

## **Newcastle City Council**

# **The Newcastle Character Assessment: Protecting Newcastle's Character and Local Distinctiveness**

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## **Background and user guide - August 2017**

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### **Foreword**

This document is about protecting and reinforcing the identity and distinctiveness of Newcastle's landscapes and townscapes and ensuring that new development respects what is there and what is valued and makes the city a better place. For certain sites this might be by creating new character and identity where before the sense of place was weak or negative. For others it will be by retaining and enhancing an already strong and attractive character.

The Council is committed to promoting places that are attractive, have identity and function well within their surroundings, improving the wider public realm and protecting the urban and rural landscape. Important views will be protected. We want development that will contribute to quality of life for residents as well as improving the impressions for visitors arriving in or passing through the City.

Our efforts to encourage protection, enhancement and management of our landscape, green spaces, trees and biodiversity will continue. The earlier assessment of rural areas is now extended into the urban areas and the results are being used in this document which underpins the Core Strategy and Development Plan Documents particularly policies CS15 and CS18.

# **The Newcastle Character Assessment: Protecting Newcastle's Character and Local Distinctiveness**

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# The Newcastle Character Assessment: Protecting Newcastle's Character and Local Distinctiveness

## 1.0 Introduction: The background to Character Assessment

### 1.1 What is a character assessment?

Character assessment is a way of examining the landscape and the features within it, natural as well as man-made, including buildings, roads and vegetation. The object is to identify what makes one area recognisably different from another: in other words what gives a 'sense of place' or identity. This assessment is visual – what the area looks like. Character can be positive or negative. The assessment also picks out the good and bad aspects of particular areas including any features that are very special, unusual, distinctive or unique. The underlying landscape determines the character of towns and cities, villages and countryside and influences our daily life. The landscape in an urban area is strongly influenced by the buildings and the term 'townscape' is often used.

**1.2** Landscape assessment has been a feature of planning policy for many years. A landscape assessment in 1989 looked at the quality and amenity value of Newcastle's Green Belt countryside. This was reviewed and updated in 1994 as a background paper to the Newcastle Unitary Development Plan.

**1.3** In 1998 the Countryside Commission (now Natural England) published their study: **The Character of England's Natural and Man-made Landscape**. Volume 1 covers the North East of England.

**1.4** Newcastle City Council has been preparing Conservation Area Management Plans incorporating detailed character assessments, in line with the recommendations of National Planning Policy Guidance. There are currently 12 Conservation Areas in Newcastle.

**1.5** Some towns and cities started to carry out character assessments covering the urban area as well as the rural. The historic town of Winchester, and the seaside resort of Worthing were cited as early good practice examples.

**1.6** The Newcastle Character Assessment has been prepared as a reference suite of documents and is to be available on the City's website, as well as from the Planning Department. A printed document is not to be provided.

**1.7** A further element of Character Assessment includes the 2003 Urban Landscape Study of the Tyne Gorge, prepared by Land Use Consultants in a joint commission funded by Newcastle and Gateshead Councils and by English Heritage. The study was prepared following similar principles and guidance to the main character assessment and has proved the worth of such an exercise. The Tyne Gorge Study is also available online.

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## **2.0 Purpose of the Newcastle Character Assessment**

**2.1** Newcastle's core strategy recognises a need for character assessment as a tool to promote sustainable development. This assessment meets the requirement set out in the core strategy and will ensure that the character studies and guidance prepared by Newcastle City Council are treated as a material consideration in the course of the planning and development process.

**2.2** Landscapes and townscapes are always changing and will continue to do so - in some places suddenly and dramatically, in others, gradually and subtly. The character or quality of a certain place can be positive, neutral or weak, and the strength of this character can be low, moderate or strong. Most people will welcome regeneration and change for the better in the places that need it, but will also want to see development that respects and reinforces the positive elements in the local scene, whilst removing or reducing the negative. The purpose of the character assessment studies is to provide policy makers, planners, developers and designers with information about what gives a locality its own identity and to provide guidance for new development. Protecting or re-creating 'sense of place' is now acknowledged as an important part of decision making in planning and regeneration.

