Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council

Joint Local Plan Issues Consultation

Natural and Rural Environment Technical Paper

Contents

1.0   Introduction

1.1   This technical paper has been put together to summarise the evidence and key challenges arising in relation to Green Infrastructure (open space) across both Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme.

1.2   Green infrastructure can be defined as a strategic multi-functional network of green spaces, which can be both urban and rural in nature and support natural and ecological functions. The provision of green infrastructure is integral to the health and well-being of delivering sustainable local communities and is capable of providing vital social, economic and environmental across the plan area.

1.3   This technical paper aims to discuss the various functions of green infrastructure in both the context of the urban environment in both Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme and the rural environment in Newcastle-under-Lyme. This can include areas such as:

- Natural and semi-natural rural and urban green spaces – including woodland and scrub, brownfield sites
- Parks and gardens – urban parks, country and regional parks, formal and private gardens.
- Amenity green space – informal recreation spaces, play areas, outdoor sports facilities, housing green spaces, domestic gardens, community gardens, roof gardens, village greens, living roofs and walls, hedges, civic spaces, and highway trees and verges;
- Allotments
- Cemeteries and churchyards;
- Green corridors – rivers and canals (including banks), road verges and rail embankments, cycling routes, and public rights of way (PRoW);
- Sites selected for their substantive nature conservation value – Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Local Sites;
- Nature Reserves; Functional green space such as sustainable urban drainage schemes (SUDS) and flood storage areas.

2.0   What we are required to do

Regulations & Acts

2.1   The plan area's environmental assets including its green spaces and sites recognised as important to biodiversity enjoy a high level of protection through European regulations, acts and national policies.

Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (Section 40)

2.2   The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act places a duty on public authorities to conserve biodiversity and includes conserving biodiversity, in relation to a living organism or type of habitat, restoring or enhancing a population or habitat. The duty placed on individual local authorities ensures that biodiversity is an integral element of policy and decision making which plays a significant role in achieving the Government's commitment towards its Biodiversity 2020 strategy.

National Planning Policy Framework

2.3   The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) outlines the national approach to the natural environment and open spaces. Policies encourage the creation and enhancement of a network of open spaces and natural habitats and the protection of existing areas of open spaces and landscapes. The requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework are explored in more detail below.

Natural Environment

2.4   As part of delivering sustainable development, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) is clear that the planning system should perform a key environmental role to protect and enhance our natural environment, including helping to improve biodiversity by moving from a net loss of bio-diversity to achieving net gains for the future.

2.5   Paragraph 17 of the NPPF provides the Core Planning Principles which should be considered in both plan and decision making, this includes conserving and enhancing the natural environment and reducing pollution. Should local planning authorities seek to allocate land for development, consideration should be given to land of a lesser environmental value taking into account wider planning policies.

2.6   The planning system has a key role in enhancing and protecting the natural and local environment by:

- Protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, geological conservation interests and soils;
- Recognising the wider benefits of ecosystem services;
- Minimising impacts on biodiversity and providing net gains in biodiversity where possible, contributing to the Government's commitment to halt the overall decline in biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures;
- Preventing both new and existing development from contributing to or being put at unacceptable risk from, or being adversely affected by unacceptable levels of soil, air, water or noise pollution or land instability; and
- Remediating and mitigating despoiled, degraded, derelict, contaminated and unstable land where appropriate."[1]

2.7   To achieve these aims, local planning authorities should seek to minimise pollution and other adverse effects on the local and natural environment[2] and ensure that planning policies are truly reflective of local circumstances. Evidence should be up-to date and should include information about the natural environment and other characteristics of the area and include an assessment

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[1] National Planning Policy Framework (2012) Department for Communities and Local Government paragraph 109
[2] National Planning Policy Framework (2012) DCLG paragraph 110

of existing and potential components of ecological networks and working with Local Nature Partnerships where appropriate.

2.8   Planning policies should therefore plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale across local authority boundaries, identify and map components of the local ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity, wildlife corridors and routes that connect them and areas identified by local partnerships for habitat restoration and creation.

2.9   It is also important to promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, ecological networks and protection and recovery of species, linked to national and local targets and identify suitable indicators for monitoring biodiversity in the plan and prevent harm to geological conservation interests.

2.10   There are a variety of environmental assessments that may be required to inform the plan-making process and therefore assessments should be proportionate to the plan making area to enable local planning authorities to set out a strategic approach to positively plan for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure.

2.11   In order to protect wildlife, geology and landscape areas across the local plan area a national policy is clear that a set of criteria based policies against which proposals for any development on or affecting protected wildlife or geodiversity sites or landscape areas will be judged. Distinctions should be made between the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites, so that protection is consistent with their status and therefore policies should give appropriate weight to their importance and the contribution that they make to wider ecological networks.

2.12   Agricultural land can provide both environmental and economic benefits within an area. Where the need to develop agricultural land is clearly demonstrated to be important and necessary, development should be directed towards those areas demonstrated to be of a poorer quality in preference to agricultural land that is classified as being of a high quality. National planning policy is clear that the effective use of brownfield land is a core planning principle and therefore the reuse of previously developed land should be encouraged, provided that the land is not of high environmental quality.

Open space, sports and recreation facilities and local green space

2.13   Access to high quality open space facilities and opportunities for sport and recreation is highlighted as being important in national policy.   Open space is set out in the national planning policy guidance as taking many different forms including sports pitches, open areas within developments, linear corridors and country parks. The provision of open space can provide a number of health benefits for people living and working nearby, having an ecological value and contributing to the overall provision of green infrastructure.

