

An aerial photograph of a rural landscape. The image shows a mix of green fields, some brownish fields, and a residential area with houses and roads. A road runs diagonally across the middle of the image. The overall scene is a typical rural setting with a mix of agriculture and housing.

Cheshire East Council

New Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap Study

Main Report

Envision

delivering local planning solutions

Final: September 2013

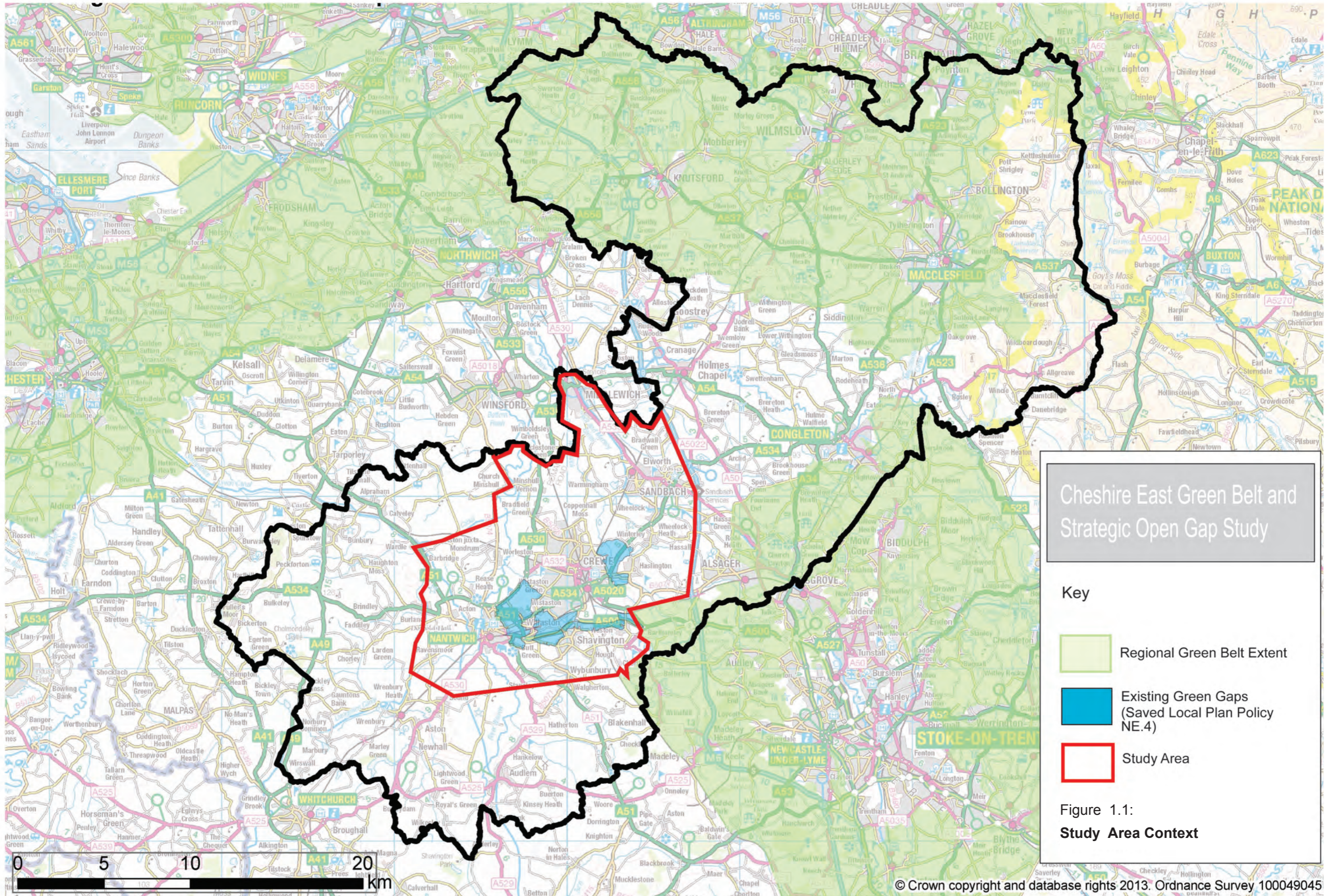
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Preface

- P1. Envision, a network of independent local planning consultants, was commissioned by Cheshire East Council in July 2013, to carry out a study of the existing gaps between settlements around Crewe and Nantwich.
- P2. The proposals to designate a new Green Belt in the Nantwich and Crewe area are set out in the “Shaping Our Future: A Development Strategy for Jobs and Sustainable Communities” consultation document (February 2013) as part of the emerging Cheshire East Local Plan.
- P3. The document also sets out proposals to designate Strategic Open Gaps in two locations:
- Between, Crewe, Shavington, Weston, Willaston and Rope; and
 - Between Crewe, Haslington, Sandbach and Middlewich.
- P4. This Study is intended to review the evidence related to these proposed designations to ensure that proposals included in the Local Plan are sound and based on robust evidence and criteria. It will form part of the Local Plan evidence base and will be considered alongside all other evidence, consultation responses and national policy and guidance when drawing up the Local Plan.
- P5. The Study Area covers the southern part of the Borough of Cheshire East, to the west of the M6, from Middlewich and Sandbach, to Crewe, Nantwich and Acton, and including the small villages and open countryside to the south of Crewe. The area is shown on Fig 1.1. Study Area Context.
- P6. The descriptions of Development Proposals and likely future growth is taken from the most recent stages of consultation on the Local Plan. These are the ‘Development Strategy’, ‘Policy Principles’ and ‘Possible Additional Sites’ consultation documents. Following consideration of the consultation responses to these documents and further evidence (including this study) collected since the consultation, the final proposals in the Local Plan may differ from those proposed previously.



Cheshire East Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap Study

Key

- Regional Green Belt Extent
- Existing Green Gaps (Saved Local Plan Policy NE.4)
- Study Area

Figure 1.1:
Study Area Context

**Stage 1: Background and Context for proposed
Green Belt and
Strategic Open Gap Designations**

1.0 Introduction

1.0.1 The proposals to designate a new area of Green Belt and Strategic Open Gaps must be considered as part of the comprehensive package, as set out in the Development Strategy, to promote sustainable growth in Cheshire East. The need to provide new homes and employment is balanced by the strong desire to protect the character of historic towns, to prevent urban sprawl and maintain the openness of the countryside.

1.0.2 This first section of the Study explains the development proposals and pressures which set the context for the Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap proposed policies.

1.1 Planning for Growth

1.1.1 The Development Strategy advises that, in accordance with current Government policies and having regard to local needs and locational opportunities, the Vision for Cheshire East in 2030 and beyond is for significant growth to take place in both housing and employment. New development will be directed primarily to the largest towns of Crewe and Macclesfield, to support regeneration priorities, and to the larger towns of the Borough which provide a good range of services and facilities.

1.1.2 The Vision also emphasises the importance of protecting the natural and built heritage assets through appropriate designations, including provision of new Green Belt and Strategic Open Gaps which are intended to prevent urban sprawl and maintain openness.

1.1.3 However, the Development Strategy emphasises (para 5.4) that, whilst a strong economy offering sustainable growth is essential in maintaining the Borough's prosperity in a fast changing world, it is important that this economic growth is within environmental limits and improves the social conditions of residents.

1.1.4 Draft Policy CS 1 sets out the proposed Overall Development Strategy for the Borough up to 2030. A key element of this economic driver for growth will be the provision of new housing in the borough, but the document (para 5.9) also sets out important social justifications for the scale of proposed housing provision. It will also be necessary to ensure the

managed release of sufficient land for development to meet the objectively assessed needs for market and affordable housing, in accordance with the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

1.2 Settlement Hierarchy and Location of Growth

1.2.1 The role, character and likely level of housing and growth of individual settlements over the proposed Plan Period to 2030 will have a key influence on the extent to which existing gaps between settlements are placed under pressure for development. Policy CS2 of the Development Strategy sets out the proposed Settlement Hierarchy and Spatial Distribution of development across the Borough according to six broad settlement types.

1.2.2 Within the proposed Settlement Hierarchy the designation of the towns and villages in the study area is as follows:

- Crewe – Principal Town
- Nantwich, Sandbach and Middlewich – Key Service Centres
- Haslington and Shavington – Local Service Centres
- Acton, Hough, Weston and Wybunbury – Sustainable Villages
- Bradfield Green and Minshull Vernon – not designated within the Settlement Hierarchy

A. Principal Towns

1.2.3 **Crewe** is the major settlement within the study area and will see major growth over the plan period. The proposed Development Strategy explains that the key objective for Crewe is to significantly increase the amount and type of employment that is available in the town. It is envisaged that Crewe will grow significantly, with the provision of 100 hectares of employment land and 6 - 7,000 new homes by 2030. This would be supported by the provision of new transport infrastructure including the Crewe Green Link road, facilitate improvements to Junction 16 of the M6; and the dualling of the A500 between Basford and Junction 16.

1.2.4 Phase 1 of the delivery of 'All Change for Crewe' is focused on the two Basford sites, expanding businesses in the town, Crewe Green Business Park, University Way and the town centre. New employment and housing development would

take place on the edge of Crewe, with abundant open spaces between them, to ensure that there is a range of high quality, attractive places to live and work. Phase 2 of 'All Change for Crewe' is represented by a possible direction of growth to the east of the town, taking advantage of any future opportunities including High Speed Rail 2.

1.2.5 The draft Town Strategy also emphasises the local importance of the retention of the existing Green Gaps between the town and surrounding settlements such as Nantwich, Haslington, Weston, Shavington, Wistaston, and Willaston, and for this type of protection to be extended to the north of the Town.

B. Key Service Centres

1.2.6 Nantwich, Sandbach and Middlewich are identified as Key Service Centres within the Study Area.

1.2.7 **Nantwich** is one of two key historic towns in Cheshire East and the Development Strategy emphasises that its heritage and distinctiveness need to be maintained and enhanced. The draft Town Strategy recognises that growth is necessary to provide new infrastructure, new employment opportunities and to meet current and future housing needs, including high quality small homes and bungalows.

1.2.8 The total level of growth envisaged by the Development Strategy is 1,500 new homes and 5ha of employment land up to 2030.

1.2.9 To ensure that the town can grow in the future, land in the north west of Nantwich is identified as a mixed use site in the Development Strategy, to provide employment land and about 1,000 houses. This site is sustainably located in close proximity to the town centre and provides opportunities to extend the Riverside Park. In addition, the former Stapeley Water Gardens site is identified to provide 2 hectares of employment land and 250 dwellings. The Snowhill area is also identified for regeneration, to include retail, offices, leisure and about 50 dwellings.

1.2.10 Two new areas of Green Belt were proposed in the Development Strategy to the east and west of the town. This reflects the responses to the draft Nantwich Town Strategy which supported retaining the open land between Crewe and Nantwich and ensuring that Nantwich retains its rural

setting.

- 1.2.11 The Development Strategy describes **Sandbach** as a thriving market town, with a historic heart. It envisages a total of 1,800 new homes and 20ha of employment land up to 2030. The aims of the draft Town Strategy include ensuring that by 2030, the town has a vibrant economy, with growth appropriate to the scale of the town.
- 1.2.12 To ensure that Sandbach has a vibrant economy, the Town Strategy recognises the need for additional employment development in the town including a new business park adjacent to Junction 17 of the M6. The Development Strategy identifies this area as a mixed use site, to include 20 hectares of employment land, a local centre, open space and about 700 new homes, together with improvements to Junction 17 of the M6.
- 1.2.13 A further site is proposed at the former Albion Chemical Works, where the Council has previously resolved to grant planning permission for a mixed development including 375 dwellings and employment land. The development of this site would also help to ensure that the town has a vibrant economy that will provide a variety of jobs in the future and a choice of high quality places for people to live.
- 1.2.14 The Development Strategy proposes to extend a 'Strategic Open Gap' around the west side of Sandbach to ensure that the town does not merge with nearby settlements such as Crewe, and retains its rural setting. This reflects the objectives of the draft Town Strategy.
- 1.2.15 The Town Strategy for **Middlewich** states that by 2030, the town will be a sustainable vibrant and prosperous place. The Development Strategy sets out proposals for site allocations for 1500 houses and 80 hectares of employment land between 2010 to 2030. This is consistent with the final Town Strategy which seeks to enable the growth of the town, ensure the delivery of improvements to the town centre and to achieve the provision of a wider range of community facilities in the town.
- 1.2.16 Additional employment land is proposed at Midpoint 18 to generate jobs around the M6 motorway corridor, including the potential development of a Cheshire Enterprise Hub. Provision of housing will occur on Brooks Lane and Glebe

Farm where developer contributions will be sought towards the completion of the Middlewich Eastern Bypass. The Town Strategy also identifies further land that would be suitable for residential development to the north east of the town, the majority of which lies in Cheshire West and Chester Borough, where the Council will consider a request to include this land as a development allocation in its Local Plan.

C. Local Service Centres

- 1.2.17 **Haslington** and **Shavington** are located within the study area and are identified as Local Service Centres. The vision for Local Service centres, as set out in the Development Strategy, is that some modest growth in housing and employment will have taken place by 2030 to meet local needs, to reduce the level of out-commuting and to secure their continuing vitality.
- 1.2.18 There are two major housing sites proposed at Shavington. The Triangle has recently been granted planning permission and land at East Shavington was proposed in the Development Strategy.
- 1.2.19 The Development Strategy proposes a Strategic Open Gap between Crewe and Haslington, to reflect the current 'saved' Green Gap policy.

D. Sustainable Villages

- 1.2.20 The villages of **Acton**, **Hough**, **Weston** and **Wybunbury** are within or adjoin the study area. The Development Strategy vision for sustainable villages is that [by 2030] some small scale residential and employment development will have taken place, to help to retain and sustain local services and to reduce the need to travel.

E. Rural Villages and Rural Areas

- 1.2.21 The smallest scale settlements identified in the Development Strategy are the remaining hamlets and small villages having few facilities, if any. The vision for these settlements envisages only infill housing development and employment development associated with a stronger and diversified rural economy.

- 1.2.22 The Vision sees the character of these areas being protected by environmental and heritage designations, and by Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap designations which are intended to maintain openness and restrict urban sprawl.

1.3 Existing Settlement Patterns in the Study Area

- 1.3.1 The evolution of the settlement patterns in the study area, as described in the Cheshire Landscape Character and Historic Landscape Character (HLC) Assessments, has been examined in order to understand the relevance and significance of the remaining gaps between towns and villages. Appendix 2 'Landscape Character and Green Infrastructure' explains why the gaps are important in terms of landscape character, to ensure that the study findings are consistent with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) where it states that *'the planning system should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, geological conservation interests and soils'*.
- 1.3.2 The Policy Principles document Policy SE 4 'The Landscape' reflects NPPF and advises that *"the landscape character of the Borough is distinct. Development should protect, and where possible, enhance the character and local distinctiveness of the rural and urban landscape ... suitable and appropriate mitigation for the restoration of damaged landscape areas"* is necessary in order to preserve and promote local distinctiveness and diversity.
- 1.3.3 The landscape character and historic landscape character assessments both emphasise the relevance and significance of the dispersed settlement pattern throughout the study area and of the remaining gaps between towns and villages. They describe a traditional dispersed pattern of scattered hamlets, large farms and moated halls which characterises the landscape. The HLC report considers that recent development on former agricultural land, particularly around Crewe, has *"seriously eroded a pattern of some antiquity"*.
- 1.3.4 Both landscape character reports substantiate the concerns of local stakeholders, as evidenced through recent consultation responses (see below) and provide documented evidence to justify the Council's intention to maintain and strengthen the protection for open land between neighbouring settlements. *"Suitable and appropriate mitigation for the restoration of*

damaged landscape areas” (Policy SE 4) should consist of strong planning policy protection for the remaining, often narrow, open gaps.

- 1.3.5 The HLC study, which forms the basis for the Cheshire East landscape strategy (in preparation), recommends management measures such as increasing *“awareness and understanding of the historical development of towns, including ... the part that former areas of dispersed settlement play in the overall history of the settlement. Where possible this historic settlement pattern should be preserved”* and *“promoting good quality building design for all new developments, which respect and enhance the layout of the adjacent settlement, for example, developments which would significantly increase the nucleation in an area of dispersed settlement should be resisted.”*

1.4 Green Infrastructure and Green Space Strategies

- 1.4.1 The Cheshire East Green Space Strategy (Local Plan evidence base) takes up the broad statements made in the Sustainable Community Strategy and *“seeks to translate the aspirations into reality for the many local communities across Cheshire East, to ensure they have access to the green space they need to live rich and fulfilling lives and to support a prosperous local economy.”*
- 1.4.2 Cheshire East has a wealth of sites designated for their nature conservation value, including nine Ramsar sites - wetlands of international importance, 33 Sites of Special Scientific Interest - covering almost two per cent of the total land area, over 400 Local Wildlife Sites, 21 Regional Important Geological Sites and numerous statutory and non-statutory nature reserves.
- 1.4.3 Crewe is surrounded by open countryside, which creates an attractive setting for the town. Proposals for the Cheshire Plain landscape character area (around Crewe) include maintaining hedgerows and field corner copses, replacing hedgerow trees and retaining ponds to strengthen the fabric of the landscape; and for Urban Fringe areas, to create an attractive well wooded edge to towns and villages and provide access to the countryside.
- 1.4.4 Cheshire East Council, in partnership with Cheshire West and Chester Council and local authorities from NE Wales, has developed a strategic Green Infrastructure Framework to

inform the Local Plan and a Green Infrastructure Action Plan for Crewe. Green Infrastructure is “a network of multifunctional greenspace, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities” (NPPF). Key themes include improving connectivity and improving access for local communities to green spaces, places of work and learning and proposals to restore Crewe’s rural green setting.

- 1.4.5 Green Space / Infrastructure requirements for Crewe consider the need for improved accessibility to natural green space, the creation of ‘a natural’ municipal green area and improved access to green corridors for residents in central and north-eastern Crewe. The plan will investigate the provision of country park facilities alongside the expansion plans for Crewe.
- 1.4.6 The Green Infrastructure Action Plan for Crewe (TEP, 2012) will be used to integrate GI within new and existing development to enable people to access greenspaces more easily through a series of connected linear routes. Crewe’s river corridors and the countryside surrounding the town are described as unrealised assets, providing opportunities for recreation, a setting for building form and connected corridors for nature.
- 1.4.7 The GI Action Plan has several objectives that are relevant to the current study. The plan aims to provide a multifunctional and connected GI network across the town; eg Valley Brook connects two of Crewe’s most significant parks and gardens, Crewe Hall and Queen’s Park. It will develop opportunities for walking and cycling to improve leisure and recreation, commuting and links between urban and rural areas; eg the Sustrans Connect 2 walking and cycling route links Queens Park in Crewe with Nantwich riverside. It aims to restore landscape character in Crewe’s countryside and improve access from the town’s ‘Green’ edge and to promote and improve three water corridors – Leighton Brook, Valley Brook and Gresty Brook.
- 1.4.8 Proposed initiatives in the Green Infrastructure Action Plan for Crewe can be applied to other settlements in the study area. The key actions include the restoration of an attractive landscape character, with increased tree cover, and greater availability of access links and rights of way from the town into the surrounding countryside.

- 1.4.9 For Nantwich, the themes include increased provision and quality of open spaces in the town and the size and quality of the Riverside. In terms of ‘natural and semi-natural Urban Greenspaces’, the plan will investigate how to provide improved access to natural open space in Haslington and Shavington.

1.5 Public Consultation Responses

- 1.5.1 The rapid growth of Crewe since the opening of the first railway station in 1837 has dramatically transformed the landscape of South Cheshire. Continued substantial growth is proposed, which threatens to subsume a number of historic villages and towns, including Nantwich, Shavington, Weston and Haslington, built up over centuries to support a predominantly agricultural economy. The distinctive identity of these small settlements is a matter of concern to many local residents and stakeholders, as evidenced by recent consultation responses in relation to emerging Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap proposals.
- 1.5.2 Responses made to the draft Crewe Town Strategy consultation in 2012 affirmed the popularity of the Green Gap Policy with local residents. The responses included 1,544 standard letters; 78 standard forms and 4 separate petitions, with a total of 4,784 signatures, supporting the Green Gap and requesting that its coverage be extended, to include the areas of Leighton and Maw Green.
- 1.5.3 Similarly, the draft Nantwich Town Strategy, produced and consulted upon in 2012, received responses including 1,590 standard letters supporting the retention of the Green Gap between Nantwich and Crewe and requesting that land at Leighton be designated as Green Gap.
- 1.5.4 General responses to the Development Strategy in 2013, in relation to Green Belt and Safeguarded Land, included 67 representations by 56 people. Comments included the following points, both in support and objecting to Green Belt proposals in the whole of the East Cheshire district:
- Extend Green Belt around Nantwich southwards to Stapeley to include Reaseheath College and retain market town character;
 - Retention of Green Gap/ introduction of Green Belt

between Nantwich and Crewe is essential to maintain separate town identities AND provision of natural environment for the benefit of the population;

- Extend North Staffordshire Green Belt around Weston Village and Stowford due to development pressures, the amount of existing development and the SHLAA. Justified under the NPPF;
- The new green belt along the A500/Nantwich corridor should include the south side of Shavington, Hough, Chorlton and Wybunbury, and should completely surround Nantwich;
- Extend Green Belt to allow wildlife corridors and movement;
- Green Belt has value for food production purposes;
- Green Belt helps separate settlements and Strategic Open Gap will prevent sprawl;
- Upgrade Green Gap / Strategic Open Gap to Green Belt;
- Support retention of Green Gaps between the town and surrounding settlements such as Haslington;
- SOG is vital to stop merging of towns, preserve character and safeguard openness; and
- Change the proposed SOG between Crewe, Shavington, Weston, Willaston and Rope;

1.5.5 Recent campaigns, press releases and petitions that have been submitted to the Council, support the views of local residents that applications for development on Green Gap land are “unplanned, unwanted and unsustainable”. As a result of these and other consultation responses, and queries from stakeholders, the study is required to consider various options for future Green Belt and/or Strategic Open Gap policies, to ensure that the final report will provide robust evidence to support the emerging Local Plan.