## **2.3 Objectives**

- To introduce the Newcastle Character Assessment and the Urban Landscape Study of the Tyne Gorge as key reference works to be regarded as "material considerations" in the planning and development process.
- To identify the relative strengths and values of each character area and the strengths and weaknesses to be addressed as an integral part of the development process.
- To give a clear steer for developers identifying the areas and features that merit protection and enhancement, those that require improvement and reinforcement and those that require change and renewal to create a new or more positive identity.
- To provide a benchmark for measuring the impact of change and the effectiveness of the Council's policies and guidance.

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- 2.4** The survey data, guidance, maps and reference material contained in the character assessment will make it easier for developers to understand and take account of local character and distinctiveness, and to include this in design and access statements. The material will be a valuable reference for development control and for members of the public wishing to respond to planning consultation. The guidance will help reduce the time spent debating what is or is not in keeping with local character and will help smooth and speed up the planning application process ensuring this is in line with national policy guidance.
- 2.6** The Character assessment is also expected to be a useful evidence base for other council initiatives.
- 2.7** Above all, the character assessment will act as a reminder for everyone that there are features of significance and value to be found in most local neighbourhoods: sometimes these are everyday features that are taken for granted, until one day they are threatened or removed and it is too late to do anything about it.

## **3.0 Planning Policy Context**

### **3.5 Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan for Gateshead and Newcastle upon Tyne 2010-2030**

#### **Policy CS15 Place-Making**

This policy emphasises the importance of the surrounding environment on the quality of life. It states that development should respond positively to local distinctiveness and character, or create a new sense of place where this is needed.

#### **Policy CS18 Green Infrastructure and the Natural Environment**

This policy covers the importance of the natural environment to the economic, social and economic needs of communities, and proposes protection, enhancement and management of Green Assets including distinctive landscape character.

Both policies provide a basis for use of the Newcastle Character Assessment as a material consideration in the development process.

These are supported by the Development Management Policies in the Development and Allocations Plan. Policy DM20 – Design covers character and integration, with supporting paragraph 6.6.2 specifically referencing the use of the Newcastle Character Assessment and the Areas of Local Landscape and Townscape Significance (ALLS and ALTS).

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## **4.0 Methodology of the Newcastle Character Assessment**

### **4.1 Townscape Character Assessment - Survey methodology**

- A plan of draft urban character areas was produced, based on a desktop assessment and local knowledge of the urban areas. These were generally in the range of 5 to 200 hectares, with most areas toward the middle of this range.
- An extensive site survey over the period from 2001 to 2003 analysed in some detail the character of all the urban areas of the city. This analysis involved reassessment of the boundaries of the character areas as the surveys progressed, with character areas being defined solely by the built character of an area, effectively ignoring geographic or political boundaries.
- As part of this process the draft areas were changed significantly, with some being sub-divided, some merged, and the boundaries between others amended, sometimes substantially. In some places an area was clearly defined by a consistent and distinctive character, with easily established boundaries. In others the character was much more variable, and in some cases the boundaries were defined less by the character of the area itself but by the fact that it was clearly not part of the various neighbouring areas. Eventually 180 urban character areas were identified. These were given both a reference number and also a name, with the names being based largely on local geographic districts, areas and features. Only once the boundaries of a character area had been satisfactorily established was the survey assessment undertaken.
- This used a standard form which addressed a number of aspects of the urban character. This was based on both current guidance and best practice examples from other areas. Aspects covered included the land uses, building ages, condition, landmarks and views, urban form, building types, local detail or character, heritage, descriptive elements (movement, colour etc), visual impact of vegetation, ecology, topography, and the nature of open spaces.
- As far as possible the categories were standardised to ensure consistency across all the survey areas, often with primary and secondary ratings to get a feel for the key elements of a given area. Thus for example there were 10 land use classes (residential, industrial, office/business etc) which were graded as being primary, secondary or insignificant (ungraded), and these were assessed both for the area itself, and also in relation to the surrounding areas.
- Some aspects were simply descriptive (eg elements of local character), while others inevitably involved a more subjective assessment (for example stimulus, ranging from boring through bland and interesting to invigorating).