2.14   A robust and up-to-date assessment of needs provides the basis to understand the current needs and the potential opportunities for new provision. National policy is clear that existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land including playing fields, should not be built upon unless it can be clearly demonstrate that the open space, buildings or land is surplus to the local needs. The loss of provision would be replaced by an equivalent or better provision.

2.15   National planning policy gives local communities the power to identify special protection green areas of particular importance to them in local and neighbourhood plans. These areas of land are known as Local Green Space and should not be developed on other than in very special circumstances. In designating Local Green Space careful consideration needs to be made about the proximity and the community the open space seeks to serve.

Public Rights of Way

2.16   National policy sets out that planning policy should protect and enhance existing public rights of way and access. Where possible opportunities should be explored to add additional links to existing rights of way and networks.

2.17   Planning Practice Guidance provides further guidance on the implementation of these policies and responsibilities set out above.

Minerals

2.18   Minerals are an essential resource to ensure and support sustainable economic growth. National Policy clearly sets out that it is important to have a sufficient supply however it is recognises that they are a finite resource and therefore it is important to make best use of them.

2.19   Paragraph 143 sets out further information that local planning authorities should consider when preparing local plans this includes:

- The identification and inclusion of policies for the extraction of mineral resources of local national importance.
- Take account of the contribution that substitute and recycled materials and mineral waste can make to the overall supply.

- Clearly define safeguarded areas and adopt appropriate policies in order that known locations are not sterilised by non-mineral development.

3.0   Our approach in the past

Local Planning Policy

The Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent Core Spatial Strategy 2006-2026

3.1   The adopted Core Strategy sets out the following relevant strategic aims and policies for the Green Infrastructure, natural environment, which will require reconsideration through the preparation of the Joint Local Plan. These include:

- **Strategic Aim 2 (SA2)** To facilitate delivery of the best healthy urban living in the development of the conurbation and to ensure that new development makes adequate provision for all necessary communities including health care, education, sports and recreation and leisure and that the quality and accessibility of existing facilities are enhances and retained were they provide for the justified community needs.

- **Strategic Aim 8 (SA8)** To increase the attraction of the area as a tourist destination based on its industrial heritage, existing and future magnets of tourism and leisure interest and the high quality environment in the surrounding rural area.

- **Strategic Aim 9 (SA9)** To safeguard valued economic resources including minerals in the City of Stoke-on-Trent.

- **Strategic Aim 13 (SA13)** - To protect and improve the plan area's network of canals and watercourses, green spaces/infrastructure and parks to provide the landscape setting for high quality development of homes, employment and leisure opportunities; opportunities for physical activity and to foster a more sustainable way of life.

- **Strategic Aim 15 (SA15)** - To protect and improve the countryside and the diversity of wildlife and habitats throughout the plan area.

3.2   The adopted Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Minerals Local Plan sets out the mineral planning policies to guide development in Staffordshire.   The production of a new Minerals Local Plan is currently underway and when the plan is adopted will replace the existing plan setting out the vision, objectives and policies to control mineral related development within Staffordshire to 2030. Staffordshire County Council submitted the plan on the 8th January to the Secretary of State for independent examination.

4.0   Other Strategies

National Strategies

Biodiversity Strategy 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services & The Natural Environment White Paper 2011

4.1   In 2011, the government at the time published Biodiveristy 2020; a national strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services which built upon the aims of the Natural Environment White Paper 2011. This strategy was subsequently incorporated into the policies of the NPPF and PPG. Key priorities of this strategy that are particularly relevant to strategic planning include delivering the following aims by 2020:

- Creating more, bigger and less fragmented areas for wildlife delivering an increase in priority habitats by at least 200,000ha and avoiding net loss of priority habitats.
- Improving habitat quality by ensuring 90% of priority habitats are in favourable or recovering condition and that at least 50% of SSSI's are in favourable condition, while maintaining at least 95% in favourable or recovering condition.

Local Strategic Plans and Programmes

Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan 2010

4.2   The Staffordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (SBAP) focuses conservation efforts on the areas within the county that will result in the greatest benefit for ecological networks, habitats and species. Most of the Newcastle-under-Lyme area is covered by the 'wooded quarter' ecosystem action plan. It covers a highly diverse area of land that ranges from marshy clay farmland and vales, wet heath moor & boglands, stream valleys and washlands, free draining upland estates and large areas of dry heathland and woodland. There are also a number of smaller 'meres and mosses' in Newcastle-under-Lyme's rural area. The primary objective within the area is the maintenance, restoration and expansion of Wood-pasture & Parkland and Native Woodland.

North Staffordshire Green Space Strategy (2007)

4.3   The strategy states the "purpose of the green space strategy is to ensure that the green space asset base in urban North Staffordshire fulfils its potential to deliver a wide range of environmental, economic and social benefits through a strategic approach to planning and management." Both authorities are looking to update their evidence base to inform the work on the Joint Local Plan.

4.4   The Green Space Strategy aims to:

- Ensure that the strategic planning, management and maintenance of the conurbation's green space supports the environmental, economic and social regeneration of urban North Staffordshire;

- Improve the quality, accessibility and coherence of green spaces within urban North Staffordshire;
- Promote the co-ordination of responsibilities and resource allocation across agencies, authorities and local groups to improve service delivery and to maximise the potential of available funding;
- Raise the profile and importance of quality green space as a key ingredient in the delivery of sustainable communities and housing market renewal;
- Create a strategic framework that facilitates a coherent and coordinated approach to the creation, improvement, protection, disposal, management, maintenance and funding of green spaces within urban North Staffordshire, which can be embedded within strategic and local policy by provision of a robust, coherent and clear set of tools for delivery at a local level;
- Highlight the value of green space in contributing to corporate strategic aims and objectives.

