4.5 CHERISHIRE PLAIN

Key Characteristics

- Level low lying rural landscape, although not truly flat
- Agricultural, predominantly pastoral use. Generally medium scale farmland, large regular rectilinear field patterns interspersed with smaller irregular fields
- Maintained hawthorn hedges and hedgerow trees provide containment and are an important landscape feature. A significant number of trees are over mature
- Numerous isolated houses, farmhouses and small settlements. Traditional buildings constructed using orange-red Cheshire brick and Welsh Slate or blue clay tile roofs
- There are Estates and Manor houses having their own distinct character and parkland feel
- Small blocks of woodland, mainly broadleaf deciduous, though with some coniferous
- Dense network of roads, primarily hedge lined country lanes. There are few major roads
- Field ponds scattered, though not omnipresent, are often vegetated and species rich features
4.5 CHESHIRE PLAIN

LANDCOVER TYPES

Brereton Heath
Area of heathland of acidic damp soils, having significant tree cover. Distinctive vegetation includes birch woodland, stands of coniferous trees and marsh grasslands.

Estate Parkland
Several areas of estate parkland occur throughout the Cheshire Plain, most notably on land associated with halls (e.g. Brereton Hall, Moreton Hall and Rode Hall), though also on land surrounding larger home farms. Well balanced and mature, maintained landscapes comprising of blocks of deciduous woodland, pasture and field trees. Some larger estates have a small lake with the grounds which adds to the parkland character.

Level Farmland
Medium to large scale field size, well defined by hedgerows with trees. There are scattered field ponds throughout the plain. Farming is primarily pastoral, although there is some arable use within the larger fields.

Urban Fringe Recreational
Recreational development occurs at Congleton’s southern urban fringe. Localised undulating landform has been utilised for golf course facilities.

Quarry Workings
Mineral extraction works occur within the Cheshire Plain. The main sites of silica extraction include Arclid Bridge, Arclid Hall Farm and Bent Farm, Astbury. Former sandpit workings at Arclid and Newbold Astbury may be evident as large water bodies and/or colonised by grassland or scrub vegetation.

LANDSCAPE QUALITY

The Cheshire Plain is overall of good quality. This is a pleasant rural landscape having a reasonable distribution of semi-natural landscape features. Factors which contribute to the quality of this landscape include:
- managed agricultural land, generally with well defined hedgerow field boundaries;
- occasional mixture of landuses such as golf courses and pasture;
- quarry activity present but generally well integrated into the landscape;
- features of local distinction include parkland estates and heathland; and
- presence of detractors such as exposed settlement edges.
4.5 CHESHIRE PLAIN

Existing Landscape

The Cheshire Plain is the most extensive of the character area types and occupies the central area of the District. The plain is broadly defined to the north by Holmes Chapel and the Dane Valley, to the east by Congleton and the Macclesfield Canal, to the south by Alsager and tributaries of the River Wheelock and to the west by Sandbach.

This is a flat, low lying landscape formed predominantly on Triassic middle keuper marls with upper saliferous beds between Middlewich and Sandbach, overlaid by glacial deposits. The vast majority of these glacial deposits are boulder clay, however, a band of more varied deposits can be found between Breerton Heath, Sandbach and Alsager. These include undifferentiated fluvo-glacial deposits, glacial sands and gravel and peat. The land falls slightly from north-west to south-east and tributaries are broadly orientated along this axis, before draining into the River Dane or Wheelock. There are localised variations in topography, notably towards the edge of the Cheshire Plain and also along river tributaries.

Predominantly medium scale, lush pastural fields, giving way to large-scale fields in places dominate the plain. The rectilinear field boundaries are contained primarily by well maintained Hawthorn hedgerows (80-90% intact) and a relatively high density of hedgerow trees, mostly mature oak, many of which are stag-headed. There are few large areas of woodland, however, scattered tree copses are always evident, but are generally small in scale. A number of none native tree groups, either poplar or coniferous plantations stand out from other vegetation types. Field ponds are scattered over the whole of the area, though with considerable local variation in distribution, their presence usually being signified by a cluster of willow or hawthorn within fields, although they do not appear as omnipresent as in other parts of the wider Cheshire Plain. There are some larger water bodies associated with the historic parks and with former mineral workings, such as Rode Hall and Arclid sandpit. They do not appear as very significant elements in the landscape as they are not widely visible, due to the generally flat topography and hedgerow containment. Similarly the sand and gravel quarries that are present are generally not evident, unless in their immediate proximity.

