

Chapter 23. Landscape character

Under the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), planning authorities have a duty to include in the development plan objectives for the preservation of the character of the landscape and the preservation of views and prospects. They also have powers to designate areas of special amenity, within which development may be prevented or limited, and landscape conservation areas, within which exempted development may be brought within planning control.

23.1 National policy on landscape character

23.1.1 National Planning Framework

The NPF recognises the importance of Ireland’s landscape character and quality as key assets for quality of life. It indicates that the protection, management and planning of the landscape is interconnected with the National Landscape Strategy for Ireland. It also signals the preparation of a national landscape character assessment.

NPO 14 protects and promotes the sense of place and culture and the quality, character and distinctiveness of the Irish rural landscape that make Ireland’s rural areas authentic and attractive as places to live, work and visit.

NPO 61 commits to landscape protection, management and change through the preparation of a National Landscape Character Map and development of guidance on local landscape character assessments, (including historic landscape characterisation) to ensure a consistent approach to landscape character assessment, particularly across planning and administrative boundaries.

At the time of drafting this Development Plan (2024), the envisaged National Landscape Character Map and guidance had not been published.

23.1.2 National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025

As a signatory of the Council of Europe’s European Landscape Convention (ELC), Ireland is obliged to implement policy changes and objectives concerning the management, protection and planning of the landscape.

The National Landscape Strategy (published by the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht in 2015) ensures compliance with the ELC by establishing principles for protecting and enhancing the landscape, while positively managing its change. It provides a high-level policy framework with six core objectives, one of which is the development of a National Landscape Character Assessment. Until a national LCA is prepared, the strategy document indicates that the primary role of planning authorities in decision-making relating to landscape issues will continue to be governed by the provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended).

23.1.3 Landscape Assessment Guidelines (2000)

The Department of Environment and Local Government (DoELG) issued *Landscape and Landscape Assessment Guidelines* in 2000. The Guidelines, which have not been updated since publication, are intended to assist planning authorities in understanding their obligations in respect of landscape issues when preparing development plans. The Guidelines stress the need for a proactive view of how development and change can be accommodated in the landscape and also highlight the need to assess all landscapes instead of focusing on ‘special’ ones.

23.2 Landscape Character Assessment

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is a process that describes, maps and classifies landscapes objectively. Defining landscape character enables an understanding to be formed of the inherent value and importance of individual landscape elements and the processes that may alter landscape character in the future.

The cultural and ecological aspects of the landscape cannot be separated from its physical and visual characteristics, so all of these elements are considered. The County's landscape is not homogeneous, and neither are the pressures on it. It is inevitable that different parts of the county will be subject to different development pressures and will exhibit differing abilities to absorb and accommodate such development pressure.

23.2.1 Sligo Landscape Characterisation Map

A landscape characterisation and appraisal study was commissioned by Sligo County Council and completed by CAAS Environmental Consultants in 1996. This resulted in a map that was the basis for the **Landscape Characterisation Map**, which formed part of all Sligo County Development Plans prepared after 1999.

The purpose of the 1996 landscape characterisation study was to assist the Council in particular where it is to:

- promote the understanding of Sligo's landscape in terms of its unique character, and recognise what elements should be preserved, conserved or enhanced;
- consider the sensitivity and capacity of the landscape to absorb new development;
- devise policies and objectives as guidance to planners and other parties, to ensure that change is favourable to landscape character.

Both the *National Landscape Strategy for Ireland (2015)* and the *National Planning Framework (2018)* indicate the government's intention to develop a National Landscape Character Assessment.

In the interest of a consistent approach to landscape characterisation and amenity protection measures across the Northern and Western Region, the RSES includes a relevant objective, RPO 5.2, which states that the Regional Assembly will prepare a **Regional Landscape Character Assessment** in order to promote improved landscape management and designation.

The existing landscape characterisation and associated map for County Sligo will be reviewed in due course, to ensure compliance with the national and regional assessments, and with any new ministerial guidance.

23.2.2 Landscape designations

The LC Map classifies the County according to its visual sensitivity and capacity to absorb new development without compromising the scenic character of certain areas. The Map (which is available separately in a large format – A1) has proven robust in both facilitating development and conserving fragile landscapes.

The LC Map shows the following designations:

- **Normal Rural Landscapes:** areas with natural features (e.g. topography, vegetation) which generally have the capacity to absorb a wide range of new development forms – these are farming areas and cover most of the County.

Certain areas located within normal rural landscapes may have superior visual qualities, due to their specific topography, vegetation pattern, the presence of traditional farming or residential structures. These areas may have limited capacity for development or may be able to absorb new development only if it is designed to integrate seamlessly with the existing environment.