Stoke-on-Trent Greenspace Strategy (2014)

4.5 The strategy identifies parks and green spaces as being integral to the cultural life of the city and crucial to the successful functioning of urban communities.[3]

4.6 It states that a long term lack of funding, investment and low prioritisation of parks and greenspace management has led to a decline in green space on a national level, including Stoke-on-Trent.

4.7 The Strategy identifies a vision of "A city with attractive, safe and accessible green spaces of exceptional quality for all generations to use and enjoy".

4.8 Within 20 years everyone in Stoke-on-Trent will have affordable access to:

- A high quality traditional park, staffed during daylight hours, with features such as mature trees, ornamental planting, seating, toilets and a café.
- Good quality playing fields and changing rooms providing for a variety of sports, games and exercises.
- Open, welcoming and well managed natural green space, such as meadows or woodland with protected wildlife habitats.
- Well kept, well maintained, imaginative and challenging play facilities, from traditionally equipped play grounds to natural play spaces, parks or games areas.
- Well maintained green space for informal recreation.
- Allotments.

It identifies a number of objectives including:

- A visible improvement in the quality of parks and green spaces.
- Encourage greater use and enjoyment of Stoke-on-Trent's parks and green spaces by all sectors of the community.
- Contribute to the wider planning of the urban fabric of the city by providing a range of good quality parks and green spaces, which play a significant role in meeting the needs of balanced and sustainable communities and

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[3] Stoke-on-Trent City Council Greenspace Strategy (2014) page 5

enhancing the landscape, to help make Stoke-on-Trent a green and sustainable city.

- Rectify the balance between green space requirements and the city's current green space offer.
- Contribute to adapting to climate change and promoting biodiversity.
- Provide a clear basis for beneficial investment in green spaces – identifying those areas where investments and improvements in green space are most needed – helping the council to 'spend better'.
- Encourage and develop community participation in the improvement, maintenance and management of their green spaces."

4.9   The strategy includes an action plan. Stoke-on-Trent City Council will be reviewing the green space work in 2016 in order to inform spatial options.

Newcastle-under-Lyme Playing Pitch Strategy 2015-2020

4.10   This is a new strategy which replaces the Playing Pitch Strategy from 2006. It sets out the strategy for identifying and meeting the needs for playing pitch and associated facilities in Newcastle Borough from now through to 2020. It covers both natural and artificial pitches, which are used for football, cricket, rugby union and hockey, bowls, netball and tennis. Facilities included within the strategy encompass those in all ownerships (i.e. public, private and third sectors).

4.11   The Playing Pitch Strategy seeks to achieve the following outcomes:

- To identify current supply and demand for playing pitches.
- To identify current and future predicted unmet demand.
- To establish, protect and enhance strategic multi pitch facilities.
- To form part of the Joint Local Plan evidence base.
- To identify potential funding opportunities to enhance outdoor sports facilities in the borough.
- To identify lapsed sites that are not required to meet current or future demand for sport.

Stoke-on-Trent Sport and Physical Activity Strategy 2009-2016

4.12   The Stoke-on-Trent Sport and Physical Activity Strategy 2009-2016 sets the direction for sport and physical activity in Stoke-on-Trent. Work is currently underway to prepare a new combined play pitch and built facility strategy for Stoke-on-Trent and is expected to be completed early 2016.

5.0 Past Trends

Designated sites

Newcastle-under-Lyme

5.1   In recent years, there has been an increase in designated sites recognised for their biodiversity in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

5.2   The Newcastle-under-Lyme Annual Monitoring Report 2011 shows that designated sites increased within the borough between 2008 and 2011 as follows;

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) +0.8ha,
- Local Nature Reserves +26ha,
- Sites of Biological Interest +4.9ha.

5.3   May 2015 GIS data obtained from the Staffordshire Ecological Record confirms that the amount of designated sites have increased further between 2011 and 2015 as follows;

- Sits of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) = +2.4ha,
- Local Nature Reserve= +28.4ha,
- Sites of Biological Interest =+154.7ha.

5.4   The Stoke-on-Trent Annual Monitoring Report 2014 identifies that no areas of biodiversity have been lost or added in the city since 2010.

Table 1: SSI Condition Data

Local authority	Percentage of total SSSI sites deemed 'favourable' or 'unfavourable- recovering' as of 2015[4]	Historic comparator for percentage of SSSI sites deemed 'favourable' or 'unfavourable-recovering'
Newcastle-under-Lyme	36.04% (33.17ha of a total 92.04ha in the borough)	75.61% in 2008[5] (62ha out of a total 82ha in the borough)
Stoke-on-Trent	87.96% (40.75ha of a total 46.33ha within the city)	

