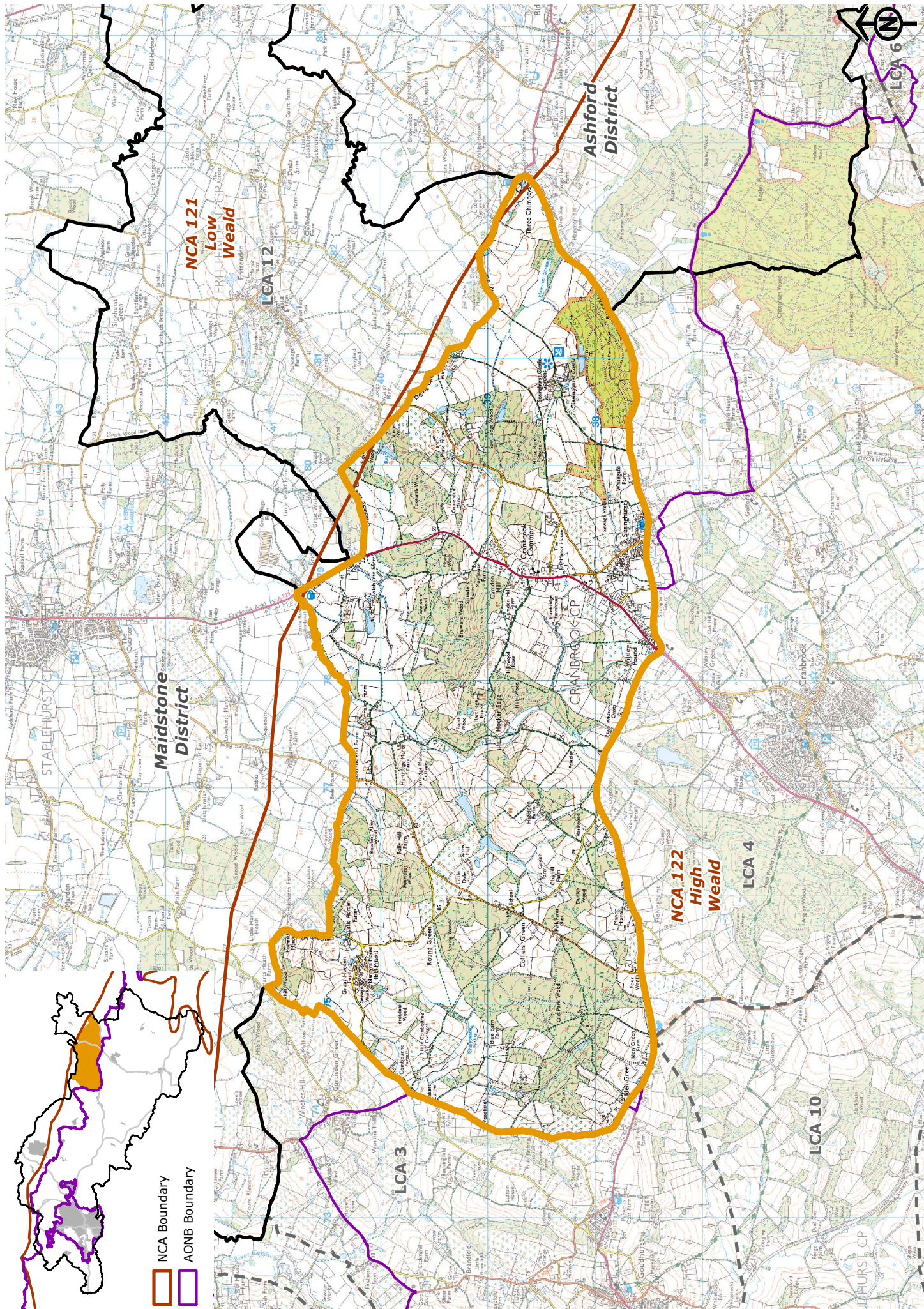


LCA 7 - Sissinghurst Wooded Farmland





## SUMMARY

**A rural agricultural landscape of pasture and arable farmland, mixed woodland and orchards punctuated by oast houses and sunken rural lanes, enclosed within undulating hills and with occasional extensive views of the Low Weald.**



