

ROSS-ON-WYE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT PORTFOLIO

1. Introduction

1.1 The material in this Character Assessment Portfolio is primarily intended as a resource for anybody proposing development in Ross-on-Wye, supporting Policies EN1 to EN5 in the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP).

1.2 As those Policies state, any planning application should make clear how its proposals respond positively to the many criteria and characteristics outlined in any or all the material that follows.

1.3 This Portfolio is constructed as it is because, when work on the NDP commenced, there were already several reports and assessments in place relating to aspects of character, design and development. With that in mind, it was clearly inappropriate to either ignore this material or to start totally fresh to resurvey or rewrite. The Portfolio therefore includes some pre-existing material and some produced specifically for the NDP. Not all will be relevant for all applications but, together, they provide comprehensive guidance to which applicants should refer. The material is all intended to be positive and constructive; it is there to ensure high quality design, not to hinder or overly constrain it.

1.4 The various elements of the Portfolio are all introduced below, starting with the pre-existing material.

2. Design and Development Requirements

2.1 This is, in full, the "Design and Development Requirements – A Design Guide for New Development in Herefordshire" produced and adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance by Herefordshire Council in 2004. It was 'supplementary' to the Unitary Development Plan but is a saved policy from the UDP so it still applies.

2.2 The 2004 guide covers all of the county and all developments, and it references other related policies. It provides thorough information about its national and Herefordshire policy context then elaborates and illustrates aspects of "The Design Concept" for any application in terms of:

- Design statement.
- Local context.
- General layout.
- Health and safety.
- Conservation of resources.

2.3 As always, with guidance for very large, complex areas such as Herefordshire, the guidance is general and does not highlight local distinctiveness, notably for Ross. The term 'local distinctiveness' was used frequently in the UDP and in the recent Core Strategy, but it only appears in the 2004 design guide in the Appendix, quoting from the UDP. Recent government guidance, most importantly the National Planning Policy Framework, now places greater emphasis on relating the design of new developments to their local context, provided that robust evidence of that local character is in place. On that basis, although some general points from the 2004 design guide still apply, priority would be expected to be given to fully argued aspects of the local distinctiveness of Ross-on-Wye.

2.4 The guide makes a brief mention of pre-application discussions, encouraging developers to request them, but this only applies to discussions with the authority, not the local community. See Plan Policy EN5.

3. Historic Environments

3.1 There is a draft "Conservation Area Appraisal" for Ross-on-Wye dated 2006. (The map of the designated area to which it relates is in the Portfolio.) It was produced by officers in the Conservation Section of Herefordshire Council, updating and adding to an initial designation in 1970 and a further designation of an expanded area in 1976. It is, however, only a draft; no full, formal, adopted assessment (including management criteria) was completed. (Note also that the area on the map includes land on the opposite side of the river Wye from the town and therefore outside the NDP area.)

3.2 However, there was not previously a full Character Assessment in place and the Conservation Area is currently regarded as 'at risk'. The Conservation Area is clearly anachronistic - it includes the former Oakfields parkland on which the Vaga Crescent and Verschoyle Crescent developments were built in the 1970s and 1980s, and where the last of the parkland trees was felled in early 2018. A revised Conservation Area had been prepared by Herefordshire Council for consultation but this work was not completed. Other energy conservation, economic and traffic pressures have also led to some deterioration in the visual quality of the centre so, in relation to all of this, the policies on design in this Portfolio are crucial.

3.3 The format of the assessment appears to be relatively standard, addressing:

- History, development and archaeology.
- Spatial analysis.
- Character areas and buildings of interest.
- Prevalent building materials and local details.
- Positive areas and features.
- Neutral and intrusive elements.
- General condition, pressures and capacity for change
- Buildings at risk.
- Proposed boundary changes.

3.4 The appraisal suggests a number of boundary changes, both to exclude some areas and include others. These changes were not made.

3.5 Given its focus, there are areas important of the town which were not assessed/appraised for this exercise (see 4. below).

