

Appendix 8B

National Character Area Descriptions

The Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain (NCA 61)

8.1.1 The Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain (NCA 61) is described as ‘*an expanse of flat or gently undulating, lush, pastoral farmland*’ and ‘*a series of small sandstone ridges cut across the plain and are very prominent features within this open landscape*’ with ‘*the lower slopes of the ridge and the surrounding plain and is punctuated by numerous ponds and meres*’.

8.1.2 In summary, the key characteristics include:

- Extensive, gently undulating plain, dominated by thick glacial till from the late Pleistocene Period, producing productive, clay soils and exemplifying characteristic glacial landforms including eskers, glacial fans, kettle holes, moraines and a landscape of meres and mosses.
- Prominent discontinuous sandstone ridges of Triassic age, characterised by steep sides and freely draining, generally infertile soil that supports broadleaved and mixed woodland.
- Few woodlands, confined to the area around Northwich and to estates, cloughs and deciduous and mixed woods on the steeper slopes of the wind-swept sandstone ridges. Locally extensive tracts of coniferous woodland and locally distinctive orchards scattered throughout.
- Strong field patterns with generally well-maintained boundaries, predominantly hedgerows, with dense, mature hedgerow trees. Sandstone walls occur on the ridges and estate walls and Cheshire-style (curved topped) metal railing fences occur locally on estates in Cheshire.
- Dairy farming dominates on the plain, with patches of mixed farming and arable in the north and large areas in the south-east.
- Diversity of wetland habitats includes internationally important meres and mosses comprising lowland raised bog, fen, wet woodland, reedbed and standing water, supporting populations of a host of rare wildlife, including some species of national and international importance.
- Extensive peat flood plains where flood plain grazing marsh habitats support regionally important populations of breeding waders in areas such as Baggy Moor, Weald Moor and Doxey Marshes.

8.1.3 Statements of Environmental Opportunity (SEO's) include, in summary:

- SEO 1: Restore, manage and protect the rivers, streams, lakes, ponds and wetland habitats from diffuse pollution and support partnerships to maintain the integrity and unique conditions for the preservation of the internationally important meres and mosses, to benefit, amongst other things, landscape character and biodiversity.

- SEO 2: Protect the landscape of the plain, recognising its importance to food production and incorporating well-maintained hedgerows, ponds and lowland grassland margins within agricultural systems, to secure resource protection and maintain productivity, while reducing fragmentation of semi-natural habitats to benefit a wide range of services, such as landscape character and sense of place.
- SEO 3: Manage and restore lowland heathland and ancient and plantation woodland, support partnerships to plan appropriately scaled new woodland cover, particularly where this will link and extend existing woodlands, restore and reinstate traditional orchards and increase biomass provision to mitigate the impact of climate change, where this will benefit biodiversity, landscape character and enhance the experiential qualities of the area.
- SEO 4: Protect and manage the nationally important geological sites and heritage features demonstrating how the interaction of natural and historical factors influenced the distinctive character of its landscape and settlement patterns.

The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (NCA 62)

8.1.4 The Cheshire Sandstone Ridge (NCA 62) is described as a ‘*discontinuous ridge, but is very prominent, rising sharply from the gently rolling topography of the surrounding NCAs*’, and ‘*compared with the surrounding plain, the NCA has a strong mosaic of broadleaved mixed woodland*’. Glacial till covers the lower slopes of the ridge, resulting in the establishment of large areas of bog.

8.1.5 In summary, the key characteristics include:

- Sandstone ridge with outcrops and bluffs over 100 m high which rise above the surrounding plain, comprising Triassic sandstone and conglomerate.
- Thin, sandy and gravelly soils in the east with scattered peatlands. Free draining, thin and generally infertile soils along the ridge.
- Strong mosaic of wet woodland, broadleaved mixed woodland comprising ancient woodland and some post-medieval conifer plantations, which contribute to the wooded character along with large blocks of commercially managed conifers on gravelly soils to the east. The medieval Royal Forest of Delamere, in the north of the area, once covered a vast area of Cheshire.
- Fragmented orchards throughout Cheshire which were once more widespread.
- Regular pattern of fields surrounded by generally well-maintained hawthorn hedgerows with scattered mature hedgerow trees surrounded by sunken lanes. Hedgerows give way to drystone walls on the ridge.
- Low-density dispersed livestock farms, with some dairy and arable on gentler slopes.
- Large areas of lowland heathland survive on Bickerton Hill and at Little Budworth Common with fragmented areas of lowland meadow throughout the area, particularly along the Pettypool Brook Valley and along the line of the Shropshire Union Canal.