## Key Characteristics

- 1) **An upland hilly plateau that falls rapidly in the north where dramatic open views across the Low Weald occur.**

Based upon a geology almost exclusively comprised of Tunbridge Wells Sand, the actions of the Biddenden Fault, which defines the northern boundary of the area, and the Benenden Fault further to the south, have elevated this land above the softer lowland geology that is predominantly Weald Clay. The area occupies a transition zone with land falling rapidly from the plateau uplands and ridges of the south, with elevations of over 120m AOD, to the large wide floodplains of the Medway and Beult Valleys to the north, below 40m AOD. This location creates a unique sense of place: glimpsed views southwards reveal the upland sandstone ridges of the High Weald whereas, in the north, there are often dramatic long-range views over the Low Weald.

- 2) **Localised gentle undulations in the landscape, brought about by presence of streams, introducing pockets of enclosure and shelter.**

Local topographic variation is increased due to the presence of tributary streams, which drain westwards to the River Teise or northwards to the River Beult. The effect of these has been to create small ripples of undulations through the area, resulting in localised enclosure within the 'valleys' and a strong sense of rising and falling when crossing the landscape.

- 3) **High proportion of woodland, including ancient woodland, mixed natural/plantation woodland blocks and coppice, small farm woods and linear ghyll woodlands in narrow valleys creating a strong framework.**

The dry, acidic soils produced by the Tunbridge Wells Sandstone are not of high agricultural quality and this has resulted in a high proportion of woodland cover remaining. In this area, there is no particular relationship between the distribution of woodland and the topography; woodlands occur on the hill tops, in the valleys and on the slopes. Together, this creates a framework of large woodland blocks, plantations, ghyll woodland and copses surrounding the farmland. The wooded character provides considerable ecological interest (see Nature Conservation Interest below).

- 4) **Attractive winding rural lanes with localised intimacy and picturesque appeal created by wooded sides, green corridors and shady banks of colourful wildflowers.**

The winding lanes, many of which are ancient routeways, are often overhung by 'green tunnels' formed by the interlocking of the branches of the flanking trees. Woodland frequently abuts the rural lanes that cross through the area. Deep, lush, shady banks and verges, swathed in attractive ground flora, including bluebells, wood anemones, celandines, honeysuckle, yellow archangel and ivy, creating secretive pockets of local interest that contribute to the intricacy and beauty of the landscape.

- 5) **Traditional orchards accentuate the topographic variation and reminiscent of Kent Fruit Belt but some are in decline.**

Between the wooded areas a patchwork of agricultural uses occurs. Numerous orchards punctuate the hillsides. The picturesque lines of these orchard trees curving around the undulating slopes provide a further layer of wooded interest and emphasise the varied hilly topography. However, most of the orchards are dwarf varieties and there is much evidence that traditional orchards are in general decline within the area. Hop gardens which were once a key characteristic of this character area are now relatively rare, having been replaced by fruit trees or converted to arable fields.

- 6) **Medium fields of pasture and arable introduce variety and result in an overall medium scale landscape pattern.**

Pasture and arable land uses are also common. The arable land is medium-large scale with evidence of past hedgerow removal. Large fields of oil seed rape blanket the arable landscape in

late spring providing a striking contrast with the wooded views. Pasture fields are, by comparison, smaller and support sheep, cattle and horse grazing. Animals, crops and hay bales create visual interest in the landscape which has an overall sense of bucolic rural harmony with distinctive and varied noises and smells.

**7) A relatively intact medieval landscape.**

The landscape retains a relatively intact historic character of assart woodland and small or medium irregular assart fields surrounded by hedges and wooded boundaries, with a relatively strong survival of ancient woodland and medieval coppice woodland. Surviving areas where small irregular fields are found within and surrounding ancient semi and assart woodland such as at Saw Lodge Wood, Old Park Wood and Brewers Wood, and medieval/ late medieval regular and assart fields around Folly Hill, Snow Hill and Hocker Edge. Small formal planned fields indicate late post medieval enclosure of commons around Cranbrook Common. Small planned fields indicate late post medieval enclosure of a landscaped deer park around Sissinghurst Castle, around which are ancient woodlands – some of which are medieval coppice woodland as at Roundhill Park, a possible historic wood pasture.