1.5.6 There have been two petitions recently submitted to the Council to maintain protection for the Green Gap:

1. Petition with 24 signatures, from ‘Keep it Green Cheshire Campaign’, stating – *‘We the undersigned call on Cheshire East Borough Council not to allow building in the Green Gap that surrounds the towns of Crewe and Nantwich and the villages of Shavington, Haslington, Hough, Stapeley, Willaston, Wistaston, Wybunbury, Weston and to protect the countryside surrounding the Leighton and Maw Green Wards by declaring it Green Gap’*
2. Petition with 1,914 signatures, from the ‘Hands off Wistaston Action Group’, stating *‘We the undersigned petition Cheshire East Council to protect existing Green Gap land in the Crewe and Nantwich area from development.’*

Stage 2: Existing Status of Gaps between Settlements

2.0 Introduction

2.0.1 At Stage 2, the Study analyses the identity of existing settlements, including their historic settings and distinctive character, and carries out an assessment of the existing gaps and the locations of potential coalescence and/or erosion of gaps. Figure 2.1 shows the gaps assessed as part of the Study. For each location, analysis of information mapped by the local authority has provided a description of the character and scale of the intervening gaps between Crewe and Nantwich and the neighbouring settlements.

2.0.2 Envision devised a Green Gap survey methodology in order to identify any settlements that may be in danger of merging or where the gap may be at risk of being significantly eroded, and to confirm these by site visit and photographs. It is assumed, for the purposes of this study, that the threat of coalescence comes primarily from the proposed growth of Crewe and also from landowners and developers who wish to develop land that is not proposed for development. Findings are recorded in Appendix 2: Green Gap Assessments and the assessment process is described below.

2.0.3 The study brief advised that this report should deal only with the general extent of any proposed new Green Belt or Strategic Open Gap. The Development Strategy advises that, if the Green Belt policy is confirmed within the Local Plan Core Strategy, further work would be required to establish detailed boundaries within the subsequent Site Allocations document. NPPF para 83 states, in relation to defining Green Belt boundaries:

“At that time, authorities should consider the Green Belt boundaries having regard to their intended permanence in the long term, so that they should be capable of enduring beyond the plan period.”

2.1 Assessment of Existing Gaps between Settlements

2.1.1 A detailed assessment has been made of the gaps between Crewe itself and the neighbouring villages and towns closest to the urban area. This is consistent with NPPF and the first Green Belt purpose, to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas, which in this case relates primarily to the main town of Crewe.

2.1.3 The site surveys are based initially on the gaps identified in the previous Local Plan (Green Gap policy NE.4):

- A. Wistaton/ Willaston and Nantwich;
- B. Willaston/ Rope/ Basford and Shavington;
- C. Basford East and West Strategic Sites and Weston / Basford (Green Gap connects to Green Belt at this point);
- D. East Crewe and Haslington;

2.1.4 An initial scoping exercise, using google and bing satellite mapping, identified the narrowest points between settlements as follows:

- Nantwich at Crewe Road A534 to Willaston/Wistaston
- Nantwich at Newcastle Road B5074/A51 to Cheerbrook Road, Willaston
- Shavington/Rope at Leisure Centre, Rope Lane
- Shavington/Basford at Crewe Road B5071
- Weston at Cemetery Road/Mill Lane - will cross A500 into Basford development areas
- Haslington at Crewe Green Avenue off Crewe Road B5077

2.1.5 In each case the gap has been measured from the start/end of each settlement at the narrowest point. Photo locations were chosen on site, to illustrate the clearest view across the gap. These are illustrated in Appendix 2, Fig. A2.2.

2.1.6 Additionally, concern has been expressed via consultation responses, now incorporated into the Development Strategy document, that the residents of other small settlements feel vulnerable to the future expansion of Crewe and Nantwich, as follows. The gaps between these smaller settlements and their neighbours have also been assessed:

- E. Acton (west of Nantwich);
- F. Bradfield Green and Minshull Vernon (northwest of Leighton);

G. Hough and Wybunbury (south of Shavington);

H. Haslington and Sandbach; and

J. Sandbach and Middlewich

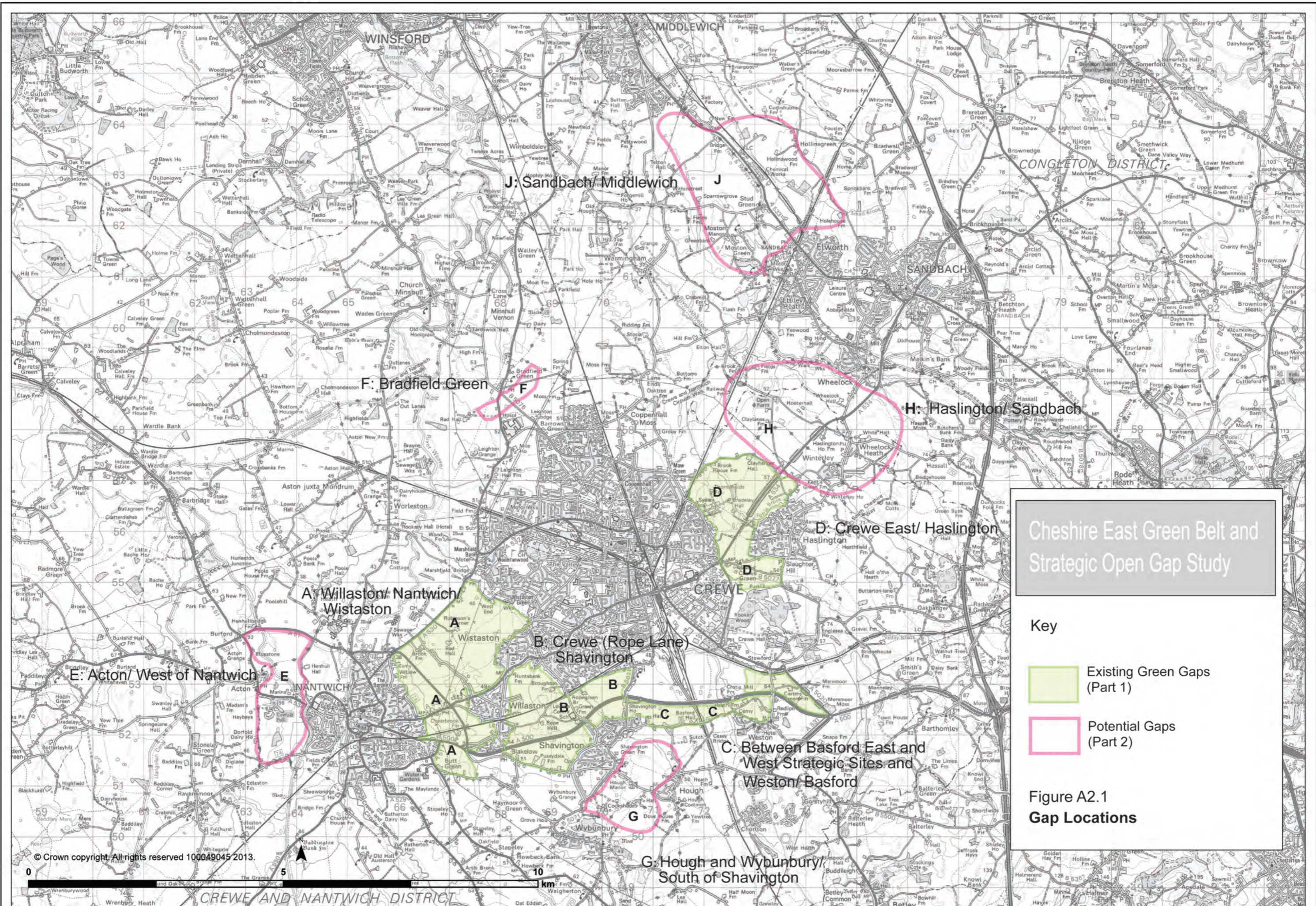
A. Desk-top analysis prior to confirmation on site:

2.1.7 For each location, analysis of information collated and mapped by the local authority has provided a description of the character and scale of the intervening gap between the neighbouring settlement and Crewe. A mapping exercise was carried out to identify key constraints. Google and bing on-line maps were also used at this stage (see Table 2.1).

2.1.8 The surveys were designed to serve two separate purposes. Green Belt is not a landscape designation, and the purposes of Green Belt are narrowly defined in NPPF. However, Strategic Open Gaps can usefully provide access to the countryside, recreation facilities and opportunities to improve biodiversity and landscape character, for the benefit of local communities.

Name of settlement separated from Crewe by open gap
Land use, essential purpose of the gap
Character and identity of the settlement, size, local distinctiveness;
Environmental and historic designations - is the gap part of the setting of a historic feature, landmark, Listed Building or conservation area ?
Public routes (roads, footpaths) that provide views in/out and access to countryside;
Name/number of main route across gap
Identify start/end point of the built up area on each side (narrowest point)
Measure width of gap (narrowest point)

Table 2.1: Desk Top Analysis Criteria



2.1.9 For the assessment of gaps around the main town of Crewe, in terms of a potential Green Belt designation, the following information was recorded. Stage 4 explains how the surveys were expanded to record relevant information for the assessment of gaps in terms of potential Strategic Open Gap designations.

2.1.10 For clarification, 'English Heritage guidance: the setting of heritage assets' (2011) uses the former PPS5 definition of setting, as all of the surroundings in which the [heritage asset] can be experienced. Setting does not have a fixed extent and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Therefore setting is particularly applicable to those urban areas that have some form of historic urban core or where views have an important role in protecting character and local distinctiveness (e.g. in Cheshire East, views across the Cheshire Plain towards the Weaver Valley; Beeston/Peckforton/ Bickerton Hills; Mow Cop; Nantwich Town Centre; the historic cores, listed buildings or conservation areas within the rural villages).

B. Visual surveys - Mapping and Photographic:

[Standing at the edge of the settlement looking out]

2.1.11 The study brief required the limited site surveys to focus on a general assessment of where settlements start and end, views across the gaps and an initial analysis of visual separation, with photographs taken from public access points.

2.1.12 A simple table has been devised for assessment on site (see Table 2.2). Each existing gap has been considered on the basis of yes/no answers to the specified questions in order to identify any settlements in danger of merging with Crewe in future. The findings are recorded in Appendix 2: Green Gap Assessments

2.2 Existing Development Pressures

2.2.1 As a result of its relatively strong economic performance, its strategic location and the attractiveness of surrounding villages, Crewe has experienced significant development pressure, particularly for housing.

2.2.2 Figures 2.2 and 2.3 show the indications of current developer interest within and adjoining the proposed Green Belt and

Name of settlement separated from Crewe by open gap
Does the gap provide views of open countryside close to where people live ?
Is there a perception that the settlement is at risk of merging/ coalescence with Crewe ?
Is there a clear visual break when passing from place to place?
Are there signs of urban activity, road traffic movement, within the gap ?
Are there signs of erosion /sprawl /spread of sporadic development into the gap?
Would future development on the edge of the urban area significantly reduce visual separation between settlements ?
Photographs of view out of settlements – record location

Table 2.2 : Site Assessment Criteria/ Questions

Strategic Open Gap locations, that have been used to inform the assessments. These maps indicate the locations of planning applications and appeals around Crewe and Nantwich. Extracts are also taken from the Council's SHLAA (Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment) to illustrate the locations where sites have been put forward for future development (Figs. 2.4, 2.5, 2.6)

2.3 Emerging Local Plan Allocations

2.3.1 The Development Strategy documents show the location of settlements and their hierarchy category, and also the locations of proposed Strategic Sites, Additional and Alternative Strategic Sites. This current study was completed prior to the proposed housing and employment allocations arising from Policy CS2 being finalised by the Council.

2.3.2 However, it can be seen from the SHLAA map extracts (Figs. 2.4, 2.5, 2.6) that developer interest, and the promotion of possible development sites in future, would substantially reduce, and in places potentially eliminate, the narrow gaps that remain between Crewe and the neighbouring towns and villages.

2.3.3 Measurements of the remaining gaps are recorded in Appendix 2: Green Gap Assessments.

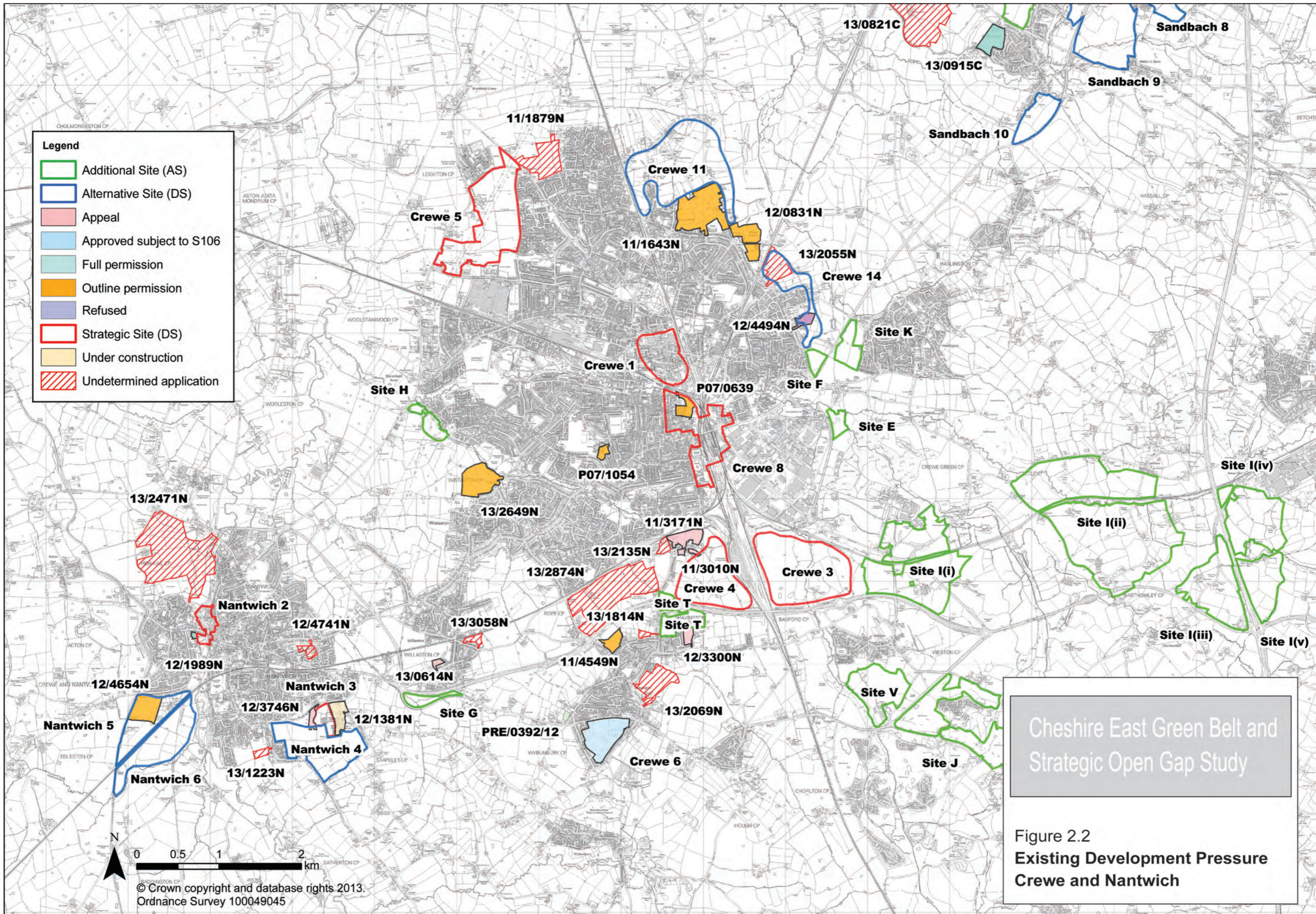
2.4 Potential Risk of Urban Sprawl and Coalescence

2.4.1 The findings of the site surveys, which followed the above methodology, are contained in Appendix 2: Green Gap Assessments. The appendix includes a detailed description of the character, width and function of each gap, together with photographs taken from each settlement across the gap.

2.4.2 ***It should be noted that at the time of the surveys the trees were in full leaf, screening most of the views across the gaps, so it would be useful to revisit the photo locations in winter.***

2.4.3 The survey findings, and their comparison with the mapped locations of future developer pressure described above, confirm that all the gaps between settlements that are protected by saved Green Gap Policy NE.4 and assessed in the study are considered to be at risk of coalescence, primarily as a result of the future growth of Crewe.

2.4.4 The gaps that remain between Crewe and Nantwich, Shavington, Weston and Haslington are narrow, mostly occupied with highways infrastructure and rarely so wide that development cannot be perceived on the opposite side. It is clear from the survey findings that future development within these protected gaps, for example, the planning application received at Gresty Oaks, would prejudice the distinctive identity and individual character of the smaller settlements around the edge of Crewe.



Cheshire East Green Belt and
Strategic Open Gap Study

Figure 2.2
Existing Development Pressure
Crewe and Nantwich

DEVELOPER INTEREST- HOUSING JULY 2013 MIDDLEWICH & SANDBACH

Cheshire East Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap Study

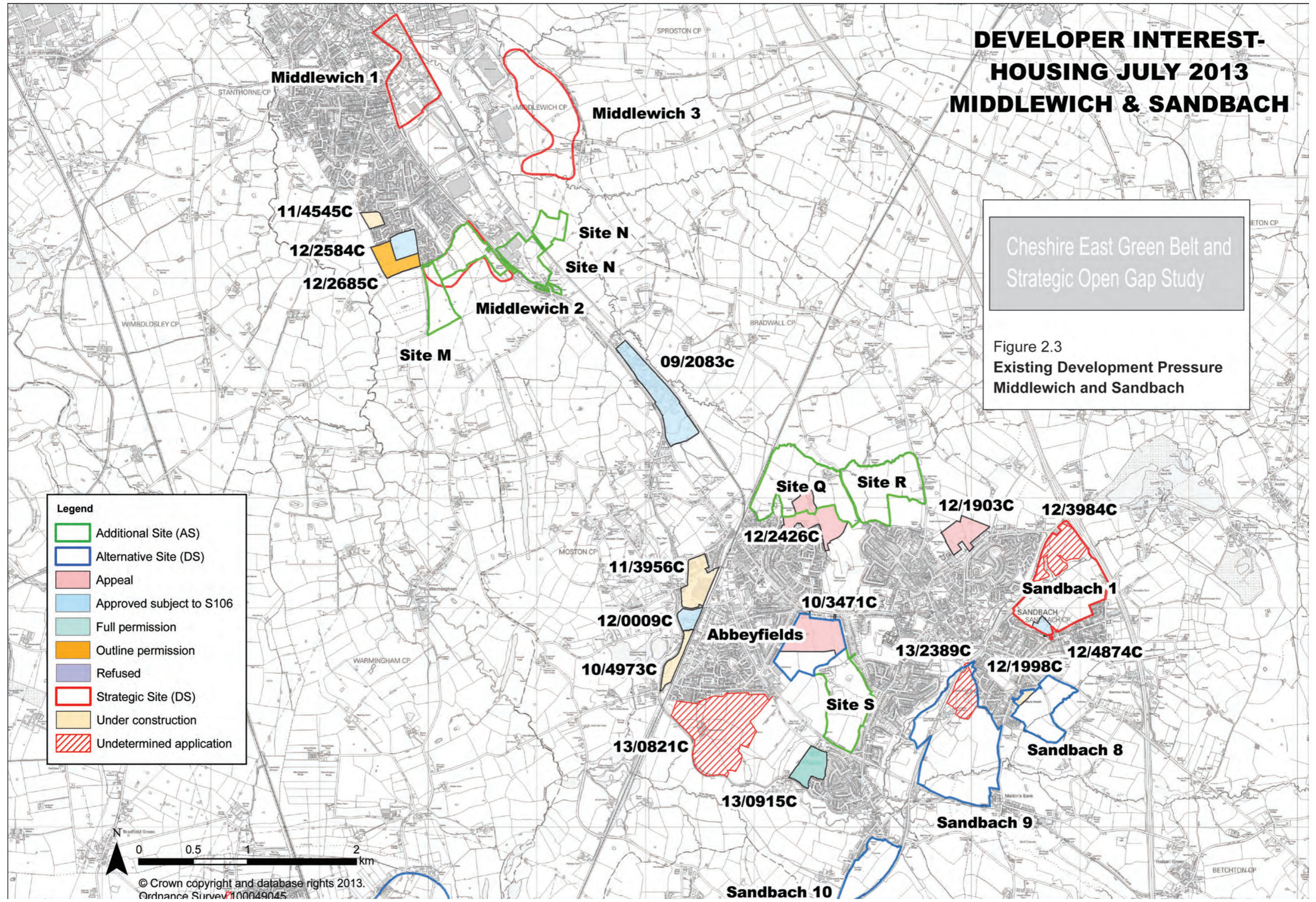
Figure 2.3
Existing Development Pressure
Middlewich and Sandbach

