

Landscapes of Worcestershire

Landscape Type Advice Sheet - Planning and Development

Unenclosed Commons

Landscape Type Description

A category of landscape offering tremendous variety of scale and size, the overriding characteristics being the lack of enclosure and, usually, a land use of rough grazing. The smaller unenclosed commons are ranked as features within other Landscape Types but a few are considered to be of sufficient extent to warrant separate classification. Settlement, where present, is usually restricted to wayside dwellings situated around the perimeter of the common.



Key Characteristics

Primary

- Unenclosed land
- Rough grazing land use

Secondary

- Unsettled but with wayside dwellings of distinctive scale and style, located on the perimeter of commons
- Unwooded, but small plots associated with dwellings often afford scattered tree cover
- Acid grassland/heath very often associated with these landscapes



Current Concerns

The character of these landscapes has developed historically as a result of the activities of those with commoners' rights. Commons can convey an exhilarating sense of wilderness and are invariably of high nature conservation value. Sadly, there now appears to be a lack of motivation to restore active pursuance of rights of common today (due to economic factors, disturbance and danger to grazing stock from busy roads, dogs and people and increased animal husbandry regulations). This has resulted in reversion to scrub in many places. Elsewhere commons are valued for their recreation potential and managed in a municipal fashion, with regular cutting of the sward and sometimes planting of ornamental trees. There have, however, been successful instances of community approaches to restoring grazing stock on common land, Monkwood Green being an example. Long term sustainable management initiatives are clearly needed for these landscapes.

The settlements associated with commons are often much sought after, but properties frequently become subject to enlargement and remodelling, and risk developing a suburban character as a result. It is important that the integrity of such small communities is retained and their distinctive detail and spatial patterns conserved.

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Opportunities for Landscape Gain

Unenclosed Landscape

It is unlikely that the common land itself, or parts of it, will have been enclosed, but should this be the case, opportunities to remove such features may be possible. The boundaries gardens/plots of land associated with settlement around the perimeter of common land are typically hedged and, where these have been replaced by fencing, there may be opportunities to restore them.

Land Use—Rough Grazing

Where dwellings with associated commoners rights change ownership, there may be opportunities to raise awareness of the importance of appropriate land management, and of the incentives and advice available to facilitate this.

Owners could be encouraged to exercise their commoners rights. There may be opportunities to bring together those individuals with commoners rights and facilitate discussion relating to the long term management of the area.

Unwooded Landscape

It would be beyond the scope of a planning applicant to bring about change in the management regime of a common but it may be possible to initiate discussion between those with commoners rights/management responsibilities and facilitate the development of a long term management plan, which may well include the removal of scrub and/or secondary woodland.

Heathy/acid Grassland Ground Vegetation

Existing areas of heath/acid grassland subject to, or in close proximity to, proposals for development will require professional ecological assessment to ascertain their biodiversity status/importance. There should be no loss of existing heathland or acid grassland of importance. There may be opportunities to protect existing areas of heath/acid grassland, secure appropriate long term management and create new areas of habitat, particularly where these will link existing areas to reduce their isolation.

Efforts should be made to emulate the vegetation communities characteristic of such infertile, sandy free draining soils in any landscaping associated with new development. The use of birch as a dominant trees species together with hawthorn and, where appropriate, pines, could be considered. Banks of gorse and broom could also be used where shrub planting is required, rather than using species of a more ornamental nature. Consideration should be given to the use of the existing seedbank in the soil rather than seeding verges and other open areas with proprietary grass seed mixes.

Wayside Cottages of Distinctive Scale and Style Located on the Perimeter of these Landscapes

Bearing in mind the legislation relating to common land and its land use, it is unlikely that the erection of new dwellings on common land itself will be acceptable. And, from a landscape perspective, proposals for infill development in the gardens/plots associated would result in unacceptable increase in density, damaging the settlement pattern by diluting the ad hoc, irregular, spatial distribution. However many of the fringing groups of cottages may lie outside the (legally) defined area of common and applications within these areas must consider the relationship between scale of new dwellings and their plot (typically they should lie in narrow plots parallel to the road). Whilst not necessarily slavishly copying the design of existing buildings, attempts should be made to reflect their scale and style – for example the proportions and design of windows, use of roofing materials and external wall treatments, overall size of dwellings, height of roofline and composition of roofscape, all of which contribute to 'cottage character'. Detailing of associated buildings will benefit from similar considerations. Also consider the size of associated grounds/land holding and orientation of dwelling in relation to the plot. Property boundaries should be hedged and reflect the natural shrub species of the locality.

For more information visit our website www.worcestershire.gov.uk/lca or contact the Worcestershire County Council Environmental Policy Team on 01905 766038