



## New local plan for Cheshire East

### Rural matters topic paper (draft) March 2024

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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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# 1 Introduction

**1.1** This topic paper provides further information to support the 'Rural matters' section of the new local plan issues paper. For ease of reading, it uses the same headings that are set out in the issues paper for this topic.

**1.2** Cheshire East is in large part a rural borough. The area contains many large and medium-sized towns, and other parts are influenced by the major Greater Manchester and Potteries conurbations, but there are also many deeply rural areas. The Cheshire countryside is highly valued by residents, visitors and businesses alike. From the sandstone ridge, across the Cheshire Plain and up to the Peak District Fringe, the borough's countryside is cherished for its scenic, recreational, aesthetic and productive qualities.

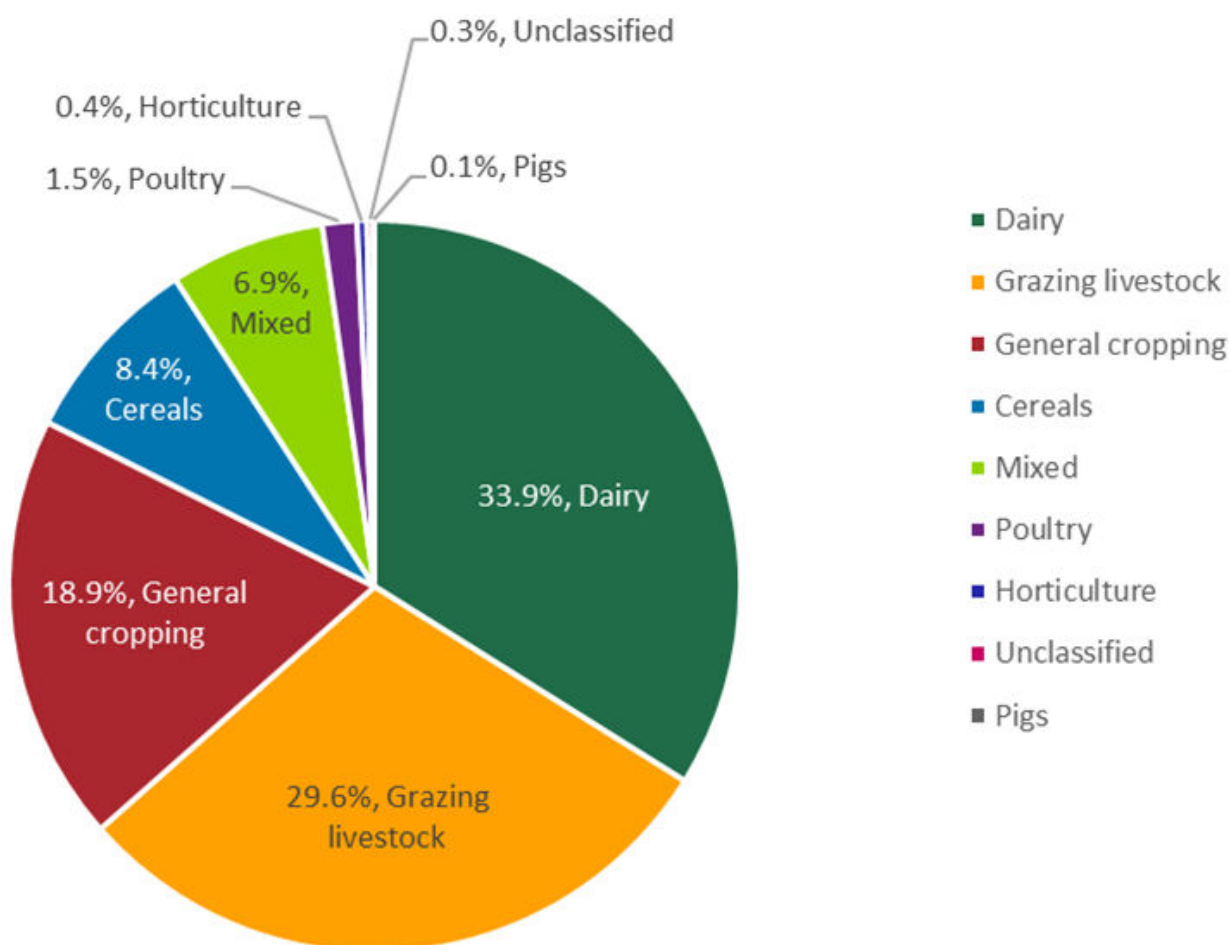
**1.3** The countryside in Cheshire East is also a working environment. Much of the land is fertile and the borough is an important area for food production. Many people live and work in the countryside, and rural tourism is an important part of the borough's economy.



