6. THE PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT OF THE LANDSCAPE

6.1 The definition and description of character areas at a variety of scales is fundamental to assessing landscape quality and its sensitivity to change. This forms one of the cornerstones of Planning Policy Guidance Note 7, which promotes the development of policies which achieve good quality development whilst respecting the character of the countryside (see para 1.4 above). The key to this is a proper understanding of the sensitivity of different landscape character areas and the nature of future change. Guidance on the ability of a landscape character area to absorb particular forms of development, or strategies for enhancing the quality of degraded landscapes, can be developed and embodied in planning policies for the Borough.

6.2 The concept of environmental sustainability derives from the recognised need to maintain basic natural resources at a level that will sustain long term economic development generated by the pressures of human exploitation of the environment. Given that almost all of Britain's ecosystem and landscape has been modified to varying degrees by human interference, a crude distinction between the 'natural' environment and human exploitation is not an appropriate basis for developing sustainable planning policies. A more subtly drawn distinction is needed to show why the effects of future exploitation should be controlled.

6.3 The challenge is to positively manage future change in a way that continues to conserve key aspects of the environment, which reflect past and present, best practice and change. Some places and areas have been subject to much more radical and repeated episodes of change than others. An issue to be addressed addressed is to what extent the character and scale of past change should influence the pattern of future change. In this case the landscape character assessment has highlighted the essential assets/components which matter for sustainability and identified their sensitivity to change.

6.4 The reliance on constraint-led planning policies for managing change arising from economic development may, therefore, need to be supplemented by criteria-based policies outside of the designated areas. This would help to guide appropriate change arising from development in terms of its location, scale, design and impact on the surrounding countryside. The landscape character and quality assessment will provide a rigorous and consistent baseline against which such development criteria can be properly tested.

Conservation of the Landscape

Designated areas for protection

6.5 Much of the Borough to the east is within South Cheshire's Green Belt, with the remainder of the land excluding settlements, designated as Open Countryside. Policies for each of these designations seek to safeguard the countryside by permitting only certain types of development. In addition to these designations there are several designations which seek to protect the character of the countryside and features that contribute to the aesthetic, nature conservation and heritage value of the Borough. These designations include:

- Parks and Gardens of Historic Interest ECA7
- Areas of Special County Value (ASCV) PS11
- Areas of Significant Local Environmental Value (ASLEV) PS12
- Sites of Biological Importance (SBI) ECA8
- Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) ECA8
- Conservation Area ECA16
- Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM) ECA17

6.6 PPG 7 gives advice on the role of the planning system in relation to the countryside. Local landscape designations apply to areas where normal planning policies cannot provide the necessary protection. The local plan should state what it is that requires extra protection and why. In considering the function and justification of existing local countryside designations, the authority should ensure that they are soundly based on the quality of the countryside, or contribute to 'strategic gaps' or 'green wedges' adjacent to urban areas.

Areas of Special County Value (ASCV)

6.7 There are two ASCV within the Borough, associated with the Dane Valley and Staffordshire Ridge. The existing policy seeks to control development that will damage the character or features, for which the areas have been designated. The majority of character areas, that have been identified within the Borough, have evolved from the Cheshire Plain, with subtle variation created by the influence of man through settlement, farming and industry. However, both ASCV within the Borough have distinctively different characters from anywhere else in the Borough or County.

6.8 The policy from the Adopted Local Plan concerning ASCV is reproduced as follows:

PS11
Within these designated areas, development which would damage their character or features for which the area of special county value has been designated will not be allowed. Otherwise acceptable or appropriate development may be allowed provided that it satisfies all of the following criteria which are relevant:

1) New buildings are needed for the purposes of agriculture or forestry and are sensitively designed and sited in relation to land form and means of access;
2) New, converted or extended buildings respect traditional forms and external materials and are related to the needs of rural enterprise or tourism;
3) Development restores, protects or enhances the character and appearance of the countryside by suitable planting, landscaping or afforestation;
4) Proposals for the extensive development of land make suitable provision for better public access to and enjoyment of the designated areas;
5) Provision of locally required utilities are related in size, position and design to the extent and needs of settlements and their resident population;
6) Provision of amenities for the locally resident population or visitors is sited with due regard to available means of access.

This policy is now considered in relation to the 2 designated Areas of Special County Value within the Borough, the extent of which are shown at Figure 16.

The River Dane ASCV (Ref A)

6.9 The valley corridor of the River Dane, located between Congleton and Holmes Chapel, although not a prominent feature within the Borough, is an important landscape asset requiring protection. The valley is of considerable biodiversity containing diverse natural resources which includes a SSSI, several SBI's and Ancient Woodland. This well balanced system contained within the valley is of very good quality.