Legend

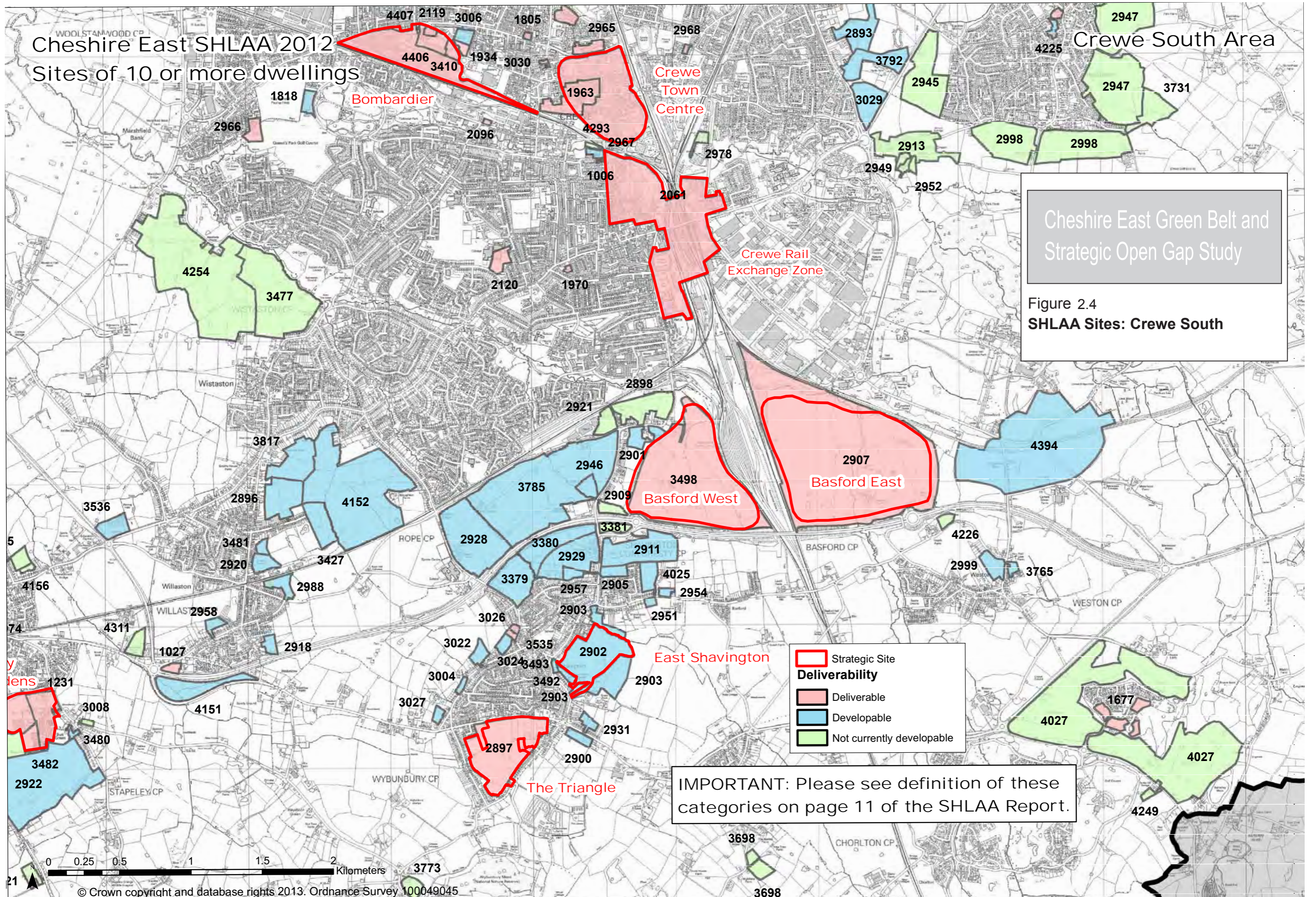
- Additional Site (AS)
- Alternative Site (DS)
- Appeal
- Approved subject to S106
- Full permission
- Outline permission
- Refused
- Strategic Site (DS)
- Under construction
- Undetermined application



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Ordnance Survey 100049045



Cheshire East SHLAA 2012
Sites of 10 or more dwellings

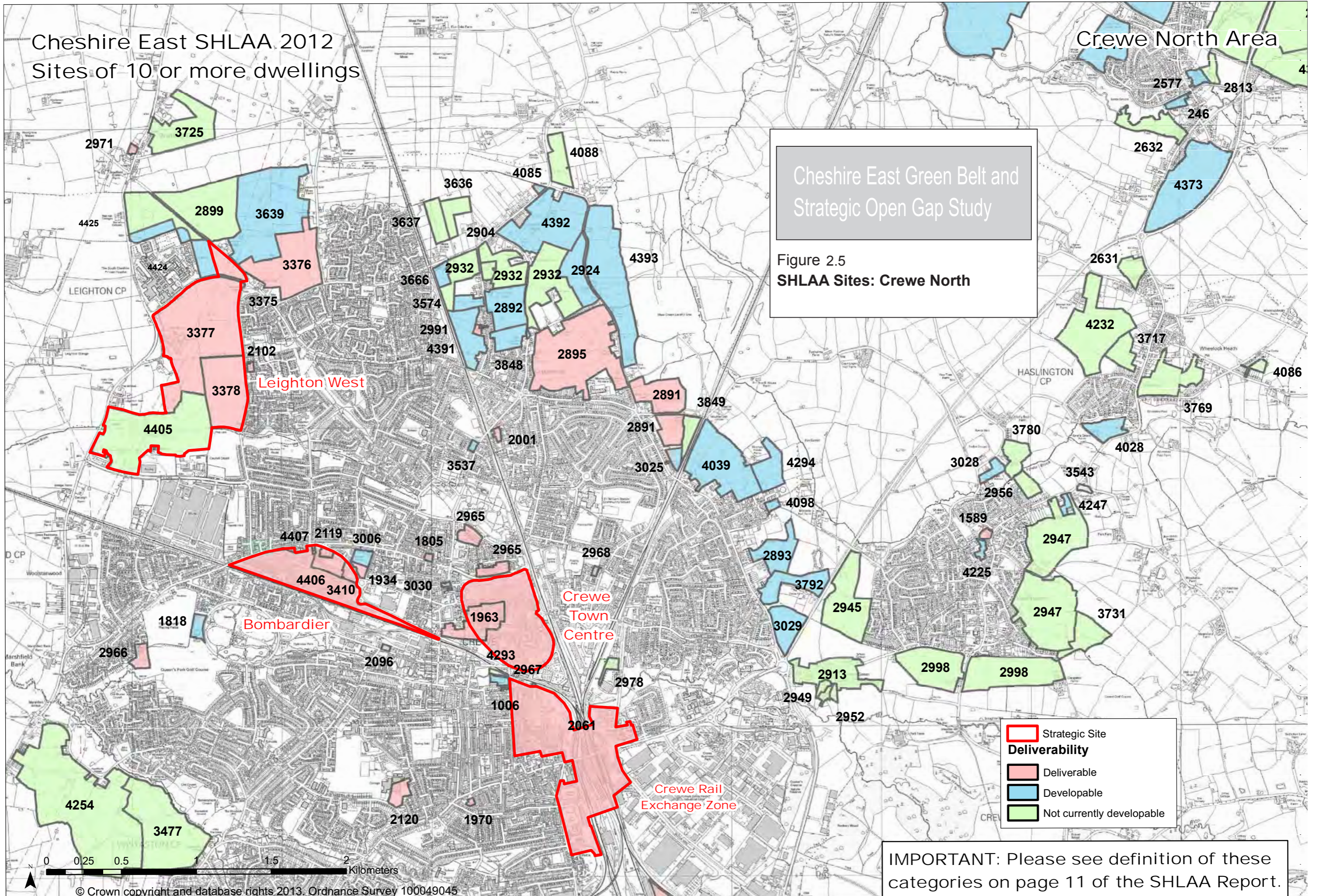


Cheshire East Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap Study
Figure 2.4
SHLAA Sites: Crewe South

Cheshire East SHLAA 2012
Sites of 10 or more dwellings

Crewe North Area

Cheshire East Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap Study
Figure 2.5
SHLAA Sites: Crewe North



Strategic Site

Deliverability

- Deliverable
- Developable
- Not currently developable

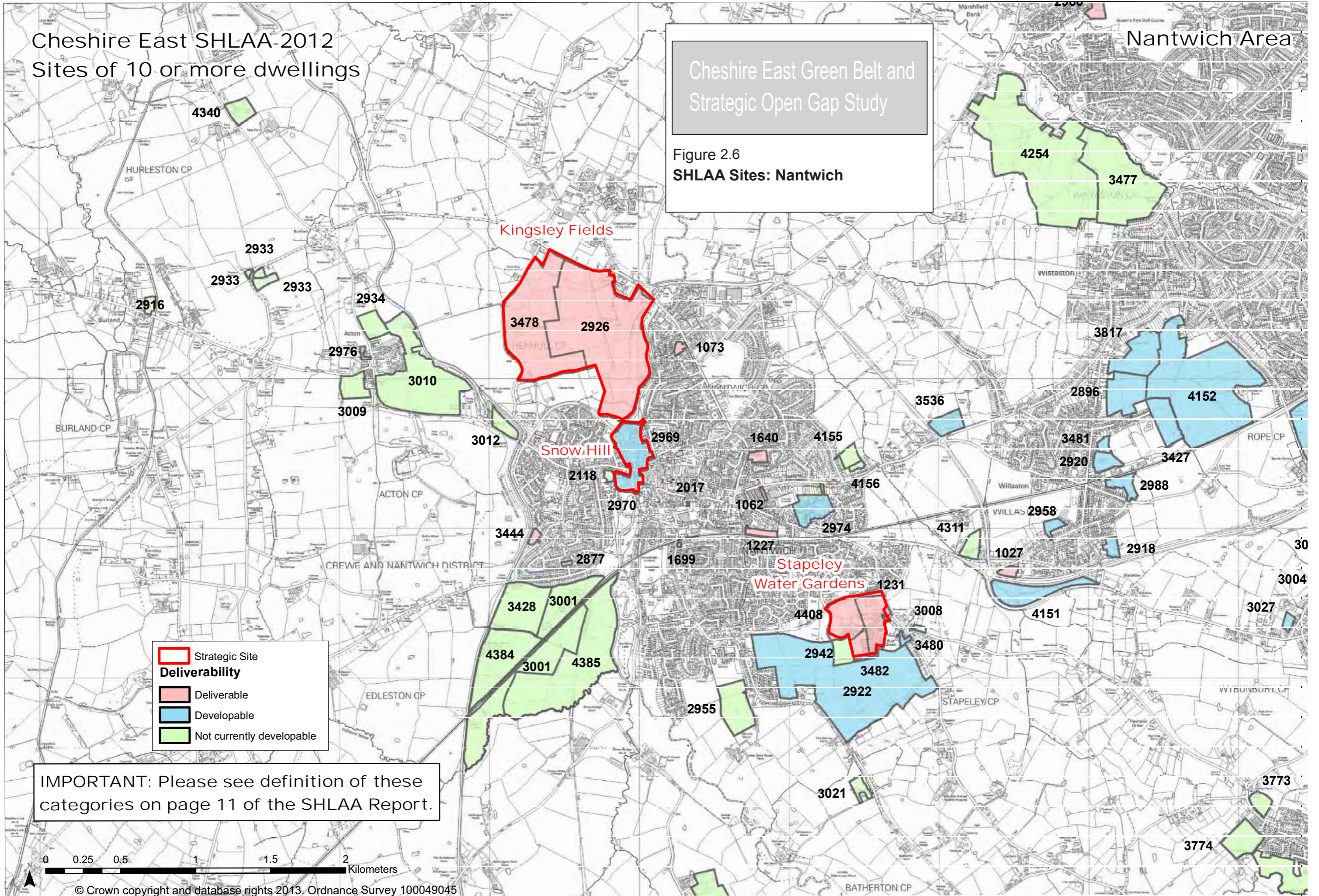
IMPORTANT: Please see definition of these categories on page 11 of the SHLAA Report.



Cheshire East SHLAA 2012
Sites of 10 or more dwellings

Nantwich Area

Cheshire East Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap Study
Figure 2.6
SHLAA Sites: Nantwich



**Stage 3: Policy Protection
For Open Gaps between Settlements**

3.1 Existing Green Gap Policy NE.4

- 3.1.1 The Local Plan Inspector's report (2003) supported the Green Gap Policy NE.4 as an important plank of the Council's overall strategy, protecting the open space between settlements, and particularly between Crewe, Nantwich and the villages to the south of Crewe. Amended wording was suggested to distinguish the policy from national Green Belt policy in PPG2.
- 3.1.2 The Council's justification for the Green Gap Policy indicates that for local, as opposed to strategic, reasons the Council's desire to protect the open countryside between Crewe and Nantwich, and prevent the two urban areas merging, justifies an approach comparable to Green Belt policy. It considers that 'standard' open countryside policy fails to provide an adequate level of protection to meet its objectives.
- 3.1.3 In 2003 there were over 250 supporting representations seeking to retain the Green Gap Policy. Several objections were pursued relating to the extent of the Green Gap designation. For example, the *"Green Gap at Weston should be extended to cover the area as far south as the present A500 through Hough. The present Green Gaps are only very narrow to the north of the village. There is a large area allocated for housing south of the A500, and proposed industrial development close to the village. There is need for greater protection against a further spread southwards. A larger area should be included as part of the Green Gap, to strengthen the Buffer Zone from Basford West."*
- 3.1.4 There were others, for example, *"a larger area at Gresty should be included as part of the Green Gap, to strengthen the Buffer Zone from Basford West, comprising land on the westerly side of Crewe Road between the Basford West site and Crewe Road. Land between the Haslington Settlement Boundary to the north, Winterley Settlement Boundary to the south, the main road to the east and Clay Lane to the west should be upgraded to Green Gap status."*
- 3.1.5 The Inspector considered that *"there is presently a visible openness between the two towns [of Crewe and Nantwich], but it is clear to me from visits that action was necessary to prevent the erosion of that gap."* In this he agreed with the Inspector's views expressed following the 1996 Inquiry into the adopted Local Plan, that the *".. standard open countryside*

policy is not adequate to protect the integrity of narrow open gaps". He was also of the view that the Council had given careful consideration to the continuing need for, and operation of the Policy, and was satisfied from the evidence that it is necessary to prevent the coalescence of Crewe, Nantwich and the various settlements in the immediate vicinity.

- 3.1.6 Crewe remains the major settlement within this study and the Development Strategy projections propose major growth over the forthcoming Plan period. Early in 2013, during the Development Strategy consultation period, further strong support was expressed for a Green Gap policy, as described above in section 1.5 (Consultation Responses).

3.2 Alternatives to Green Gap Policy

- 3.2.1 Various options are available to the local planning authority for the protection of open land between Crewe and Nantwich and their neighbouring settlements. These include the continued reliance on standard countryside policies, the adoption of a form of Green Gap policy, possibly redefined as a Strategic Open Gap policy, or the designation of a new or extended Green Belt.
- 3.2.2 The advantages and disadvantages of each Options are described in Tables 3.1 to 3.3 opposite and overleaf:

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>NPPF Core Planning Principles: take account of the different roles and character of different areas, promoting the vitality of our main urban areas, protecting the Green Belts around them, recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and supporting thriving rural communities within it;</p>	<p>Loss of PPS7 policy guidance, County Structure Plan countryside policies, Regional Strategy rural policies; NPPF Core Planning Principles promote mixed use developments, and encourage multiple benefits from the use of land in urban and rural areas, recognising that some open land can perform many functions (such as for wildlife, recreation, flood risk mitigation, carbon storage, or food production);</p>
<p>Local countryside designations carry less weight than national designations but could be used to restrict intrusive development within gaps.</p>	<p>Development that would contribute to the rural economy would normally be permitted; NPPF para 28 supports:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business and enterprise in rural areas, both through conversion of existing buildings and well designed new buildings; • the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses; • sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments that benefit businesses in rural areas, communities and visitors, and which respect the character of the countryside.
<p>Where pressure for development is not in evidence, existing countryside policies provide a robust way to prevent the coalescence of smaller villages;</p>	<p>Types of built development within a sensitive gap that would be difficult to resist:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • redevelopment of redundant farm buildings; • industrial or commercial development as farm diversification; • extensive built facilities supporting recreation, golf or sports uses; • tourism uses; • stables and equestrian buildings;
<p>Sustainable development policies can support the preservation of the distinctive identities of separate villages around Crewe.</p>	<p>Pressure for development alongside new by-pass roads through open gaps leads to built up areas effectively joined and loss of village identity;</p>
<p>Site allocation policies can steer future development towards more sustainable locations around Crewe, and away from countryside locations</p>	<p>Without specific designations, decision-making is not always consistent; Some legitimate countryside uses could cumulatively erode a narrow open gap between settlements and harm the visual character of the landscape.</p>

Table 3.1:
Option 1:
No Special Protection –
Normal Countryside Policies will apply

Table 3.2:
Option 2: Continuation of existing Green
Gap Policy (as a Strategic Open Gap)

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>The Green Gap Policy was devised to give additional protection to those areas of open countryside under the most intense pressure for development, on the edge of the main urban areas.</p>	<p>In some locations the pressure for land to be allocated for development is intense and cannot be adequately resisted by a locally-derived policy; Where there is some doubt about the 5 year+ housing land supply, a local gap policy could be vulnerable to developer pressure;.</p>
<p>Where pressure for development of land within the open gaps is strong, a stricter level of policy control is necessary to ensure continuing separation of the settlements.</p>	<p>Designation of areas of land not under pressure for development could weaken the effectiveness of the policy.</p>
<p>In existing Green Gap locations, the policy has operated effectively as a protection measure up to the present. It is only recently that the Green Gap policy has started to be challenged on the issue of the five-year housing land supply and absence of an up-to-date Local Plan.</p>	<p>The width of gap necessary to achieve adequate separation between settlements is a matter of judgment and not of fact.</p>
<p>Successive Local Plan Inspectors agreed that “standard open countryside policy is not adequate to protect the integrity of narrow open gaps”.</p>	<p>Strategic Open Gaps should only be defined in the gaps between settlements, not in wider rural areas where countryside policies operate effectively.</p>

Table 3.3:
Option 3: Designation of New Green Belt

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>Green Belt provides certainty;</p> <p>NPPF: The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence;</p> <p>Once established, Green Belt boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances.</p>	<p>The permanence of Green Belt means there is no opportunity to review boundaries in the short term;</p> <p>Therefore necessary to identify Safeguarded Land between urban areas and the Green Belt which may be required to meet longer term development needs beyond the end of the Plan period.</p>
<p>Sufficient space should be safeguarded to allow settlements to grow in future years. If drawn up correctly, the Green Belt would reinforce the sustainable development of each town or village.</p>	<p>NPPF para 84 explains that when drawing up or reviewing Green Belt boundaries local planning authorities should take account of the need to promote sustainable patterns of development.</p>
<p>A particularly strong case for a new or extended Green Belt can be made where there is either (i) a current or recent commitment to a major urban extension or new settlement; or (ii) large areas of brownfield land available which would otherwise be overlooked in favour of greenfield sites.</p>	<p>Green Belt policies should define boundaries clearly, using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent (NPPF para 85).</p>
<p>NPPF ‘presumption in favour of sustainable development’ does not apply in Green Belt areas (para 14 NPPF).</p> <p>The Development Strategy document recognises the important role of the Green Belt in the Borough, particularly in preserving its towns and settlements from merging into one another, safeguarding the countryside and concentrating development into its urban areas.</p>	<p>Green Belt proposals should not include land which it is unnecessary to keep permanently open and demonstrate that the inclusion of all the land is necessary to achieve the objective of separating settlements (NPPF para 85) .</p>
<p>Green Belt supports the creation of Green Infrastructure, access to the countryside, healthy and active communities, biodiversity and habitat creation.</p>	<p>There must be consistency with the Local Plan strategy for meeting identified requirements for sustainable development.</p>
<p>Green Belt policies reinforce heritage and environmental policies intended to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns and villages.</p>	

3.3 Identification of Broad Areas for possible Green Belt designation

- 3.3.1 In order to consider the general extent of proposed new Green Belt, the study has used background information supplied by Cheshire East Council, and information contained within the Local Plan evidence base, to supplement the initial survey findings.
- 3.3.2 Appendix 2 records the findings of the assessments carried out in the office and on site, including photos across the gaps between the settlements described above. Figures 2.2 to 2.6 include extracts taken from the Council's SHLAA maps and demonstrate that there is significant pressure for future development around the outer edge of Crewe and also around Nantwich.
- 3.3.3 The methodology used to progress the current study reflects that used for previous Green Belt Studies carried out by Envision in recent years (Blackburn, Sefton and Knowsley) and explores the potential for including land within the gaps between settlements, previously protected by Green Gap Policy NE.4, within a new Green Belt designation. The gaps have been considered against the purposes of including land in the Green Belt, as set out in para 80 of the NPPF, as follows:
- 1 to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
 - 2 to prevent neighbouring towns [and villages] from merging into one another;
 - 3 to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
 - 4 to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns;
 - 5 to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land
- 3.3.4 The study is required to consider the broad extent of any future Green Belt area, rather than defining parcels of land and considering the definition of precise boundaries at this stage. The initial conclusions of the assessment against Green Belt purposes are as follows:

Purpose 1: Land adjoining the built up area that could be considered to be 'sprawl' if developed in future:

Some land within the gaps could be said to be partially contained, where 25%-50% of the parcel abuts the urban area; the majority of the land is detached from the urban area;

Purpose 2: Preventing the merging of neighbouring towns:

The release of parcels of land within the identified gaps, and their future development, would significantly diminish the existing gaps, leaving a separation of less than a mile, and in some cases remove the gap altogether, between adjoining settlements.

Purpose 5: To assist in urban regeneration:

There are some brownfield sites within Crewe and Nantwich (predominantly in Crewe), although their number is limited

It should be noted that, in Green Belt assessments elsewhere, this fifth Green Belt purpose of assisting in urban regeneration is often screened out as it could equally apply to all areas.