3.6. The Portfolio also contains a map showing the four Scheduled Ancient Monuments within the Ross-on-Wye parish.

4. Rapid Townscape Assessment

4.1 This was produced by officers in the Conservation Section of Herefordshire Council in 2010. It was intended to "contribute to an assessment of the potential of the Ross on Wye settlement area to accommodate growth allocated through the LDF and, eventually, to contribute to the preparation of a design framework for areas of development potential". It was based on a model developed by English Heritage (as was at the time).

4.2 The key objectives were to:

- "Define broad character areas within the Ross on Wye settlement area.
- Describe their visible historic and townscape characteristics in sufficient detail to inform strategic options for spatial planning policy.
- Contribute to an urban capacity study.

- Identify issues that may need to be addressed in the spatial management of the respective areas."

4.3 Key aspects of information sought included:

- "Historic development.
- The mapping of character areas.
- An assessment of significance.
- Recommendations on integrating significant heritage assets with development or renewal."

4.4 The report acknowledges that it was an "extensive" assessment which would be followed by an "intensive" assessment. The latter has not been completed, hence the later and completely complementary community survey work in this Portfolio. The nature and coverage of the report also complements what is in the draft Conservation Area Character Assessment, see above. Though focused primarily on the built area, there are some mentions of the town's rural context.

5. Shopfront Design Guide

5.1 This is another county-wide guide, dated 2011. It states that it has been adopted by Herefordshire Council, linking it to policies in the Unitary Development Plan, but it is not longer in force. The Core Strategy states that it has been superseded by policies in the Core Strategy but these are very general and no mention is made of shopfronts. Despite these points, it is nevertheless valuable and should be referred to in preparing applications.

5.2 The guide covers the following:

- Design Principles (e.g. "respecting the building")
- Other Design Considerations (e.g. "illumination")
- Security Measures
- Accessibility
- Detailing

5.3 It then provides a planning checklist, with specific attention to shopfronts in the Conservation Areas and for Listed Buildings. Several shopfronts are mentioned as being of particular conservation value.

5.4 In addition to the general guidance a community survey was undertaken of all shops and their shopfronts in the town centre. This is included in the Shopfronts folder and includes several other sets of information other than just the shopfronts (e.g. about building age and any listing). There are also two folders including examples of shopfronts judged by community surveyors to of positive quality and negative quality.

6. Landscape

6.1 There are three related elements to this material: the Landscape Character Assessment and Urban Fringe Landscape Sensitivity Analysis produced by Herefordshire Council, and the Management Plan for the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Full reports and/or abstract sections are in the portfolio.

6.2 The "Landscape Character Assessment" was produced in 2004 and the version here is the updated one from 2009. It was adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance to the Unitary Development Plan but is not explicitly mentioned in association with the current Core Strategy (though such assessments are only updated very occasionally). The assessment followed well-established national guidelines.

6.3 The document defines 'sub regional' Character Areas, two of which surround Ross-on-Wye. The majority of the landscape around the town is defined as the "Central Herefordshire" Character Area; the area to the south east of the town and the wooded hills belong to the "Forest of Dean" Character Area. The document goes into further detail by defining Landscape Character Types. There are three surrounding the Town:

- Principal settled farmlands
- Principal Wooded Hills
- Riverside Meadows

The Landscape Type "Principal settled farmlands" (see p. 21) surrounds much of the town, along with much of central Herefordshire. More detail is provided (see pp. 69-70) along with information on what are considered to be key characteristics for the type, which, if well represented, the aim would be to conserve (and, if not well represented, to enhance). The primary characteristic identified for this type is recorded as:

- Hedgerows used for field boundaries

To the south east the steeply sloping wooded hills, much of which is classified as Ancient Woodland, is defined as the Landscape Type "Principal Wooded Hills" (see p. 39). The primary characteristics which are defined as providing a significant contribution to landscape character are:

- Varied, often steeply sloping topography
- Ancient wooded character made up of mixed broadleaved woodlands, often of ancient origin

To the west and the River Wye, a linear Character Type associated with the River and its flat alluvial floodplain is named as the "Riverside Meadows" (see p.55). The primary characteristics which are defined as providing a significant contribution to landscape character are:

- Pastoral land use
- Well defined linear patterns of willow and alder
- Tree cover represented by stream side and hedgerow trees
- Unsettled landscape

There is no detail that refers specifically to Ross and its immediately surrounding landscape.

