

3.0 LANDSCAPE BASELINE

The following section defines and describes the study area, including the geographical extent and landscape character of Aberdeenshire and its surroundings. It also reviews other relevant information including landscape-related designations, natural heritage and cultural heritage constraints. In the latter case it is the extent to which they may have a bearing on landscape character and value that is the primary consideration in this study.

3.1 Study Area

The study area for this assessment is shown in Figure 3.1. The local authority area of Aberdeenshire is located in the east of Scotland and projects out into the North Sea, between the Moray Firth to the north, Angus in the south and the granite mass of the Grampian Mountains to the west. It borders Angus and Perth and Kinross to the south, and Highland and Moray to the west. Aberdeenshire has a total area of 6,313 km² and a population of approximately 247,000

The study focuses on the local authority area of Aberdeenshire excluding the area covered by the Cairngorm National Park for the purposes of determining landscape capacity. Nevertheless, there are a number of existing, consented and proposed windfarms and turbines in neighbouring local authority areas. Some consideration has been given to these, due to the extensive visual influence exerted by most wind turbines. The study area therefore includes a 30km buffer around its boundary, including the North Sea.

3.2 Baseline Landscape Character Assessment

3.2.1 Landscape Context

The landscape of Aberdeenshire is located on the junction between three distinct types of landscape; the Highland Mountains, the flat north-east coastlands of Banff and Buchan and the low-lying rift valley of Strathmore. This transition results in a great diversity of landscapes, from the high granite plateaux of the Grampian mountains in the west, which project out into the gently rolling agricultural lowlands before progressing eastwards down to the flatter coastal plain farmland and thence to the coastal landscapes.

The coast shows a wide variety in landform from rocky cliffs and sheltered coves to the broad dynamic duneland that runs along sections of the eastern shore. Along the southern edge of the Grampians runs the Highland Boundary Fault where the mountains plunge down to the flatter farmland of the Mearns, the termination of Strathmore. Topography is shown in Figure 3.2.

The bulk of the population lives in small towns and villages in the lowland area, through which the main transport routes pass. These trunk routes radiate out from Aberdeen City which is the main centre of the north-east of Scotland. The landscape of Aberdeenshire is described in detail in both the *South and Central Landscape Character Assessment*

(SNH, 1997) and *National Programme of Landscape Character Assessment: Banff & Buchan* (SNH 1997).

The *Aberdeenshire Local Development Plan* associated supplementary guidance in *Appendix 1* provides an amalgamated revision of these Landscape Character Assessments and it is these areas that form the landscape baseline in the study.