**8) Hedgerows and trees providing interest and landscape structure alongside rural roads and dividing agricultural fields.**

Hedgerows create a strong landscape structure. They are commonly natural in appearance rather than manicured; alongside lanes or adjacent to orchard fields they are often high, confining views to the narrow lanes rather than out into the landscape. Hedgerow boundaries reduce the perceived sense of scale of the landscape, create localised texture and natural interest and a sense of enclosure. In general, hedgerows in the pasture areas are hawthorn, but sometimes beech, hornbeam, bramble, oak and occasionally holly. In places hedgerows have become bare or removed and the field boundaries have frequently not been replaced or replaced with post and wire fences, enlarging the scale of the landscape.

**9) A small scale and dispersed settlement pattern of isolated farmhouses and hamlets.**

Settlement is small-scale, including isolated farmhouses, regularly spaced hamlets, and the small village of Sissinghurst. Settlement appears sparse and, other than from close range, is not an obvious feature in the landscape due to the extent of screening woodland. However, where this structure breaks down, development on unwooded hilltop locations is visible for some distance. Large buildings are also occasionally visible in the wider landscape.

Although the area is crossed by a number of rural lanes it retains an air of rural seclusion with little traffic. This 'remoteness' breaks down close to the main roads; one that skirts the southern perimeter of the area, and the other that cuts northwards in the eastern part of the area. These roads, the A262 and A229 respectively, create corridors of noise and commotion that cut across the grain of the landscape and introduce a more suburban character locally along the roadside, with the introduction of suburban style boundary fences and ornamental planting.

HM detention centre at Blantyre House is a large institutional building that makes a negative contribution to the visual quality of the landscape locally, situated as it is on the unwooded ridge of a locally prominent hillock and secured by high wire fences.

**Sissinghurst village:** originally called Milkhouse Street, contains a Conservation Area, set around the historic ridgetop thoroughfare through the village. The village contains several buildings relating to the medieval and slightly later cloth-making industry as well as an interest variety of local buildings including oast houses and rural buildings relating to the past agricultural activities.

**10) Distinctive vernacular buildings including oast houses and historic farmsteads.**

Vernacular buildings add local variety and interest, including oast houses and historic farmsteads. Oast houses are a common feature, creating visual interest as they are consistently spread across the area along rural lanes and next to working orchards, and provide a strong cultural reference that is strongly representative of the Kent landscape.



Built materials of local houses impart a strong character, including red bricks, red tiles, weatherboarding, hipped roofs, chimneys and climbing plants adding local colour and texture. Built form is human-scale and creates a harmonious balance with the woodland, fields and hedgerows in the area. Colours of materials are earthy browns and reds with local details in white or black. Buildings are often arranged in farmstead patterns. Some newer buildings or residential renovations are larger in scale and create a more bulky appearance that does not integrate so well with the existing human-scale landscape pattern.

#### **11) Sissinghurst Castle.**

Sissinghurst Castle is a unique and distinctive feature which gives the area a strong cultural association. The Castle is Grade I listed. The height of the turrets allows the building to be seen for long distances, providing a clear point of orientation, and creating a unique quality to the eastern sector of the character area. The world-famous gardens adjoining the castle, including the renowned 'white garden' created by Vita Sackville-West, are also Grade I listed on the Historic England Register of Historic Parks and Gardens; now owned by the National Trust they are a popular tourist attraction that also offers local walking routes through the adjacent woodlands and fields.

#### **12) Relatively high levels of tranquility with some of the largest areas of dark skies of the borough.**

CPRE night lights mapping shows that the area has some of the consistently darkest skies of the borough, with large areas showing very low levels of night lights. It is a landscape of relatively high tranquillity with a sense of quiet and calm along many of the rural lanes and footpaths.

