

I. INTRODUCTION

THE WILTSHIRE LANDSCAPE

Although Wiltshire is dominated by the vast sweeps of the chalk downs, its landscape is highly varied with intimate river valleys contrasting with open uplands and broad vales. The significance of the landscape of Wiltshire is acknowledged in the designation of 44% of the area administered by Wiltshire County Council as Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This comprises 38% (1,725km) of the North Wessex Downs AONB, 61% (983km) of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB and 6% (2,040km) of the Cotswolds AONB. In addition a small section to the far south east of the county is within the New Forest National Park.

Wiltshire is located in the south west of England. To the west are Somerset and Gloucestershire, to the south Dorset, to the south east Hampshire and to the east Berkshire. Within Wiltshire there are 4 district authorities: North Wiltshire, West Wiltshire, Salisbury and Kennet and the unitary authority Swindon Borough Council.

Wiltshire covers approximately 3,255 square kilometres and has a population of around 433,000. The population is largely rural with nearly half living in towns or villages of fewer than 5,000 people. A quarter of the county's inhabitants live in settlements of fewer than 1,000 people. The location and context of the study area are shown in **Figure 1**.

WILTSHIRE LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

The Wiltshire Landscape Character Assessment was commissioned by Wiltshire County Council and undertaken by Land Use Consultants between January 2004 and April 2005. The project was directed by a steering group comprising officers from the County Council and constituent district and unitary authorities.

Landscape character assessment is a technique that has been developed to facilitate systematic analysis, description and classification of the landscape. It involves identification of those features or combinations of elements that contribute to the character of the landscape, thereby enabling the special character and qualities of a particular area to be understood. This information allows reasoned consideration of those issues affecting the landscape, which can be used as a basis for the development of appropriate recommendations for future landscape conservation and management.

Planning Policy Statement 7 Sustainable Development in Rural Areas states that local planning authorities should use tools such as landscape character assessment in preparing policies and guidance to encourage good quality design in rural areas and in formulating criteria based policies to protect particularly highly valued areas of landscape.

The main purpose of this assessment is to document the current status of the Wiltshire landscape, furthering the understanding of the landscape resource available in the area and giving an indication of areas in need of enhancement and of conservation. This will enable better-informed decisions to be made on the future

management of the landscape and provide an objective basis for developing policies and enhancement and restoration projects.

The method for undertaking the landscape character assessment follows the current accepted method promoted by the Countryside Agency as set out in the document *Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland* (2002). A detailed description of the assessment methodology is given in **Appendix I**.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The structure of this report is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction: Introduces the landscape of Wiltshire and the landscape assessment context of the area.

Chapter 2: Landscape Character Context: Outlines the landscape character context of the study.

Chapter 3: Physical influences: Establishes the physical factors that have influenced the character of the area, including geology, topography, hydrology and soils.

Chapter 4: Ecological character: Provides an overview of ecological characteristics across the area that relate to their underlying physical environment.

Chapter 5: Human influences: Establishes the human factors that have influenced the character of Wiltshire.

Chapter 6: Built character: Outlines the character of settlement and the buildings of the county.

Chapter 7: Agricultural land use: Summarises the recent, current agricultural land use within Wiltshire and outlines future trends.

Chapter 8: Perceptions of Wiltshire: Provides an overview of perception of the county chiefly through the work of writers and artists.

Chapter 9: Recreational influences: Establishes the principal recreational influences such as access to the countryside, recreational routes and visitor attractions.

Chapter 10: The Landscape Character of Wiltshire: This is the main body of the report and contains descriptions for landscape type, summary descriptions of character areas and evaluations of the types including identification of forces for change and a broad landscape strategy leading on to management guidelines.

Chapter 11: Conclusions: Provides an overview of the landscape character of Wiltshire focussing on condition, strength of character and strategy.