6.10 The boundary of the ASCV, shown in the adopted Congleton Local Plan, extends beyond the boundary of the character area identified through this landscape character assessment. It extends to the north encompassing farmland and parkland on the North Congleton Plain. Here, these features are less unique than the Dane valley and can be found elsewhere across the Cheshire Plain. In addition to the landscape quality of the area, the valley is also designated as a SSSI and contains several SBI's and Ancient Woodland. There is therefore, considerable justification for using the character area boundary to define the ASCV. Much of the higher quality landscape associated with the parkland would remain protected by other designation such as Parks and Gardens of Historic Interest ECA7 and Open Countryside PS10.
Upland Ridge ASCV (Ref B)
6.11 The upland ridge located between Congleton and Mow Cop is the main landscape feature within the Borough, featuring prominently in views from the wider Cheshire Plain. A combination of the ridgeline, historic features, distinct vegetation types, (including a SSSI and SBIs) make the area especially attractive.

6.12 The Staffordshire Ridge character area is defined by key features associated with the ridgeline. The Mow Cop Fringe and the Cloud Fringe character areas encompass the transitional landscapes located between the ridge, the Cheshire Plain and Congleton town.

6.13 The ASCV boundary in the adopted plan generally extends beyond the Staffordshire Ridge character area boundary, westwards to include the lower slopes and the Dane-in-Shaw, and northwards to the Borough boundary, thereby including much of what has been identified as the Cloud Fringe. However the ASCV falls short southwards of the landscape surrounding Mount Pleasant, which the Staffordshire Ridge character area boundary includes. The lower slopes are not of a unique quality in themselves, but are important in that they provide a setting for the ridgeline. Additionally the Dane-in-Shaw and landscape to the north along the River Dane is not of the same high quality as the ridgeline. On this basis, the Staffordshire Ridge character area boundary could be used to define the ASCV. The overall area protected under the ASCV designation would be significantly reduced. Appropriate protection would be required to areas no longer under the ASCV designation.

6.14 This report has recommended changing the ASCV boundary to coincide with character area boundaries. However the ASCV relate to the whole County, whereas this study has been concerned with the landscape of the Borough. Quality assessments have therefore been set in this context and are relative to the landscapes found in the Borough, not the County.

Recommendation: Given that ASCV designations are a county designation it is recommended that the county consider these proposed changes as and when they undertake a review of the ASCV boundaries throughout the county, as part of the structure plan review for Cheshire 2011.

Areas of Significant Local Environmental Value (ASLEV)

6.15 There are eight ASLEVs within the Borough, located close to the urban edge of settlements eg Congleton and Sandbach, and/or in areas of local landscape value, eg the Dane Valley or the landscape setting to the Staffordshire Ridge. These areas are shown in figure 16 in relation to the character areas, main settlements and transport corridors. The largest groups of ASLEV are located to the east of the Borough and are important in setting the context for views to and from the Staffordshire Ridge ASCV (numbers given after each ASLEV cross reference the location plan). For reasons given at paragraph 6.14, the existing ASCV boundary of the Upland Ridge is taken as constant, which sets the context for amended boundaries of ASLEVs in and around this area.

6.16 ASLEV are a local designation that do not relate to the county structure plan and are not of strategic county importance. The designation seeks to control the types of development that would normally be permitted in order to protect the character of these areas. The ASLEV do not correspond as closely with character area boundaries because they are concerned with the functional and amenity value of the land and not just its landscape quality.

6.17 The local plan guidance and policy are as follows: The policy concerning ASLEV from the Adopted Local Plan, together with guidance text is reproduced as follows:

PS 12
Areas of significant local environmental value are defined on the proposals map and inset maps and, within them, development which would normally be permitted (having regard to other policies of the borough local plan) will be considered in relation to the extent which it would respect the prevailing character or improve the future appearance of the local countryside.

ASLEV are of special importance in the Borough because of a combination of qualities and features of landscape, archaeological and nature conservation interest, their local amenity value and/or their importance in separating built up areas.

6.18 There are three areas around Sandbach, designated as ASLEV in the adopted plan. All three areas are essentially ‘green wedges’, which help to define Sandbach’s urban edge.

6.19 Abbeyfields and Hind Heath ASLEV (Ref 1)
Land at Abbeyfields, which is largely agricultural farmland, prepares the built-up areas of Sandbach and Elworth (south of Middlewich road) preventing the urban areas from merging. The Wheelock Rolling Plain character area extends to the Sandbach settlement boundary. However, land at Abbeyfields is more closely associated with the surrounding urban forms of the town, than the Wheelock Rolling Plain. The area is of limited recreational or visual amenity value. There are no features which elevate the quality of the land above that of the wider landscape.

Recommendation: We would recommend that the Abbeyfields ASLEV be retained, though emphasising its function primarily as a strategic gap between the Sandbach and Elworth. Future enhancement for amenity value would benefit the area.