6.4 The "Urban Fringe Landscape Sensitivity Analysis" report is more relevant because it focuses specifically on Ross. It notes that "*none of the land around the periphery of Ross-on-Wye was classified as low sensitivity*". It then highlights the following areas of varying sensitivity:

- **Low-Medium:** Hildersley, Ashfield (south west of Cleeve Lane).
- **Medium:** Merrivale, Ashfield.
- **High-Medium:** Greytree, Rudhall/Marsh Farm, Penyard Park/Chase Wood, Lower Cleeve.
- **High:** Netherton, Town and Country Trail to Penyard Park/Chase Wood, South of Tudorville/Archenfield, Ashfield (river escarpment).

6.5 The "Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2009-2014" provides both complementary guidance to the Landscape Assessment as above (it refers directly to the Character Areas) and also takes that on into more detail. One section (see pp. 58-59) highlights ways in which the landscape assessment could be used in relation to development plans. Another section highlights the historic environment (see pp. 62-63) and one other outlines key aspects of an approach to specific developments (see pp. 69-71).

6.6 In compiling evidence specific to this Neighbourhood Plan, the importance of one area of landscape, not identified in the existing evidence base, has been highlighted. This area is noted on the Key Landscape Areas map, the Development Strategy maps and is also mentioned in the Development Sites Appraisal Report (in relation to SHLAA site O/Ross/007 in particular). The area is to the south east of the town and sits below Chase Wood. The area forms a tranquil corridor of undeveloped land (with the exception of Alton Court), between the town and Chase Wood/Penyard Park. There are a number of public rights of way in this area, including the town and Country Trail, which make the area an important and easily accessible recreational resource for local people. The land in this area slopes up and becomes the north eastern facing slope of Penyard Park. The elevated and visually prominent agricultural fields and ancient woodland form a key part of the rural backdrop to Ross-on-Wye and the area is visible from many places in and round the parish as highlighted in the Key Views Report.

7. Key Views

7.1 This could have been included in the Landscape section because it is so closely related to it but is kept in a separate section for two reasons:

- The Neighbourhood Development Plan includes specific policies on views and their protection, making this material slightly different to that in the remainder of the Portfolio.
- The draft Conservation Area Character Assessment highlights a number of key views but not in the wider landscape context.

7.2 The views covered in this report highlight specific views, selected to demonstrate a key view from a feature or given viewpoint in the landscape, together with illustrative views that demonstrate a particular effect or specific issues. Four key views have been highlighted, but all those identified illustrate key points to be taken into account for any development in and around Ross-on-Wye and the AONB.

8. Character Areas

8.1 As is clear from the title of section 4 above, that was a 'Rapid' assessment. That takes nothing away from its value but it was also a broad brush townscape assessment, with a notable emphasis on traditionally valued historic environments. It was therefore less valuable for some of the more recent areas of the town. With that in mind, it was decided to enroll local volunteers into doing some of their own, different but complementary character assessment.

8.2 The format used is well proven in character assessment and design statement work. It was adapted very minimally to the Ross context. The whole built area of the town was divided very roughly into 11 possible character areas, though it was known from the start that some or all of these might warrant some sub-division and some might even be combined. Surveyors were given thorough briefing notes, a form and a map. They were also asked to take some photos of their survey area and, where appropriate, annotate the map. A map in the folder shows all 11 areas.

8.3 All areas were surveyed, four by local sixth formers, others by adults, all but two by local people (a consultant did two). The results for each area (all in the folder) were either typed up by surveyors or handwritten forms were scanned. Not everybody produced photographs.

9. Town Centre Streets

9.1 It was decided to do a more thorough, street-by -street, assessment of the town centre, again to complement the material in the Rapid Townscape Assessment and the

Conservation Area Appraisal.

9.2 Once again, the format used is well proven in character assessment and design statement work. Surveyors for each street were given thorough briefing notes, a form and a map. They were also asked to take some photos of their survey area and, where appropriate, annotate the map.

9.3 15 streets were surveyed with slightly varying levels of detail and provision of photographs. The results are in the relevant folder in the Portfolio.