- Numerous field ponds, scattered areas of glacial meres and mosses in varying stages of succession, exemplified by internationally important Oak Mere and Abbots Moss.
- The meandering rivers Gowy and Weaver rise in the Peckforton Hills that form a local watershed.
- Remains of iron-age hill forts, burial mounds, ring ditches and castles, and finds of stone tools, occur along the ridgetop. A Roman road crosses the area en route to Manchester from Chester.
- Large historic halls include Peckforton and Utkinton (both listed Grade I), and Tirley Garth to the south-west of Kelsall, a Grade II* Listed Building surrounded by a Grade II* Registered Park and Garden. Beeston and Maiden castles are also popular visitor destinations.
- Sparsely populated with a dispersed settlement pattern of scattered farms and small villages, mostly of medieval origin. Red brick is the dominant building material, together with some local sandstone and timber-frame buildings.
- Former sand pits around Delamere provide a mosaic of wetland and woodland that is now important for biodiversity and recreation.
- The Shropshire Union Canal, the A54 and A51 cross the area and the Sandstone Trail, a long-distance footpath, offers elevated views across the NCA and beyond.
- Communication masts on the ridgetop and the war memorial at the northern end of the ridge are prominent local landmarks.

8.1.6

Statements of Environmental Opportunity (SEO's) include, in summary,

- SEO 1: Manage and enhance the rivers, streams and wetland habitats, including flood plain grazing marsh and wet woodland, protecting them from diffuse pollution to benefit, amongst other things, landscape character, and biodiversity.
- SEO 2: Manage and expand areas of semi-natural woodland, restore and reinstate hedgerows and hedgerow trees, protect and restore ancient woodland, for example in the Delamere Forest Park and throughout the Mersey Forest, thus reducing habitat fragmentation to benefit landscape character, amongst other things, whilst enhancing the recreational, educational and experiential qualities of the NCA.
- SEO 3: Protect and manage the geological sites, with an emphasis on demonstrating the strong link between geology and its influence on landscape and industrial development.
- SEO 4: Manage and, where appropriate, expand areas of characteristic heathland and other priority habitats, thus reducing habitat fragmentation to benefit landscape character and sense of place, while enhancing the recreational and experiential qualities of the NCA.

The Mersey Valley (NCA 60)

8.1.7 The Mersey Valley (NCA 60) is described as consisting of a *‘wide, low-lying river valley landscape focusing on the River Mersey, its estuary, associated tributaries and waterways’* and *‘encompasses a complex mix of extensive industrial development and urban areas, with high-quality farmland in between’*. *‘There is a dense communication network of major roads, railways, canals and transmission lines.’*

8.1.8 In summary, the key characteristics include:

- The landscape is low-lying, focusing on the broad linear valley of the River Mersey; it is estuarine in the west and has extensive areas of reclaimed mossland in the east.
- Underlain by Triassic sandstone, the surface geology is principally drift material: marine and river alluvium in the valley bottom, extensive areas of till, pockets of glacial sands and gravels, with peat in some drainage hollows.
- The Mersey Estuary is a defining element in the landscape, with expansive intertidal mudflats/sand flats and low exposed cliffs.
- The River Mersey flows from east to west, joined by associated tributaries, although the Mersey itself is often obscured from view.
- Trees and woodland are mainly associated with settlements, occasional parkland and isolated woodland blocks; and in recent years new community woodlands have been planted.
- Large-scale, open, predominantly flat, high-quality farmland occurs between developments, with primarily arable farming to the north of the valley and a mixture of arable and dairying to the south.
- The field pattern is regular and large scale, often defined by hedgerows with isolated hedgerow trees; many hedgerows are intermittent and have been replaced by post-and-wire fencing, while field boundaries on the mosses are marked by ditches.
- A range of important wetland habitats remain, including estuarine mudflats/sand flats and fringing salt marshes in the west, remnants of semi-natural mosslands and pockets of basin peats in the east, with the broad river valley in between.
- The predominant building material is red brick though some sandstone construction remains, and some survival of earlier timber frame.
- There are densely populated urban and suburban areas, with major towns particularly at the river crossings, including Runcorn, Widnes and Warrington.
- There is large-scale, highly visible industrial development, with docks, chemical works and oil refineries.
- The river valley has a dense communication network with motorways, roads, railways and canals running east–west, and power lines are also prominent.