## 2 Agriculture

**2.1** Cheshire has historically been a farming county and for many years, agriculture was the primary industry. Agriculture plays a vital role in ensuring food security for the country and it also forms an important part of the economy in Cheshire East. DeFRA statistics<sup>1</sup> show that, in 2021, there were 1,572 farm holdings in Cheshire East covering a total farmed area of 85,652 hectares. The majority of agricultural land is used for dairy, grazing livestock, general cropping and cereals, as shown in Figure 2.1 below.

**Figure 2.1 Agricultural land use in Cheshire East**



**2.2** In 2021, just over 4,000 people were employed as part of the agricultural labour force on commercial holdings in Cheshire East and the numbers of livestock were around 350 goats, 2,200 horses, 3,500 pigs, 125,000 cattle, 143,000 sheep, and 2.35 million poultry birds.

<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/structure-of-the-agricultural-industry-in-england-and-the-uk-at-june>

## Supporting agriculture

**2.3** Many agricultural developments do not require planning permission and can be allowed under 'permitted development' rights, set nationally. However, some types of developments do still fall within the remit of planning and the current local plan includes a number of policies that are designed to support agriculture in Cheshire East. These include support for:

- new agricultural buildings
- proposals for farm diversification, where this is necessary to support the continued viability of agricultural businesses
- new dwellings for agricultural workers where there is an essential need for them to live at or close to their place of work

## Agricultural land

**2.4** Agricultural land is a finite and precious resource. The Agricultural Land Classification assesses the quality of agricultural land to enable informed choices to be made about its future use within the planning system. There are five grades of agricultural land, with grade 3 subdivided into 3a and 3b.

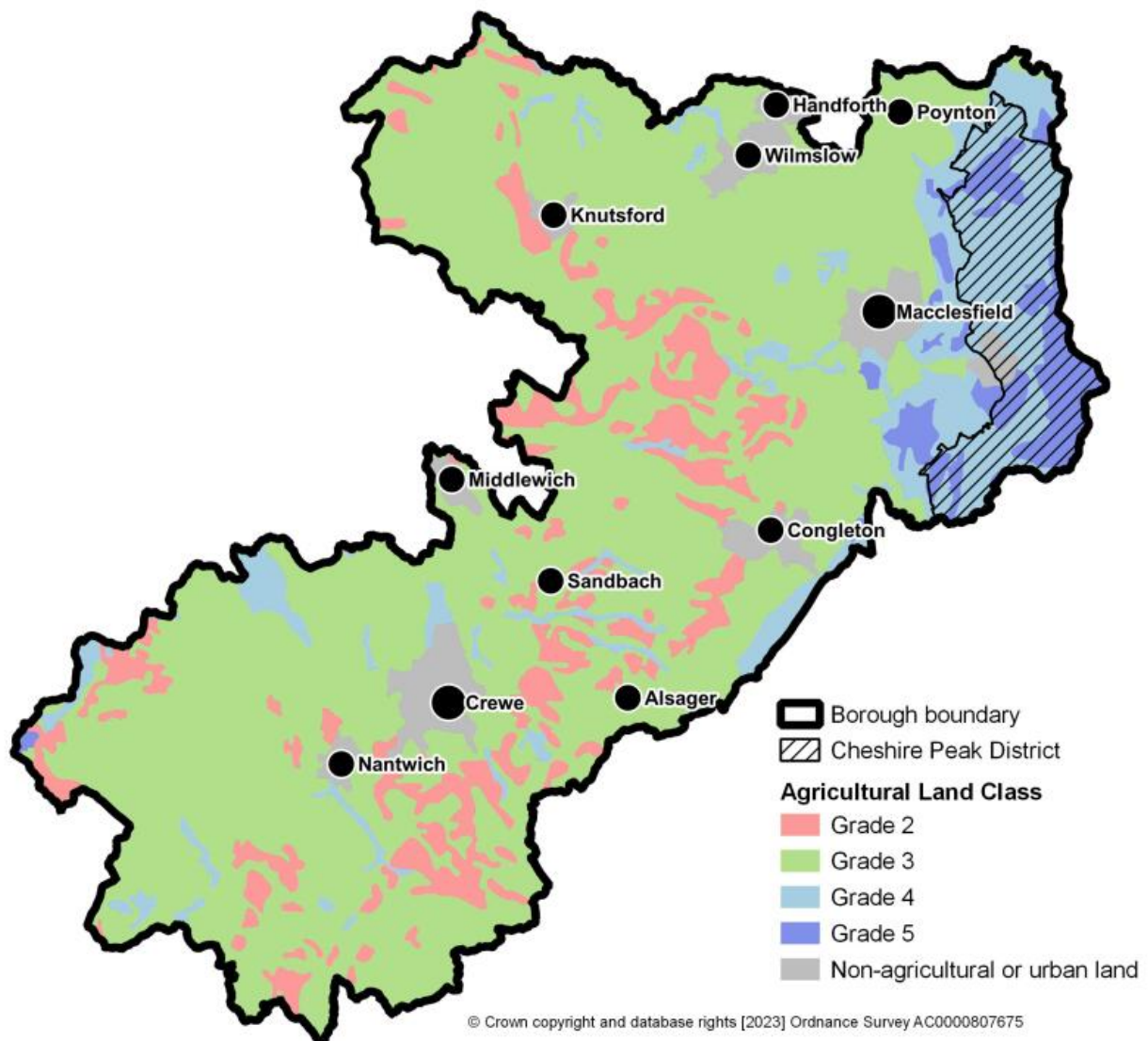
**2.5** Under national policy, local plan policies should “take account of the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land”. The best and most versatile agricultural land is defined as grades 1, 2 and 3a. Whilst there is some limited data on grades 3a and 3b, most data does not distinguish between these and reports only on grade 3 land so it is not always easy to determine whether a particular area comes under the definition of best and most versatile land.