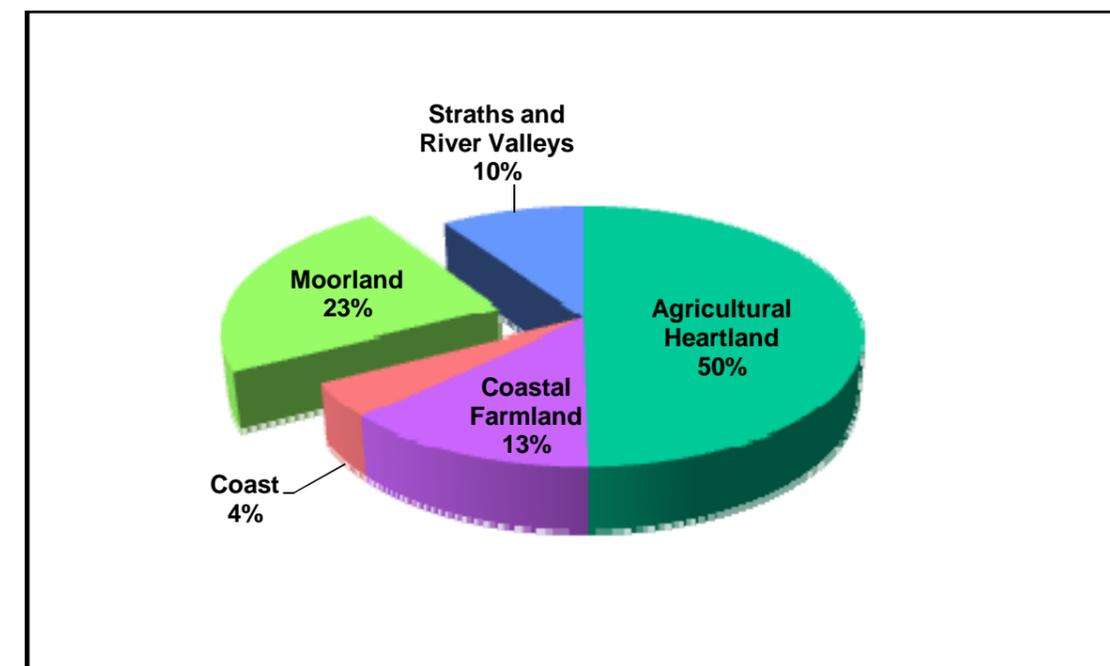
3.2.2 Landscape Character

Table 3.1 and Figures 3.3 and 3.4 consider the landscape in more detail. There are a total of eight LCTs outlined in the two landscape character assessments from 1997. These have been agglomerated into five regional landscape character types for the purpose of the study. These amalgamate the eight previous LCTs from the original assessments:

- 1) Coast
- 2) Coastal Farmland
- 3) Agricultural Heartland;
- 4) Moorland
- 5) Straths and River Valleys

These are further divided into thirty-seven landscape character areas

Figure 3.1. Landscape Character Types in Aberdeenshire by Area (km²)



Lowlands comprise the majority of Aberdeenshire’s landscapes, 77% with just 23% of the total area upland in character. The coastal area, although important to the character of Aberdeenshire, covers little of its surface area; just 4%, being a predominantly narrow strip. In contrast the Agricultural Heartland comprises 50% of the landscape area, and it is

this vast bulk of productive farmland that the wealth of the county has been traditionally based on.

The dividing line between the higher ground and lower farmland varies considerably with the moorland spurs projecting from the central massif of the Grampians out into the surrounding lower farmland. Between these ridges of higher ground lie upland farmed landscapes predominantly livestock farming and the steeper river valleys of the Dee, Don, Deveron and Bogie. Further east are the intensively managed agricultural heartlands a vast rolling plain of mixed agriculture. To the north-east are the flatter coastal farmlands which are again predominantly arable.

The following section briefly describes the context and character of the landscape in each of these areas. More detailed description and analysis is given in the appropriate LCAs.

Table 3.1. Landscape Character Areas in Aberdeenshire

Regional Landscape Character Type	Landscape Character Type	Landscape Character Areas
COAST	2. The Coast	26 (i) Cliffs of the North and South East Coasts 26 (ii) Dunes and Beaches from Fraserburgh to Peterhead
	9. Coastal Strip	9 (i) Kincardine Cliffs 9 (ii) Formartine Links and Dunes 9 (iii) Kincardine Links
COASTAL FARMLAND	7. Coastal Farmland	7 (i) Eastern Coastal Agricultural Plain 7 (ii) Western Coastal Farmland 7 (iii) North Eastern Coastal Farmland 7 (iv) Sandstone Ridges and Valleys South of Troup 7 (v) Coastal Farmland East of Macduff
AGRICULTURAL HEARTLAND	1. Agricultural Heartland	1 (i) Knockhill and Aberchirder 1 (ii) Agricultural Heartland 1 (iii) Wooded Estates around Old Deer 1 (iv) Upland Ridges South of the Deveron 1 (v) Northern Rolling Lowlands 1 (vi) Ythan Strath Farmland 1 (vii) Inch Basin 1 (viii) Formartine Lowlands 1 (ix) Central Wooded Estates 1 (x) Howe of Alford 1 (xi) Cromar Farmlands 1 (xii) Howe of Cromar 1 (xiii) Kincardine Plateau 1 (xiv) Garvock and Glenbervie 1 (xv) Howe of Mearns