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[4] Sourced from SSSI condition data available from Natural England's website – Accessed 30/09/2015
[5] Newcastle-under-Lyme Annual Monitoring Report 2008
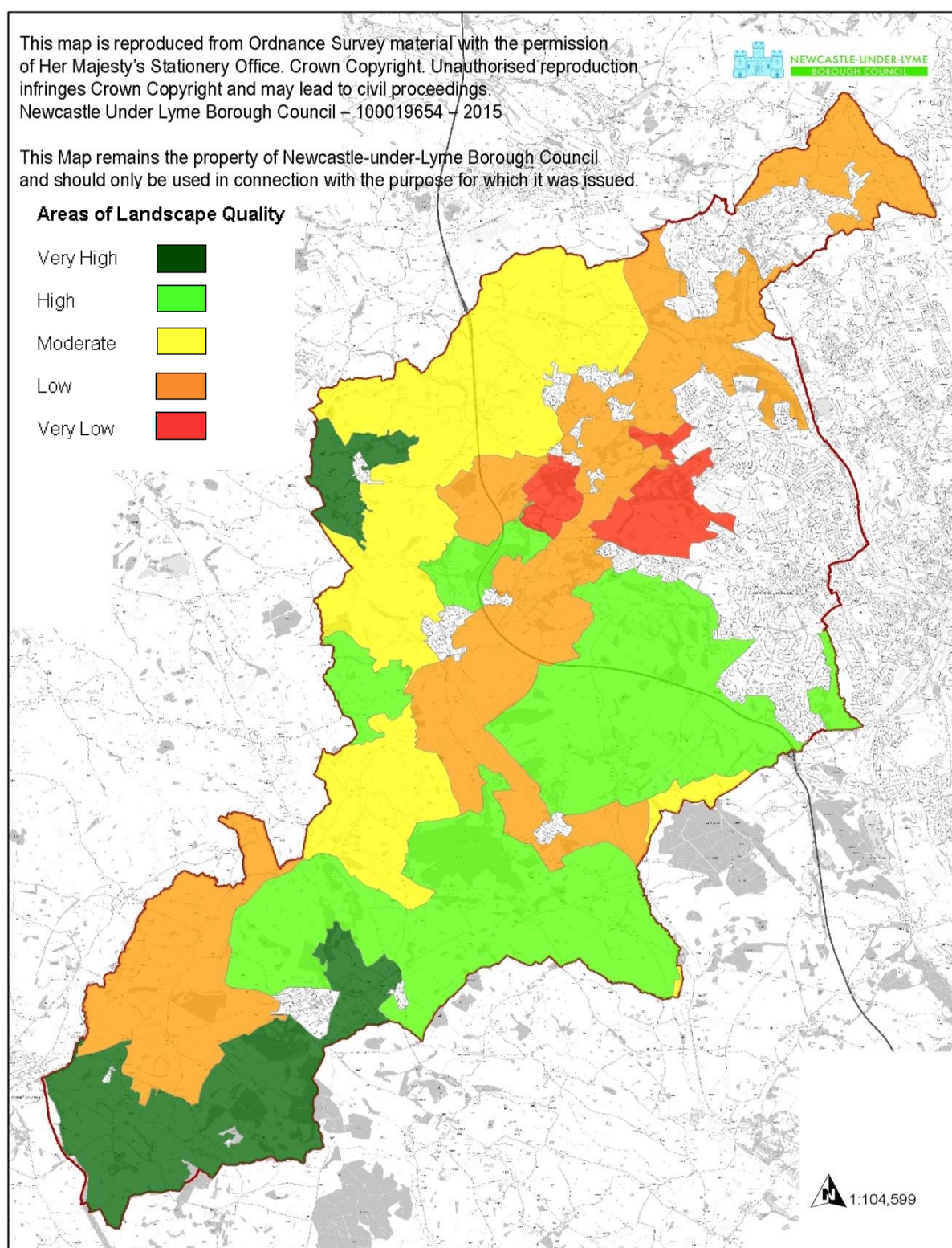
6.0   What are we doing now

Evidence Base

6.1   To meet the requirements of national planning policy, we are required to use up-to-date information about the various elements of green infrastructure/ open space to inform the plan-making process.

Landscape Context

6.2   Staffordshire County Council undertook previous landscape character assessment work in 2000 to support the previous Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Structure Plan, (1996-2011), This identifies a variety of landscape character types within the borough, each with its own sensitivities and key characteristic features. Whilst the characteristics of landscape features vary between different parts of the borough, some key issues critical for the protection and enhancement of landscape character are identified. These include the protection of semi-natural planting and vegetation, such as hedgerows, woodlands and heathlands and the retention of hedged field patterns and arable farmlands within the south west of the borough. Many of these areas are identified as being highly sensitive to future development and the increasing sprawl of urban development is also identified as risking creating further incongruous features within the landscape. A number of these areas also contain opportunities for future enhancement, through the provision of new woodland planting and habitat provision and management. In particular, this includes the potential to improve the landscape to the north-west of Newcastle-under-Lyme's urban area, by screening any further urban expansion with new woodland planting in the ancient slope and valley area.

6.3   This work identified five different types of landscape area within Newcastle-under-Lyme, each of which was determined based upon detailed consideration of landscape character and contained different opportunities for landscape improvement and protection. Areas of very high quality landscape requiring active conservation were identified in the borough, particularly to the south-west of Loggerheads and to the west of Betley. Areas of high quality and characteristic landscape, in which the key priority highlighted was to maintain the existing landscape, were also identified to the west and south-west of Newcastle-under-Lyme's urban area. Examples of these areas included the countryside surrounding Keele University and village and the area to the north of Madeley. The remaining areas of the borough's rural area were broadly identified as containing moderate to very low landscape quality, where the enhancement, restoration or innovative regeneration of the landscape may be required. In particular, areas of very low landscape quality requiring regeneration of the landscape were identified in the countryside to the north of Silverdale and to the south of Halmerend.

6.4   This work is currently under review by Staffordshire County Council and this future review is anticipated to consider areas within Stoke-on-Trent as well as Newcastle-under-Lyme. If and when this work becomes available, information

from this updated work will be used to inform assessments of potential impact on the landscape and future policy.