**2.6** There is no grade 1 agricultural land in Cheshire East, around 10.9% of the total land in the borough is grade 2, and around 67.4% is grade 3.

**2.7** Cheshire East is a food-producing area with a significant agricultural economy, and it also faces significant pressures for new development. Consequently, the protection of the best and most versatile agricultural land is of particular importance in the borough.

**2.8** The current local plan includes policies to protect the best and most versatile agricultural land where possible.

Figure 2.2 Agricultural land classification in Cheshire East



## 3 The countryside

**3.1** The current local plan defines areas of ‘open countryside’. Maintaining the character of the countryside whilst supporting the livelihoods of those who live and work there are significant and enduring tensions and the current policy approach seeks to protect the countryside from urbanising development, whilst allowing certain forms of development to support the rural economy.

### Extent of the open countryside

**3.2** The current local plan defines settlement boundaries for all our major towns and villages.<sup>2</sup> In planning terms, all areas outside of these settlement boundaries are considered to be “open countryside”. This includes a number of smaller villages that have defined infill boundaries, but remain within the open countryside.<sup>3</sup>

### Rural development

**3.3** National policy requires local plan policies to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, but recognises that some types of development should be allowed in rural areas. It requires the local plan to enable development to support the rural economy (including development for businesses, tourism, leisure and community facilities), support opportunities to bring forward rural affordable housing and allow homes for essential rural workers, such as those employed in agriculture or forestry.

**3.4** As a result, the current local plan establishes a more restrictive approach to development in the countryside than within defined settlements. However, to support the rural economy and the livelihoods of those who live and work on the countryside, it does allow for certain forms of development, including:

- development associated with agriculture and forestry, including farm diversification and dwellings for essential workers
- outdoor sport, leisure and recreation facilities
- essential development for existing businesses, or for new businesses where the nature of the business means that a countryside location is essential
- Visitor accommodation where the type of accommodation is intrinsically linked with the countryside.
- Equestrian development.
- Essential infrastructure.

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2 Alderley Edge, Alsager, Audlem, Bollington, Bunbury, Chelford, Congleton, Crewe, Disley, Goostrey, Handforth, Haslington, Holmes Chapel, Knutsford, Macclesfield, Middlewich, Mobberley, Nantwich, Poynton, Prestbury, Sandbach, Shavington, Wilmslow and Wrenbury have settlement boundaries defined in the current local plan.