Regional Landscape Character Type	Landscape Character Type	Landscape Character Areas
MOORLAND	11. Farmed Moorland Edge	11 (i) The Cromar Uplands 11 (ii) Daugh of Cairnborrow 11 (iii) Lumsden Valley
	22. Moorland Plateau	22 (i) Grampian Outliers 22 (ii) The Mounth 22 (iii) The North-Eastern Hill Ranges
STRATHS AND RIVER VALLEYS	24. River Valleys	24 (i) Deveron and Upper Ythan Valleys
	25. Straths and Valleys	25 (i) Deveron and Bogie Straths 25 (ii) Deeside 25 (iii) Donside 25 (iv) Upper Deeside Estates 25 (v) Muir of Dinnet.

Coast

Within the Coast area there are two landscape character types divided into a total of 5 landscape character areas. The divisions in areas reflect the distinct differences in character between rocky cliffs and coves, and the sections of coast with broad, lower dune systems. The two landscape types are a product of a geographic difference with *The Coast* running along the far northern and eastern coast of Banff and Buchan and *The Coastal Strip* in the east of southern Aberdeenshire.

The north coast, 26 (i) *Cliffs of the North and South East Coasts* is an area of cliff-edged headlands, with settlements huddled at the base of cliffs together with the larger settlements of Peterhead and Fraserburgh. To the south 9 (i) *Kincardine Cliffs* is broadly similar in its character with rocky headlands and coves. In both farmland stretches to the edges of the cliffs and there are few trees, the areas being open and windswept. The smaller settlements in the south have typically been extended back from their traditional fishing village core.

The other characteristic type of coastal landscape in Aberdeenshire are the extensive dunes and beaches that form a wide strip both in the north-east, between Fraserburgh and Peterhead, and north of Aberdeen at the vast Forvie Dunes close to the Ythan Valley 9 (ii) *Formartine Links and Dunes*. These areas have extensive beaches, dynamic dune systems, open views and the absence of tree cover.

Raised beaches are typical of the stretch of coastline south Inverbervie. They slope gently upwards and encompass open farmland, marsh and reedbed, merging into the rolling agricultural heartland of Garvock and Glenbervie behind. There are caravan sites and farms together with small villages perched on cliff tops, such as St Cyrus.

Coastal Farmland

Within the *Coastal Farmland* landscape character types there are five landscape character areas. This LCT is restricted to the far north and eastern coasts of Aberdeenshire, in Banff and Buchan. They occupy the hinterland behind the thin *Coastal Strip* and are distinct from the rolling agricultural heartlands. They have a gently undulating landform and the influence of the sea is evidenced in their character. Parts of the 1 (viii) *Formartine Lowlands* close to the coast have similar characteristics. Medium to large in scale, the type is large in extent and is the second most common landscape character type of the north east of Scotland.

South of Fraserburgh is the LCA 7 (i) *Eastern Coastal Agricultural Plain*. This area in common with other parts of the *Coastal Farmland* comprises large arable fields, is sparsely wooded and has few field boundaries. This results in a landscape with few vertical features and combined with landform creates a simple pattern. Settlement is sparse with few villages of any great size and widely scattered farmsteads.

Due to the low undulating landforms across much of the LCT any hills or low prominences become significant features and distinctive landmarks integral to the landscape identity of Aberdeenshire. In 7 (ii) *Western Coastal Farmland* Durn Hill and Hill of Culburnie are important local landmarks as is Mormond Hill which spans both 7 (i) *Eastern Coastal Agricultural Plain* and 7 (iii) *North Eastern Coastal Farmland*.

Sandstone Ridges and Valleys South of Troup is a locally rare example of moorland close to the coast and its distinctively mounded saddle landform of open hill tops and incised broad valleys is a backdrop to the neighbouring LCAs.

Agricultural Heartland

The *Agricultural Heartland* is the largest regional LCT in extent (50% of Aberdeenshire) and is further subdivided into fifteen landscape character areas. The predominant lowland landscape type within Aberdeenshire, they comprise the rolling farmland that surround Aberdeen and slope down from the higher ground in the west towards the coastal strip.