Therefore, in principle, all the land within the gaps between settlements around Crewe would robustly serve Green Belt Purpose 1 - to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas, Purpose 2 - to prevent neighbouring towns [and villages] from merging into one another; and Purpose 5 - to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

Acton, to the west of Nantwich, would not be affected by any future sprawl of the built up area of Crewe, and is thought to be unlikely to merge with Nantwich because of the significant historic designations in the surrounding area.

The desk-top assessments for the current study have considered the status of land within the gaps between settlements in terms of the remaining Green Belt Purposes 3 and 4 as follows:

Purpose 3: To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment

Considerations include:

- a. Whether there are clear, strong and robust boundaries to contain development and prevent encroachment in the long-term;
- b. Existing land uses(s), the proximity and relationship to the built-up area and relationship to the open countryside;
- c. The degree of existing encroachment by built development and sense of openness or enclosure.

The study findings (in Appendix 2) identify existing land uses, existing countryside character and the extent to which built development and urban activities encroach into the gaps between settlements.

The majority of farmland within the study area is identified as Grade 2 or 3, with small amounts of Grade 4 lower quality land.

Access into the countryside via public rights of way are available from all the settlements in the study area.

This leads us to conclude that future development at the edges of the identified settlements would be seen to encroach into open countryside, albeit very narrow gaps of open countryside in several locations. Therefore, in principle, all the land within the gaps between settlements around Crewe would robustly serve Green Belt Purpose 3, by safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.

Purpose 4: To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns and villages

Haslington (Crewe Green), Weston, Shavington, Acton and Nantwich all contain significant heritage assets, including conservation area and listed buildings either within or immediately adjoining the gap between the village or town and Crewe.

In each case future development within the gaps would have a direct impact on heritage assets, and key views of landmarks and listed buildings would also be harmed.

Therefore, in principle, all the land within the gaps between settlements around Crewe would robustly serve Green Belt Purpose 4, to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns and villages.

3.4 Green Belt purposes: Assessment of Gaps between Settlements

3.4.1 The gaps between settlements that are at present protected by saved Policy NE.4 have been considered (above) against the purposes of including land in the Green Belt. Table 3.4 below summarises the findings and demonstrates that land within the identified gaps, between settlements that are at risk of coalescence resulting from future growth of Crewe, robustly meet the specified purposes of Green Belt, as set out in para. 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework. It should be noted that, even if a Green Belt policy is confirmed within the Local Plan Core Strategy, further work will be required to establish detailed boundaries within the subsequent Site Allocations document.

3.4.2 The village of Acton is located to the west of Nantwich and is not considered to be at risk of coalescence from the growth of Crewe. In the previous Local Plan it was not considered necessary to duplicate existing heritage and environmental policies by the imposition of the Green Gap Policy NE.4. Although the proposed Strategic Site of Kingsley Fields would occupy land to the north west of Nantwich, the furthest extent of the development area will be more than 700m from Acton. The form and design of the western edge of the future developed area will inevitably be restricted by its potential impact on the important heritage designations of the historic Nantwich Battlefield and the Acton Conservation Area.

3.4.3 The study therefore concludes that coalescence is unlikely to occur in future in the gap between Nantwich and Acton and that a new Green Belt designation to the west of Nantwich cannot be justified in terms of the strict criteria in NPPF. Further analysis of the gap between Acton and Nantwich is provided at Stage 4 (p 42), dealing with Strategic Open Gap policies.

3.5 Examples of new Green Belt designations

3.5.1 The study was asked to carry out research to identify any locations where new Green Belt has recently been designated, and has found none. The most recent examples found, that provide some limited insight into the process, are the Tewkesbury, Gloucester, Cheltenham Joint Core Strategy Green Belt Assessment (Amec 2011), the SE Derbyshire Local Plan, adopted 1998, which carries forward the designation of a small area of Green Belt between Burton-on-Trent and Swadlincote, and the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Green Belt Boundary Study 2009.

3.5.2 The **South and South East Derbyshire Green Belts Local Plan**, which was adopted by Derbyshire County Council in 1983, established the boundaries of Green Belts to the SE of Derby and between Burton on Trent and Swadlincote. The approval of the Derbyshire Structure Plan in 1990 confirmed the Green Belt boundaries and the policies of the Green Belt Local Plan were subsequently carried forward in the SE Derbyshire Local Plan adopted in 1998. The purposes of Green Belt in this location were to limit the continuing urban expansion in the area of South Derbyshire between Burton on Trent and Swadlincote; to prevent coalescence and maintain the separate identity of the towns and smaller settlements in the general area of the Green Belt; and to maintain the open character of the Green Belt area.

3.5.3 **The South Derbyshire Local Plan (Part 1) Summary Report of Responses to Public Consultation on the Preferred Growth Strategy (October – December 2012)** outlines the issue raised around the suggestion for safeguarding land currently in the Green Belt for development beyond the plan period. *“The majority of the public responses suggest that the land should not be safeguarded for development and should instead continue to be protected as Green Belt. The main reasons given for this include leaving the land for agriculture use, Green Belt land is required to prevent urban sprawl and protect the character of villages and that developing a site within the greenbelt would affect wildlife.*

3.5.4 *There were nevertheless some responses who stated that land should be safeguarded for development. Derbyshire County Council considers that it is appropriate that the District Council consider the possible need to review Green Belt boundaries and identify potential ‘safeguarded land’ in*

Settlement / Gap	Purpose 1 Sprawl	Purpose 2 Merge	Purpose 3 Countryside	Purpose 4 Setting	Purpose 5 Regeneration
A. Nantwich	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
B. Shavington	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
C. Weston	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
D. Haslington	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
E. Acton	no	no	yes	yes	yes

Table 3.4: Green Belt Purposes

the area in question.”

3.5.5 **The Tewkesbury Borough Council, Gloucester City Council, Cheltenham Borough Council Joint Core Strategy Green Belt Assessment was carried out by Amec in 2011.** *“This strategic assessment provides an objective and independent review of Green Belt boundaries to facilitate clear decision making and option testing once other evidence is available to the Joint Core Strategy Team. It should not be viewed in isolation, and needs to be viewed in the context of the entire Joint Core Strategy evidence base.”*

3.5.6 The study included an assessment of potential areas for addition to the Green Belt. *“Seven such areas were assessed against the five purposes of including land in Green Belt using the same broad assessment criteria that were used for assessing the existing Green Belt.”* New areas were suggested where land adjoining the urban area was not currently designated as Green Belt or where adjoining land had previously been included in the Green Belt and, in one case, where new Green Belt *“may assist in safeguarding the historic setting of central Gloucester”*.

3.5.7 As for this current study, the Amec study found few examples to draw on from other authorities where significant areas of Green Belt have been added. The study advises that some areas of land do not merit consideration for inclusion where these do not contribute to the gaps between settlements. Any land considered for future inclusion *“should play a role in the key purpose of designation of the Green Belt in this location, maintaining the separation between Gloucester and Cheltenham and between Cheltenham and Bishop’s Cleeve.”*

3.5.8 **The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Green Belt Boundary Study** (Proposals for New Green Belt Land) March 2009 provides the initial findings of a review of green belt boundaries around the towns and villages that are not at present included within the Green Belt. It proposes to regularise anomalies and suggests potential boundary amendments on the edges of the Green Belt, to be carried forward through the Local Plan. A number of the proposed locations offer an opportunity to provide protection to open space areas at the edge of settlements that may be subject to pressure for development. However, the report does not address broader strategic issues such as whether new Green

Belt should be designated to prevent coalescence, and is not directly relevant to this study.

3.6 National Planning Policy Framework – Exceptional Circumstances

3.6.1 As described above, one of the policy options for the protection of gaps between settlements is to designate land as Green Belt. The Development Strategy proposes to create two new areas of Green Belt around Nantwich, to protect the town from the future expansion of Crewe and to prevent it merging with surrounding villages, and the initial assessment (section 3.4 above) demonstrates that all the gaps at presently protected by saved Policy NE.4 could be said to robustly meet the specified purposes of Green Belt, as set out in para. 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

3.6.2 As a first step, before considering the potential extent of any future Green Belt designation, the study is required to consider whether there are exceptional circumstances that could justify creating new areas of Green Belt. These are set out in NPPF para 82 as follows:

“New Green Belts should only be established in exceptional circumstances, for example when planning for larger scale development such as new settlements or major urban extensions. If proposing a new Green Belt, local planning authorities should:

- *demonstrate why normal planning and development management policies would not be adequate;*
- *set out whether any major changes in circumstances have made the adoption of this exceptional measure necessary;*
- *show what the consequences of the proposal would be for sustainable development;*
- *demonstrate the necessity for the Green Belt and its consistency with Local Plans for adjoining areas; and*
- *show how the Green Belt would meet the other objectives of the Framework. “*

3.6. a Demonstrate why normal planning and development management policies would not be adequate:

3.6.3 Section 3.2 above illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of policy protection for open gaps between settlements. Overall, the predominantly rural character of the southern part of Cheshire East district appears to have been well maintained by countryside policies. However, the historic rural character of areas around the two main settlements (Crewe and Nantwich) has not survived to the same extent and the Cheshire Historic Landscape Characterisation 2008 suggests that *“the rapid expansion of Crewe in the latter half of the twentieth century, combined with planning policies such as village envelopes, have led to a greater degree of nucleation in the settlement pattern.”* The report considers that this has *“seriously eroded a pattern of some antiquity”*.

3.6.4 The Development Strategy argues that areas proposed as Strategic Open Gap need additional protection in order to maintain the definition and separation of existing communities, and to indicate support for the longer term objectives of preventing the merging of Crewe with surrounding villages and the merging of Sandbach and Middlewich. The building of principal traffic routes through the narrow gaps between the settlements has the potential to increase pressure for new development up to and along those routes. That pressure is already manifest in these areas, justifying a stricter level of development management to ensure continuing separation of the settlements.

3.6.5 An example of this type of **development pressure along principal traffic routes** is evident between Crewe and Nantwich. The historic cores of both these towns lie some 7km apart and the towns remained clearly separate during the first half of the 20th century as shown in Figure 3.1 opposite. During Crewe’s expansion in the second half of the 20th century, development has spread outwards almost along the entire length of the main Crewe – Nantwich road (A534), incorporating the villages of Wistaston and Willaston into the ‘Greater Crewe’ area and leaving only the smallest of gaps between the built up areas of these two towns.

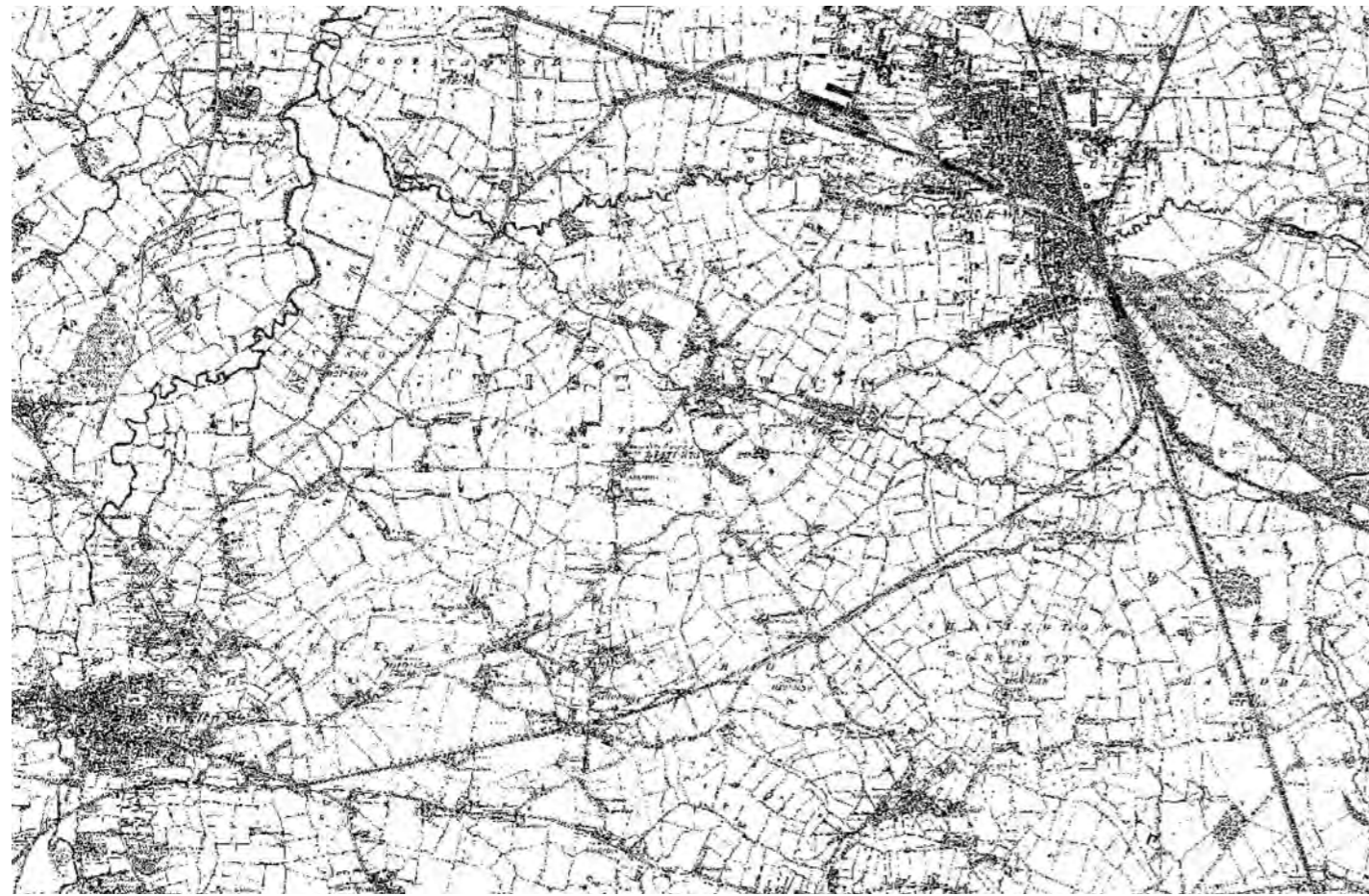


Figure 3.1: Historical development of Crewe and Nantwich.

Maps showing the development of Crewe and Nantwich in the second half of the 19th Century (top left), first half of the 20th Century (top right) and the present day (bottom)

- 3.6.6 There has been **strong public support**, through Local Plan consultations, for countryside policies that retain the distinct character of individual settlements and, in the Crewe area, for the saved Green Gap policy that has helped to maintain the existing gaps between settlements (section 1.5 above). Some responses suggest that local people believe that only the strength of national Green Belt policies will be sufficient to protect the open gaps from urban development.
- 3.6.7 Historically, since its introduction in 1996, the Green Gap policy appears to have been **generally effective in maintaining what remains of the gap** between Crewe and Nantwich. Despite the incorporation of Wistaston and Willaston in the 'Greater Crewe' urban area, the two villages do manage to retain some sense of separation as they are not completely surrounded by the urban area. The Council has been consistent in refusing applications in the Green Gap, although recently a number of these are being taken to appeal.
- 3.6.8 However, with strong support for the future growth of Crewe, as described in the Development Strategy, and **increasing developer pressure**, as illustrated on Figures 2.2 and 2.3 showing Strategic Sites for development, applications and appeal sites, the local authority now considers that the open gaps between settlements are being subject to a significant amount of pressure.
- 3.6.9 Planning applications are in preparation for major residential development within the Green Gap areas, indicating that the **policy lacks credibility** in the minds of strategic land buyers and development interests. A recent example of an appeal, granted despite the saved Green Gap policy, is land at Rope Lane, Shavington. Whilst this is only one appeal decision (based on the five-year housing land supply issue), it does give an indication that the gaps can be vulnerable to development.
- 3.6.10 In terms of the **demand and need for more housing** around Crewe, the 2010 SHMA identifies an overall annual requirement for 2,753 open market dwellings and 1,243 affordable dwellings across Cheshire East. This includes a shortfall of 415 affordable dwellings p.a. in the former Crewe and Nantwich District.
- 3.6.11 The SHMA also shows that for Crewe, demand exceeds supply for all sizes of property, particularly one bed properties, and that demand exceeds supply for all types of property (except terraced houses), but particularly for semi-detached houses and bungalows. In Nantwich, demand exceeds supply for all sizes of property (except two bed), but particularly for four or more bed properties. For property types, demand exceeds supply for semi-detached houses and particularly for detached houses and bungalows.
- 3.6.12 In Crewe, out of a total of 29,915 households, there were 2,752 households in need (9.2%) and in Nantwich 493 households out of 6,658 (7.2%) were in need. By comparison, the overall proportion of households in need across Cheshire East was 6.0%.
- 3.6.13 The 'All Change for Crewe' programme along with the emerging Cheshire East Local Plan attempts to drive growth in Crewe in a structured way. **Future growth around Crewe and Nantwich** is being driven by both demonstrable local need and also developer pressure. This is placing a number of areas under pressure for development, outside of any structured programme of growth envisaged by 'All Change for Crewe' and the emerging Local Plan. The recent SHLAA maps (extracts Figs. 2.4, 2.5, 2.6) demonstrate that a significant number of sites were submitted within Green Gap areas and there are very few significant brownfield sites available for development. Further evidence relating to this issue will be set out in the Council's brownfield land study (in preparation).
- 3.6.14 Therefore the study concludes that, within the plan period, 'normal' planning and development management policies are unlikely to be sufficient to resist the growing pressure for development of land within the narrow gaps that remain between Crewe and the neighbouring settlements of Nantwich, Shavington, Weston and Haslington as well as Wistaston, Willaston and Rope.
- 3.6.b. Set out whether any major changes in circumstances have made the adoption of this exceptional measure necessary:**
- 3.6.15 Since the Green Gap policy was first drawn up in 1996, circumstances have changed considerably. Crewe has been identified as a key driver for growth in the Cheshire and Warrington sub region. If the HS2 project is confirmed, this will create a major transport hub, which will support regeneration and generate new jobs. After years of discussion, major new employment sites at Basford are now on the cusp of commencement, with funding confirmed for the necessary highway infrastructure. Substantial new development is also planned for other areas on the periphery of the town.
- 3.6.16 The 'All Change for Crewe' Partnership Board, a private sector-led public/private partnership, has produced a Prospectus as the practical expression of, and focus for, their ambitions and intentions for the town. Crewe's growth profile, supported by committed civic leadership and underpinned by thorough economic analysis, anticipates:
- Over 14,500 new jobs focused on the Basford strategic employment site and in the Town Centre
 - In excess of £230million additional retail and leisure spend.
 - 20% population growth by 2031, from 83,000 to around 100,000
- 3.6.17 The development priorities identified in the prospectus are said to be ambitious to reflect the scale of opportunity. As a result of Local Government reorganisation in 2009, Crewe is now the largest settlement in a County Borough of over 370,000 people. It is already the area's primary population centre, with a population of 70,240 (2012), and its major economic hub. Its 5,000 businesses include concentrations of professional services, distribution and logistics, and advanced engineering built on its rich rail and car manufacturing heritage.
- 3.6.18 Funding has already been secured from the Department for Transport to support Phase 1 of the Crewe Rail Exchange project and to deliver the Crewe Green Link Road, unlocking private sector investment and employment opportunities at Basford East and West. Significant private investment has been secured at Crewe Business Park, the Grand Junction Retail Park and MMU University as well as the recent announcement of £800 million investment at Bentley Motors, creating 1,000 new local jobs.
- 3.6.19 However, the Council acknowledges that Crewe exhibits the highest levels of deprivation, health inequality, low skills,

economic inactivity etc within Cheshire East. The town has many strengths, including its excellent transport links and skills in advanced engineering, but it faces many challenges. A poor physical environment in places and lack of choice in the housing stock are barriers to attracting jobs, investment and skilled workers. The change in spatial emphasis within South Cheshire, including physical regeneration and a major house-building programme in Crewe, is key to improving conditions in the town.

- 3.6.20 Crewe has been a centre for growth for some time and the scale of housing and employment growth in the plan period is **not significantly different to previous Local Plans**. The RSS figure for the former Crewe and Nantwich Borough was 450 net additional dwellings per year, and the Development Strategy now envisages 325 net additional dwellings p.a. in Crewe and 75 p.a. in Nantwich between 2010 and 2030. The Council has identified enough land to meet a significant proportion of the level of development set out in the Development Strategy to 2030, including Basford East and West and other identified strategic sites.
- 3.6.21 However, if investment in development is to continue in a sustainable manner, safeguards need to be in place to ensure that future development provides direct benefits within the **inner areas of the town most in need of regeneration**. Without constraints at the edge of the urban area, there is a clear possibility (as evidenced by the location of many SHLAA sites within the Green Gap areas) that the town will expand outwards, merge with neighbouring villages and draw investment away from the planned regeneration areas such as the town centre.
- 3.6.22 As Crewe becomes the pre-eminent economic growth point in the south of Cheshire the pressure on the narrow gaps between settlements has become stronger and residents' concerns have grown (as evidenced by consultation responses to the draft Local Plan). Figures 2.2 and 2.3 illustrate the locations of developer interest and Strategic Sites being considered in the Development Strategy.
- 3.6.23 The gaps between settlements most likely to be affected by proposals for future development are described above. Stage 2 analyses the identity of existing settlements, including their historic settings and distinctive character, and assesses the existing gaps and the locations of potential coalescence and/

or erosion of gaps.