3 Acton, Adlington, Arclid, Ashley, Astbury, Aston, Brereton Green, Church Minshull, Cranage, Eaton, Gawsworth, Hankelow, Hassall Green, Henbury, High Legh, Higher Hurdsfield, Higher Poynton, Hough, Langley, Lawtongate and Lawton Heath, Lyme Green, Mount Pleasant, Mow Cop, Over Peover, Pickmere, Plumley, Rainow, Rode Heath, Scholar Green, Styal, Sutton Lane Ends, The Bank, Winterley, Wybunbury, and Wychwood Village have infill boundaries defined in the current local plan.



- Infill development: in villages “limited infilling” is allowed, and outside of villages “the infill of a small gap with one or two dwellings in an otherwise built up frontage” is allowed.
- Small affordable housing schemes where there is an identified local need.
- Dwellings that are exceptional in design and sustainable development terms.
- The re-use or replacement of existing buildings.
- Limited extensions to existing buildings.
- Development for the conservation and enhancement of heritage assets.

## 4 Green Belt land

**4.1** “Green Belt” is a planning policy designation with the fundamental aim of preventing urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. Green Belts have been defined around many of the country’s largest cities and conurbations, to prevent urban sprawl extending outwards into the surrounding areas. The five purposes of Green Belt are:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas.
- To prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another.
- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns.
- To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

**4.2** The term “Green Belt” is different from “greenfield”. A Green Belt is a policy designation covering a wide area and may include buildings, infrastructure, brownfield land and other degraded land, as well as large areas of undeveloped land. Greenfield land refers to all land (whether in the Green Belt or not) that has not been previously developed.