The intensively managed *Agricultural Heartlands* are a vast rolling plain of mixed agriculture containing most of the towns and villages in Aberdeenshire, together with the main transport routes and a network of smaller roads. Fields are medium to large in size with post and wire fences.

Tree cover varies with scattered broadleaved shelterbelts running along hill ridges and around farms and some areas such as the *Central Wooded Estates*, *Wooded Estates around Old Deer* and *Ythan Strath Farmland* have a large number of old estate policy woodlands. The *Agricultural Heartland* LCT contains the majority of Aberdeenshire's inventory Historic Gardens and Designed Landscapes (HGDLs) with a total of eighteen out of the twenty eight in the study area. *Central Wooded Estates* has eight HGDLs.

The northern LCAs are located around the broad river valley of the Deveron and Upper Ythan.

To the south *The Mounth* projects out separating the *Howe of Mearns* and *Garvock and Glenbervie* from the rest of the agricultural heartland. The Howe of Mearns is the continuation of Strathmore, which extends west into Angus and merges with the *Broad Valley Lowlands*. Strathmore, in Perth and Kinross, Angus and Aberdeenshire, forms a broad continuous valley of 65km length between the River Tay in the southwest and Glenbervie in the northeast.

Moorland

There are two distinctive *Moorland* landscape character types, the only upland character areas in Aberdeenshire, *Farmed Moorland Edge* and *Moorland Plateaux*. These make up the high ground in the western part of the study area and are the transitional landscapes between the much higher Grampian Mountains massif, within the Cairngorms National Park, and the rolling lowland landscapes of *Agricultural Heartlands*.

The *Moorland Plateaux* forms the distinctive, upland backdrop to much of Aberdeenshire and comprises unique ridges and prows that project out into the flatter farmland. They have simple, open, moorland tops with distinctive rocky outcrops such as Milther Tap and Tap O'Noth. These areas have strong wilderness qualities, forming islands of 'wild land' contrasting strongly with the farmed landscape that surrounds them. Often extensive conifer plantations clothe the slopes and steadings are located at the base of hills where there is a transition to farmland

The unique plunging slopes of the Highland Boundary fault are reflected in *The Month* landscape Character area. Here there is an abrupt transition between the higher *Moorland Plateaux* and arable farmland of the *Howe of Mearns* below. This character type extends west into Angus.

The *Farmed Moorland Edge* LCT is the transition, separating the higher *Moorland Plateaux* and merging into the rolling agricultural heartland areas to the east of Aberdeenshire. This character type continues west into Perth & Kinross and merges with other upland character types, including *Moorland Plateaux*, to the north and to the east in Aberdeenshire. *The Cromar Uplands*, *Daugh of Cairnborrow* and *Lumsden Valley* often form the watersheds between the deeper straths of the rivers Dee, Don, Deveron and Bogie. Mainly of variable relief, including compact landforms of small valleys and mounds as well as wide-open basins and plateaux, the small fields, well defined by drystone dykes are used predominantly for livestock farming.

Straths and River Valleys

Within the *Straths and River Valleys* regional landscape character type there are four landscape character areas. This LCT is restricted to the north and western areas of Aberdeenshire. They are the distinctive valley landforms formed by the rivers whose source is the high Moorland and Grampian Mountains in the west. Their principle characteristics are the river and valley. Medium to small in scale and enclosed, the type is relatively rare in distribution within north east of Scotland.

In Banff and Buchan is the LCA 24 (*i*)*Deveron and Upper Ythan Valley* which is a shallow valley that flows out to the sea at Macduff. Its sides are clothed with a mix of broadleaved and conifer woodlands and its floor has farmland running to the rivers edge. Its shelter has resulted in settlements such as Turriff, Fyvie and large estates resulting in five HGDLs.

Smaller in scale is 25 (*i*)*Deveron and Bogie Strath LCA*, this valley has a steeper profile in the south before broadening out into gentle straths around Huntly, sandwiched between steeper moorland there is grand sense of scale. Land use is predominantly agriculture with a network of roads and settlements adding to the mosaic.

