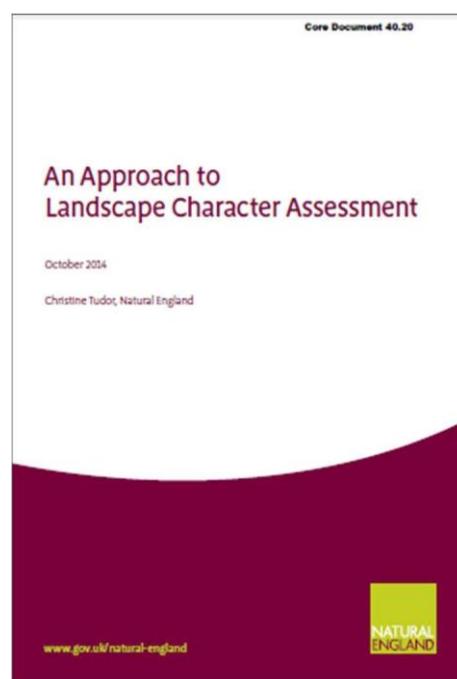
The Natural England methodology was used most recently in the production of the NIRLCA where 26 regional Landscape Character Areas were identified.

26 Regional Landscape Character Areas

The three key levels at which such assessments are usually carried out are:-

National and Regional Scale – typically at 1:250,000 identifying broad patterns in the variation of landscape character – assessments at this scale often provide the context for more detailed assessments. Boundaries tend to represent wide zones of transition. Assessments at this scale inevitably involve a degree of generalisation which limits their use at the more local scale, however they can be very useful for strategic purposes, and they can provide the context and starting point for more detailed landscape character assessments.

Local Authority Scale – applied at the county, unitary authority or district level, at 1:50,000 or 1:25,000 for identifying landscape areas – landscape character traverses administrative boundaries so care needs to be taken to ensure assessments on either side of administrative boundaries match up.



Assessments at this scale, for example those for local authority areas, National Parks, and AONBs, should sit within the context of any existing higher level national / regional assessment. They can also draw upon information from Landscape Character Assessments carried out at a more detailed level. Sometimes 1:25,000 is used where local authority areas are small, where only part of an area is being assessed, or where more precise boundaries are required to inform policy. This scale may also be appropriate when dealing with the urban fringe, and where an element of townscape analysis is included. It should be understood that boundary differences between broad scale and intermediate scale assessments are likely to arise because boundaries drawn at the former scale can in reality be several miles wide – they are much less precise than more detailed assessments.

Local Scale or Site Level – at approximately 1:10,000 or larger scales. Where greater detail is required a Landscape Character Assessment may be carried out at a more detailed level, such as 1:10,000, e.g. to inform:-

