4.11 STAFFORDSHIRE RIDGE

Key Characteristics

- Rising land from lower pasture farmland in an easterly direction to a prominent gritstone ridge with exposed rock outcrops
- Distinct vegetation patterns including birch woodland which gives way to heaths and heather associated with rock outcropping
- Thick, overgrown hedgerows on lower slopes. Individual hedgerow trees less apparent. Hedgerows give way upslope to grit stone walls
- Woodland cover is higher on upper slopes, compared to the wider Cheshire Plain
- Prominent summits located along the ridgeline are the Cloud and Mow Cop
- Settlement is dispersed, comprising isolated houses and farmsteads. Buildings are simple and robust, older buildings are grey Millstone grit or red sandstone. Modern buildings are constructed using Cheshire brick and clay tiles
- Transport network consists of minor winding roads, with localised containment by woodland and hedges
- Expansive views westwards from the ridge are impressive and spectacular over and across the Cheshire Plain. Views eastwards from lower slopes have the ridge as a backdrop
4.11 STAFFORDSHIRE RIDGE

LANDCOVER TYPES

Lower Farmed Slopes
Pasture fields are overall small in scale and irregular in pattern. Thick hedge boundaries give way to stone walls. Land quality is poor with areas of rougher grassland and greater incidence of gorse towards the ridge.

Upper Woodland Slopes
Substantial woodland cover on steeper ground below the two summits. Narrower bands of woodland are along tributaries and around disused quarry.

Ridgeline
Along the ridgeline are areas of heath and associated sandy soils, grassland and heather. Additionally rock outcrops along the ridgeline, most notably below the two summit points.

LANDSCAPE QUALITY

The Staffordshire Ridge is high quality. This is an aesthetically attractive landscape which includes distinguishing features. Factors which contribute to this high quality landscape include:

- scarcity within the Borough;
- distinctive landform and geology;
- presence of historic features;
- attractive, consistent vegetation types; and
- features which create a distinctive landscape with an identifiable 'sense of place'.

CONGLETON LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT
4.11 STAFFORDSHIRE RIDGE

Existing Landscape

The Staffordshire Ridge character area forms the eastern boundary of the Borough. It is separated from the Cheshire Plain by the transitional landscapes of the Mow Cop Fringe and the Cloud Peak Fringe. The ridgeline extends south from the Cloud to Mow Cop. These two summits are prominent features within the landscape. The character area breaks down to a thin ribbon adjacent to Congleton where it is bisected by a shallow valley at Whitemoor. The area broadens out either side of this natural pass to include the slopes below the two summits.

The area is heavily influenced by the underlying geology. The dramatic change in topography is associated with the transition from the Triassic lower keuper marls of the Cloud Peak Fringe and Mow Cop Fringe to Carboniferous millstone grits, and lower/middle coal measures. The Mow Cop Fringe is separated from the summit by a band of keuper sandstone. The area is overlaid with thin glacial deposits and in many places the underlying solid geology is exposed at the surface, either naturally occurring or as a result of quarrying. Water is drained off the western face of the ridge by several watercourses that extend westwards across adjacent areas to feed the River Wheelock or River Dane.

Generally farmland is used for pasture and tends to comprise small scale irregular fields defined by maintained hedgerows on lower slopes which quickly give way to gritstone walls at higher elevations. Field trees become more stunted and gorse, birch and heather becomes more evident. Some fields on steeper slopes are often neglected dependent on the degree of in-bye land, which varies between landholdings. Rushes are evident in poorly drained fields on the lower slopes.

Overall tree coverage is generally higher than within the more lowland landscapes. However, individual hedgerow trees are less apparent where hedges, primarily hawthorn have become overgrown. Oak ash woodland is predominant on the lower slopes giving way to birch woodland on higher ground. Large blocks of birch woodland below Mow cop give way to heathland vegetation, where sander soils are evident. Moorland heather along with gorse is also a feature at the Cloud. Indeed areas of heath extend almost the entire length of the ridgeline.

