

NORTH WEST LEICESTERSHIRE DRAFT LOCAL PLAN

BACKGROUND PAPER 11

Policy En1: Nature Conservation

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This is one of a number of background papers which have been published to support the draft Local Plan. The purpose of these papers is to provide more information in support of Policy En1 (Nature Conservation) than can be included in the draft Local Plan document itself if it is to remain of a manageable size.

2.0 THE POLICY

- 2.1 Policy En1 seeks to minimise the potential impacts of development on areas of biodiversity importance and, where possible, achieve net gains in biodiversity.

Policy En3: Nature Conservation

- (1) Proposals for development will be supported which conserve, restore or enhance the biodiversity in the district.**
- (2) Where a proposal for development would result in significant harm to one of the following and which cannot be avoided, or mitigated or compensated for, then planning permission will be refused:**
 - **Special Areas of Conservation (SAC);**
 - **Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)**
 - **Local and Regionally Important Geodiversity Sites (RIGS) and candidate Regionally Important Geodiversity Sites (cRIGS)**
 - **Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs), Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) and candidate Local Wildlife Sites (cLWSs) which meet the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland LWS criteria;**
 - **Local and National Biodiversity Action Plan-related (BAP) priority habitats;**
 - **River corridors;**
 - **Irreplaceable habitats (defined as Ancient woodlands; Mature plantation or secondary woodland; Species –rich ancient hedgerows; Ancient or veteran trees; Species –rich neutral grassland; Acid grassland and heath grassland; Dry and wet heathland; Bogs and Sphagnum pools and Rock outcrops)**
- (3) New development will be expected to maintain existing ecological networks , hotspots and landscape features (such as water courses and waterways, disused railway lines, hedgerows and tree lines) for biodiversity, as well as for other green infrastructure and recreational uses.**
- (4) The use of Sustainable Urban drainage Systems (SUDs) to create wetland and marshland habitats will be encouraged subject to the provisions of Policy xx**

We will prepare a Supplementary Planning Document to provide more guidance on this issue.

National Planning Policy Framework

2.2 National Planning Policy Framework, paragraph 117 (NPPF, 2012):

NPPF Paragraph 117:

To minimise impacts on biodiversity . . . planning policies should:

- plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale across local authority boundaries;
- identify and map components of the local ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity, wildlife corridors and stepping stones that connect them and areas identified by local partnerships for habitat restoration or creation;
- promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species populations, linked to national and local targets, and identify suitable indicators for monitoring biodiversity in the plan.

2.3 The District Council commissioned Leicestershire and Rutland Environmental Records Centre to prepare a Ecological Networks Report which has been used to inform Policy Ec1.

2.4 The following sections provide more information in respect of the various categories listed in Policy Ec1.

3.0 What are Ecological Networks?

3.1 Ecological networks are needed to maintain environmental processes and to help to conserve biodiversity where remnants of semi-natural habitats have become fragmented and isolated.

3.2 An ecological network is made up of:

- core areas or ‘hotspots’, where the conservation of biodiversity, including habitats, is a priority function;
- movement routes, which allow species to travel between core areas – these may take the form of linear corridors or ‘stepping stones’;
- Permeable areas, usually with a low intensity of management and land-use and some semi-natural features;
- buffer zones, which are adjacent to and protect the network from damaging impacts arising from human activities.

3.3 An important principle is the concept of ‘connectivity’ within the landscape. Different landscape elements and habitat patches create a mosaic of features that can either hinder or enhance movement of species through a landscape. Increasing connectivity to enable the movement of plants and animals between otherwise isolated habitat patches is thought to sustain populations of these species, making them less vulnerable to environmental impacts.

3.3 The ability of species to move through a landscape mosaic depends on various specific traits, such as dispersal, movement and colonisation abilities and dependence on specific habitat

features. Barriers like major roads or large tracts of inhospitable land such as intensively managed arable farmland can prevent movement of species.