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- In all cases the assessments were undertaken on site, and in most cases two surveyors undertook the surveys, particularly in the earlier stages, and one individual was involved in all the surveys, which it is hoped has provided a degree of consistency to both the methodology and the scoring.
- Upon completion of the surveying all the information was entered into an Access database, and also into a GIS based project, allowing mapping of the data. Photographs were also taken of all the character areas to provide a visual record of typical areas, individual features or areas of interest, and notable views within and from the area.
- In order to enable areas to have some form of grading applied, a scoring system was developed based upon those categories for which a consistent and meaningful score could be applied. This was based on the ratings for the General Condition, Consistency of Character, Sense of Place, Heritage and Stimulus. The last three were aggregated to give a total score for the Character Value or Quality Rating of an area, while the first two were also added to give a value for Character Strength.
- These aggregate values were then grouped to give three grades for each category, namely weak, neutral and positive for the Quality Rating and low, moderate and strong for the Character Strength.
- The scores were also plotted on a GIS map and evaluated against the expectations from the survey process and local knowledge. The scored results were as would have been predicted with no unexpected results. This provided reassurance that the scoring system was reliable and was therefore useable as a basis for the development guidance.
- This was then used as the basis for the definition of Areas of Local Townscape Significance (ALTS), which were areas which scored as Positive for Quality Rating and a Character Strength of Moderate or Strong (see Appendix for more detail).

## **4.2 Rural Character Assessment - Survey methodology**

- Following completion of the survey of the urban character areas the process was then extended out to cover the rural areas to achieve coverage of the whole city area. The rural areas had been surveyed in 1989, with 84 identified areas. The boundaries of these were derived essentially from geographic features such as land cover and topography, particularly where this limits the extent of the land that can be seen.

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- Unlike many urban areas, variation between rural areas is generally much more gradual, relying on subtle changes of land use and topography, and is much more reflective of the underlying landscape than the urban areas where the built form is generally the dominant feature. As a consequence distinct edge features such as roads were needed to help identify a useable boundary between areas which may be of similar or of different character.
- The 1989 survey was reviewed with further survey assessment in 1994, and the results of this survey, which characterised 70 individual areas, were used to derive the Area of Exceptional Landscape Value (AELV) classification used to define areas of very high landscape value requiring particular protection in the 1998 UDP.
- To further update this as part of the Citywide landscape and townscape character assessment the methodology was reviewed in the light of the latest guidance, and also taking into account the methodology used in the urban surveys. Consideration was given to using the same form for both but it was considered that the issues which needed to be addressed were sufficiently different for this not to be generally practical.
- One consequence of this was that a decision had to be made prior to surveying as to whether an area should be assessed as a rural or an urban area, and in this context some areas such as the Town Moor and Jesmond Dene, which had been included in the 1994 survey as areas of rural character, were in this case considered as urban areas, forming part of the surrounding urban fabric, albeit of a different character to the majority of urban areas.
- However it was considered that the urban assessment asked sufficient questions to still enable a viable assessment of these particular areas to be made, as many of the questions overlap on both the urban and rural forms, with the differences predominantly concentrating on issues such as building types and features (largely of minor importance in rural areas) and the detail of rural/agricultural vegetation and land use patterns (largely of little relevance to urban areas).
- Similarly some areas such as parts of the Newcastle Great Park had been developed in the interim period to the point where these were now clearly of predominantly urban character.
- The character area boundaries used as the basis of the previous assessments were again used as the basis of the new surveys, with the validity of these boundaries reassessed as part of this process. These varied less than the urban areas but were of comparable overall size, typically ranging from 13Ha up to 350Ha, with again most areas toward the middle of this range.
- Like the urban areas the assessment resulted in some changes to boundaries, and as well as those areas which were transferred into the urban assessment, some areas were merged, and others subdivided. However in the main changes were relatively minor and in most cases the areas retained their previous boundaries. In all there were 64 rural character areas identified in the 2004-2005 survey.

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- Following completion of the site surveys the areas were again graded using the most relevant categories. In this case the Character Value or Quality Rating was derived from the assessments of heritage, rarity, stimulus and pleasure, while the Character Strength was derived from the assessments of harmony, security, general condition and ecology.
- As with the urban character areas the scores were aggregated and graded, and these were then plotted on a GIS system. The results were tested against both what would have been expected and also against the results of the previous surveys. In both cases the correlation was good, and where the Quality Rating scores were different from the previous survey this largely reflected changes on the ground, for example areas of former open-cast mining which were now regenerating well.
- This was then used as the basis for the definition of Areas of Local Landscape Significance (ALTS), which again were areas which scored as Positive for Quality Rating and a Character Strength of Moderate or Strong (see Appendix for more detail).