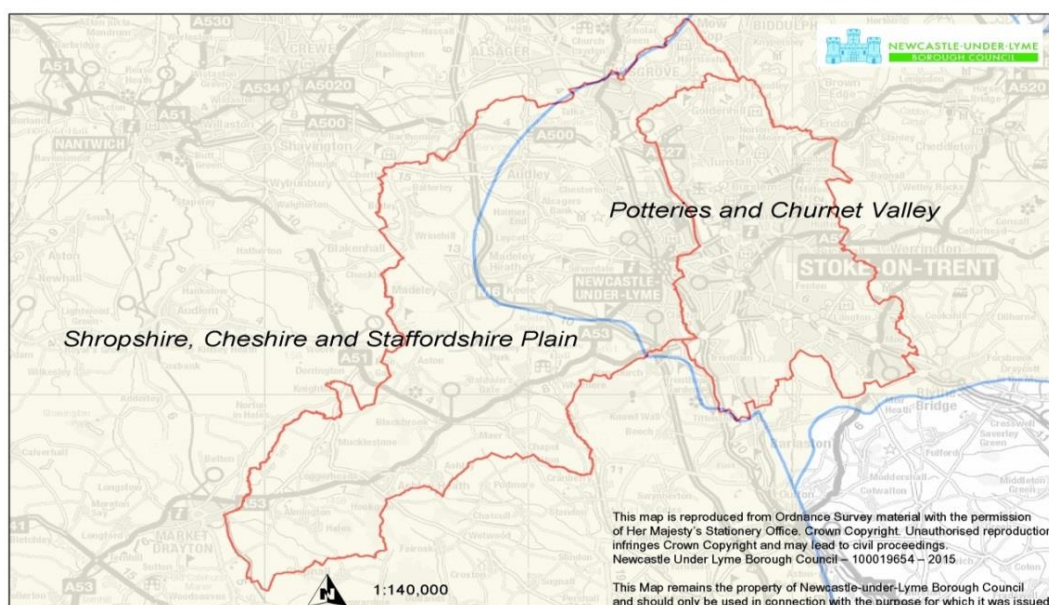Figure 1: Areas of Landscape Quality in Newcastle-under-Lyme

Source: 'Planning for Landscape Change' Supplementary Planning Guidance, Staffordshire County Council.

National Character Areas

6.5   Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent are located within the 'Potteries and Churnet Valley' and 'Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain' landscape character areas with a National Character Area profile having been published for each area in 2014 and 2015 by Natural England. In particular, the 'Potteries and Churnet Valley' National Character Area states "In contrast to the densely populated areas of the Potteries, there exists a network of green spaces developed on former industrial and extractive sites that evoke a sense of tranquillity in the heart of the urban area." It also states that "In the urban area, landscape scale reclamation of former mines and industrial sites has led to the creation of the Lyme Valley Park, Apedale Country Park, Central Forest Park, Westport Lake, Chatterley Whitfield Heritage Country Park and the garden festival site at Etruria, providing a sense of tranquillity in the heart of the urban area. Public parks, for example Fenton and Hanley, also provide high-quality open spaces in otherwise densely populated areas."[6]

6.6   A number of key characteristics are also identified for the western part of Newcastle-under-Lyme's rural area, which falls within the 'Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain' National Character Area Profile. This area is characterised by a diversity of wetland habitats and internationally important meers and mosses. This character area also contains extensive and gently undulating plains with strong field patterns with generally well-maintained boundaries and some limited areas of woodlands.[7]

Figure 2: Map of the Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain and Potteries and Churnet Valley

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[6] Natural England (2015) National Character Area Profile – 64. Potteries and Churnet Valley page 65
[7] Natural England (2015) National Character Area Profile – 61. Shropshire Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain page 8

Natural Environment

6.7   In terms of the natural environment, this may include a variety of environmental assessments to establish the existing and potential components of ecological networks. This involves consultation with key stakeholders, such as Local Nature Partnerships, to identify the range of information any assessment must cover. The evidence currently available to the councils is set out below under key topic areas.   Where future pieces of evidence may also need to be prepared to support the development of the Joint Local Plan, this has also been highlighted.

Ecology and Biodiversity

6.8   A diverse range of natural assets exist in the plan area, including sites of international, national and local areas of wildlife and ecological value. These include:

- 2 Ramsar sites in Newcastle-under-Lyme
- 7 Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI)

    In Newcastle-under-Lyme, these are:
    - Betley Mere
    - Black Firs and Cranberry Bog
    - Burnt Wood
    - Metallic Tilleries, Parkhouse
    - Maer Pool

    In Stoke-on-Trent, these are:
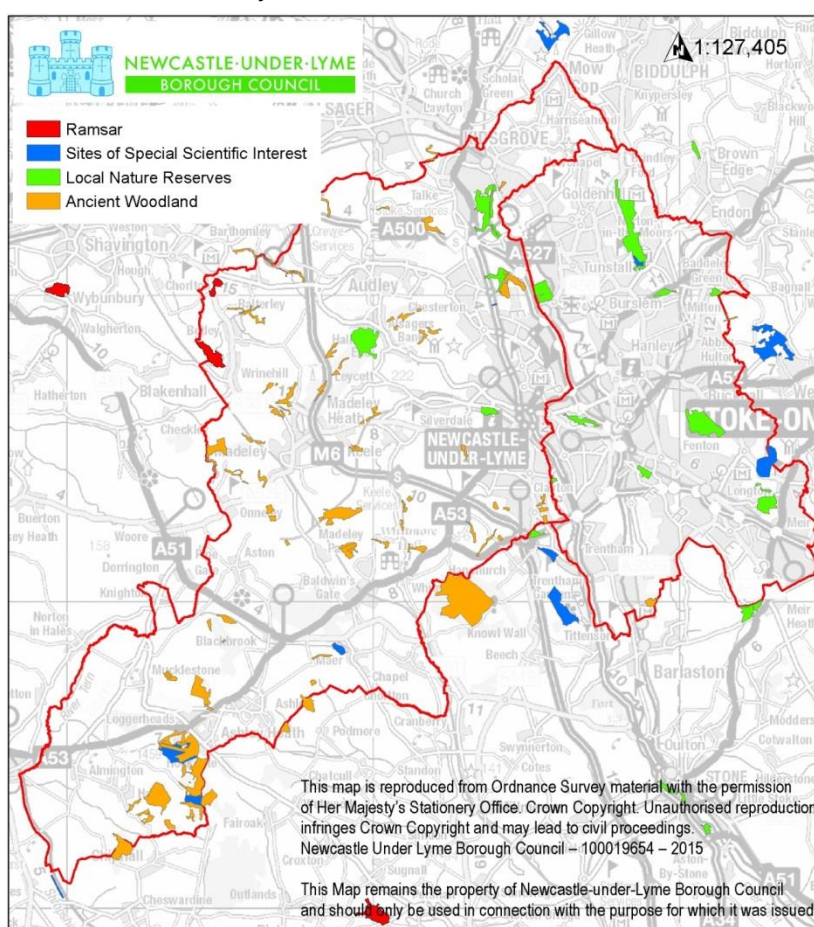   - Ford Green Reedbed
    - Hulme Quarry