- 3.4 Species will move across different landscapes at different rates depending on the range of features present and the intensity of land use. Species also have different spatial requirements for connectivity depending on various species specific traits. Many mobile species, such as birds and bats, will have very different requirements from more sedentary specialist species with exacting habitat requirements. An effective means of meeting a range of species connectivity requirements across highly fragmented landscapes is by reducing the overall land use intensity and either improving the quality or size of remaining semi-natural habitat patches.
- 3.5 Without care, development can impact upon ecological networks and cause the loss of key habitats or severance of important links in the network of connected habitats, increasing species isolation and reducing the viability of some species to survive environmental change.
- 3.6 For example, a poorly planned development can sever a wildlife corridor, such as a river or stream, and through measures such as channelling and culverting can miss an opportunity to strengthen the river/stream as a green corridor and link in to other habitats.
- 3.7 Conversely, planned development can enhance the ecological network by creating habitats, strengthening or buffering existing corridors, and creating new stepping stones to join up existing habitat parcels.
- 3.8 Taking land out of intensive agricultural production and managing it in a less intensive manner as private gardens, public open space or peripheral development land can improve its overall biodiversity value, and increase its permeability. An example is the peripheral land around industrial estates or solar farm installations, which can be managed as species-rich grassland and be an important source of nectar for pollinators.

4.0 Designated sites

- 4.1 Across Leicestershire and Rutland, important places for wildlife have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) or Local Wildlife Sites (LWS, cLWS and pLWS).
- 4.2 **Sites of Special Scientific Interest** are the country's very best wildlife and geological sites, and are nationally important. There are 17 in North West Leicestershire one – the River Mease – has been designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) of international importance for its aquatic habitats and associated species. SSSIs have statutory protection, and are designated by Natural England. These sites can be viewed at Map 1 Appendix A.
- 4.3 **Local Wildlife Sites (Map 2 Appendix A)** are designated following the criteria and procedures set out in the '[Guidelines for the selection of Local Wildlife Sites in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland \(revised 2011\)](#)' published by Leicestershire County Council. The definition of LWS given in this publication is:

'Local Wildlife Sites are important reservoirs of rare, local and declining native species and are the best examples of typical Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland habitats. LWS may also be areas of ecological interest that provide people with the opportunity to learn about, appreciate and experience habitats and species of the natural world.'

- 4.4 **Proposed and Candidate Local Wildlife Sites (Map 2 Appendix A)** are sites that have not been through the formal notification process as a LWS but for which there is evidence that the site meets the criteria necessary for designation as LWS. Candidate LWS are those which are known through survey data to meet the LWS criteria. Potential LWS are those that are likely to meet the LWS criteria, but further survey is needed to confirm.
- 4.5 Candidate LWS have the same status in planning terms as LWS. The only difference between the two is that LWS have been accepted by the landowner and formally endorsed by a panel of experts. Both designations mean that a site has met local quality criteria related to local BAP priorities, and are of county-wide value for wildlife.
- 4.6 Many of the locally important sites were identified during the recent (2006-08) Habitat Survey of NWL, which has provided an invaluable evidence base for the ecological network map. This was a comprehensive survey of the area, attempting to categorise all land parcels within the district through surveys on the ground, backed up by analysis of aerial photographs. There are inevitably some gaps in coverage caused by difficulties in accessing land, etc. New sites are still being identified, and this will continue; especially on post-industrial and former mineral land, which can naturally regenerate very quickly after activity ceases.
- 4.7 These locally designated sites are non-statutory, intended to inform landowners and decision-makers. These designated sites form the basis of the core areas or 'hotspots' in NWL.
- Irreplaceable habitats***
- 4.8 In North West Leicestershire, irreplaceable habitats are
- Ancient woodlands
 - Mature plantation or secondary woodland
 - Species-rich ancient hedgerows
 - Ancient or veteran trees
 - Species-rich neutral grassland
 - Acid grassland and heath grassland
 - Dry and wet heathland
 - Bogs and *Sphagnum* pools
 - Rock outcrops
- 4.9 Many of the irreplaceable habitats have been designated as nationally or locally important sites (Ancient woodlands, SSSIs, LWS or candidate LWS) but there is always a possibility that some have been overlooked. For this reason, definitive habitat maps do not exist for any of these habitats apart from Ancient woodlands. It is likely that there are many species-rich hedgerows and veteran trees that have not yet been found and designated, but most acid grassland, heathland, bogs, *Sphagnum* pools and rock outcrops will be included within SSSIs and local Wildlife Sites. Many species-rich neutral grasslands are designated, but it is likely that there will be more sites with this habitat to be discovered.
- 4.10 **Ancient woodlands (Map 3 Appendix A)** include both ancient semi-natural woodlands and replanted ancient woodland. The latter have been clear-felled and replanted in the past, but still retain the characteristic rich ground flora and invertebrate fauna associated with ancient woodland. The woodlands have been identified by research undertaken by Natural England, and it is extremely unlikely that any have been overlooked.