8.1.9 Statements of Environmental Opportunity (SEO's) include, in summary,

- SEO 1: Conserve and enhance the Mersey Valley's rivers, tributaries and estuary to mitigate flood risk while also enhancing habitats for wildlife and for people's enjoyment of the landscape.
- SEO 2: Promote the Mersey Valley's historic environment and landscape character and positively integrate the environmental resource with industry and development, providing greenspace within existing and new development, to further the benefits provided by a healthy natural environment, as a framework for habitat restoration and for public amenity.
- SEO 3: Manage the arable and mixed farmland along the broad linear Mersey Valley, and create semi-natural habitats, woodlands and ecological networks, to increase connectivity and improve the character of the landscape.
- SEO 4: Manage and enhance the mossland landscape in the east, safeguarding wetlands to conserve peat soils and amongst other things contribute to landscape character and store carbon.

The Lancashire Coal Measures (NCA 56)

8.1.10 The Lancashire Coal Measures (NCA 56) is described as a '*varied topography of gentle hills and valleys*' and '*the area is dominated by its industrial heritage, long associated with mining activity. The resulting landscape is a complex mosaic of farmland, scattered urban centres, industry, active mineral sites and derelict or reclaimed workings, giving this area a strong and distinctive identity*'.

8.1.11 In summary, the key characteristics include:

- Fragmented landscape created by a complex pattern of mining and industrial activity intermixed with housing; this is a densely populated area with a scattered settlement pattern.
- Gentle hills and valleys run from the north-west to the south-east, creating a soft but varied topography.
- The area is underlain by Coal Measures, which are buried under a patchy layer of glacial deposits, subsequently affected by a long history of mineral working.
- Woodland cover is limited across most of the area (covering 9 per cent). Community woodlands have been established on many post-industrial sites, and bring multiple benefits, including for public access.
- Some large tracts and isolated pockets of agricultural land remain within the urban fabric, principally used for permanent grassland or cereal production, although horse grazing and stabling are also common.
- Field patterns are predominantly medium to large and rectangular, mostly resulting from 18th-century and later change, with field boundaries defined by poorly managed hedges or post-and-wire fencing.
- Widespread ground subsidence, caused by coal mining activities, has resulted in the formation of open water and wetlands, while scattered ponds and fragmented pockets of semi-natural habitat remain elsewhere. Landscape is a complex mosaic of farmland, scattered urban centres, industry, active mineral sites and derelict or reclaimed workings.

- The area has an increasingly recognised strong cultural and industrial heritage, associated with heavy industry and mineral extraction – while the majority of the pits, spoil heaps and open cast sites have now been reclaimed and landscaped.
- The area is significantly influenced by transport and utilities infrastructure, with motorways, major roads and rail lines criss-crossing the landscape.

8.1.12

Statements of Environmental Opportunity (SEO's) include, in summary:

- SEO 1: Safeguard, manage and expand the mosaic of wetland habitats, including lowland raised bogs, reedbeds, wet pastures, watercourses, subsidence flashes and ponds – to protect and enhance their ecological value, and to increase their contribution to the landscape.
- SEO 2: Conserve and manage the Lancashire Coal Measures' geological features and historic environment, to safeguard the strong cultural identity and mining heritage of the area, with its distinctive sense of place and history. Engage local communities with their past through the restoration and enhancement of key features and sites, and by improving understanding, interpretation and access.
- SEO 3: Manage and support the agricultural landscape through conserving, enhancing, linking and expanding the habitat network, while conserving the qualities of the farmed landscape and improving opportunities for enjoyment of the open countryside.
- SEO 4: Expand and link green infrastructure through restoring and enhancing post-industrial sites that raise the overall quality, design and location of new development, bringing multiple environmental benefits including functioning networks for wildlife and access and recreational amenities for people to enjoy.