6.20 Sandbach Golf Course ASLEV (Ref 2)
To the north of Middlewich road, Sandbach golf course and agricultural land separate Sandbach from Elworth. The break in urban development enables some distinction between the two historic centres. The Cheshire Plain character area extends to the Sandbach settlement boundary, where urban influences on the land become apparent. The manicured golf course provides visual relief to built-up residential areas on either side.

Recommendation: We would recommend retaining this ASLEV, though emphasising its function primarily as a strategic gap between the Sandbach and Elworth. ASLEV at Abbeyfields, Hind Heath, and Sandbach Golf Course should stress this goal.

6.21 Sandbach Heath and Offley Wood ASLEV (Ref 3)
This pocket of agricultural land extends into the urban fringe at Sandbach and is defined to the east by the M6 motorway. Unlike the previous ASLEV at Sandbach, the conservatism of this landscape is less critical for the townscape of Sandbach. However, the area does provide some recreational value. The Cheshire Plain extends to Sandbach’s settlement boundary although the ASLEV is not typical of the wider plain. The area has significant local topographical variation and vegetation along tributaries.

Recommendation: We would recommend retaining this ASLEV, emphasising its recreational potential.

6.22 Dane Valley at Holmes Chapel ASLEV (Ref 4)
The distinctive River Dane valley corridor, located to the north of the important character feature of the Borough. Similar to the Dane Valley character area, this stretch of river also requires protection. However, due to the greater influences of man upon the valley, not least the close proximity of Holmes Chapel and also the M6, the area’s quality is lessened. The Dane Valley West character area is defined by features of the river corridor which contribute to its quality. The present ASLEV boundary roughly follows that of the character area boundary although extends beyond in places, into the North Congleton Plain and Cheshire Plain. These features are less unique than the Dane Valley topography, landmark and sense of place and can be found elsewhere across the Cheshire Plain and North Cheshire Plain.

Recommendation: There is justification for using the Dane Valley character area boundary to define the ASLEV.
6.23 Mow Cop and Congleton Edge ASLEV (Ref 5)
Located between Mow Cop and Congleton Edge is a transitional landscape, which extends from the Staffordshire Ridge westwards towards the Cheshire Plain character area. The quality of this rural area is good, with a strong sense of place associated with ridgeline. This landscape is important in setting the context for views to and from the Staffordshire Ridge ASCV. The current ASLEV boundary extends from the ASCV boundary, as shown in the adopted local plan, westwards to the A34, northwards to Lamberts Lane (see Howey Hill and Lamberts Lane ASLEV) and southwards to Scholar Green.

Recommendation: We would recommend that the Mow Cop Fringe character area boundary be used to define the ASLEV's western boundary. Overall this would result in a considerable reduction of the ASLEV, with the recommended boundary following the line of the canal, rather than the A34. Additionally the ASLEV boundary would extend northwards to Congleton's settlement boundary to encompass a small area of land. This would provide protection to the important landscape (Mow Cop Fringe area) and limit urban spread from Congleton or Scholar Green. The landscape of Little Moreton Hall and Great Moreton Hall would continue to be protected by other designations such as Parks and Gardens of Historic Interest ECA7.

6.24 Scholar Green and Lawton Gate ASLEV (Ref 6)
Located between the settlements of Scholar Green, Lawton Gate and Rode Heath is a block of rural landscape. The area's boundaries are defined to the north and south by Pool Side Lane, Church Lane and the Trent and Mersey Canal respectively. Within this area are extensive parkland and historic gardens associated with Rode Hall and Lawton Hall. The land is well used for recreation, which includes woodland walks and fishing. It will be important to maintain a strategic gap between the settlements, conserve the historic parkland and conserve areas of amenity value. The ASLEV covers character areas, but this does not create any difficulties in so far as the role of the land as ASLEV is concerned. Within this Cheshire Plain land is of more rural character, whilst within the Alsager Plain urban influences are greater.

Recommendation: There is good justification for retaining this ASLEV.

6.25 Bath Vale and Timbersbrook ASLEV (Ref 7)
Located at the eastern urban fringe of Congleton and defined to the east by the Macclesfield Canal is a 'green wedge' of land. The area has substantial topographical variation and vegetation along Timbersbrook and its tributaries. The land is farmed with some rough grazing and is also used for informal recreation. This ASLEV falls within the Cloud Fringe character area, although more closely associated with the urban edge of Congleton. The present ASLEV boundary maintains a strategic gap between urban areas at Congleton's fringe. However the ASLEV does not extend to Congleton's settlement boundary and therefore excludes a small area of land located between Buglawton and the Macclesfield Canal. Also of importance is the need to protect the landscape to the east, which provides the setting to the ridgeline and ASCV.

