



## New local plan for Cheshire East

### Our natural environment topic paper (draft)

March 2024

Open

Fair

Green

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Front cover images (clockwise from top-left):

- Crewe Market Hall and Municipal Buildings
- Arclid north plant site and lake (image supplied by Bathgate Silica Sand Ltd)
- Jodrell Bank Observatory
- Lamberts Lane Bridge, Congleton
- Tabley Park, Northwich Road, Knutsford

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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Cheshire's natural environment.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The Environment Act 2021 and the new biodiversity duty.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Biodiversity net gain.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Cheshire local nature recovery strategy.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Landscape and geodiversity.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Green infrastructure.....</b>	<b>10</b>

# 1 Cheshire's natural environment

**1.1** This topic paper provides further information to support the 'Our natural environment' section of the new local plan issues paper.

**1.2** The natural environment is one of the borough's greatest assets and is highly valued by residents and visitors alike. Protecting and enhancing the environment that makes Cheshire East special is a key aspiration of the local plan.

**1.3** The flora and fauna exist in a range of varying environments, many of which have received environmental designations in recognition of their importance.

**1.4** Designated sites in Cheshire East include:

- **400 local wildlife sites** - locally valued sites of biological diversity.
- **23 local geological sites** - locally valued sites of geological or geomorphological value.
- **8 local nature reserves** - locally important sites within the control of local authority where the local authority is committed to their management for the benefit of wildlife and the enjoyment of wildlife by residents.
- **33 sites of special scientific interest** - nationally important sites, designated as they are felt to represent the very best wildlife and geological sites in the country.
- **2 national nature reserves** - nationally important sites established to protect the most important areas of wildlife habitat and geological formations in Britain.
- **1 special protection area** - designated because of its importance as a habitat for rare and vulnerable birds and is of international importance.
- **2 special areas of conservation** - designated due to their potential to contribute towards the conservation of habitats and species, identified as requiring conservation at a European level (excluding birds). These sites are internationally valued.
- **3 Ramsar designations** - wetlands of international importance designated under the Ramsar Convention.

**1.5** Habitats and species, including at designated sites, have the potential to come under increasing pressure from the provision of new housing, employment, and infrastructure in the borough. This could be from increased disturbance (recreational, noise and light induced) and atmospheric pollution, as well as the loss of habitats and fragmentation of biodiversity networks. The loss and fragmentation of habitats may be exacerbated by the effects of climate change, which has the potential to lead to changes in the distribution and abundance of species and changes to the composition and character of habitats.

**1.6** According to the State of Nature Report 2023<sup>1</sup> the UK, like many other countries, has experienced a significant loss of biodiversity. The UK is now one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth. Sir Partha Dasgupta in the Dasgupta Review<sup>2</sup> quotes the World Wide Fund for Nature's findings; that the UK has more than 1 in 7 native species

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1 State of Nature Partnership, State of Nature Report 2023, [https://stateofnature.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report\\_2023\\_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf](https://stateofnature.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report_2023_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf)

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>



facing extinction and more than 40% in decline. Biological diversity has been declining at a disturbing pace. The populations of birds, fish mammals and reptiles has fallen by almost 70% since 1970. The way in which land has been managed, most notably for agriculture, has been a major contributory factor to this.

**1.7** Despite efforts in ecosystem restoration, conserving species, and moving towards more nature-friendly land uses, the UK's nature and wider environment continues, overall, to decline and degrade. The Environmental Improvement Plan<sup>3</sup> (EIP23), published at the beginning of 2023, sets out government plans for significantly improving the natural environment. By 2030, the government has committed to:

- Halt the decline in species abundance.
- Protect 30% of UK land.

**1.8** By 2042, the government has committed to:

- Increase species abundance by at least 10% from 2030, surpassing 2022 levels.
- Restore or create at least 500,000 ha of a range of wildlife rich habitats.
- Reduce the risk of species extinction.
- Restore 75% of our one million hectares of terrestrial and freshwater protected sites to favourable condition, securing their wildlife value for the long term.

**1.9** The National Planning Policy Framework states that 'The planning system should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by...minimising impacts on biodiversity and providing net gains in biodiversity where possible, contributing to the government's commitment to halt the overall decline in biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures'.

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3 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan>

## 2 The Environment Act 2021 and the new biodiversity duty

**2.1** The Environment Act 2021 introduced a 'strengthened' biodiversity duty for public bodies, including local authorities, building on the original duty introduced by the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. The aim of the extended duty is to provide for the enhancement and improvement of biodiversity, going beyond the maintenance of biodiversity in its current state.