- 4.11 **Mature plantation or secondary woodland** is only replaceable in the long-term (40 years or more) and given the scarcity of truly ancient woodland in Leicestershire, its value is extremely high. In many Parishes in North West Leicestershire it is the only mature woodland habitat present, and its loss would break the continuity of woodland habitats across the Borough. Therefore, it should also be deemed an irreplaceable habitat.
- 4.12 **Species-rich ancient hedgerows** have affinities to ancient woodlands, often supporting similar species, and are irreplaceable. When present, it is usually along old boundaries, such as Parish or Park boundaries, or along roads, tracks and public rights of way. They are defined either by our Local Wildlife Site criteria or by being assessed as ‘important’ hedges under the Hedgerow Regulations ecology criteria.
- 4.13 **Ancient or veteran trees** are defined by the Local Wildlife Site criteria. Many have been designated as LWS or candidate/potential LWS; however, it is extremely likely that many have not yet been identified. This habitat is susceptible to slow and un-noticed loss of individuals, but it is known that veteran trees are exceptionally rich in invertebrate life, as well as supporting fungi, lichens and many species of birds and mammals such as bats. Concentrations of veteran trees are especially important in this respect.
- 4.14 **Old species-rich neutral grassland** is often identified by the presence of ‘ridge and furrow’, which indicates a lack of recent disturbance through ploughing, draining etc. Unimproved grassland is very rare in Leicestershire, and species-rich grassland is usually ‘semi-improved’ in the sense that it is, or has been, subject to minor agricultural improvements.
- 4.15 **Acid grassland, heath grassland, dry and wet heathland, bogs, *Sphagnum* pools and associated rock outcrops** are extremely important habitats, rare in Leicestershire, and supporting the relic populations of species that were once much commoner in our county. They are completely irreplaceable.
- 4.16 Most other habitats present within North West Leicestershire are replaceable, in the sense that they can naturally regenerate or be created under certain conditions. These habitats include recent secondary woodland and scrub, recent plantation, hedges that post-date the Enclosures Acts, semi-improved grassland of low species richness, many ponds and wetlands, brooks and streams, and post-industrial habitats. For these habitats to regenerate or be created, the right conditions of soil pH, structure, substrate, drainage, soil fertility, aspect and hydrology must be created first.

Biodiversity ‘hotspots’

- 4.17 An overview of designated sites and irreplaceable habitats in NWL reveals natural clusters and groups of designated sites in areas of high biodiversity value and low intensity management. These clusters form the ‘hotspots’ and ‘stepping stones’, which are the main areas for priority nature conservation. Thirteen of these have been identified (Map 4 Appendix A and Table 1 Appendix B), with the boundaries determined by drawing a line to enclose the clusters of designated sites.

Wildlife corridors

- 4.18 Many of the hotspots and designated sites are already linked by wildlife corridors, underlining the importance of these corridors for conservation. Watercourses, canals, railways (active and disused) are the backbone of the ecological network. To these can be

added a few main roads, including the motorways – although main roads are paradoxically also barriers to species movement across them, they can act as dispersal corridors along their length if they are associated with wide verges, cuttings and embankments.

The main corridors are mapped in Map 4 Appendix A and tabled in Table 2 Appendix B.