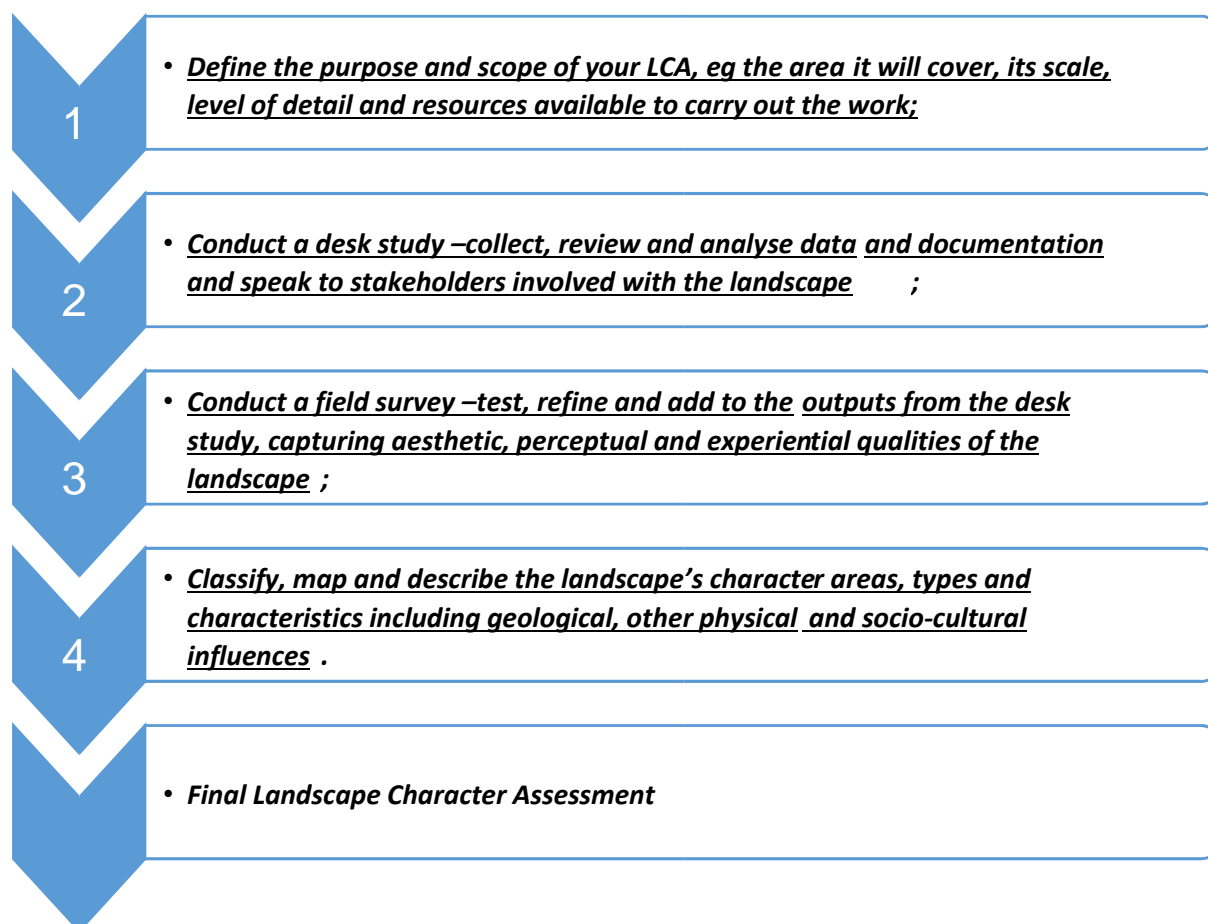
- a. the scale, layout, and design of new development such as housing;
- b. assessment of a particularly complex landscape / townscape;
- c. place based decision making – e.g. Local Landscape Character Assessments are increasingly being undertaken by local community groups;
- d. the Landscape Impact and Visual Impact Assessment associated with an Environmental Impact Assessment of a particular development.

Depending upon the geographic extent of the assessment this level of assessment can be particularly resource intensive. Most assessments at this scale will need to be undertaken from scratch, but they should be compatible with existing broader scale assessments.

The role and importance of Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

GIS has increased in importance, aiding the assembly, analysis and manipulation of data derived from desk and field study. However, these processes should still be informed by professional judgement, to identify areas of distinct landscape character and to decide whether different areas are sufficiently similar to be grouped together as one landscape character area, for example. The skill in carrying out this type of classification is to be able to recognise and describe consistent patterns of attributes, from map overlays and other information, and to relate these to variations in character identified through field survey, and stakeholder engagement. GIS may be utilised, but it is important to avoid a rigid and computer driven approach at this level. Sense of place and patterns of local distinctiveness will be important when identifying, and describing, character at this scale.

The **4 main steps of Landscape Character Assessment** are as follows (an example of a detailed process is described in Annex 1 on page 14¹⁰):-



These four steps apply equally to all levels of LCA from national/regional to local authority level and local/site level.

Reviewing Landscape Character Assessments

If a Landscape Character Assessment already exists for an area, guidance in Natural England’s ‘**An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment**’ (2014) provides an indication of issues that could be considered to inform whether, or not, an existing LCA can be used for a particular task.

All Landscape Character Assessments represent a snapshot in time and, depending upon drivers for change and rates of change, Landscape Character Areas will need to be reviewed

and updated as time progresses. Planning policy, for example, may be subject to change and its implementation is constantly being refined through operational practice, planning appeals and case law. This may mean, for example, that types of development may change and this may in turn affect the landscape character of an area.

References:-

1. European Landscape Convention: Article 1 (a)
2. European Landscape Convention: Article 6 (C, E) Identification and assessment
3. European Landscape Convention: Preamble
4. Natural England : An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment Annex 1 (2014)
5. Natural England : An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment (2014): Figure 1
6. Natural England : An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment Annex 1 (2014)
7. Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035: para 3.31
8. Strategic Planning Policy for Northern Ireland (SPPS) Sept 2015: para 6.76
9. Strategic Planning Policy for Northern Ireland (SPPS) Sept 2015: para 6.195
10. Natural England : An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment (2014): Figure 2

Annex 1: Landscape Character Assessment Process