- 13 Local Nature Reserves and a number of Local Sites in both local authority areas.

Stoke-on-Trent in particular benefits heavily from a large number of Local Sites, with 41 designated sites totalling 567.5ha being present within the city, covering approximately 6% of the overall area within Stoke-on-Trent. Local Nature Reserves are also a crucial part of the natural environment in both areas, with 4 sites totalling 140.9ha in Newcastle-under-Lyme and 9 sites totalling 246.4ha in Stoke-on-Trent. Newcastle-under-Lyme also contains a very large amount of Ancient Woodland, with approximately 650 hectares present in the borough, making up roughly 3% of the borough's area. Stoke-on-Trent currently contains a much smaller proportion of this designation, with approximately 7.85ha present in the city. The distribution of the national and international sites and Local Nature Reserves within the two areas can be seen on the map below. In addition to the designations depicted, a number of Local Sites are also present throughout both areas.

6.9   The councils will need to consider the possibility that any future development strategy proposed in the Joint Local Plan could have a significant effect on internationally designated sites, such as the Midlands Meres and Mosses Phase 1 & 2 (Ramsar). There are requirements under European legislation to assess the likely impacts on European sites of plans or programmes. The first stage of this work is screening which involves identifying sites within and beyond the plan area and assessing whether the plan is likely to have an impact on these sites.   If this cannot be ruled out then an Appropriate Assessment is required to consider the potential significant likely effects. The councils will undertake this work as and when they consider appropriate in line with the legislative requirements. The NPPF paragraph 166 states "Local Plans may require a variety of other environmental assessments, including under the Habitats Regulations where there is a likely significant effect on a European wildlife site (which may not necessarily be within the same local authority area)."[8]

International and national wildlife and geology sites and Local Nature Reserves in Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent

Figure 3: International and national wildlife and geology sites and Local Nature Reserves in Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent

Source: Natural England GIS data 2015

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[8] National Planning Policy Framework (2012) Department for Communities and Local Government

In addition to designated sites of various levels of importance, both authorities contain a large quantity of green spaces which are not covered by a formal designation. The previous audit work to examine where these sites are and the functions they are performing was previously carried out as part of the North Staffordshire Green Space Strategy 2007, which identified a number of sites which contributed towards the natural environment. Recognising the dated nature of this work, both councils are seeking to update their Green Space Audits to inform the preparation of the Joint Local Plan.

In preparing this update, particular emphasis on examining the multi-functional nature of many of borough's green spaces will be completed, to ensure that the social, economic and environmental benefits of the borough's green infrastructure is robustly captured.

Newcastle-under-Lyme Biodiversity Opportunity Mapping 2014

The Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Biodiversity Opportunity Mapping identifies a number of areas of existing or potential future biodiversity value. This mapping shows that woodland, urban area and grassland opportunity zones are present in the borough. The mapping identifies some key ecological issues that are facing each zone. These include:

- Loss of habitats through urban expansion and the proximity of biodiversity opportunity zones to a major conurbation and rural towns where there is pressure for development
- Development pressures are often targeted towards brownfield areas, despite the relative ecological value of such sites.
- Intensification of agricultural practices can contribute to the fragmentation of semi-natural habitats, the decline of hedgerow habitats and adverse impacts on river valley biodiversity through the discharge of agricultural chemicals.
- Increasing density of development in urban locations can result in the loss of biodiversity through gardens and green spaces being developed.

The Stoke-on-Trent Biodiversity Opportunity Mapping

The Stoke-on-Trent Biodiversity Opportunities Map provides guidance on opportunities for biodiversity within different area of the city – 'character areas'. It states that this "can be used to guide strategic forward planning and partnership work to deliver the government's objectives for coherent and resilient ecological networks."[9]

Key points from the Stoke-on-Trent Biodiversity Opportunities Mapping are:

Better sites:

- continue to manage existing biodiversity interests
- implement positive management for biodiversity

Bigger sites:

- expand existing semi-natural sites

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[9] 'Planning for a coherent and resilient ecological network in the City of Stoke-on-Trent' Biodiversity Opportunities Mapping

More joined up sites:

- improve connectivity for biodiversity by habitat creation
- improve connectivity for biodiversity by implementing positive management
- improve connectivity for biodiversity by retaining open land links

The mapping identifies that whilst the mapping presented is to inform work in Stoke-on-Trent that "the maps do not stop at the artificial boundary of the Local Authority area but reach beyond to link in with the mapping exercises completed or underway in the neighbouring boroughs of Stafford, Newcastle-under-Lyme and Staffordshire Moorlands."[10]

Agricultural Land Classification

6.10   The NPPF defines best and most versatile agricultural land as land falling within Grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification. Mapping information prepared by Natural England identifies areas falling within Agricultural Land Classifications 1-5, as well as 'urban' and 'non-agricultural' areas within Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent. However, the information currently available does not allow Grade 3 land to be comprehensively split into 3a and 3b categories, meaning the full extent of best and most versatile land cannot be conclusively determined.