3.6.c. Show what the consequences of the proposal would be for sustainable development:

- 3.6.24 The designation of additional Green Belt land to the south of Crewe may reduce the Council's choice of sustainable locations for growth. However, depending on where the boundaries of the Green Belt are drawn, land could still be made available for longer term future growth (safeguarded land) on the southern edge of Crewe, without compromising the gaps between Crewe and the smaller settlements immediately to the south of the A500.
- 3.6.25 Green Belt policy incorporates a very strong presumption against inappropriate development, and new boundaries must endure in the long term, beyond the Plan period. The Local Plan would therefore need to include an interpretation of 'permanence' in terms of the need for safeguarded land and the future expansion of settlements. Sustainable development may be more difficult to achieve and maintain in the longer term if Green Belt boundaries are too tightly drawn around existing towns and larger villages.
- 3.6.26 The constraints of Green Belt policy support the creation of sustainable communities by ensuring that the directions for growth, and a long term settlement hierarchy, are identified in the Local Plan, and that the alternative approaches of channelling development towards urban areas inside the Green Belt boundary, towards towns and villages inset within the Green Belt or towards locations beyond the outer Green Belt boundary are fully explored. The fifth purpose of Green Belt "to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land" would contain the southwards growth of Crewe and support the regeneration of the Basford areas and Crewe Town Centre, as key objectives of the draft Development Strategy.
- 3.6.27 If new Green Belt is wrapped around the southern, eastern and western edges of Crewe, and between Nantwich and Crewe, both towns would retain the capacity to grow and develop sustainably in different directions. Crewe would retain capacity to grow, predominantly to the north (although some land to the north of Crewe experiences a high water table and future development would give rise to other issues such as highway and transport implications, which would need to

be resolved). Nantwich will also be able to grow towards the south and the north-west.

- 3.6.28 An extended Green Belt would maintain open land which can be used not only to protect the separate identities of settlements and influence the future direction of urban development, but also to provide access to the countryside, green infrastructure benefits in terms of health and wellbeing, links between urban open spaces, recreational opportunities and biodiversity resources, all of which would benefit the communities of Crewe, Nantwich and neighbouring villages.

3.6.d Demonstrate the necessity for the Green Belt and its consistency with Local Plans for adjoining areas:

- 3.6.29 The main objective of the current study was to consider whether two new areas of Green Belt should be created (as identified in the Development Strategy) to secure the open areas of separation between the towns of Crewe and Nantwich.
- 3.6.30 There is no doubt in the Council's mind that strong policy protection is needed to preserve the existing gap between the two towns. However, the study has concluded that the separate area of Green Belt to the west of Nantwich, which was proposed to safeguard the gap between Nantwich and Acton, is not justified in terms of Green Belt purposes.
- 3.6.31 Green Belt is a strategic (national) designation. Creating isolated areas of Green Belt is difficult to justify; the name refers to belts/bands of open land around large urban areas and conurbations that could otherwise spread and expand across open countryside. The previous Local Plan Inspector who supported the retention of a local Green Gap policy made it clear that the policy wording must differentiate it from national Green Belt policy.
- 3.6.32 The current study has assessed the existing gaps between settlements around Crewe that are protected by the saved Green Gap policy and has concluded that strong policy protection continues to be necessary to preserve those gaps as Crewe grows and develops. Both Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap policies have been considered.
- 3.6.33 The outcome of the study (section 3.8 below) is a proposal to extend the existing North Staffordshire Green Belt, which

already extends into South Cheshire between Crewe and Stoke, around the southern, eastern and western edges of Crewe. This would safeguard, at a local level, the gaps between Crewe and Nantwich, Shavington, Weston and Haslington. It is also considered necessary, at a strategic level, to link these individual gaps together, in order to extend and strengthen the Green Belt policy protection for the open countryside between Crewe and Stoke, and to support the regeneration aims of these neighbouring local authorities.

3.6.34 As part of their Duty to Cooperate, Cheshire East has been in discussion with their neighbouring local authorities in Staffordshire (section 3.9 below). These cross-boundary discussions are ongoing but views expressed to Cheshire East are that more housing being allowed in the south of Cheshire could adversely affect regeneration in the Potteries area. The Green Belt in this location was intended to prevent the outward spread of development from the Potteries to the north, but it also functions to safeguard regeneration initiatives around Stoke on Trent and Newcastle under Lyme in terms of the future growth of Crewe and Alsager.

3.6.35 The study therefore concludes that the proposed new extensions of the Green Belt between Crewe and Stoke are necessary in order to contain the growth of Crewe and Nantwich towards the south-east, maintain the separation between these main towns and Stoke on Trent and thus strengthen the existing policy protection provided by the earlier extension to the North Staffordshire Green Belt into Cheshire.

3.6.e Show how the Green Belt would meet the other objectives of the Framework:

3.6.36 Table 3.5 opposite and overleaf describes how the proposed Green Belt would meet the other NPPF objectives:

1	Building a strong, competitive economy	The longevity of Green Belt policy, together with certainty about appropriate areas for future development, will support long term employment and housing growth and the regeneration of Crewe
2	Ensuring the vitality of town centres	“All change for Crewe” prioritises the town centre regeneration project; the containment of the southern edge of Crewe will assist in concentrating retail, social and service provision within the town centre.
3	Supporting a prosperous rural economy	NPPF requires local planning authorities to plan positively for the beneficial use of land in the Green Belt once boundaries have been set. High quality agricultural land around Crewe will be safeguarded. Certainty will encourage local food production and local markets, increase farm business viability and food security. Consistent with the Green Infrastructure (GI) strategy which aims to promote locations for recreation, nature conservation and access to the countryside; farm businesses growing food for local markets can providing GI benefits such as nature conservation and educational visits.
4	Promoting sustainable transport	Green Belt will help to direct development to more sustainable locations where public transport links can be provided economicall. West Coast mainline services and HS2 support the growth of Crewe as a major railway junction; Improved highway network with links to the M6 may support radial and inter-urban bus routes.
5	Supporting high quality communications infrastructure	Communications infrastructure in the Green Belt is not always inappropriate development.
6	Delivering a wide choice of high quality homes	NPPF para 52 supports the supply of new homes through planning for larger scale development, such as new settlements or extensions to existing villages and towns that follow the principles of Garden Cities; Green Gaps, Green Infrastructure and other policies in the Development Strategy, including mixed use development at Basford East and West, promote sustainable forms of development that will deliver high quality homes and living environments. There is strong community support for the separation of settlements around Crewe (by the saved Green Gap policy).
7	Requiring good design	Green Gaps, Green Infrastructure and other policies in the Development Strategy promote sustainable forms of development that will deliver high quality living environments and require high quality design.

Table 3.5: How the Green Belt would contribute to other objectives of the National Planning Policy Framework

8	Promoting healthy communities	<p>NPPF para 81 advises that once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of the Green Belt, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land.</p> <p>Evidence shows that, on the basis of a comparison of Green Belt land with similar urban edge land without the designation, Green Belt designation encourages higher levels of nature conservation and public access (CPRE / Natural England 2010).</p>
9	Protecting Green Belt land	New Green Belt in Cheshire East will support and reinforce the strong protection for Green Belt land in North Staffordshire.
10	Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change	<p>The protection of open countryside from built development will safeguard open land that can accommodate landscape schemes for climate change adaptation, flood water alleviation, surface water absorption, rainwater capture, aquifer and water catchment protection.</p> <p>In terms of energy generation, inappropriate development in the Green Belt must demonstrate very special circumstances if projects are to proceed. Such very special circumstances may include the wider environmental benefits associated with increased production of energy from renewable sources.</p>
11	Conserving and enhancing the natural environment	<p>Green Belt provides opportunities for improving the environment around towns, in line with the Green Infrastructure Action Plan for Crewe, by providing land for recreation and access to the countryside, tree planting, habitat creation; landscape restoration in line with the landscape character area assessments.</p> <p>There is evidence that Green Belts have been shown to be effective in terms of their primary purposes, and the land within them has also gained a range of environmental benefits (CPRE / Natural England, Green Belts: a greener future, January 2010)</p>
12	Conserving and enhancing the historic environment	Green Belt would support and reinforce the protection afforded to heritage assets by existing designations such as conservation areas, battlefield sites, listed buildings, registered parks and gardens, ancient monuments
13	Facilitating the sustainable use of minerals	It is believed that no mineral reserves would be affected by the proposed creation of a Green Belt extension around Crewe; however, mineral extraction is not inappropriate development in the Green Belt

Table 3.5: How the Green Belt would contribute to other objectives of the National Planning Policy Framework

3.7 Policy Protection for Open Gaps between Settlements: Justification for linking new Green Belt with existing Green Belt

3.7.1 As explained in Section 1 above, this Study is required to review all the evidence related to the proposed designations of Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap in the Development Strategy, in order to ensure that proposals included in the Local Plan are sound and based on robust evidence and criteria. The study forms part of the Local Plan evidence base and will be considered alongside all other evidence, consultation responses and national policy and guidance.

3.7.2 Following recent consultations on the Development Strategy and other draft documents, Cheshire East Council was asked by stakeholders to consider various options for future Green Belt or Strategic Open Gap policies. This report considers three options as follows, to ensure that the study provides robust evidence to support the emerging Local Plan. The areas under consideration include the new Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap locations proposed in the Development Strategy to replace the saved Green Gap Policy NE.4. (Figure 3.2 illustrates the general extent of the three options under discussion).

Option 1: Is there sufficient planning policy justification for designating two new areas of Green Belt to prevent the towns of Crewe and Nantwich from merging?

Option 2: Is there sufficient planning policy justification for linking a proposed new area of Green Belt between Crewe and Nantwich with or in place of the proposed Strategic Open Gaps to the south and east of Crewe, then linking into the existing Green Belt?

Option 3: Is there sufficient planning policy justification for linking a proposed new area of Green Belt between Crewe and Nantwich with or in place of the proposed Strategic Open Gaps to the south and east of Crewe, together with further land to the south, then linking into the existing Green Belt?

3.7.3 This study has examined the three options very carefully in light of the strong safeguards in NPPF, where it is explicit that the Government attaches great importance to Green Belts. “The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban

sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.”

3.7.4 As Green Belt is a strategic policy designation, supported by national policies in NPPF, the options have been examined in a different order. It is our view that it may not be easy to justify isolated areas of Green Belt around Nantwich unless these can be connected into the existing adopted Green Belt. Option 2 is therefore considered first.

Option 2: Proposed areas of new Green Belt between Crewe and Nantwich with or in place of the proposed Strategic Open Gaps to the south and east of Crewe, linking into the existing Green Belt?

3.7.5 The Cheshire Green Belt was altered in 1992 to include an extension of the North Staffordshire Green Belt into South Cheshire. At that time it was considered that, for strategic reasons, Green Belt could only be applied to the south-east quadrant of the former Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council area. The justification for this is understood to be to prevent the outward spread of the Potteries towards the built up areas of Crewe and Alsager. It is not known why the broad swathe of Green Belt, to the north and south of the A500 west of the M6, extends only as far west as Englesea Brook.

3.7.6 Around Crewe and Nantwich, the saved Green Gap policy was devised as a local, rather than a strategic, policy to give additional protection to those areas of open countryside under the most intense pressures for development. It was applied around the urban edge of Crewe where there was strong justification for preventing the coalescence of the town with villages on the urban fringe. With a renewed focus on Crewe as a growth point, and with increased personal mobility and extended travel to work areas since the earlier Green Belt extension into South Cheshire, the Council believes it may now be appropriate to reconsider the Green Gap policy and to expand the original purpose of Green Belt in this location, to prevent the outward spread of Crewe and its merging with other settlements.

3.7.7 NPPF advises that a strong case for a new or extended Green Belt can be made where there is either a current or recent commitment to a major urban extension or new settlement, or large areas of brownfield land available which

would otherwise be overlooked in favour of greenfield sites. The large development sites of Basford East and Basford West are considered to fall into the category of major urban extension, which adds to the justification for Green Belt designation at this location. These mixed use development sites are intended to help facilitate the regeneration of Crewe as a whole by providing new transport links, homes and jobs, although they are predominantly greenfield, rather than brownfield, sites.

3.7.8 The previous concerns of residents about the continuing planned expansion of Crewe to the south around Basford and the east around Haslington, have been reinforced by the growing pressure for development along the A500, A5020 and A534. The indications of developer interest, planning applications, permissions and appeal sites, as well as the proposed Strategic Sites south of Rope and north of Shavington would, if developed, entirely eliminate the present narrow gaps between settlements.

3.7.9 Proposed Strategic Sites at Haslington, close to others adjoining the eastern edge of Crewe at Crewe Green, suggest that the narrow gap between settlements at this location could easily be eliminated in future. The eastern edge of Crewe, to the east of the A5020 University Way and to the south of Haslington, is to some extent safeguarded from development by various heritage designations. St Michael and All Angels Church is within Crewe Green Conservation Area, the Temple of Peace Wood and Rookery Wood are Grade II Registered Parks and Gardens, and Crewe Hall is a Grade 1 Listed Building. However, the recent MMU Cheshire Campus extensions and Business Park developments close to Haslington, together with the existing Crewe Hall Enterprise Park, the large Strategic Site to the south, and the proposals for the Basford East area, may make it hard to resist the future expansion of Crewe towards the south-east.

3.7.10 Similarly, the Basford East and West sites immediately adjoin the A500, where two new roundabouts have been created. These road junctions could also provide access to the south, between Shavington and Basford village and at Weston. Future development to the south of the A500 would then be hard to resist, and could eliminate the existing narrow gap. In addition, a large Strategic Site proposed to the south of Crewe Hall could potentially be amalgamated with other sites to the south of Weston, causing the present historic village

to be merged into a large suburban extension of Crewe. This could potentially, in the longer term, become connected to the existing housing developments at Wychwood Park, Wychwood Village, Gorsty Hill and Balterley Heath. There is known to be developer interest in the Gorsty Hill Golf course and land south of Weston.

3.7.11 The Development Strategy emphasises how important it is that Crewe should continue to grow and thrive as a railway town, with HS2 and the West Coast mainline route both travelling through Crewe. It is clear that there will, in the foreseeable future, continue to be strong pressure for the development of land around existing employment areas, the University, the Business Parks and the strategic employment sites at Basford East and West. Highway improvements to the A500 and the M6 junctions, that are intended to make Crewe a more attractive focus for investment, have also drawn a considerable amount of developer interest.

3.7.12 The future growth of Crewe along the eastern and southern fringes, and the merging of the town with villages to the east, south east and south of the built up area would, at a strategic level, narrow the gap between Crewe, Stoke and Newcastle. It is our understanding that the existing cross-boundary Green Belt was applied to the south-east quadrant of the former Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council area in order to prevent the outward expansion of Stoke. However, the Green Belt boundaries to the west of Alsager exclude the existing settlements to the south of the A500 and do not provide the rural villages in South Cheshire with any protection from the planned and potential expansion of Crewe to the south.

3.7.13 Therefore it is our view that a new area of Green Belt, extending the existing boundary around Barthomley and Englesea Brook towards the north and west in order to safeguard the gaps between Crewe and Haslington, Weston, Shavington and Nantwich, would provide more effective policy protection than the proposed Strategic Open Gap indicated in the Development Strategy.

Option 1: Two new areas of Green Belt to prevent the towns of Crewe and Nantwich from merging.

3.7.14 The 'saved' Green Gap policy was considered, in 2003 when it was carried forward from the previous local plan, to be comparable to Green Belt policy, but at a non-strategic

local level in terms of maintaining distinctions between settlements. The significant suburban growth of Crewe had, by that time, eroded the gap between the urban area and the villages of Wistaston and Rope, and connected to the village of Willaston. It is clear from the Local Plan Inspector's report that the 'Green Gap' was necessary to give additional protection to those areas of open countryside under the most intense pressures for development, on the periphery of Crewe and Nantwich urban areas.

3.7.15 There is no doubt that the towns of Crewe and Nantwich are at risk of coalescence, as evidenced by Section 2 above and survey findings recorded in Appendix 2 Green Gap Assessments. The Development Strategy document explains that the expansion of Crewe in recent years has led to continued pressure for development within the narrow gap that separates Crewe and Nantwich. *"This pressure looks set to continue into the future – especially as Crewe becomes the pre-eminent economic growth point in the south of Cheshire."* The proposed Strategic Site at Wistaston would, if developed, would make the western edge of Crewe more vulnerable to development pressures in future, and other Strategic Sites on the southern edge of Willaston and at the south-eastern edge of Nantwich, would consolidate an existing gap where it is already very narrow.

3.7.16 Therefore it is considered that, on the eastern edge of Nantwich, there is sufficient justification to carry forward the previous Green Gap policy as a new area of Green Belt. This designation, if connected into the proposed Green Belt extension around the southern side of Crewe, would ensure that the openness of the remaining narrow gap between Crewe and Nantwich will be safeguarded in the long term, beyond the plan period, as a permanent measure to prevent the merging of these two important towns. The Green Belt could potentially be wrapped around the village of Willaston to prevent any further merging with Crewe, even though a linear connection has already been made along the A534, around the Crewe Road/Wistaston Road junction.

3.7.17 For the second potential area of Green Belt, there is insufficient evidence to justify the designation of the area to the west of Crewe, around the village of Acton, in terms of the Green Belt purposes defined in NPPF. For the purposes of this study only Crewe, as a designated Principal Town, is considered to meet the definition of a large built-up area (Green Belt

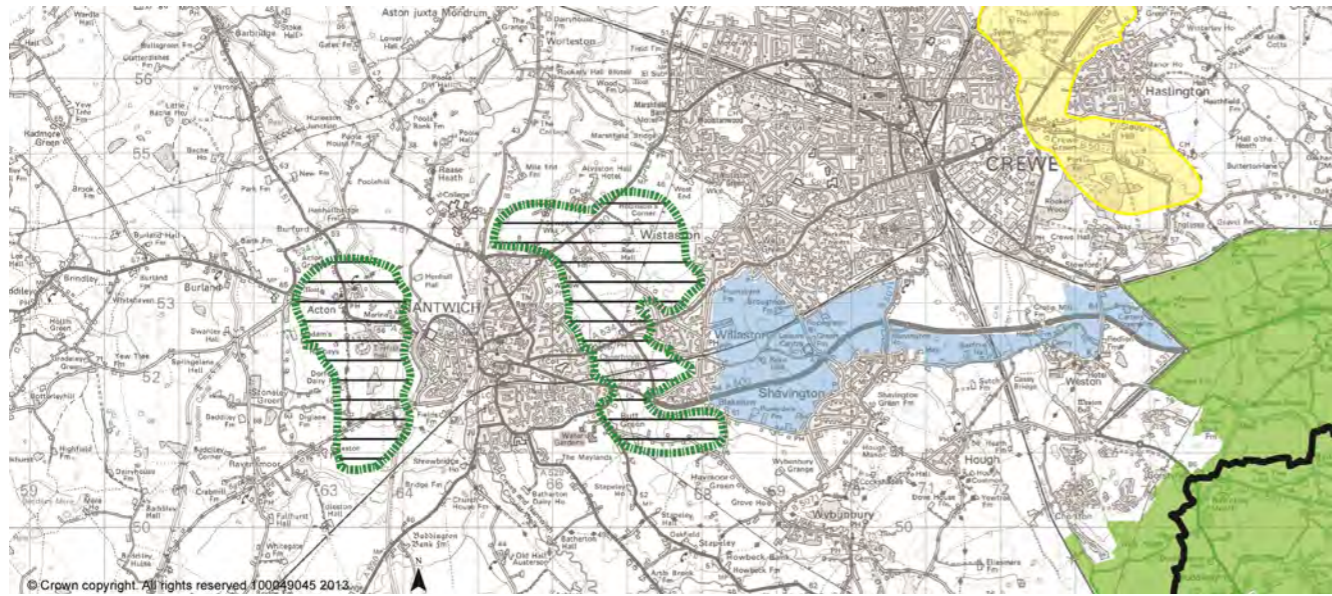
Purpose 1) with potentially unrestricted sprawl that needs to be checked. Nantwich, as a Key Service Centre and historic town, is not a Principal Town and the Shropshire Union Canal forms a strong physical barrier to growth on the west side. Although it could potentially grow to the northwest (Strategic Site) it seems unlikely that the historic town would be allowed to expand and sprawl, to the extent that neighbouring villages such as Acton would become merged (Purpose 2).

3.7.18 If developed, the proposed strategic site at Kingsley Fields would complete the northwest quadrant of Nantwich without extending the urban form any further to the west than existing. As described in Appendix 2: Landscape Character and Green Infrastructure, the countryside to the west of Nantwich is in any case protected from large scale development by environmental and heritage designations such as the Nantwich Battlefield and the conservation areas at Acton and Reaseheath. It is therefore considered that countryside and heritage policies will continue to be sufficient to protect the existing gap between Acton and Nantwich.