#### **Evidence of Past Use and Cultural Evolution**

- 1) Sissinghurst Castle is a significant Grade I listed building which is the ruin of an Elizabethan courtyard house and moat dating from 1558. The tall red brick tower, with its distinctive dual turrets, rises majestically from the surrounding woodland and has a decidedly fairy-tale quality about it.
- 2) Registered Parks and Gardens of Sissinghurst Castle (Grade I) and Hartridge House (Grade II). Sissinghurst is a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century formal garden created by Vita Sackville-West and her husband Sir Harold Nicolson with surviving built features of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and with adjacent land which formed part of a 16<sup>th</sup> century park. Hartridge House contains gardens laid out in 1907 by the respected horticulturalist and nursery owner Colonel Charles Grey, to provide the setting for his new house.
- 3) A relatively large number of historic farmsteads, particularly farmsteads retaining one or more buildings of 17<sup>th</sup> century or earlier date, have a very high survival rate in the character area. They are often associated with historic routeways, pre-19<sup>th</sup> century coppiced woodland and orchards. The HLC indicates a strongly surviving pattern of anciently enclosed small fields with wavy boundaries.
- 4) Sissinghurst Conservation Area coincides with the historic core fronting onto The Street, the historic ridgetop thoroughfare through the village. The village contains several buildings relating to the medieval and slightly later cloth-making industry as well as oast houses and rural buildings relating to the past agricultural activities. A unified palette of building materials such as timber frames and cladding of red and blue brick, tile hanging and weatherboarding create a strong consistency. Hipped, half-hipped and gabled roofs with traditional casement and sash windows and use of red brick and clay tile give the buildings distinctiveness and characteristic warm red and orange colour scheme that contrasts with black, white and buff localised details.
- 5) Few hop gardens now survive but where they do they are surrounded by stark lines of poplar with a distinctive pattern of hop poles (from the coppiced woodlands) with connecting hop-bines which add an additional layer of historical and cultural interest to the landscape.

**Semi-Natural Landscape and Priority Habitats**

- 1) Brewers Wood is a particularly notable plantation woodland that clings to the steep slopes around the Camden Hill and Hockers Edge area. It is a mixed plantation of conifer and broad-leaved species with areas of sweet chestnut and sessile oak and combines with the adjoining semi-natural/plantation Hilly Wood to the west, and Foxearth Wood which is part of Leggs Wood LWS to the east and continues further east into the Frittenden Character Area (LCA 12). Hilly Wood has mature sweet chestnut coppice with standard ash, beech and some Scots Pine.
- 2) Old Park Wood, site of the former deer park of Glassenbury, is a LWS woodland covering nearly 180 hectares and is the largest mixed woodland in the area. It was formerly ancient mixed broad-leaved woodland and heathland, but has now largely been converted to chestnut coppice and conifer plantation. In the stream valleys, pockets of the original mixed woodland remain.
- 3) Actively coppiced woodlands remain a notable feature of the landscape, particularly in spring when the ground flora is abundant in bluebells. Sissinghurst Park Wood is the most important sweet chestnut coppice in the area, notified as a SSSI, and also contains areas of birch and alder alongside the streams. This site is particularly important for the flora found alongside the rides. Roundhill Park Wood, another chestnut coppice, is also designated as a LWS and is the site of a former entrance and drive to Sissinghurst Castle.
- 4) The woodlands and surrounding land are identified as part of the High Weald Biodiversity Opportunity Area, forming part of a wider pattern of intricate matrix of ancient semi-natural woodland and grassland with small water bodies, streams and rivers continuing predominantly southwards into the AONB. Large sections of deciduous woodland across the area, and traditional orchards in the north west of the area, are identified as BAP priority habitats.

**Valued Features and Qualities**

In addition to the valued features and qualities which apply to the whole of the Borough noted in **Chapter 1**, features and qualities considered to be of particular value in the landscape character area are identified below.