## **4.3 Broader Character Zones**

- Having undertaken the detailed assessments of the 180 urban character areas and the 64 rural ones, an analysis was made of whether these usefully fitted into broader groupings or zones. It was considered that in fact there were groupings which, while not wholly consistent, did provide a useful larger scale overview. In the main for the urban areas the resulting seven zones represent the general date of original development, in bands generally progressing out from the city centre, whereas for the predominantly rural areas the six zones primarily reflect the underlying landscape and topography, along with land use.

## **4.4 2017 survey update.**

- The Character areas were reviewed in 2017 when a number of areas had changed significantly while others remained virtually unchanged. The Newcastle Character Assessment was therefore updated, and as part of this process 4 rural areas north of Kingston Park were transferred to urban areas, reflecting the build out of the Newcastle Great Park. Further areas will change in the future as the Great Park and also the Strategic Land Release sites are brought forward. However as this survey is an assessment of existing condition, not a predictor of future condition, any future updates can only be assessed once the areas have changed significantly.

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## **5.0 How to use the Newcastle Character Assessment**

### **5.1 Finding the information for the area you are interested in**

- First locate the area you wish to know about using the plan of character zones and areas. Each broad character zone is referenced by a letter. Each area has a number reference: two figures for rural areas, three figures for urban areas.
- Look at the city wide character statement and the zone statement for a general overview. The zones also includes an aerial view of the zone and a map of the character areas within the zone. Use the zone maps to identify individual areas of interest.
- Look at the area assessment, which contains a summary of the survey of the area, a map, an aerial view and a selection of typical photos. The area assessment also contains some guidance notes about future development.
- Look at the plan illustrating the Areas of Local Landscape Significance (ALLS) and Areas of Local Townscape Significance (ALTS). An area within one of these strongly positive character groups will be one where the emphasis should be on retaining and protecting that character. It will be no surprise that all the city's Conservation Areas rate as being moderately to strongly positive. An area with weak, positive character will need efforts to reinforce that character. A neutral or bland area may be one where character could be strengthened and made more positive by directed change and improvement. An area with a strongly negative or weak quality rating is a place where change should be embraced and encouraged, in order to achieve new and strongly positive character. Section 6 below describes the areas that have been defined as having local landscape and townscape significance.
- If your chosen area is within the Tyne Gorge or a Conservation Area, look also at the Tyne Gorge Study and Conservation Area Management Plans (Note that these are cross referenced in the area guidance and the zone statements).

### **5.2 Using the information for planning applications**

Prospective developers will be expected to take into account the information and guidance contained within the Newcastle Character Assessment and to demonstrate clearly in master plans, feasibility studies, Design and Access Statements and other supporting information, how local character and distinctiveness has been considered, and retained or enhanced as appropriate.

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## **6.0 Landscape and Townscape - Areas of Local Significance**

- 6.1** Planning designations are used to identify and provide special protection for features that are particularly significant. At the national scale, landscapes can be designated as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). There are no nationally designated landscapes within Newcastle upon Tyne. National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are recognised for their nationally significant wildlife or geological significance and the wildlife habitats thus protected also confer protection on the landscape: there are five SSSIs within Newcastle. Historic Parks and Gardens are nationally recognised on the English Heritage register: there are 4 within Newcastle.
- 6.2** At the regional scale there are Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC or SNCI) identified and designated by local wildlife trusts: there are currently 26 within Newcastle. There is also recognition of local landscape interest in the 1998 Unitary Development Plan where there were six "Areas of Exceptional Landscape value" consisting of 11 character areas.
- 6.3** Within the built –up area Newcastle has 11 Conservation Areas, a national designation protecting the setting of Listed Buildings and other features of particular historic and architectural importance. There is currently no designation that recognises areas of more local significance, although the Tyne Gorge has been recognised as of particular note, and a Local List of buildings and other features of merit has been compiled for Newcastle.
- 6.4** The character assessment has allowed us to identify areas of local landscape and townscape significance that would benefit from special protection. In these areas the following priority will be given, achieved through the powers given to the City Council and in particular through its roles as Local Highway Authority and Local Planning Authority.
- Protecting trees, woodlands and hedges from harm, using statutory powers.
  - Protecting and enhancing landscape features and wildlife habitats
  - Protecting and enhancing built features, paving and streetscapes
  - Recommending planning approval for developments that clearly demonstrate that they enhance the character of the area.
- 6.5** Newcastle's Areas of Local Landscape Significance (ALLS) and Areas of Local Townscape Significance (ALTS) are those character areas that achieved particularly high scores in the assessments, with both a Positive Quality Rating and a Moderate or Strong Character Strength.