6.11   Based on the information currently available, it can be established that the vast majority of Stoke-on-Trent is classed as 'urban', although there are some limited areas of Grade 3 land bordering the south of the city and Grade 4 land adjacent to the city's eastern border. The vast majority of the rural area to the west of Newcastle-under-Lyme lies within Grade 3 land. There is also an area of Grade 4 land to the west of Newcastle-under-Lyme's urban area and to the east of the town of Kidsgrove. Isolated areas of Grade 2 land are also present within the borough, particularly to the south-west of the borough in the area to the west of Loggerheads.

6.12   Therefore there is some potential for further land falling under the definition of 'best and most versatile' agricultural land to be present in Newcastle-under-Lyme's rural area and on Stoke-on-Trent's southern border. However, based on the currently available information, only a small amount of best and most versatile agricultural land can currently be identified within the two authorities. Furthermore, the limited amount which can be identified does not adjoin any major settlement within the rural area, so such land may be less likely to come under pressure from speculative development.

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[10] 'Planning for a coherent and resilient ecological network in the City of Stoke-on-Trent' Biodiversity Opportunities Mapping

Public Rights of Way

6.13   Stoke-on-Trent has a number of public rights of way which anybody may use at any time. Public rights of way are recorded on a Definitive Map and Statement (a legal record of public rights of way). Each route is classified according to what people can do on them. There are four categories of public rights of way:

Public footpath

- For walkers only.
- You are allowed to take a pram, pushchair or wheelchair along any public footpath - but be aware that many routes may not be physically suitable for them.
- Public footpaths are often waymarked with yellow arrows.

Bridleways

- For walkers, horse riders and pedal cyclists.
- Cyclists must give way to walkers and horse riders.
- Bridleways are often waymarked with blue arrows.

Byways open to all traffic (BOAT)

- As the name suggests, these routes - often simply called byways - are for walkers, horse riders, cyclists and vehicles - including horse-drawn carriages, motorcycles and other motor vehicles.
- BOATs are often waymarked with red arrows.

Restricted byways

- For walkers, horse riders, cyclists and horse drawn vehicles only.
- Restricted byways are often waymarked with purple arrows.

6.14   Newcastle-under-Lyme also has numerous rights of way running throughout its borough, which are examined in more detail in the Staffordshire County Council Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Staffordshire. This shows that the types of Public Rights of Way within Newcastle-under-Lyme are split up as follows[11]:
-    92.9% are public footpaths
-    5.1% are public bridleways
-    2% are byways open to all traffic (BOAT)

6.15   The Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Staffordshire also identifies that the southern and south-western areas of the borough (around Ashley, Keele, Loggerheads and Whitmore) have high demand for walking opportunities, but

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[11] Figure 3.2 of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Staffordshire

low provision of walking routes. There is a wider mismatch of the needs and provision for horse riding across the borough, with the exception of areas around Knighton and Madeley Heath. These issues are considered further in the Transport Issues Paper.

Green Space, Sport and Recreation

6.16   There are a range of publically accessible green and open spaces in Stoke-on Trent that provide a range of functions in the City. These include:

- 96 parks in the city including countryside sites
- 74 parks with play areas in the City, these include:
    - 3 strategic parks – Park Hall (Green Flag awarded in 2011- also a countryside site), Westport Lake (also a countryside site) and Central Forest Park
    - 6 district parks – Bucknall, Burslem, Fenton, Hanley, Queens Park, Longton (Green Flag awarded in 2011) and Victoria Park, Tunstall.
    - 36 Neighbourhood Parks
    - 29 Local Parks
- There are 24 Countryside park sites (this includes Park Hall and Westport
- Lake)
- 3,420 allotment plots on 76 sites over 75 hectares
- 12 bowling clubs.
- More than 13 community waters (fishing pools)
- Two Diamond Wood sites, which are new woodland areas to celebrate Her Majesty the Queen's historic 2012 Diamond Jubilee. (The only city in England to have a Diamond Wood site)
- Various sports courts in District Parks.
- An outdoor gym in Queens Park, Longton.
- A large network of connected Greenways (former rail lines) and Canal side paths.