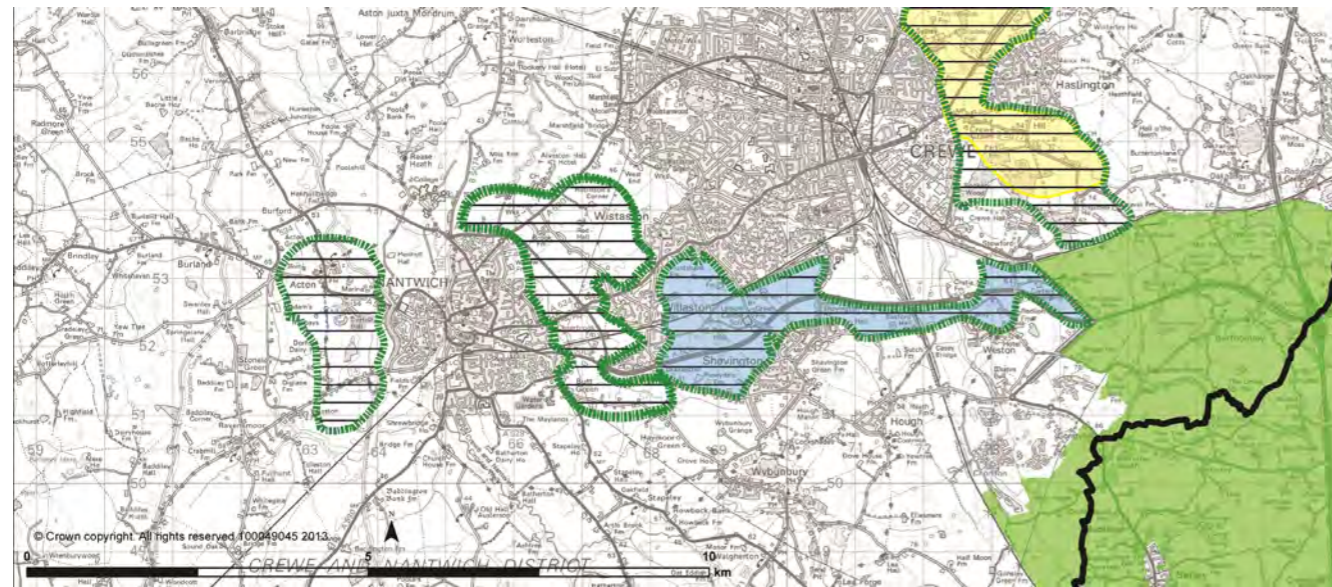
Option 3: Proposed new area of Green Belt between Crewe and Nantwich with or in place of the proposed Strategic Open Gaps to the south and east of Crewe, together with further land to the south, all linked to the existing Green Belt.

3.7.19 The study has not considered the gaps between small settlements around the urban areas of Crewe in any detail. However, the area to the south of Crewe, beyond the proposed Strategic Open Gap, is identified in the study brief as an 'Area of Search' for the consideration of additional policy designations. If it is decided to pursue an extended Green Belt designation around the southern, eastern and western edges of Crewe, Option 2 above, then it would be reasonable to consider extending that designation towards the south-west to encompass other nearby settlements in the gap between Crewe and Stoke, that could in future become the focus for new development.

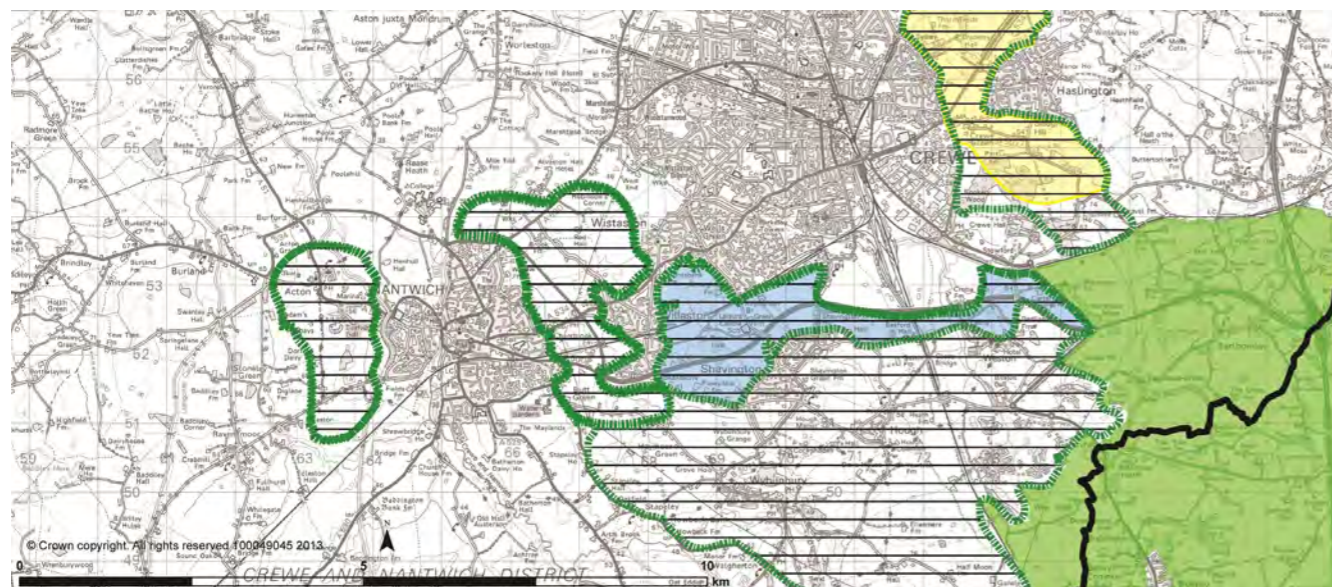
3.7.20 Concerns have been expressed by residents and stakeholders in relation to potential future impacts of growth on Acton (considered above), Wybunbury, Hough and Weston to the south, and Bradfield Green and Minshull Vernon to the north. These villages have therefore been examined to consider whether the expansion of Crewe in future may threaten to



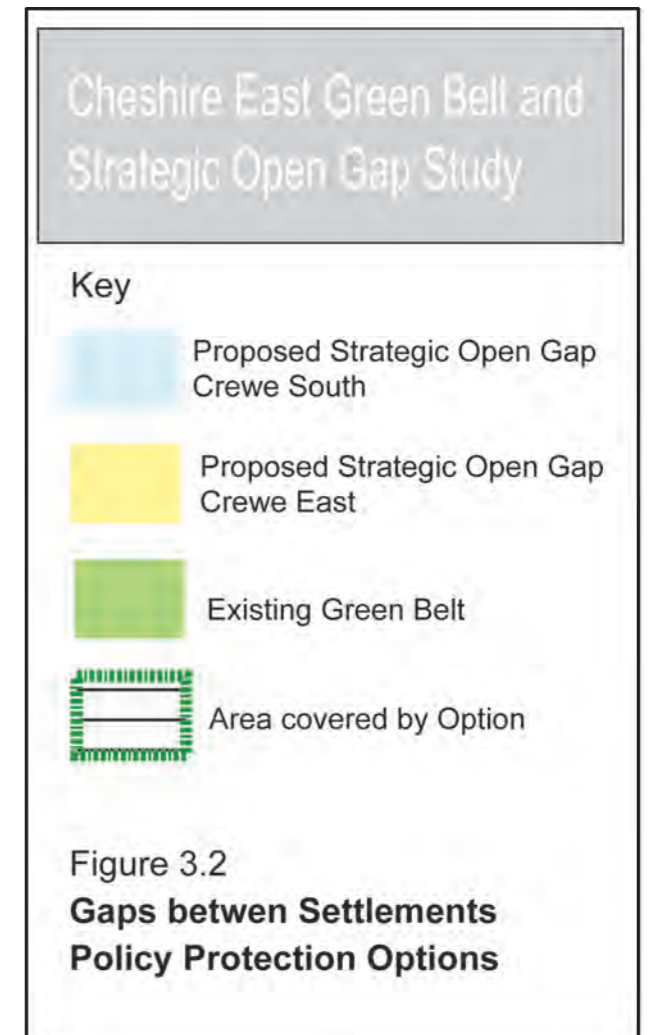
Option 1:
Is there sufficient planning policy justification for designating two new areas of Green belt to prevent the towns of Crewe and nantwich from merging?



Option 2:
Is there sufficient planning policy justification for linking a proposed new area of Green Belt between Crewe and Nantwich with or in place of the proposed Strategic Open Gaps to the south and east of Crewe, then linking into the existing Green Belt?



Option 3:
Is there sufficient planning policy justification for linking a proposed new area of Green Belt between Crewe and Nantwich with or in place of the proposed Strategic Open Gaps to the south and east of Crewe, together with further land to the south, then linking into the existing Green Belt?



merge with them and thus destroy their rural identity.

- 3.7.21 **Wybunbury:** There are no Strategic Sites proposed in the Development Strategy or current developer interest that would directly threaten the separation of Wybunbury from Shavington, and part of the intervening gap is designated as an SSSI, Ramsar site and Area of Special Conservation (national and international wildlife designations). However, there is a large site with planning permission within Shavington Triangle and a potential Strategic Site on the east side of the village. Therefore, if this settlement is prevented from extending towards the A500 on the north side, it is possible that developer interest may arise on the southern edge in future.
- 3.7.22 The open character of Wybunbury makes an important contribution to the openness of the countryside at this location. Therefore it would be advisable to consider extending the proposed Green Belt to 'wash over' this small settlement to the south of Shavington. Shavington itself, as a large village and Local Service Centre, should be 'inset' into the Green Belt.
- 3.7.23 **Hough:** Hough is a village to the south east of Shavington, with no Strategic Sites or developer interest that would directly threaten the present separation of these settlements. However, as for Wybunbury, there is a large site with planning permission within Shavington and a potential Strategic Site on its eastern side. It is possible that developer interest may arise on the south eastern edge in future and this would prejudice the gap between Shavington and Hough and the rural character of Hough itself.
- 3.7.24 Therefore it would be advisable to consider extending the proposed Green Belt to 'wash over' the village of Hough to the south east of Shavington.
- 3.7.25 **Weston:** There is significant developer interest to the south of Weston, and both Gorsty Hill Golf Club and Wychwood Park have been developed as large scale recreation and tourism venues in the countryside. There is a large potential Strategic Site also to the south of Weston and current developer interest in the Gorsty Hill Golf course.
- 3.7.26 This attractive conservation village is close to the expanding edge of Crewe around Basford East and, if it is prevented

from extending towards the A500 on the north side, it is possible that further developer interest may arise on the southern edge in future. Development to the south of Weston would prejudice the rural identity of the village and potentially merge the Wychwood Park, Wychwood Village and Gorsty Hill developments into the wider urban area of Crewe on this south eastern side.

- 3.7.27 Therefore it would be advisable to consider extending the proposed Green Belt to 'inset' the village of Weston to the south east of Crewe, linking directly into the existing Green Belt immediately to the east around Englesea Brook.
- 3.7.28 **Bradfield Green and Minshull Vernon:** These small settlements are located to the north of Crewe and cannot be linked into the existing or proposed Green Belt to the south. However, if it is decided to extend the Green Belt around the southern sides of Crewe, then suppressed growth along the A500 may be diverted towards the north of the town. A sustainable pattern of development needs to be achieved, but there are Strategic Sites around Leighton and Leighton Hospital which may be developed in future. If so, then Bradfield Green in particular could become merged with Crewe and lose its rural identity.
- 3.7.29 These settlements are therefore considered in the following Stage 4 dealing with Strategic Open Gaps.

3.8 Proposed new Areas of Search for Green Belt designation

- 3.8.1 The study is concerned only with the general extent of a new Green Belt area around Crewe and Nantwich. Green Belt is a strategic policy designation, supported by national policies in NPPF, and the guidance does not make any reference to increasing the area of land in the Green Belt solely to compensate for areas of Green Belt released elsewhere for development. Therefore any Green Belt extension must be limited to those areas that make a contribution to the five Green Belt purposes and to the original purpose of designation, the separation of Stoke from Crewe, Alsager and other settlements in South Cheshire. Consideration of the three options above has led to the following conclusions.
- 3.8.2 The Cheshire Green Belt was altered in 1992 to include an extension of the North Staffordshire Green Belt into South

Cheshire in the south-east quadrant of the former Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council area. The justification for this is understood to be to define proper defensible boundaries to the Green Belt which prevents the outward spread of the Potteries towards the built up areas of Crewe and Alsager. However, the current Cheshire East Development Strategy emphasises how important it is that Crewe should continue to grow and thrive. The future growth of Crewe along the eastern and southern fringes, and the merging of the town with villages to the east, south east and south of the built up area would, at a strategic level, narrow the gap between Crewe, Stoke and Newcastle.

- 3.8.3 The current study has concluded that strong policy protection continues to be necessary to safeguard the existing gaps between settlements that are at risk of coalescence resulting from future growth of Crewe. The gaps that are at present protected by saved Policy NE.4 have been considered (section 3.3 above) against the purposes of including land in the Green Belt. The study considers that land within the identified gaps robustly meets the specified purposes of Green Belt, as set out in para. 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework.
- 3.8.4 The concerns of residents, about the continuing planned expansion of Crewe to the south around Basford and the east around Haslington, have been reinforced by the growing pressure for development along the A500, A5020 and A534. The indications of developer interest, planning applications, permissions and appeal sites, as well as the proposed Strategic Sites south of Rope and north of Shavington would, if the land were to be developed, entirely eliminate the present narrow gaps between settlements. However, the existing Green Belt boundaries to the west of Alsager exclude the existing settlements to the south of the A500 and do not provide the rural villages in South Cheshire with any protection from the planned and potential expansion of Crewe to the south.
- 3.8.5 The study concludes that a proposal to extend the existing North Staffordshire Green Belt, which already extends into South Cheshire between Crewe and Stoke, around the southern, eastern and western edges of Crewe, is justified. A new area of Green Belt, extending from the existing boundary around Barthomley and Englesea Brook, towards the north around Crewe Hall and beyond, in order to prevent Haslington

from merging with East Crewe, and towards the west, in order to safeguard the gaps between Crewe and Weston, Shavington and Nantwich, would provide more effective policy protection than the proposed Strategic Open Gap indicated in the Development Strategy. However, there is insufficient evidence to justify the designation of the proposed area to the west of Nantwich, around the village of Acton, in terms of the Green Belt purposes defined in NPPF.

3.8.6 The proposed Green Belt extension would safeguard, at a local level, the gaps between Crewe and Nantwich, Shavington, Weston and Haslington and could be extended to the south to encompass other nearby settlements such as Hough and Wybunbury, in the gap between Crewe and Stoke, that could in future become the focus for new development.

3.8.7 It is also considered that, at a strategic level, it will be necessary to link these individual gaps together and connect them into the existing Green Belt, in order to extend and strengthen the policy protection for the open countryside between Nantwich, Crewe and Stoke. An extended Green Belt designation would provide certainty in the long term, help to secure a sustainable future for the countryside and support the rural economy and local communities. Including the gaps between settlements around Crewe within Green Belt could also encourage investment in improved access to the countryside, physical activity and healthy living, and engender a greater sense of wellbeing for local people. It would shape the sustainable development of settlements, helping to consolidate their built forms and encouraging a high standard of design that respects their character and local distinctiveness.

3.8.8 The proposed Green Belt Area of Search is illustrated on Figure 3.3. If this proposal is pursued, then the purposes of such designation would be as follows:

- to limit continuing urban expansion in the area of South Cheshire between the Potteries and Crewe;
- to prevent coalescence and maintain the separate identity of the towns and smaller settlements in the general area between the Potteries and Crewe;
- to maintain the separation between the main towns of the Potteries and Crewe in order to support the regeneration

aims of these neighbouring local authorities; and

- to maintain the open character of the North Staffordshire / South Cheshire Green Belt area.

3.8.9 If the Council should decide at a later stage to progress the proposed Green Belt designation, then they will need to identify clearly defined, defensible and permanent physical features on the ground, to form a new northern boundary to the North Staffordshire/ South Cheshire Green Belt in this location. Robust long term Green Belt boundaries may comprise the existing outer edge of an urban area, the line of a highway such as the A500 or A51, the line of a railway line, river or stream. Fences, trees and drainage channels are less robust boundaries as they may not be permanent in the long term. The line should be drawn around strategic sites currently proposed for development and around safeguarded sites that need to be excluded from the Green Belt and safeguarded for future development beyond the Plan Period.

3.9 Proposed New Green Belt: Consistency with Local Plans for adjoining areas

3.9.1 The North Cheshire Green Belt separates Cheshire towns from those of the Greater Manchester conurbation; the South Cheshire Green Belt separates Crewe and Alsager from the Potteries conurbation and Stoke on Trent. We understand that the Green Belt around Alsager (in the former Congleton Borough) was designated in the South Cheshire Green Belt Local Plan (early 1980s). At that time, the Green Belt did not extend into the former Crewe and Nantwich Borough.

3.9.2 The original purposes of defining Green Belts in Cheshire were to prevent the outward spread of development from Greater Manchester, Merseyside and the Potteries, and to restrict the spread of development around the historic town of Chester. It is understood that the North Staffordshire Green Belt was altered in 1992 to include its extension into the former Crewe and Nantwich District in order to give a defined and defensible boundary to the Green Belt surrounding the Potteries. The boundaries of the Cheshire Green Belts are currently defined in existing Local Plans.

3.9.3 The study has also considered whether any new Green Belt designations would impact on the existing Green Belts in

and around Cheshire. It has concluded that there would be no impacts on the geographically separate North Cheshire Green Belt, which is in any case subject to a separate review by the Council.

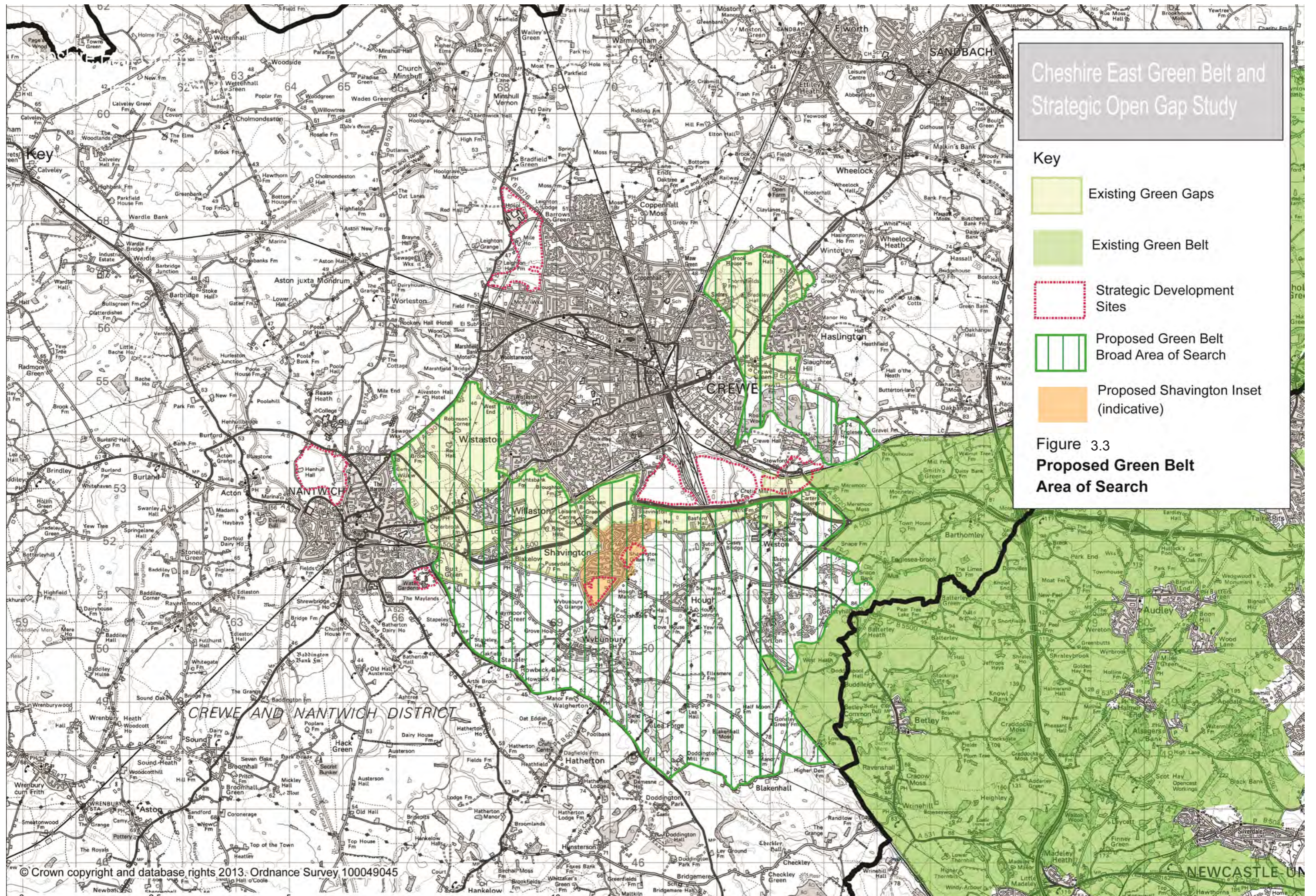
3.9.4 More recently the growth of Crewe has made it necessary to review the purpose and extent of the Green Belt in South Cheshire in terms of potential impacts on the regeneration objectives of the Potteries authorities. There are no proposed new Green Belt designations in adjoining authority areas. The neighbouring Local Authorities have been consulted on Cheshire East Local Plan proposals, including those that would impact on the Green Belt, and discussions have taken place around cross-boundary issues such as Green Belt and potential site allocations.

3.9.5 Cheshire East Council has carried out a preliminary review of the existing Green Belt, which included assessment of land in “areas of potential significant development pressure”, which were defined as areas with significant clusters of sites submitted to the Council’s Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment and areas with proposed and alternative strategic sites set out in the Council’s Development Strategy. Within the current study area, Barthomley and Weston to the south east of Crewe were considered due to development proposals to create sustainable new settlements.

3.9.6 The draft methodology advises that potential release of sites within the identified strategic parcels will be considered through the Local Plan process in the context of a range of planning, sustainability and landscape issues having been informed by the Local Plan evidence base as a whole, not just the draft Green Belt Review.

3.9.7 Subsequently, in ‘Duty to Co-operate’ meetings with the neighbouring Staffordshire authorities, the issues of potential development close to the district boundaries around Crewe and Alsager were discussed. Newcastle and Stoke Councils expressed concerns about the potential impact on regeneration initiatives within Staffordshire and queried the need to release Green Belt land within Cheshire East. The Potteries housing market is said to be fragile, with low viability and a continuing housing renewal legacy, in comparison to the more buoyant situation in Cheshire.