Deeside and Donside LCAs are deep narrow valleys broadening out as they extend eastward into the farmland of Aberdeenshire. They are sandwiched between steep, upland areas and the contrast between the moorland, richly wooded valley sides and the sinuous shingly rivers make them distinctive and high quality, scenic landscapes. They provide access into the heart of the *Grampian Mountains* and have numerous traditional settlements and old estates together with roads and paths.

3.3 Landscape Designations

Landscape designations are an indication of landscape or scenic value recognised at national, regional or local levels. Landscape designations form part of the baseline for both the assessment of landscape capacity, and the preparation of a spatial framework. Landscape designations within the study area are noted below, and are shown in Figure 3.5, in relation to LCAs.

3.3.1 National Landscape Designations

The Cairngorms National Park includes the hills and upper glens in the west of Aberdeenshire. This area is not included in the core study area although part of it lies within the 30km buffer.

There are two areas of national landscape designation within Aberdeenshire, one is the Deeside and Lochnagar National Scenic Area (NSA) and the other is The Cairngorms National Scenic Area (NSA) both of which lie in the Cairngorms National Park and cover the upper strath of the River Dee and the mountainous western edge of Aberdeenshire.

The Cairngorms National Park is a landscape-related national designation. It is located in the west of the area and extends beyond into Moray, Highland and Angus. It includes the NSAs within its boundaries.

Taking into account existing and emerging policy it is unlikely that commercial windfarm proposals would be considered acceptable within the NSA or the National Park and whilst buffer areas are not encouraged by policy, the effects of windfarms nearby to the NSA or National Park could be a material consideration.

Other national designations are primarily related to sites of natural or cultural heritage value (eg. SPAs, NNRs, SSSIs and Scheduled Ancient Monuments), which are not the subject of this study. Nevertheless some of these areas such as *Loch of Strathbeg*, *Tore of*

Troup and the numerous castles, churches, prehistoric monuments and hillforts in Aberdeenshire can make a contribution to landscape character and are considered, as one element, in the assessment of landscape value and capacity.

3.3.2 Local Landscape Designations

There are no local landscape designations such as Special Landscape Areas or Areas of Great Landscape Value within Aberdeenshire. The protection of landscape character outside the National Park is based on local plan policy SG Landscape 1: Landscape character; which is informed by the three Landscape Character Assessments that cover Aberdeenshire. These have been amalgamated and revised within the local development plan. The aim of this policy is to provide all landscapes within Aberdeenshire with adequate protection against damaging development as set out in the European Landscape Convention (2000). The policy also highlights areas of increased landscape sensitivity within the character areas coincident with what have formally been identified as Areas of Landscape Significance.

Angus also has no local landscape designations. In Moray the south of the county is classified in its entirety as an AGLV. This runs along the border with Aberdeenshire from A920 at the Haugh of Glass southwards and is shown in Figure 3.5.

3.3.3 Other Landscape Designations

There are thirty-four inventory Historic Gardens and Designed Landscapes (HGDLs) within Aberdeenshire, and thirty, within the Aberdeenshire study area. Some such as at Haddo House are large and the extensive policies continue to make a major contribution to the scenic quality of the local area. They are all located within lowland areas. Whilst this is not a statutory designation it is a landscape factor that contributes to the assessment of landscape character and value. These are taken into account in the assessment.

There are also four country parks in the area, one at Balmedie, another at Haddo House and two at Alford-Haughton and Mintlaw-Aden. These are shown in Figure 3.5.

3.4 Other Designations

There are a number of designations that, whilst not solely landscape related, clearly indicate landscape value and inform the assessment process. These are shown in Figure 3.6.

3.4.1 Historic and Cultural Designations

Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAMs) are primarily a historic or archaeological designation. However they can be of landscape significance in their own right and contribute to the character and value of a landscape. Furthermore, effects on their setting can be a consideration for neighbouring development proposals.