6.17   As part of the North Staffordshire Green Space Strategy 2007, an audit of green spaces within Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme was carried out[12]. This work identified that, Newcastle-under-Lyme contains:
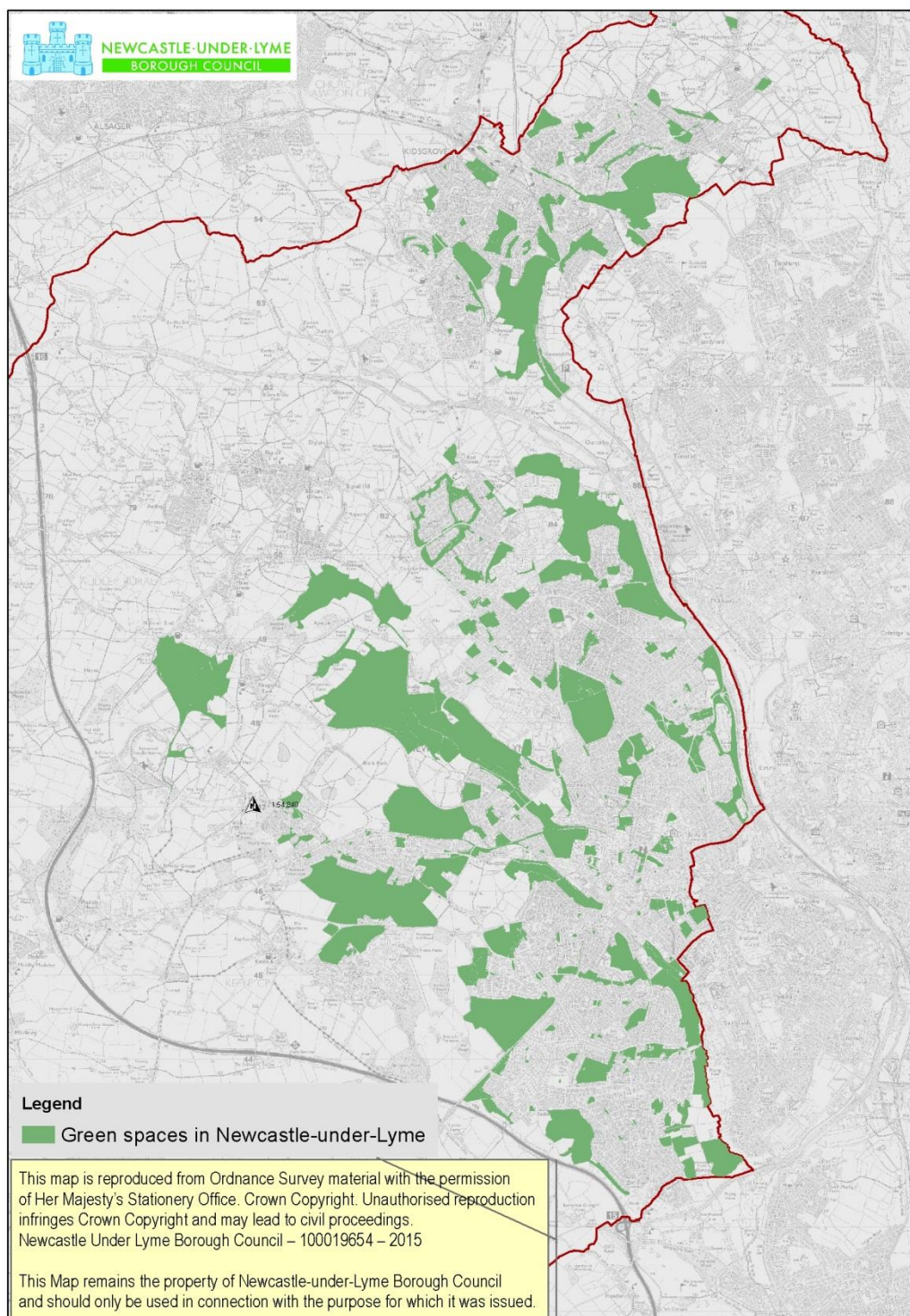
- 270ha of parks and gardens
- 10ha of playgrounds
- 118ha of outdoor sports facilities
- 60ha of nature reserves
- 264ha of semi-natural green spaces
- 28ha of green corridors
- 218ha of amenity green spaces

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[12] The North Staffordshire Green Space Strategy 2007 and the associated audit are available from Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council's website: http://www.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/all-services/planning/planning-policy/north-staffordshire-green-space-strategy

- 237ha of other green spaces (including 136ha of golf courses, 11ha of allotments, 6ha of agricultural land, 21ha of churchyards and cemeteries and 62ha of institutional green spaces)

These green spaces are shown on figure 4.

Figure 4 – Green spaces in Newcastle-under-Lyme

Source: Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council GIS information

6.18   In addition to these spaces, there are numerous green spaces present throughout the rural area of Newcastle-under-Lyme.

6.19   The assessment set out above for both authorities is based on the previous audit completed in 2007 by Scott Wilson as part of the previous North Staffordshire Green Space Strategy. This information is due to be updated in 2016 and will feed into the next stage in the Joint Local Plan process.

7.0   Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Large amounts of green spaces interspersed amongst the conurbation. - The effective use of reclaimed land to provide tranquil open spaces which contribute to the urban landscape of Stoke-on-Trent. - The quality of the landscape beyond Stoke-on-Trent, including the nearby Peak District National Park and the opportunities it offers for recreation. - The retention of nationally and locally designated areas of biodiversity in both authorities and the increase in such designations in Newcastle-under-Lyme - The large amount of locally important wildlife and geological sites in both areas. - The biodiversity value of some brownfield sites within the two authorities. - The presence of wetlands of international importance ('Ramsar' sites) within Newcastle-under-Lyme and in close proximity to both authorities. - Areas of higher quality agricultural land within the south-west of Newcastle-under-Lyme. - Areas of higher quality natural landscape in the south and west of Newcastle-under-Lyme's rural area - The ancient rail and canal routes in Stoke-on-Trent provide a framework of good quality green routes that provide connections and benefits to a whole range of commercial, residential, public health, recreational, transport and tourism activities.	- The decline in condition of SSSI land within Newcastle-under-Lyme borough. - Increasing development density in Newcastle-under-Lyme has led to loss of biodiversity through gardens and green spaces being developed. - Development pressures can have negative ecological impacts on habitats and species adjacent to Newcastle-under-Lyme's conurbation and rural settlements. - Areas of lower quality natural landscape in the north of Newcastle-under-Lyme's rural area. - Decline in the quality of parks and greenspaces due to the lack of funding and management in Stoke-on-Trent. - Potential for large costs in maintaining greenspaces in the future.