Throughout the highest summits, outcroppings of rock amongst heather is clearly visible.

Settlement is dispersed, there are scattered isolated properties, farmholdings and a small settlement at Timbersbrook. Older buildings are typically simple two storey stone construction with pitched slate, clay-tile or stone flagged roofs. Roads are minor, winding, narrow lanes which generally run along or adjacent to contours. There are more roads to the north below the Cloud.

From the Mow Cop Fringe and Cloud Fringe, the backdrop of the Staffordshire Ridge is a main feature in views to the east, being dominant against the skyline. Expansive, commanding views westwards from the ridgeline are impressive and spectacular over huge distances across the Cheshire Plain. Landmark features within the plain, which are clearly visible on a clear day, include railway viaducts, settlements, Jodrell Bank and the Cheshire Ridge. The ridgeline forms an important part of the Staffordshire Way and Mow Cop Trail, both of which are popular recreational routes, along which there are the many vantage points. In places localised erosion, road signage and post and wire fencing along degraded stone walls detract from views and the overall quality of the area. The overall harmony of this landscape is becoming weakened by poorly designed and inappropriately sited modern buildings, which interrupt views and detract from the wilder character of this part of the borough.

This pleasant and diverse rural landscape is distinctly different from any other area within the borough. Unlike many other areas it does not share any of the characteristics of the wider Cheshire Plain. The ridgeline benefits from a rich tapestry of landscape types and distinctive features such as rock outcrops and the Mow Cop, the folly that stands on a rock pinnacle isolated by quarrying.

Designations

Landscape designations within the Staffordshire ridge are as follows:

- Statutory Designations
  - SSSI – includes ancient woodland, CWT reserves and disused quarry below Mow Cop.
  - SAM – The Bridestones, Congleton occupies land on the ridgeline south of the Cloud
- Non-Statutory Designations
  - ASCV–covers whole of character area.
  - SBI A – The Cloud, Congleton includes woodland and heath. Narrow belt east of Congleton includes ancient woodland.
  - SBI B – narrow belt of ancient woodland along tributaries below Mow Cop and north of the Cloud.
  - SBI C – Mow Cop Heaths; areas of grassland, peatland and heath along the ridge between Mow Cop and Congleton. Areas of grassland at the Cloud.

Forces for Change

The main issues and forces for change affecting this area are mainly to do with recreational pressure and agricultural change

- Neglect of farmland, neglect and removal of hedges, removal of walls and replacement by fencing
- Visitor pressure along the Staffordshire Way and Mow Cop Trail contributes to erosion, exposing soils
- Minor urban pressures from Mow Cop and Timbers Brook

Future Management

The aim of the following guidelines is to outline the most appropriate management and conservation strategies, which ensure that the character is conserved, restored or enhanced.

- Retain expansive views over the Cheshire Plain, which are distinguishing features of the character area. Careful consideration should be given to the location of new developments to ensure that these views are maintained.
- Protect the ridgeline. The ridgeline is under pressure from people straying from the footpath network. Ensure that footpaths are well signposted to encourage proper use.
- Continue to preserve and repair stone walls, to match existing, thereby ensuring that they continue to be a prominent feature of the character area.
- Planting should reflect existing species in the area retaining diversity between the lower slopes, upper slopes and ridgeline. Oak, ash and hawthorn species should be promoted for planting within farmed slopes whilst oak, birch, hawthorn, heather and gorse are appropriate for upper slopes. The coniferous planting below the Cloud should be respected.
- Continue to maintain hedgerows and hedgerow trees as positive conservation features within the landscape. Manage hedgerows to maintain the existing age and species diversity, ensuring hedgerows maintain a feature of the landscape.
- Replant and manage blocks of woodland, to ensure the continuation of these characteristic features.
- Preserve archaeological features within the area.