Recommendation: We would recommend that the ASLEV be extended to cover land between the ASCV boundary, Congleton's settlement boundary and the Macclesfield Canal.

6.26 Howey Hill and Lamberts Lane ASLEV (Ref 8)
This area of land, which is largely urban fringe farmland extends from Congleton's southern settlement boundary, between Astbury Mere and the Macclesfield Canal, to Lamberts Lane. The boundary should be clarified as being along Lamberts Lane, which coincides with the current Greenbelt boundary. The land is of some local value for recreational and visual amenity. Congleton's indented urban edge is a characteristic of the town and should be protected. Retention of this 'green wedge' is necessary to prevent urban spread towards the Greenbelt (land south of Lamberts Lane). The land falls within the Cheshire Plain character area, although it is influenced by the surrounding urban fringe development of Congleton.

Recommendation: We would recommend that this ASLEV be retained, emphasising its function as a strategic gap, necessary to maintain Congleton's characteristic settlement boundary.

Priority Improvement Landscapes

6.27 The character areas whose character and quality are being rapidly degraded should be targeted for improvement. These are primarily the Sandbach Flashes, Middlewich Open Plain and parts of the Wheelock Rolling Plain. Detracting features within these areas have been highlighted, in order that future development and appropriate mitigation measures may improve the landscape and/or prevent their further deterioration. However, this should not lead to the neglect of other areas. Recommendations and guidelines for improvements in these priority areas are described below.

6.28 Within these areas, priority should be given to those improvements identified as having the greatest impact upon the landscape. Environmental improvements should be undertaken in accordance with management guidelines previously listed.

Sandbach Flashes

6.29 The Sandbach Flashes has been identified as a landscape of overall poor quality. There is an unsatisfactory juxtaposition between Sandbach's western urban fringe and the landscape, with little buffer planting between town and countryside. Within this open landscape, the detractors of industry, railway infrastructure, areas of subsidence and settlement boundaries are visible. The vision is to increase balance and maturity to the landscape by enhancing Sandbach's urban fringe and promoting the Flashes as an attractive feature, unique to the Borough. More specifically we would recommend:
- greater integration of the urban edge with the surrounding landscape
- screen belts along edges of development and roads
- creating the Flashes as a focus for their visual and recreational value.

Middlewich Open Plain

6.30 The Middlewich Open Plain has been identified as a landscape of overall poor quality. This is a disturbed landscape which suffers from the effects of subsidence and industry. Much of the land is degraded, open landscape with little mature vegetation or effective mitigation measures for the settlements of Middlewich and Sandbach or along the railway line. The vision is to enhance the urban fringes and the railway corridor, promoting the Trent and Mersey Canal as a main attractive feature. This could be achieved by the following improvements:
- planting belts along the urban edges to screen industry and integrate new development into the landscape
- further enhancements along the canal with sensitive design detailing and waterside planting
- screening of the railway embankment infrastructure.

Wheelock Rolling Plain

6.31 The Wheelock Rolling Plain has been identified as being an ordinary/good quality landscape. The bordering settlements of Alsager and Sandbach, along with the presence of the M6 motorway have contributed towards urban development pressures upon the landscape. This is evident in recent development including new roads, housing and golf courses. There is a need to ensure that future development be accommodated sensitively within the landscape to not detract from features and areas of value. The aim should be to strengthen the distinctive landscape characteristics of the area. The canal and river corridor could become a focus for landscape improvements. More specifically we would recommend:
- the River Wheelock, its tributaries and the Trent and Mersey Canal could be improved, adding to existing vegetation and diversifying the margins of these watercourses.

CONGLETON LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT
improvements should concentrate on these watercourses in the vicinity of main settlements, Sandbach and Alsager, for greatest impacts.

Recommendations on Planning Policy
6.32 Policy GR6 is a new policy to be included in the local plan review. This policy relates to the landscape character of rural areas and is reproduced in first draft format as follows:

Development will not be permitted which, in the view of the Borough council, would be likely to adversely impact upon the landscape character of areas of countryside or would obscure views or lessen the visual impact of significant landmarks or landscape features as a result of the location, design or landscaping of the proposal.

We suggest that this policy should go further than restricting development which would be likely to adversely impact on the landscape character. The policy should seek an increase in the quality of the countryside and produce where possible an enhancement of local landscape character.

Recommendation: We would propose an alternative policy for GR6 which would read as follows:

Proposals will be expected to have due regard to the distinctive character of the landscape as identified in the Congleton Landscape Assessment. Development will be permitted only if the following criteria can be satisfied:

i) the selection of the site can be adequately justified;
ii) the siting of the development will minimise impact;
iii) the design, materials and landscaping measures are appropriate and would lead to an enhancement of the character of the landscape; and
iv) the scale of the proposal is appropriate to the location concerned;

6.33 The justification for policy GR6 is considered appropriate in its current form.