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## **7.0 Monitoring and Review**

- 7.1** The character assessment will need regular review and amendment, and has already had several reviews focussed where areas have changed significantly. Public comment and participation in the process is also welcomed.

## Appendix

### Grading Newcastle's Landscapes and Townscapes

Newcastle's Areas of Local Landscape Significance (ALLS) and Areas of Local Townscape Significance (ALTS) are those character areas that achieved particularly high scores in the assessment:

- For urban areas this is character areas with a Quality Rating of Positive (aggregate score of 16-19) and a Character Strength of Moderate (5-7) or Strong (8-9).
- Similarly for rural areas this is character areas with a Quality Rating of Positive (19-27) and a Character Strength of Moderate (14-17) or Strong (18-26).

#### How were the scores calculated?

When each character area was surveyed, a survey form was completed. The survey forms contain some 20 main headings, and in all address 31 elements or questions in the rural areas, and 38 in the urban areas. These were used for recording information on site and a number of these elements have been used to measure the character value or Quality Rating, and also the Character Strength. The scoring is slightly different for the urban and rural character areas. There is no weighting or complex formula used: the process is a simple numerical calculation, intended to be as transparent as possible. It is not possible to avoid some degree of subjective evaluation in an assessment of this nature.

#### Urban areas.

##### Quality Rating

Score	6c Urban Character: Sense of Place	9 Heritage	13 Stimulus
1			boring
2	weak	weak	boring-bland
3	weak-average	weak-average	bland
4	average	average	bland-interesting
5	average-strong	average-strong	interesting
6	strong	strong	interesting-invigorating
7			invigorating

The scores for each individual area were added together to give an aggregate figure, with Quality Ratings as follows:

- 5 - 9 weak
- 10 - 15 neutral
- 16 - 19 positive

## Character Strength

Score	1 General Condition	14 Consistency of Character
1	poor	
2	poor-average	fragmented
3	average	varied
4	average-good	uniform
5	good	

The scores for each individual area were added together to give an aggregate figure, rating Character Strength as follows:

- 3 - 4 weak
- 5 - 7 moderate
- 8 - 9 strong.

## Rural areas.

### Quality Rating

Score	7 Heritage	15 Rarity	17 Stimulus	18 Pleasure
1			boring	offensive
2	weak		boring-bland	offensive-unpleasant
3	weak-average	ordinary	bland	unpleasant
4	average	ordinary-unusual	bland-interesting	unpleasant-pleasant
5	average--strong	unusual	interesting	pleasant
6	strong	unusual-rare	interesting-invigorating	pleasant-beautiful
7		rare	invigorating	beautiful

The scores for each individual area were added together to give an aggregate figure, with Quality Ratings as follows:

- 7 - 13 low
- 14 - 18 medium
- 19 - 27 high

## **Character Strength**

<b>Score</b>	<b>11 Harmony</b>	<b>16 Security</b>	<b>19 General Condition</b>	<b>20 Ecology</b>
<b>1</b>	chaotic	threatening		
<b>2</b>	chaotic-discordant	threatening-unsettling	poor	weak
<b>3</b>	discordant	unsettling	poor-average	weak-average
<b>4</b>	discordant-balanced	unsettling-safe	average	average
<b>5</b>	balanced	safe	average-good	average-strong
<b>6</b>	balanced-harmonious	safe-comfortable	good	strong
<b>7</b>	harmonious	comfortable		

The scores for each individual area were added together to give an aggregate figure, rating Character Strength as follows:

- 6 -13 weak
- 14 -17 moderate
- 18 - 26 strong