**2.2** In May 2023 the government published guidance about the new duty and how to comply with it:<sup>4</sup>

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4 <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/complying-with-the-biodiversity-duty>

## 3 Biodiversity net gain

**3.1** The Environment Act also introduced a mandatory biodiversity net gain (BNG) of at least 10% on development sites, to be calculated using the national methodology biodiversity metric. This will be implemented in 2024 across a range of developments through the current planning system.

**3.2** Biodiversity net gain (BNG) is a way of creating and improving natural habitats. It makes sure development has a measurably positive impact ('net gain') on biodiversity, compared to what was there before development.

**3.3** The government has published guidance about BNG.<sup>5</sup>

**3.4** The council is preparing a BNG supplementary planning document<sup>6</sup> to provide local guidance about how BNG should be achieved in the borough through new development.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/understanding-biodiversity-net-gain#what-biodiversity-net-gain-is>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/planning/spatial-planning/cheshire\\_east\\_local\\_plan/supplementary\\_plan\\_documents/supplementary\\_plan\\_documents.aspx](https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/planning/spatial-planning/cheshire_east_local_plan/supplementary_plan_documents/supplementary_plan_documents.aspx)

## 4 Cheshire local nature recovery strategy

**4.1** Preparing local nature recovery strategies (LNRs) is a statutory requirement under the Environment Act 2021. These are intended to be locally-led with public, private and voluntary sectors working together to agree what should be done to recover nature in the area.

**4.2** There are 48 strategy areas covering the whole of England. Cheshire East will be working with Warrington and Cheshire West and Chester, with the latter appointed as the lead authority for its preparation. Every strategy must contain a local habitat map and a written statement of biodiversity priorities. It is expected that, by March 2025, local nature recovery strategies should be in place across the whole of England.

**4.3** The government expects that local plans will need to reflect LNRs to capitalise on opportunities to strategically enhance biodiversity.



## 5 Landscape and geodiversity

**5.1** Cheshire East has a rich and diverse landscape including the Cheshire Plain, the Pennine foothills and the Derbyshire and Staffordshire boundaries. It includes the southern part of the Sandstone Ridge (currently being considered by Natural England as a potential area of outstanding natural beauty) and the rolling landscape of the Shropshire boundary. The Cheshire Plain is a mosaic of clay plain, heathland, meres and mosses, shallow river valleys and salt related landscapes.

**5.2** The NPPF states that 'to minimise impacts on biodiversity and geodiversity, planning policies should: plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale...; identify and map components of the local ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites...; promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species populations...; and aim to prevent harm to geological conservation interests'.

**5.3** Local landscape designation (LLD) areas sit within a framework of the landscape character assessments, defining the special qualities of areas including their distinctiveness, perceptual character, landscape and scenic quality, natural character, cultural character and function. A landscape character assessment<sup>7</sup> and LLD areas review<sup>8</sup> for Cheshire East were published in 2018.

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7 [https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/environment/heritage\\_natural\\_environment/landscape/landscape\\_character\\_assessment.aspx](https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/environment/heritage_natural_environment/landscape/landscape_character_assessment.aspx)

8 [https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/environment/heritage\\_natural\\_environment/landscape/local-landscape-designation-areas.aspx](https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/environment/heritage_natural_environment/landscape/local-landscape-designation-areas.aspx)

## 6 Green infrastructure

**6.1** Green infrastructure (GI) is a network of multi-functional green and blue spaces and other natural features, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental, economic, health and wellbeing benefits for nature, climate, local and wider communities and prosperity.

**6.2** In January 2023 Natural England, launched the Green Infrastructure Framework<sup>9</sup> to help increase the amount of green cover to 40% in urban residential areas. Parks and greenspaces in England deliver an estimated £6.6 billion of health, climate change and environmental benefits every year. But with 80% of people in the country now living in towns and cities, one third of people do not have access to good quality green and blue space within 15 minutes of their home. The government's Environmental Improvement Plan, published in February 2023, includes a commitment that the public should be able to access green space or water, such as woodlands, wetlands, parks and rivers, within a 15-minute walk from their home.

**6.3** The GI Framework also provides a structure to analyse where greenspace in built up areas is needed most. It aims to support equitable access to greenspace, with an overarching target for everyone being able to reach good quality greenspace in their local area.

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9 <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/GreenInfrastructure/Home.aspx>