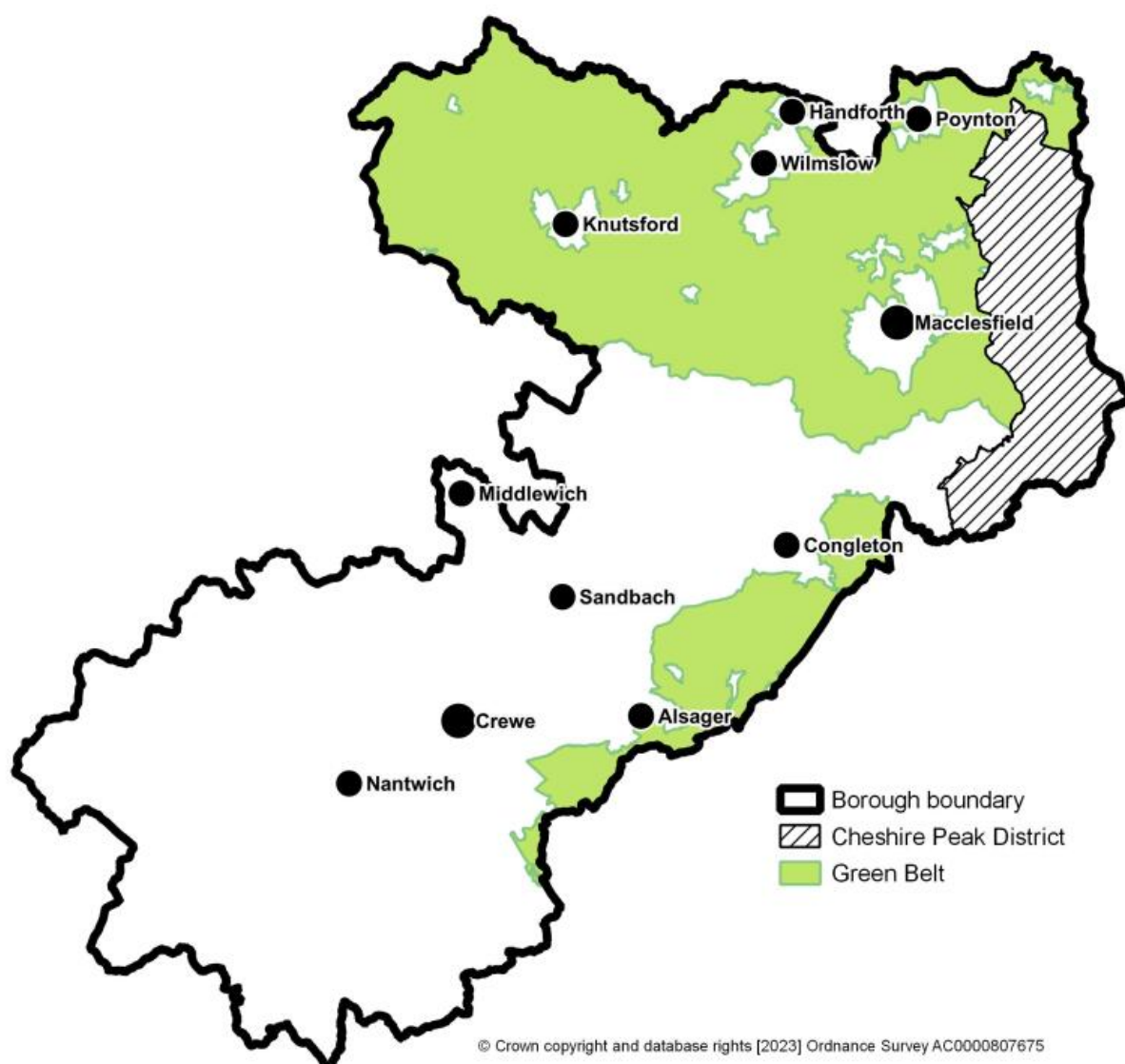
### Extent of the Green Belt

**4.3** Within Cheshire East, there are two areas of Green Belt. In the north of the borough, the North Cheshire Green Belt forms part of the Green Belt surrounding Greater Manchester and, in the south, the South Cheshire Green Belt forms part of the Green Belt surrounding The Potteries conurbation.

**4.4** In the southern parts of the borough, our major towns are located beyond the outer edge of the Green Belt. However, in the north, the Green Belt is much wider and there are towns surrounded by the Green Belt. Historically, the boundaries were drawn very tightly around these towns, leaving little space for future development.

**4.5** All areas in Cheshire East that are defined as Green Belt are also within the ‘open countryside’ designation in the current local plan.

Picture 4.1 Extent of Green Belt in Cheshire East



**4.6** As set out in national policy, the permanence of Green Belts is very important, and their boundaries should only be altered in exceptional circumstances. The current local plan maintained the general extent of the Green Belt but did make alterations to the detailed Green Belt boundaries around a number of towns and villages to identify enough land to meet development needs to 2030. It also identified areas of “safeguarded land”, which is land that was taken out of the Green Belt in order to potentially assist in meeting longer-term development needs.

## Development in Green Belt areas

**4.7** As all areas of Green Belt in Cheshire East are also within the open countryside, the restrictive approach to development for the countryside also applies in Green Belt areas. However, there are some additional restrictions set out in national policy (and repeated in the local plan) in Green Belt areas.

**4.8** As set out in national policy, the construction of new buildings is normally considered to be “inappropriate development” in the Green Belt and should only be allowed in “very special circumstances”. However, there are some exceptions and development can be allowed (with certain restrictions in some cases) for:

- Agriculture and forestry.
- Appropriate facilities for outdoor sport and recreation, cemeteries and allotments.
- Limited extensions to existing buildings.
- Replacement of buildings.
- Limited infilling in villages.
- Small affordable housing schemes where there is an identified local need.
- Limited infilling or the redevelopment of previously-developed (brownfield) land.
- Mineral extraction and engineering operations.
- Local transport infrastructure.
- The re-use of existing buildings.

**4.9** As Green Belt policy is set through the National Planning Policy Framework, there is very little scope for local plans to define a different local policy approach to the Green Belt.

## 5 Strategic green gaps

**5.1** Large areas in the southwest of the borough lie beyond the Green Belts surrounding Greater Manchester and The Potteries. This includes Crewe, which is our largest town. Within some of the areas around Crewe, there are a number of neighbouring towns and villages in close proximity to each other. As Crewe has grown since the arrival of the railways in the 1830s, the loss of the gaps between Crewe, Nantwich and a number of smaller settlements has caused some settlements to merge into the Crewe urban area and very narrow gaps to remain in other cases.

**5.2** It has been recognised that some form of further long-term local policy protection is required in addition to the normal policy for open countryside, to prevent settlements from merging and protect their settings and separate identities. Some form of additional “green gap” policy has been in place since at least 1996.