- 3.9.8 The Basford East and West sites at Crewe are long standing commitments which now have confirmed funding for the Crewe Green Link Road. The sites are envisaged as high-tech facilities associated with retaining such employers as Bentley, to be pursued in tandem with vocational skills training from the technical college. However, these sites and others on the east side of Crewe could potentially attract investment and future employment away from Stoke on Trent.
- 3.9.9 In light of these cross-boundary discussions, the study concludes that any proposed new extensions of the Green Belt between Crewe and Stoke will serve to contain the growth of Crewe towards the south and east and thus strengthen the existing policy protection provided by the earlier extension of the North Staffordshire Green Belt into Cheshire. As described above, this was originally intended to prevent the outward spread of development from the Potteries to the north, but also functions to safeguard regeneration initiatives around Stoke on Trent and Newcastle under Lyme in terms of the future growth of Crewe and Alsager.



Cheshire East Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap Study

- Key**
- Existing Green Gaps
 - Existing Green Belt
 - Strategic Development Sites
 - Proposed Green Belt Broad Area of Search
 - Proposed Shavington Inset (indicative)

Figure 3.3
Proposed Green Belt
Area of Search

Stage 4: Strategic Open Gaps

4.1 Cheshire East Context: Green Gaps Policy NE.4

4.1.1 The emerging Local Plan proposals for Strategic Open Gaps are based on the existing “Green Gaps” (but expanded) identified in Saved Policy NE4 of the adopted Crewe and Nantwich Replacement Local Plan 2011 (2005).

NE.4 GREEN GAPS

4.1.2 The following areas defined on the Proposals Map are:

Green Gaps in the open countryside: Wistaston / Nantwich Gap; Willaston / Rope Gap; Haslington / Crewe Gap; Shavington / Weston / Crewe Gap;

Within these areas, which are also subject to POLICY NE.2, approval will not be given for the construction of new buildings or the change of use of existing buildings or land which would:

Result in erosion of the physical gaps between built up areas; or Adversely affect the visual character of the landscape.

Exceptions to this policy will only be considered where it can be demonstrated that no suitable alternative location is available.

Justification

These areas need additional protection in order to maintain the definition and separation of existing communities, and to indicate support for the longer term objective of preventing Crewe, Willaston, Wistaston, Nantwich, Haslington and Shavington from merging into one another. The building of principal traffic routes through the narrow gaps between the settlements has the potential to increase pressure for new development up to and along those routes. That pressure is already manifest in the Green Gaps, justifying a stricter level of development control to ensure continuing separation of the settlements.

4.1.3 Section 3.1 above explains that the Council’s justification for the saved Green Gap Policy indicates that for local, as opposed to strategic, reasons the Council’s desire to protect the open countryside between Crewe and Nantwich, and prevent the two urban areas merging, justifies an approach

comparable to Green Belt policy. It considers that ‘standard’ open countryside policy fails to provide an adequate level of protection to meet its objectives.

4.1.4 In 2003 the Local Plan Inspector considered that *“there is presently a visible openness between the two towns [of Crewe and Nantwich], but it is clear to me from visits that action was necessary to prevent the erosion of that gap.”* In this he agreed with the Inspector’s views expressed following the 1996 Inquiry into the adopted Local Plan, that the *“.. standard open countryside policy is not adequate to protect the integrity of narrow open gaps”*. He was also of the view that the Council had given careful consideration to the continuing need for, and operation of the Policy, and was satisfied from the evidence that it is necessary to prevent the coalescence of Crewe, Nantwich and the various settlements in the immediate vicinity.

4.1.5 Crewe remains the major settlement within this study and the Development Strategy projections propose major growth over the forthcoming Plan period. Early in 2013, during the Development Strategy consultation period, further strong support was expressed for a Green Gap policy, as described above in section 1.5 (Consultation Responses).

4.2 Cheshire East Development Strategy

4.2.1 In the Cheshire East area, successive Councils have sought to preserve the different characters and identity of each town and the surrounding villages – and maintain an area of open land between them. This led to the popular ‘Green Gap’ policy within the Crewe & Nantwich Local Plan. However, with the expansion of Crewe in recent years and its proposed future expansion, there remains continued pressure on the narrow gaps that now separate the two towns and separates Crewe from its surrounding villages.

4.2.2 The Development Strategy argues that areas identified as Strategic Open Gap need additional protection in order to maintain the definition and separation of existing communities, and to indicate support for the longer term objectives of preventing the merging of the town of Crewe with its surrounding villages, and the merging of Crewe with Sandbach and of Sandbach with Middlewich.

4.2.3 Proposals to designate a new area of Green Belt and Strategic

Open Gaps must be considered as part of a comprehensive package to promote sustainable growth in Cheshire East, as described in Section 1 above. The need to provide new homes and employment is balanced by the strong desire to protect the character of existing towns and nearby villages, to prevent urban sprawl and maintain the openness of the countryside.

4.2.4 The draft Crewe Town Strategy, produced and consulted upon in 2012, also emphasises the local importance of the retention of the existing Green Gaps between the towns of Crewe and Nantwich and the surrounding settlements such as, Haslington, Weston, Shavington, Wistaston, and Willaston. The Town Strategy also included a potential ‘green buffer’ to the north west of Crewe. Similarly, the draft Nantwich Town Strategy, produced and consulted upon in 2012, supported retaining the Green Gap between Crewe, Wistaston, Willaston and Nantwich, thereby ensuring that Nantwich retains its rural setting and distinct character and identity as a historic market town. The retention of the Green Gap policy was strongly supported by local residents and stakeholders, as explained in section 1.5 above.

4.2.5 The Development Strategy proposes a ‘Strategic Open Gap,’ which covers a much wider area than that which is currently protected by the Green Gap Policy. The aim is to ensure that Crewe does not merge with the settlements, to the south, of Weston, Shavington, Rope, Wybunbury, Wistaston, and Willaston and, to the east, that Crewe does not merge with the village of Haslington and the town of Sandbach.

4.2.6 The ‘Strategic Open Gap,’ also extends to the north of Crewe, ensuring that the town does not merge with the small villages of Bradfield Green and Minshull Vernon. It also extends to the north east of the town of Sandbach, to ensure that it does not merge with the town of Middlewich. This is to ensure that the towns and villages retain their separate characters and identities, along with their rural settings.

4.2.7 As described in Section 1 above, the area between Crewe and Nantwich is proposed as a new area of Green Belt, in the Development Strategy. The combination of a proposed new area of Green Belt and the proposed Strategic Open Gap reflects the objectives of the draft Town Strategies for both Crewe and Nantwich. For Rural Villages and Rural Areas, the vision sees the character of these areas being protected

by environmental and heritage designations, Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap designations which are intended to maintain openness and restrict urban sprawl.

4.3 Green Belt and/or Strategic Open Gap designations

4.3.1 The main objective of the current study was to consider whether two new areas of Green Belt should be created (as identified in the Development Strategy) to secure the open areas of separation between the towns of Crewe and Nantwich. As described above, the study concludes that strong policy protection is needed to safeguard the existing gap between the two towns and that Green Belt designation should be considered in this location. However, the study considers that the designation of a separate area of Green Belt to the west of Nantwich, which was proposed to safeguard the gap between Nantwich and Acton, is not justified in terms of Green Belt purposes.

4.3.2 The survey findings described in Section 2 and Appendix 2, and their comparison with the mapped indications of developer interest illustrated on Figures 2.2 – 2.6, confirm that all the gaps between settlements that are protected by saved Green Gap Policy NE.4 are considered to be at risk of coalescence, primarily as a result of the future growth of Crewe. In these locations the remaining gaps are narrow, mostly occupied with highways infrastructure and rarely so wide that development cannot be perceived on the opposite side. It is clear from the survey findings that future development within these protected gaps would prejudice the distinctive identity and individual character of the smaller settlements around the edge of Crewe.

4.3.3 The assessments described above demonstrate that strong policy protection continues to be necessary to safeguard those remaining narrow gaps as Crewe grows and develops. Both Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap policies have been considered. However, this report will form only part of the extensive evidence base that will be used to inform the Local Plan. It will be considered alongside all the other evidence, consultation responses and national policy and guidance when the Council draws up the Local Plan Core Strategy.

4.3.4 The initial outcome of the study, described in Section 3 above and shown on Figure 3.3, is a proposal to extend the existing North Staffordshire Green Belt, which already

extends into South Cheshire between Crewe and Stoke, around the southern, eastern and western edges of Crewe. This would permanently safeguard the gaps between Crewe and Nantwich, Shavington, Weston and Haslington. It is also considered necessary, at a strategic level, to link these individual gaps together, in order to extend and strengthen the existing Green Belt policy protection for the open countryside between Crewe and Stoke, and to support the regeneration aims of these neighbouring local authorities.

4.4 Proposed Locations of Strategic Open Gaps

4.4.1 As an alternative to the proposal above to link new areas of Green Belt to the west and south of Crewe into the existing North Staffordshire / South Cheshire Green Belt, the study is required to consider whether a Strategic Open Gap policy should be adopted in place of the saved Green Gap policy. Stage 4 therefore sets out the justification and proposed criteria for the assessment of the potential areas for coverage by Strategic Open Gaps.

4.4.2 In the Development Strategy, the rationale for the designation of Strategic Open Gaps (to replace Saved Policy NE.4 Green Gaps) is based on the following:

- To ensure that Crewe, Sandbach, Middlewich and related villages do not merge into an uncoordinated conurbation
- To ensure openness is maintained around these settlements
- To retain the character and individual identity of these settlements
- Strong support through Local Plan consultations for policies that retain the distinct character of individual settlements – and in the Crewe and Nantwich area for the policy of ‘Green Gap’ that helps maintain this objective.
- Around Crewe there are particular issues with the spread of development around the town – and this is also matched by areas further to the north. Between Sandbach and Middlewich the development of the large brownfield site at the Albion works erodes the sense of separation between the two communities. Likewise there is a similar risk of gradual erosion of countryside north of Crewe in

the arc between Leighton, Sandbach and Haslington.

- Complimenting normal countryside policies.

4.4.3 The Development Strategy Policy CS5 sets out proposals to identify Strategic Open Gaps as a local designation that will seek to maintain the definition and separation of existing communities. The following areas, which will be defined on the Proposals Map, are proposed as Strategic Open Gaps:

- Between, Crewe, Shavington, Weston, Willaston and Rope ;
- Between Crewe, Haslington, Sandbach and Middlewich; and
- Between Sandbach and Middlewich

4.4.4 **CS5 Justification:** *Areas identified as Strategic Open Gap need additional protection in order to maintain the definition and separation of existing communities, and to indicate support for the longer term objectives of preventing the merging of Crewe with surrounding villages and the merging of Sandbach and Middlewich. The building of principal traffic routes through the narrow gaps between the settlements has the potential to increase pressure for new development up to and along those routes. That pressure is already manifest in these areas, justifying a stricter level of development management to ensure continuing separation of the settlements.*

4.4.5 As described above, the Stage 2 site surveys are based initially on the gaps identified in the previous Local Plan (Green Gap policy NE.4):

- A. Wistaton/ Willaston and Nantwich;
- B. Willaston/ Rope/ Basford and Shavington;
- C. Basford East and West Strategic Sites and Weston / Basford; and
- D. East Crewe and Haslington.

4.4.6 Additionally, concern was expressed via consultation responses that the residents of other small settlements feel

vulnerable to the future expansion of Crewe and Nantwich, as follows. The gaps between these smaller settlements and their neighbours have also been assessed and the findings are recorded in Appendix 2 Green Gap Assessments.

E. Acton (west of Nantwich);

F. Bradfield Green and Minshull Vernon (northwest of Leighton);

G. Hough and Wybunbury (south of Shavington); and

H. Haslington and Sandbach; and

J. Sandbach and Middlewich

4.5 Broad Purposes of Strategic Open Gaps

4.5.1 The study was asked to explore the use of strategic open gap policies in local plans and a few current examples are described below, in Chesterfield, Harborough (NW Leicestershire) and Winchester, based on PUSH (Partnership for Urban South Hampshire) criteria. These few examples support, and in the case of Chesterfield, refer to the findings of a research report 'Strategic gap and green wedge policies in structure plans' (ODPM, 2002). This review is considered still to be relevant as it appears to be the most up to date comparison of the use of various forms of policies to protect open gaps between settlements. The guidance has been used to compare and expand the criteria used for the Green Belt surveys described in Section 2 above.

A. To protect the setting and separate identity of settlements, and to avoid coalescence;

4.5.2 Successful strategic gap policies can help safeguard local distinctiveness. If the individual character of a place is to be retained, its setting must provide a clear visual break when passing from place to place. Separate identity is seen to be enhanced if there is an absence of urban activity within a defined strategic gap. Development and road traffic movement are seen as reducing the perception of a gap.

B. To retain the existing settlement pattern by maintaining the openness of the land;

4.5.3 Retaining openness and preventing coalescence through the use of strategic gaps can effectively retain the coherence and ambience of the urban and rural structure and also the balance between the built-up areas and the open or largely undeveloped areas around and between them.

C. To retain the physical and psychological benefits of having open land near to where people live;

4.5.4 Undeveloped land close to where people live retains the opportunity for local people to find the recreational, scenic or amenity resources they require without having to travel long distances. It is also suggested that having undeveloped land and countryside near residential areas confers psychological benefits which contribute to general quality for life and well-being of local residents.

4.5.5 These broad objectives are reflected in the NPPF Core Planning Principles, advising that planning should:

- be a creative exercise in finding ways to enhance and improve the places in which people live their lives;
- take account of the different roles and character of different areas, promoting the vitality of our main urban areas, protecting the Green Belts around them, recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and supporting thriving rural communities within it;
- contribute to conserving and enhancing the natural environment and reducing pollution;
- encourage multiple benefits from the use of land in urban and rural areas, recognising that some open land can perform many functions;
- actively manage patterns of growth and focus significant development in locations which are or can be made sustainable; and
- take account of and support local strategies to improve health, social and cultural wellbeing for all.

4.5.6 NPPF Para 73 advises that access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation can make an important contribution to the health and well-being of

communities. Para 75 requires planning policies to protect and enhance public rights of way and access.

4.5.7 The NPPF provides a framework in which local communities and Councils can create their own distinctive Local Plans which reflect the needs of the community. Extensive local support has been shown for the Green Gap designation and for its retention within the Draft Crewe and Nantwich Town Strategies. It is considered that the proposed Strategic Open Gap designation would provide a useful local planning tool consistent with the objectives of NPPF.

4.6 Criteria for Strategic Open Gaps

4.6.1 The Cheshire East study uses the following criteria to identify the broad locations of gaps between settlements that require additional policy protection. These are based on the saved Green Gap policy NE.4 and informed by recent studies carried out elsewhere (summarised below). They were refined following the desk-top investigations and site visits described above, which were used to identify locations where narrow gaps between settlements may be reduced or eliminated by the future growth of Crewe.

4.6.2 The proposed Strategic Open Gap policy will seek to identify land that performs an important role in defining:

- the open nature of countryside between settlements;
- the settlement character and identity; areas where there are opportunities for landscape character to be restored (this reflects an objective included in the Green Infrastructure Action Plan for Crewe (2012);
- the physical and visual separation between settlements at risk of coalescence;
- the setting for a town/village, an historic feature, listed building or a conservation area;
- opportunities for access to the countryside, via existing public footpaths, providing recreational, psychological and health benefits to residents, as well as the visual benefits of having open countryside close to where people live (this reflects a number of objectives included in the Green infrastructure Action Plan for Crewe (2012)

and Cheshire East’s Sustainable Community Strategy ‘Ambition for All’ (2010); and

- open land between settlements that acts as a biodiversity resource.

4.6.3 The detailed assessment of potential impacts that future development may have on the integrity of a gap will consider the following:

Open nature of countryside between settlements:

- Existing balance/mix of built-up areas and the open or largely undeveloped areas around and between them;
- Visual benefits of having open countryside close to where people live;
- Whether future development would diminish the physical and/or visual separation of settlements; and
- Whether future development would individually, or cumulatively with other existing or proposed development, compromise the integrity of the gap.

Settlement character/restoration of landscape character:

- Local distinctiveness;
- Character and identity of the settlement;
- Land uses, amenity value and landscape character;
- Opportunities for restoration of landscape character; and
- Perception of separation or coalescence/ merging.

Physical and visual separation between settlements:

- Clear visual break when passing from place to place;
- Separation, physical width of gap;
- Perception of a gap/ openness;
- Absence of urban activity within a defined gap; and

- Erosion/sprawl by spread of development and road traffic movement within the gap.

Setting for a town/village, an historic feature/Listed Building or a conservation area:

- Views out of settlements, landmarks; and
- Gap provides setting of historic features, Listed Buildings, conservation areas.

Recreational or biodiversity resource:

- Visual and recreational benefits of having open countryside close to where people live;
- Public footpaths, access to countryside; psychological and health benefits; and
- Potential recreational and/or ecological value.

4.7 Assessment of Open Gaps between Crewe and Neighbouring Settlements

4.7.1 As a result of existing and predicted pressure for development around the margins of Crewe that could cause the town to expand on all sides, the settlements that have been assessed below are those closest to Crewe that could, in the longer term, become merged with the larger town. These settlements are identified in the Development Strategy document, to be prevented from merging by either new Green Belt or Strategic Open Gap policies.

Desk-top Analysis

4.7.2 For each location, analysis of information mapped by the local authority has provided a description of the character and scale of the intervening gap between the neighbouring settlement and Crewe (Appendix 2: Green Gap Assessment). The following tables were used as checklists to record information relevant to the consideration of both Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap policies.

4.7.3 For the Strategic Open Gap assessments, additional information was recorded in order to enable the study to consider the potential for the enhancement of landscape character, recreational opportunities, wildlife value and

enjoyment of the countryside for local communities. Strategic Open Gaps, as part of the Cheshire Green Infrastructure network, will have a role to play in linking urban open space out into the countryside and providing recreational land and other benefits for local communities , as well as areas for habitat and landscape character restoration (Appendix 2).

Name of settlement
Land use, essential purpose of gap
Character and identity of the settlement;
Existing balance/mix of built-up areas and open areas;
Size, local distinctiveness of settlement;
Present status of gap ?
Landscape Character Assessment ;
Need for restoration of landscape character ?
Environmental and historic designations:
Is the gap part of the setting of a historic feature, landmark, Listed Building or conservation area ?
Public routes (roads, footpaths) that provide views in/out and access to countryside;
Physical separation, identify start/end point of the built up area on each side (narrowest point)
Measure width of gap measured along main route;
Name of main route across gap.

Table 4.1: Existing Gap Desk Top Review Criteria

Site Assessments

4.7.4 A simple table was been devised for scoring these criteria on site, as follows. Each existing gap has been scored on the basis of yes/no answers to the specified questions and given a total score to assess how well it meets the criteria above. These overall scores will be used to consider whether each potential gap should then be included in the Strategic Open Gap designation.

[Standing at the edge of the settlement looking out]

Name of settlement separated from Crewe by open gap
Does the gap provide views of open countryside close to where people live ?
Is there a perception that the gap prevents merging/ coalescence with Crewe (or Nantwich)?
Is there a clear visual break when passing from place to place ?
Are there signs of urban activity, road traffic movement, within the gap ?
Are there signs of erosion /sprawl /spread of sporadic development into the gap ?
Would future development on the edge of the urban area significantly reduce visual separation between settlements ?
Gap provides opportunities for restoration of landscape character;
Gap provides opportunities to improve recreational and/or ecological value of open land;
Photographs of view out of settlements – record location

Table 4.2: On Site Visual Assessment Checklist Criteria

4.8 Conclusions: Proposed Strategic Open Gap designations

4.8.1 As explained earlier, this study is a high level objective assessment of the potential extent of future Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap designations, considering the broad extent of possible policy areas rather than detailed boundaries at this stage. The detailed boundaries of the Strategic Open Gaps will be defined in the Local Plan Proposals Map. The conclusions outlined below relate to the general locations indicated in the Development Strategy or raised in consultation responses, including those that have not in the past been protected by Policy NE.4.

4.8.2 The Development Strategy Policy CS5 indicates the following possible locations for a Strategic Open Gap policy:

- Between, Crewe, Shavington, Weston, Willaston and Rope ;
- Between Crewe, Haslington, Sandbach and Middlewich; and
- Between Sandbach and Middlewich

4.8.3 CS5 Justification: *Areas identified as Strategic Open Gap need additional protection in order to maintain the definition and separation of existing communities, and to indicate support for the longer term objectives of preventing the merging of Crewe with surrounding villages and the merging of Sandbach and Middlewich. The building of principal traffic routes through the narrow gaps between the settlements has the potential to increase pressure for new development up to and along those routes. That pressure is already manifest in these areas, justifying a stricter level of development management to ensure continuing separation of the settlements.*

4.8.4 In addition, the gaps between other settlements have been considered as follows:

- Between Shavington, Hough and Wybunbury;
- Between Leighton, Bradfield Green and Minshull Vernon;
- Between Acton and Nantwich

4.8.5 The study has used the survey findings described in Appendix 2: Green Gap Assessments, to consider each of the identified gaps in terms of their proposed definition as Strategic Open Gaps in place of the saved Green Gap policy, as follows (see *Figures 2.1 and 4.1*):

Gaps A, B, C: Nantwich, Crewe, Shavington, Weston, Willaston and Rope:

4.8.6 The conclusions at Stage 3 above are that the narrow gaps between Crewe and Rope and other nearby settlements to the south, Willaston, Shavington and Weston, should, like the gap between Willaston, Wistaston and Nantwich, be permanently protected by a Green Belt designation. If the Council decides that this is not an appropriate way forward, then the Strategic Open Gap policy in the Development Strategy would be essential to replace the Green Gap Policy NE.4.