Conservation Areas are primarily an urban designation. Nevertheless the appearance of a settlement can be a key feature contributing to the surrounding rural landscape and equally

the setting of a Conservation Area can be affected by developments in the surrounding countryside.

There are currently 37 Conservation Area designations and 16 proposed designations within Aberdeenshire. The largest includes whole sections of the coast surrounding the villages of Catterline and Muchalls. Other areas of note include the coastal fishing villages of Pennan, Banff and Portsoy together with the inland historic villages of Old Deer and Aberchirder. Estates such as at Crimonmogate are also included.

Listed Buildings feature throughout the urban and rural areas. The greatest concentrations are located in the older settlements, particularly, but also in the smaller historic settlements and throughout most of the lowland areas. Listed buildings contribute to landscape character and value and their setting is a consideration for neighbouring development proposals.

There are extensive SAMs throughout Aberdeenshire. There are Hillforts many of which form distinctive landmarks in the landscape such as Tap O'Noth and Dunnideer. There are also a large number of ruined castles such as at Slains, Dunottar, Huntly, Kildrummy and Pitsligo.

3.4.2 Nature Conservation Designations

Areas designated for their nature conservation interest and importance include SPAs SACs, SPA, SSSIs and National Nature Reserves (NNRs). All are national or international designations and subject to the highest level of constraint in spatial frameworks. Whilst these constraints are primarily related to nature conservation interests, the designated area often contributes to the character and value of a landscape through its relatively undisturbed natural features and potential visitor interest.

In the Aberdeenshire study area the most extensive areas are SPA/SSSI/NNR sites located along the coast: including *Loch of Strathbeg*, *Ythan Estuary*, *Buchan Ness*, *Fowelsheugh* and *St Cyrus*. Inland a number of Mosses, including the *Tore of Troup* and lochs are SSSI's and part of the Cairngorm SPA extends into the high ground around the Mounth.

Several extensive SPAs/SSSI's lie outside the study area within the 30km buffer within the Cairngorms National Park.

Ancient woodland inventory sites are distributed across Aberdeenshire, most being located in the lowland areas and river valleys. The most significant areas are on the slopes of Bennachie, Deeside, Haddo, The Bins (above Huntly) and the old policy woodlands in the *Central Wooded Estates* LCA between Aberdeen and rising ground of Bennachie.

3.5 Wildness Mapping

SNH's wild land policy (*Policy Statement No 02/03: Wildness in Scotland's Countryside*) recognises the importance both of wild land in Scotland's countryside and to perceptions of wildness to society. The policy also notes the potential for development to erode the extent of wild land and perceptions of wildness in other areas.

SNH has recently completed a mapping exercise in which the factors that contribute to wildness in a landscape have been combined and mapped to create a detailed picture of wildness on a relative scale (*Mapping Scotland's Wildness, Wildness Map January 2012*). Figure 3.7 shows these in relation to the landscape character areas. Wildness characteristics strengthen in the west of Aberdeenshire in particular the high ground of the *Moorland Plateaux* areas. The highest levels of wildness are in the Grampian Outliers and in particular *The Mounth* and *The North Eastern Hill Ranges* closest to the boundary with the Cairngorm National Park.

40 draft Core Areas of Wild Land have been identified across Scotland, based on the assessment of wildness. Area 16: Lochnagar and Mount Keen is located in Aberdeenshire and abuts the Aberdeenshire study area (*Core Areas of Wild Land in Scotland, April 2013*). This area is also shown on Figure 3.7. It spans the boundary with Angus and is contiguous with *The North Eastern Hill Ranges* LCA.

This information is used to identify areas with the highest wildness qualities in the study area and informs the assessment of landscape value of landscape character areas.

3.6 Other Relevant Matters

Other areas of interest which contribute to landscape value include walking and cycle routes such as the Speyside and Formantine & Buchan Ways and Aberdeenshire Core Paths, North Sea Cycle Route (NCN1), tourist routes (such as the Castle Trail), viewpoints, golf courses and access land. These areas are mapped on Figure 4.2 and taken into account in the assessment of value.