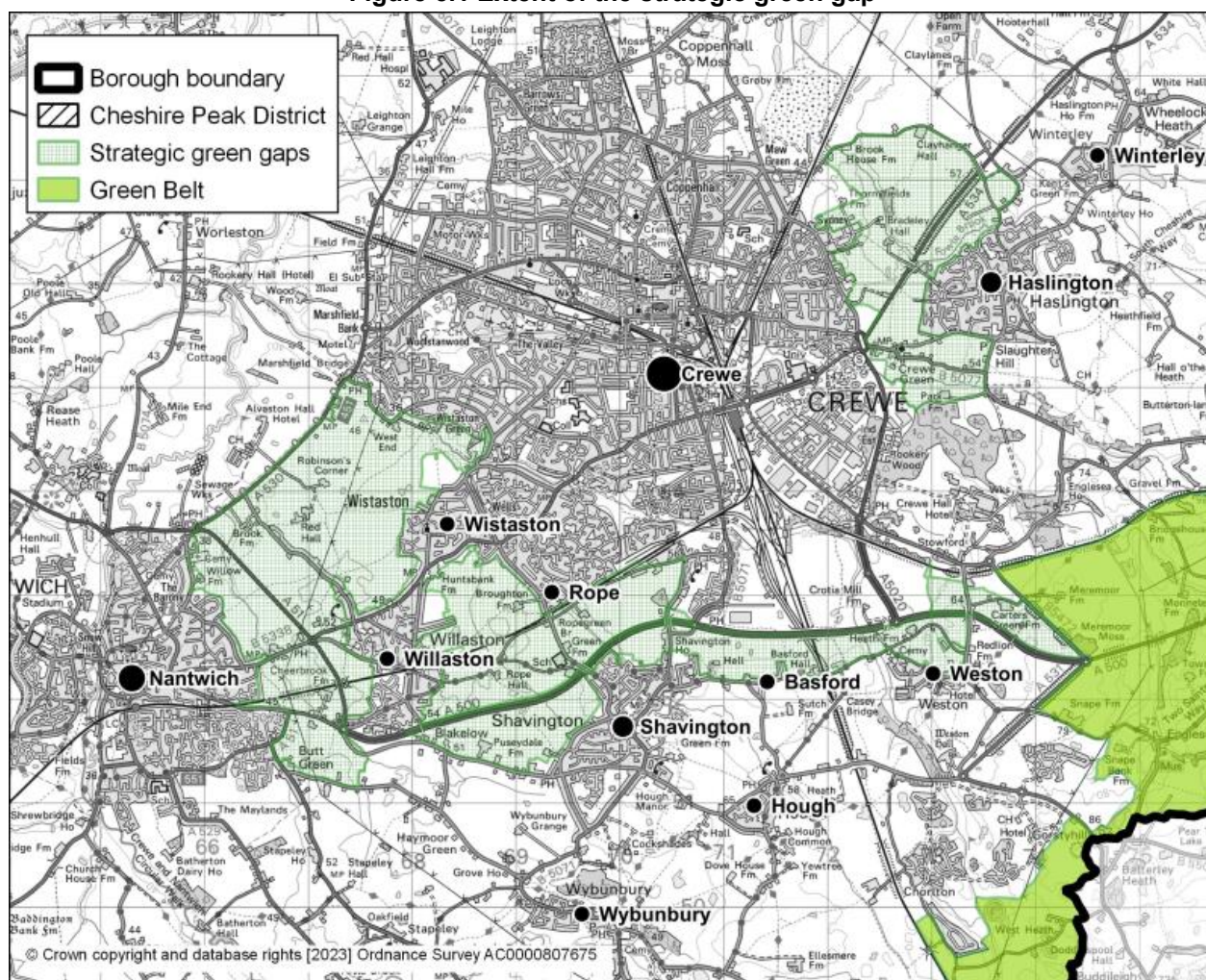
### Extent of the strategic green gap

**5.3** The extent of strategic green gap is defined in the current local plan. It extends further westwards from the outer boundary of the South Cheshire Green Belt and includes areas to the south, west and east of Crewe where there is a risk, over the long-term, of settlements coalescing.

**5.4** All areas within the strategic green gap are also within the ‘open countryside’ designation in the current local plan.



Figure 5.1 Extent of the strategic green gap



## Development in the strategic green gaps

**5.5** As all areas of the strategic green gap are also within the open countryside, the restrictive approach to development for the countryside also applies in the strategic green gaps. Unlike Green Belt, there is no national policy on strategic green gaps, however, there are some additional restrictions set out in the current local plan.

**5.6** In addition to the open countryside policy, the current plan seeks to prevent any development within the strategic green gaps that would result in the erosion of a physical gap, adversely affect the visual character of the landscape, significantly affect the undeveloped character of the green gap, or lead to the coalescence between existing settlements.