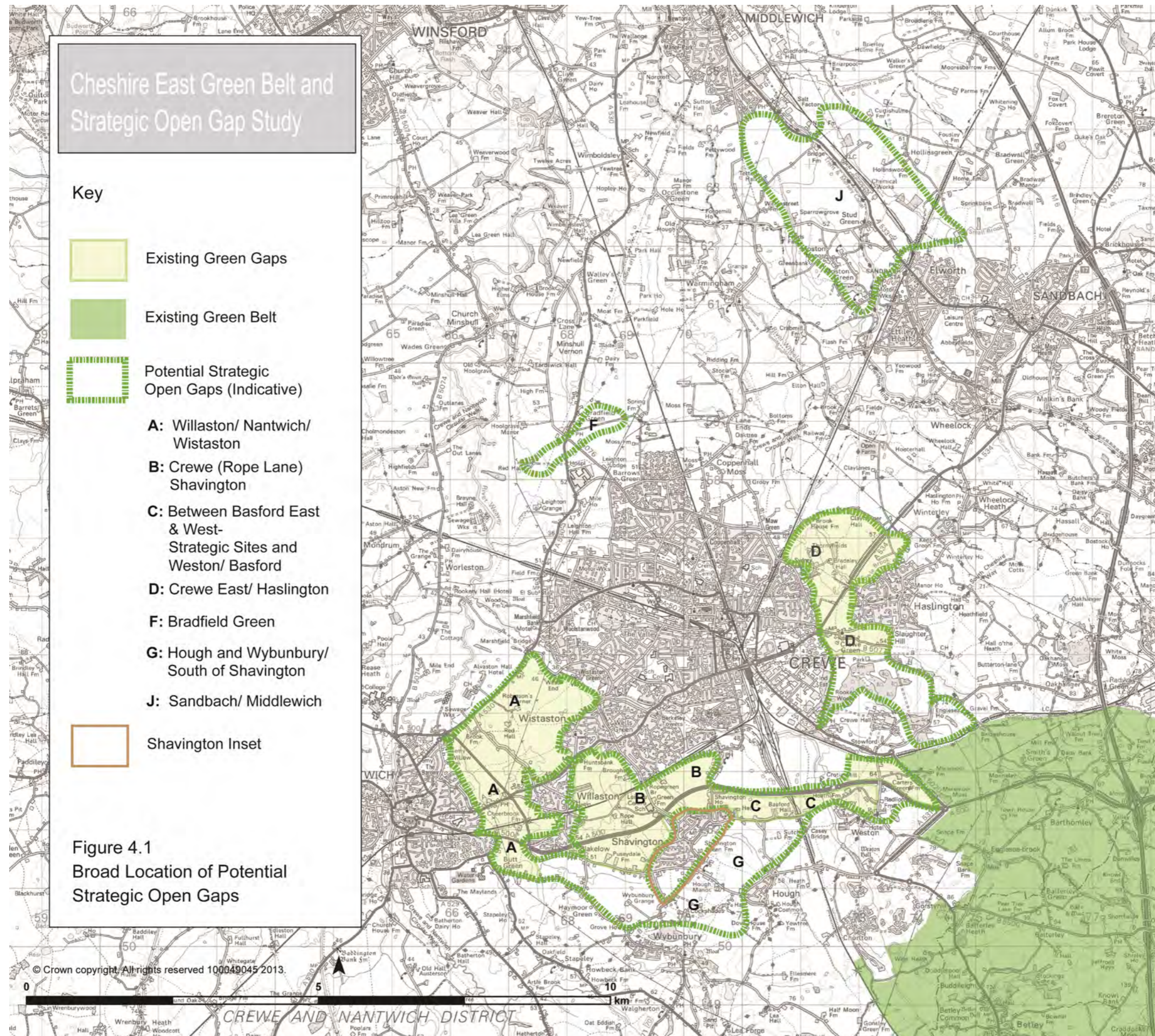
4.8.7 As well as robustly performing all the purposes of Green Belt stated in NPPF, these gaps meet the criteria, defined above, that have been used to identify land that would qualify as a Strategic Open Gap in policy terms.

Gap D: Haslington and East Crewe

4.8.8 The Development Strategy indicates a broad swathe of Strategic Open Gap across open countryside around the northern and eastern sides of Crewe, to the north of Haslington and to the west of Sandbach along the A534.

4.8.9 Gap D between Crewe and Haslington is recommended for inclusion in the proposed Green Belt designation (Section 3.8 above). If the Council decides that this is not an appropriate way forward, then the Strategic Open Gap policy in the Development Strategy would be essential to replace the Green Gap Policy NE.4 in respect of the narrow gap between Haslington and East Crewe. As well as robustly performing all the purposes of Green Belt stated in NPPF, this gap meets the criteria, defined above, that have been used to identify land that would qualify as a Strategic Open Gap in policy terms.

4.8.10 Gap H between Haslington and Sandbach, and Gap J between Sandbach and Middlewich, are discussed below.



Gap E: Acton and Nantwich

- 4.8.11 Appendix 2: Green Gap Assessments explains that the gap between Nantwich and the village of Acton is effectively protected by important heritage designations. The historic core of the village is preserved within a conservation area and by several listed buildings; the northern part of the open gap includes the Registered Civil War Battlefield of Nantwich; the southern part contains Ancient Woodland, the Grade II* Registered Dorfold Hall estate and the Grade I Dorfold Hall. These are very significant protective designations that have an important role in protecting the character and local distinctiveness of the village that will be vigorously defended from any unsympathetic development by English Heritage.
- 4.8.12 The settings of these important heritage assets are also protected, to the extent that any unsympathetic development proposed within the settings of the battlefield, the estate and the mansion will be strongly resisted. Para 2.1.10 outlines the English Heritage definition of setting as all of the surroundings in which a heritage asset can be experienced. Therefore a significant area of land around the village of Acton, where views of the Listed Buildings and Registered Parks, Gardens and Battlefield are available, is already effectively protected by current legislation and guidance.
- 4.8.13 In the previous Local Plan it was not considered necessary to duplicate these heritage and environmental policies by the imposition of the Green Gap Policy NE.4 on the area between Nantwich and Acton, and the study assessment in section 3.4 above considers that a new Green Belt designation to the west of Nantwich could not be justified in terms of the strict criteria in NPPF.
- 4.8.14 Despite the fact that the proposed Strategic Site of Kingsley Fields would occupy land to the north west of Nantwich, the furthest extent of the development area would be more than 700m from Acton. The form and design of the western edge of the future developed area will inevitably be restricted by its potential impact on the important heritage designations of the battlefield area, and by the Shropshire Union Canal, which will be a strong physical barrier preventing the further expansion of Nantwich on the west side. The study therefore concludes that it is not necessary to include the area of open countryside to the west of Nantwich within the proposed Strategic Open Gap policy area, as this does not fall within a gap between settlements where coalescence is likely to

occur.

Gap F: Leighton, Bradfield Green and Minshull Vernon

- 4.8.15 These small settlements are located to the north of Crewe and, if it is decided to restrain growth along the A500 along the southern edge of Crewe, then future development may be diverted towards the north of the town. There are Strategic Sites around Leighton and Leighton Hospital which are likely to be developed in future as the hospital expands. If so, then Bradfield Green in particular could become merged with Crewe and lose its rural identity.
- 4.8.16 The study concludes that the narrow gap between Bradfield Green and Leighton is a vulnerable location where coalescence is likely to occur. In order to justify a Strategic Open Gap in this location, it will be necessary to define the extent of the area of land that contributes to the protection of the character and identity of the village, helps to secure the physical and visual separation between settlements and contributes to the setting of these villages and the approach towards Crewe along the A530 Middlewich Road.
- 4.8.17 However, as Bradfield Green is very close to the proposed Strategic Sites to the north of Crewe, the Council may wish to consider an alternative approach, to safeguard the existing gap from the encroachment of built development, by requiring a substantial green buffer to be established between Leighton and Bradfield Green as part of the future development area.

Gap G: Shavington, Hough and Wybunbury

- 4.8.18 The conclusions at Stage 3 above are that it would be advisable to consider extending the proposed Green Belt to 'wash over' the villages of Hough and Wybunbury to the south east and south of Shavington. If the Council decides that this is not an appropriate way forward, then the Strategic Open Gap policy in the Development Strategy would be essential to replace the Green Gap Policy NE.4.
- 4.8.19 These gaps meet the criteria, defined above, that have been used to identify land that would qualify as a Strategic Open Gap in policy terms. There is a large site with planning permission within Shavington Triangle and a potential Strategic Site on its eastern side. It is possible that developer interest may arise on the south eastern edge in future and this would prejudice the gaps between Shavington, Hough and Wybunbury. The

rural character of both these small settlements makes an important contribution to the openness of the countryside at this location. Therefore it would be advisable for the Local Plan to consider proposals for Shavington in the context of the need for a Strategic Open Gap to preserve its physical and visual separation from Hough and Wybunbury in future.

Gap H: Haslington and Sandbach:

- 4.8.20 For the purposes of this Study, the gap between Haslington and Sandbach is considered to be the land along the A534 Crewe Road that comprises predominantly open countryside. The gap from the edge of Haslington to the edge of Sandbach measures approximately 2.76 km and any future small scale development along current boundaries should not reduce, to any noticeable extent, the visual separation between these settlements. Therefore there is a negligible risk of coalescence of Haslington with Sandbach within the plan period.
- 4.8.21 The Development Strategy indicates a broad swathe of proposed Strategic Open Gap across open countryside around the northern and eastern sides of Haslington and to the west of Sandbach. However, the majority of this area does not appear to meet the draft criteria defined in section 4.6 above, in that it does not contribute to the character and identity of any particular settlement, the physical and visual separation between settlements at risk of coalescence or the setting for a town/village, an historic feature, listed building or a conservation area. It is possible that the land in question could provide opportunities to enhance biodiversity, or to restore landscape character, and it already comprises predominantly open countryside that provides recreational access along established routes and paths. However, this would not justify its inclusion in the proposed Strategic Open Gap restraint policy.
- 4.8.22 The study considers that the Strategic Open Gap policy should only be applied to areas where there is considerable risk of coalescence of neighbouring settlements within the plan period. It therefore concludes that the policy should only be applied within the gaps between Sandbach and Middlewich, and between Leighton and Bradfield Green. Otherwise, normal countryside policies should provide sufficient control to keep the countryside open between Haslington and Sandbach.

Gap J: Sandbach and Middlewich:

- 4.8.23 The gap between Middlewich, Elworth and Sandbach is defined by the open area of countryside seen from the A533 Booth Lane. This gap was not previously protected by the saved Green Gap policy and the redevelopment of the former Albion Chemical Works on Booth Lane, the A533, significantly reduces the gap between them, leaving only a small area of open countryside on the edge of each of these towns.
- 4.8.24 As the linear form of the redevelopment site runs parallel to the main road, the majority of the gap is occupied by built (industrial) development in views from the road. Whilst it is clearly important to protect the remainder of the gap between these two towns with a robust policy of restraint, it is not immediately apparent where the gap policy should be applied.
- 4.8.25 In order to justify a Strategic Open Gap in this location, it will be necessary to define the extent of the area of land that contributes to the protection of the character and identity of the two separate towns, helps to secure the physical and visual separation between settlements at risk of coalescence and contributes to the setting of and approach to each town. It may therefore be necessary to define the gap in two separate parts, one on each side of the Albion Works site. It is not logical, or necessary, to include the area of open countryside to the north-west of Sandbach within the proposed Strategic Open Gap area, as this does not fall within a gap between settlements where coalescence is likely to occur.

4.9 Recent Examples of Gap Policies

A. Chesterfield Borough Council, Green Wedge & Strategic Gap Indicative Assessment (Oct 2011), explains that the essence of the support for strategic gaps appears to reside in three basic arguments. These are:

- The need to protect the setting and separate identity of settlements, by avoiding their coalescence.
- The need to retain the openness of the land by resisting greenfield growth, and thus conserving the existing character of an area in terms of its current mix of urban and rural development.
- The need to provide real access and recreational benefits to urban dwellers, and the perceived (psychological) as

well as real benefits of having open countryside near to where people live.

The report expands this third argument to include the role that Green Wedges and Strategic Gaps have, as part of a Green Infrastructure network, by linking urban open space and the countryside and providing recreational access to nearby open land. They consider that the gaps should also be viewed as areas for biodiversity protection or improvement. For a predominantly urban area like Chesterfield Borough the aim should be to identify those areas that will provide the most benefits for local communities living within an urban environment.

Chesterfield BC developed criteria to identify whether it is appropriate in planning terms to designate an area as a strategic gap, based on four key questions:

- Do they prevent the merging of settlements?
- Do they provide a 'green lung' into urban area?
- Do they act as a recreational or biodiversity resource?
- Do they influence the form and direction of urban development?

They also advised that further consideration should be given to the way strategic gaps are important to overall urban form by preventing the coalescence of distinct settlements, and promote the notion of 'setting'.

In the Chesterfield Core Strategy, the broad locations of Strategic Gaps and Green Wedges are identified on the Key Diagram and will be defined in detail in the Sites and Boundaries DPD. The boundaries will be based on an assessment of the character of the proposed [Green Wedge or] Strategic Gap and its contribution to:

- the setting and identity of the borough and its urban areas;
- landscape character, habitat and biodiversity;
- access to countryside and recreation;
- the ability to connect areas of green infrastructure; and
- the impact that development would have on the function of the [Green Wedge or] Strategic Gap.

B. Winchester Joint Local Plan Part 1 (with SDNPA) Core Strategy 2013

The Local Plan sets out the case for continuing existing Gaps. Identification of detailed boundaries to be through site allocations DPD and Neighbourhood Plans- based on PUSH (Partnership for Urban South Hampshire) criteria. In his Examination Report the Inspector accepted this approach.

PUSH Criteria:

- a) The open nature/sense of separation between settlements cannot be retained by other policy designations;
- b) The land to be included within the gap performs an important role in defining the settlement character of the area and separating settlements at risk of coalescence.
- c) In defining the extent of a gap, no more land than is necessary to prevent the coalescence of settlements should be included having regard to maintaining their physical and visual separation.

Local Development Documents will identify the location of the gap(s) and include a policy and ancillary documentation which show on an OS map base the extent of land included within the gap(s). The policy will set out the types of development which will be permitted within the gap(s) based on the principle that development within Gaps will only be permitted if:-

- a) it would not diminish the physical and/or visual separation of settlements; and
- b) it would not individually or cumulatively with other existing or proposed development compromise the integrity of the gap.

**C. Harborough District Council (NW Leicestershire):
Areas of Separation Review December 2011**

POLICY EV/3

[Within the Defined areas] THE DISTRICT COUNCIL WILL REFUSE PLANNING PERMISSION FOR DEVELOPMENT THAT WOULD:- ADVERSELY AFFECT THE PREDOMINANTLY OPEN CHARACTER OF THE LAND; OR RESULT IN A REDUCTION IN THE EXISTING OPEN LAND SEPARATING THE SETTLEMENTS CONCERNED.

Local Plan Policy EV/3 is 'saved' and will be replaced by policy within the Allocations Development Plan Document.

The need to ensure that wherever possible urban fringe areas are put to beneficial use is reflected in Policy CS 8b) which states:

'Green Wedges and, where appropriate, Areas of Separation will be the main focus for Green Infrastructure improvements in urban fringe areas of the district. So far as is consistent with their predominantly open and undeveloped character, opportunities to improve public access and recreation use in these areas will be encouraged for the benefit of the wider community. Similarly, opportunities to conserve, enhance and/or restore their biodiversity and geo-diversity value will be a priority.'

**Stage 5: Conclusions of the
Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap Study**

5.1 Study Conclusions

- 5.1.1 This Study reviews the evidence related to the proposed policies, in the Cheshire East Development Strategy, for Green Belt and Strategic Open Gaps, to ensure that proposals included in the Local Plan will be sound and based on robust evidence and criteria. It will form part of the Local Plan evidence base and will be considered alongside all other evidence, consultation responses and national policy and guidance when the Council draws up the Local Plan. The report deals only with the general extent of any proposed new Green Belt or Strategic Open Gap designations. The Development Strategy advises that, if the Green Belt policy is confirmed within the Local Plan Core Strategy, further work will be required to establish detailed boundaries within the subsequent Site Allocations document.
- 5.1.2 Stage 1 of the Study explains the development proposals and pressures which set the context for the proposed Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap policies, including the recent 'Development Strategy', 'Policy Principles' and 'Possible Additional Sites' consultation documents. The evolution of the settlement patterns in the study area has been examined in order to understand the relevance and significance of the remaining gaps between towns and villages. The distinctive identity of these small settlements is a matter of concern to many local residents and stakeholders, and the role, character and likely level of housing and growth of individual settlements over the proposed Plan Period to 2030 will have a key influence on the extent to which existing gaps between settlements are placed under pressure for development.
- 5.1.3 At Stage 2, the Study carried out desk-top and site-based assessments of the existing gaps and the locations of potential coalescence and/or erosion of gaps between Crewe itself and the neighbouring villages and towns closest to the urban area. The survey findings confirm that all the gaps between settlements, that are protected by saved Green Gap Policy NE.4 and assessed in the study, are potentially at risk of coalescence, primarily as a result of the future growth of Crewe.
- 5.1.4 Stage 3 of the Study considered different forms of policy protection for open gaps between settlements, as alternatives to the saved Green Gap policy. The initial assessment demonstrates that all the gaps at present protected by saved

Policy NE.4 would robustly meet the specified purposes of Green Belt, as set out in para. 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework. The study considers three possible options in terms of future Green Belt designations, to ensure that the study provides robust evidence to support the emerging Local Plan.

Potential New Green Belt Designation

- 5.1.5 The Study concludes that strong policy protection continues to be necessary to safeguard the existing gaps between settlements that are at risk of coalescence resulting from future growth of Crewe. It considers that a proposal to extend the existing North Staffordshire Green Belt, which already extends into South Cheshire between Crewe and Stoke, around the southern, eastern and western edges of Crewe (Gaps A,B, C &D), would provide more effective policy protection than the proposed Strategic Open Gap indicated in the Development Strategy.
- 5.1.6 It considers that, on the eastern edge of Nantwich, there is sufficient justification to carry forward the previous Green Gap policy as a new area of Green Belt (Gap A¹). This designation, if connected into the proposed Green Belt extension around the southern and eastern sides of Crewe (Gaps B, C & D), would ensure that the openness of the remaining narrow gap between Crewe and Nantwich will be safeguarded in the long term, beyond the plan period, as a permanent measure to prevent the merging of these two important towns and adjoining villages. However, for the second potential area of Green Belt, there is insufficient evidence to justify the designation of the area to the west of Nantwich (Gap E), around the village of Acton, in terms of the Green Belt purposes defined in NPPF.
- 5.1.7 The Study considers that the proposed Green Belt should be extended to the south to encompass other nearby settlements such as Hough and Wybunbury (Gap G), in the gap between Crewe and Stoke, that could in future become the focus for new development. An extended Green Belt designation would provide certainty in the long term, help to secure a sustainable future for the countryside and support the rural economy and local communities.

(NB: Under this scenario of extending the Green Belt to cover Gaps A, B, C, D, and G it will also be necessary to consider

applying the Strategic Open Gap Policy to the Gaps between Sandbach and Middlewich (Gap J), and between Bradfield Green and northwest of Leighton (Gap F) - see below)

Potential Strategic Open Gaps (see Figure 4.1)

- 5.1.8 As an alternative to the proposal to link new areas of Green Belt, to the west, south and east of Crewe, into the existing North Staffordshire / South Cheshire Green Belt, Stage 4 of the Study considers whether a Strategic Open Gap policy should be adopted in place of the saved Green Gap policy. This would seek to identify land that performs an important role in protecting the setting and separate identity of settlements, and to avoid coalescence; retaining the existing settlement pattern by maintaining the openness of the land; and retaining the physical and psychological benefits of having open land near to where people live.
- 5.1.9 The Study considers that the Strategic Open Gap policy should only be applied to areas where there is considerable risk of coalescence of neighbouring settlements within the plan period. Therefore it concludes that, as an alternative to an extended Green Belt designation and to replace saved Green Gap Policy NE.4, the Strategic Open Gap policy should be applied within the gaps between Nantwich, Wistaston and Willaston (Gap A), between Rope and Shavington (Gap B), West and East Basford and Weston (Gap C), between East Crewe and Haslington (Gap D), between Sandbach and Middlewich (Gap J), and to protect the proposed green buffer between Leighton and Bradfield Green (Gap F).
- 5.1.10 Also as an alternative to an extended Green Belt designation, areas to the south of Shavington, Basford and Weston (Gap G) should be considered for inclusion in the Strategic Open Gap policy where open land performs an important role in protecting the setting and separate identity of these small settlements, and to avoid coalescence. Otherwise, normal countryside, environmental and heritage policies should provide sufficient control to keep the countryside open between Acton and Nantwich, between Haslington and Sandbach and to the north-west of Sandbach.
- 5.1.11 The findings of the Study are summarised in Table 5.1

1. See Figure 2.1 for Gap Locations

Gap No	Location of Gap	Proposed policy protection	Alternative policy protection
A	Wistaton/ Willaston and Nantwich	Green Belt	Strategic Open Gap
B	Willaston/ Rope/ Basford and Shavington	Green Belt	Strategic Open Gap
C	Basford East and West Strategic Sites and Weston / Basford	Green Belt	Strategic Open Gap
D	East Crewe and Haslington	Green Belt	Strategic Open Gap
E	Acton (west of Nantwich)	Countryside/ heritage policies	As existing
F	Bradfield Green and Minshull Vernon (northwest of Leighton)	Strategic Open Gap	Green Buffer within Strategic Site/s
G	Hough and Wybunbury (south of Shavington)	Extended Green Belt	Strategic Open Gap
H	Haslington and Sandbach	Countryside Policies	As existing
J	Sandbach and Middlewich	Strategic Open gap	Countryside Policies

Table 5.1: Cheshire East Green Belt and Strategic Open Gap Study- Conclusions (See Figures 2.1 and 4.1 for Gap Locations)