- **Sensitive Rural Landscapes:** areas that tend to be open in character, highly visible, with intrinsic scenic qualities and a low capacity to absorb new development – e.g. Knocknarea, the Dartry Mountains, the Ox Mountains, Aughris Head, Mullaghmore Head etc.
- **Visually Vulnerable Areas:** distinctive and conspicuous natural features of significant beauty or interest, which have extremely low capacity to absorb new development – examples are the Ben Bulbin plateau, mountain and hill ridges, the areas adjoining Sligo’s coastline, most lakeshores etc.
- **Scenic Routes:** public roads passing through or close to Sensitive Rural Landscapes, or in the vicinity of Visually Vulnerable Areas, and affording unique scenic views of distinctive natural features or vast open landscapes.

In addition to remote views, scenic routes have often a distinctive visual character conferred by old road boundaries, such as stone walls, established hedgerows, lines of mature trees, adjoining cottages or farmyards together with their traditional, planted enclosures etc., all of which warrant protection.

Appendix C contains a list of roads designated as Scenic Routes and details of the scenic views to be preserved.

23.3 Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC)

Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) is concerned with identifying and detailing the contribution of the past to the present-day landscape and broadens the understanding of landscape character. HLC is an important addition to landscape management, because it considers the historical development of the landscape and the relationship of buildings and monuments to landscape patterns. The Heritage Council has issued guidance on Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) in Ireland: Policy and Best Practice Guidance (2010).

Landscape Conservation Areas

Section 204 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended enables a Planning Authority to designate a Landscape Conservation Area, within its functional area, in order to preserve it. During the life of this plan, the designation of Landscape Conservation Area(s), in respect of their core areas for (a) Cuil Irra Peninsula, (b) Carrowkeel and (c) Inishmurray will be explored.

Landscape character protection policies

It is the policy of Sligo County Council to:

P-LCP-1 Protect the physical landscape, visual and scenic character of County Sligo and seek to preserve the County's landscape character.

Planning applications for developments that have the potential to impact significantly and adversely upon landscape character, especially in *Sensitive Rural Landscapes*, *Visually Vulnerable Areas* and along *Scenic routes*, may be required to be accompanied by a visual impact assessment using agreed and appropriate viewing points and methods for the assessment.

P-LCP-2 Discourage any developments that would be detrimental to the unique visual character of designated Visually Vulnerable Areas.

P-LCP-3 Preserve the scenic views listed in **Appendix C** and the distinctive visual character of designated *Scenic Routes* by controlling development along such Routes and other roads, while facilitating developments that may be tied to a specific location or, in the case of individual houses, to the demonstrated needs of applicants to reside in a particular area.

In all cases, strict location, siting and design criteria shall apply, as set out in **Section 33.4 Housing in rural areas** (development management standards).

P-LCP-4 Strictly control new development in designated Sensitive Rural Landscapes, while considering exceptions that can demonstrate a clear need to locate in the area concerned.

Ensure that any new development in designated Sensitive Rural Landscapes:

- does not impinge in any significant way on the character, integrity and distinctiveness of the area;
- does not detract from the scenic value of the area;
- meets high standards of siting and design;
- satisfies all other criteria with regard to, inter alia, servicing, public safety and prevention of pollution.

P-LCP-5 Protect the County's Sensitive Rural Landscapes from the visual intrusion of large-scale energy and telecommunications infrastructure.

P-LCP-6 Protect the archaeological heritage, rural character, setting and amenity of the Cuil Irra Peninsula, Carrowkeel and Inishmurray.

P-LCP-7 Preserve the status of traditionally open/unfenced landscapes. Fencing in upland or amenity areas will not normally be permitted unless such fencing is essential to the viability of the farm and conforms to best agricultural practice. The nature of the material to be used, the height of the fence and, in the case of a wire fence, the type of wire to be used will be taken into account. Barbed-wire shall not be used for the top line of wire. Stiles or gates at appropriate places will be required.

P-LCP-8 Where possible, preserve the open character of commonage and other hill land and secure access thereto.

Landscape character protection objectives

It is a policy of Sligo County Council to:

- O-LCP-1** Seek the designation of a Landscape Conservation Area, pursuant to Section 204 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), for the Cuil Irra Peninsula and Carrowkeel.
- O-LCP-2** Seek the designation of a Landscape Conservation Area, pursuant to Section 204 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended), for Inishmurray.
- O-LCP-3** Prepare an updated Landscape Character Assessment for County Sligo in conjunction with the forthcoming Renewable Energy Strategy (refer to objective O-REN-1 in Chapter 31). **[PA-69]**
- O-LCP-4** Investigate the feasibility and potential of North Sligo (Ben Bulbin and its hinterland) and Lough Arrow as National Parks / National Recreation Areas in conjunction with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and other relevant stakeholders. **[PA-70]**