This area lies adjacent to the High Weald AONB. There are strong associations between this area and the AONB and the area enhances the character of the AONB landscape. The following key qualities related to the AONB are particularly valued in this character area:

- 1) The area includes some of the northern slopes of the High Weald based on Tunbridge Wells Sandstone sloping down to Weald Clay.
- 2) The higher ground of elevated ridges provides some localised long views over the Low Weald to the north and some glimpsed views southwards reveal the upland sandstone ridges of the High Weald.
- 3) Sunken winding lanes with wooded sides are remnants of the ancient routeways and radiating droveways which continue into the AONB, remnants of the historic practices of transhumance and exploitation of the resources of the forest.
- 4) The dispersed settlement pattern of the area and a relatively large number of historic farmsteads, isolated farmhouses, hamlets and occasional small villages (Sissinghurst) which continue the small scale pattern of family holdings so characteristic of the AONB.
- 5) A high proportion of ancient woodland which once formed part of the historic extent of the

Forest of Anderida, one of the largest tracts of woodland in early medieval England. Many of the woodlands in the area are coppices, historically used for producing timber, and chestnut coppice which was used for hop poles.

- 6) Locally distinctive features so characteristic of the AONB are consistently represented throughout the area, including orchards, a few remaining hop gardens, oast houses, historic houses and building details such as traditional weatherboarding, clay tiles and hipped roofs. The visual harmony of vernacular buildings with the rural landscape creates strong scenic interest.
- 7) A relatively intact medieval landscape character provided by the pattern of historic assart woodland and medieval field patterns.

Other features and qualities considered to be of particular landscape and visual value to the character area include:

- 8) World-famous Sissinghurst gardens created by Vita Sackville-West (Grade I listed) now owned by the National Trust are a nationally renowned and popular tourist attraction.
- 9) The area has some of the consistently darkest skies of the borough and is a landscape of relatively high tranquillity.
- 10) The readily accessible agricultural land through a complex network of footpaths that provides opportunities to experience breath-taking rural views.
- 11) A varied rural landscape character as a result of locally distinctive features including subtle east west valleys, woodlands, apple orchards and sheep fields and an intact landscape condition, which is strongly representative of Kent.

## Detractors and Opportunities

In addition to the detractors noted in **Chapter 3**, features which detract from the character area are identified below.

### Detractors and Opportunities

- 1) Impact of busy main roads cutting through the landscape introducing background noise, visual intrusion and movement as well as suburbanisation in terms of styles of buildings and boundary treatment.
- 2) Presence of larger-scale built elements including new building renovations, which sometimes appear out of scale with the surrounding human-scale landscape pattern.
- 3) Changes to traditional land management including orchards which are in decline.
- 4) Hedgerow removal/ denudation which increases the scale of the landscape and reduces visual and biodiversity interest.
- 5) HM detention centre at Blantyre House is a large institutional building that makes a negative contribution to the visual quality of the landscape locally, situated as it is on the unwooded ridge of a locally prominent hillock and secured by high wire fences.

## Landscape Strategy

Borough landscape considerations are detailed in **Chapter 3**, and local objectives are outlined below.

### Landscape Strategy

The Local Character Area should be considered in the context of the High Weald AONB, particularly the role the character area plays in the setting of the AONB. The valued features and qualities of the landscape should be conserved and enhanced.

- 1) Wherever possible ensure that the visual diversity and landscape pattern is maintained, in particular the traditional woodland, coppice, orchard, arable and pasture farmland. Poor and inappropriate management of various elements could potentially lead to a decline in intimacy and enclosure.
- 2) Recognise the importance that the highly visited area around Sissinghurst Castle plays in the perception of the landscape of the Borough and the County.
- 3) Promote the rural economy in the area, where possible encouraging the reinstatement of traditional orchards and hop farms which may become more viable again in the context of the increasing trend towards craft beer production.
- 4) Ensure new development is appropriate in scale and character to the landscape context. New buildings should avoid visually prominent locations and new development should be well-integrated (e.g. with locally appropriate planting) and maintain the valued features and qualities of the character area.