At Breerton Heath, a distinctive pocket of heathland contrasts sharply from the surrounding open Cheshire Plain. Much of the area has significant tree cover although there are small areas of pasture dotted around the central wooded core. Acidic soils, boggy in places, peatland, heath and a predominance of silver birch and coniferous species are very evident. Breerton Heath Country Park includes a large water body derived from peat/mineral extractions. The area is a local attraction and is crossed by several footpaths.

Settlement is relatively dispersed, with numerous isolated houses, farmhouses and several small settlements. The older buildings are constructed in orange-red Cheshire Brick with Welsh slate or clay-tile roofs. However many more contemporary structures are present, such as modern residential dwellings and agricultural buildings. Country estates and manor houses have their own distinct character and introduce a parkland feel that elevates the landscape quality of the plain at these locations, for example; Great Moreton Hall, Little Moreton Hall and Rode Hall.

The transport system comprises a relatively dense road network. A very distinct feature is the network of winding country lanes, which are only occasionally cut through by wider single carriageway roads. Major roads include the M6, which runs approximately north south through the eastern half of the borough and the A54 and A34, which link the larger settlements.

This is a pleasant rural landscape of medium scale but neither spectacular nor dramatic. There is no real sense of remoteness as property albeit isolated, is evident throughout the area. The degree of openness varies; some parts are fairly open with views across fields of 2km or more and distant views of the Peak Fringe to the east. Conversely, views from within other areas are more limited where hedgerows are slightly higher and tree cover slightly denser, which invokes a sense of intimacy. These differences are relatively subtle and a whole range of degrees of containment lie between the two. Poplar and coniferous plantations, whilst giving some greater degree of containment and an overall appearance of a more wooded landscape, appear slightly incongruous and alien.

Designations

Landscape designations within the Cheshire Plain are as follows:

Statutory-designation
- SSIs – Brookhouse Moss, Smallwood. Bagmere, Breerton Heath (also a RAMSAR site). Gannister Quarry, Newbold Astbury
- SAMS – Earthwork at Bent Farm, Newbold Astbury. Long barrow 230m SE of Somerford Bridge, Somerford. Little Moreton Hall, moated site and outlying prospect mound, Odd Rode
- Park and Garden of Special Historic Interest (included on the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission – Rode Hall
- Conservation area – Newbold Astbury

Non-statutory Designations
- ASCV 1996 & ASLEV
- SBI A – Pool Wood, Somerford. River Dane tributaries, along which are belts of ancient woodland. Timbersbrook, Congleton; small area of woodland along tributary of River Wheelock. Peatland area near Brookhouse Green. Stanherhouse Lane Meadows, Betchton. Martin’s Moss, Smallwood
- Parks and Gardens of Historic Interest.
4.5 CHESHIRE PLAIN

Forces for Change

The main issues and forces for change affecting this character area are mainly concerned with urban fringe development pressures and some agricultural change.

- Cheshire Plain is bordered by main urban settlements including Alsager, Congleton, and Holmes Chapel and Sandbach. Pressures at the urban fringes will include residential and commercial developments.
- recreational influences at Congleton urban fringe and increasing visitor pressure along country lanes.
- Some developmental pressure for mineral extraction.
- Neglect of farmland is minimal, however there is some degradation of hedgerows.

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 open views towards Staffordshire Peak ridgeline and Pennines. Notable views towards the ridgeline are a feature of the area. Careful consideration should be given to the location of new developments to ensure that these views are maintained.
- Continue to maintain hedge, hedgerow trees and field trees as positive conservation features within the landscape. Manage hedgerows to maintain the existing age and species diversity, ensuring hedgerows continue to be a feature of the landscape.
- Respect the conservation value of Newbold Astbury. Avoid development that would be detrimental to the settlement's character.
- Conserve Brereton Heath. This is an area of distinctive local character, which adds diversity to the landscape. Retain and maintain character.
- Respect the conservation value of the historic parks and gardens. Areas of estate parkland are a feature of the Cheshire Plain. Retain and maintain character.