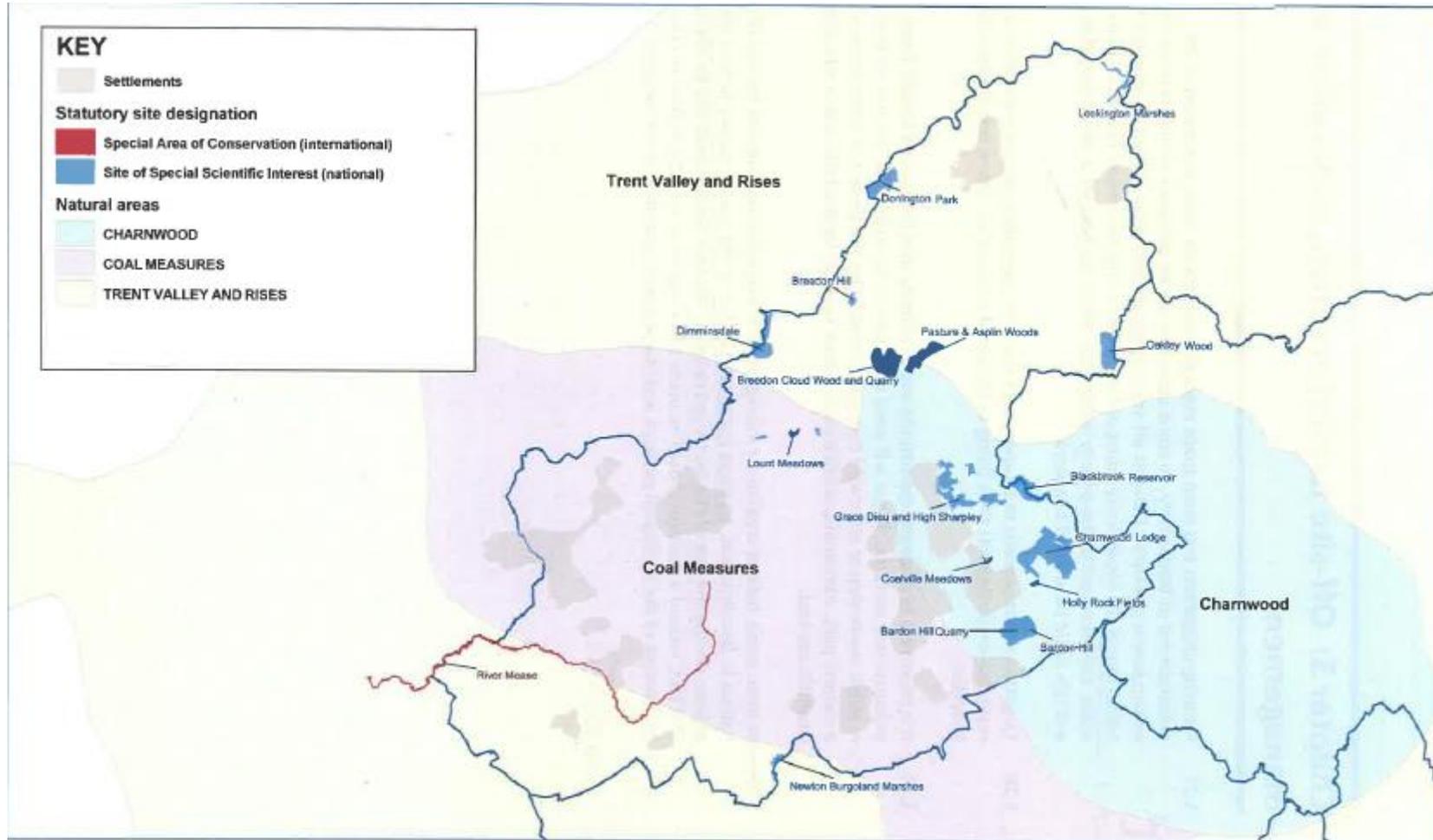
- 4.19 Corridors can be of national, regional/county and local importance. These are hedges, roadside verges, disused railways, small watercourses and other associations of habitats, which are extremely important at a local level.
- 4.20 Local corridors will be a consideration in almost all major development proposals, and many smaller ones, and how they are treated will have a major impact on the overall viability and conditions of the ecological network

5.0 Crossing administrative boundaries

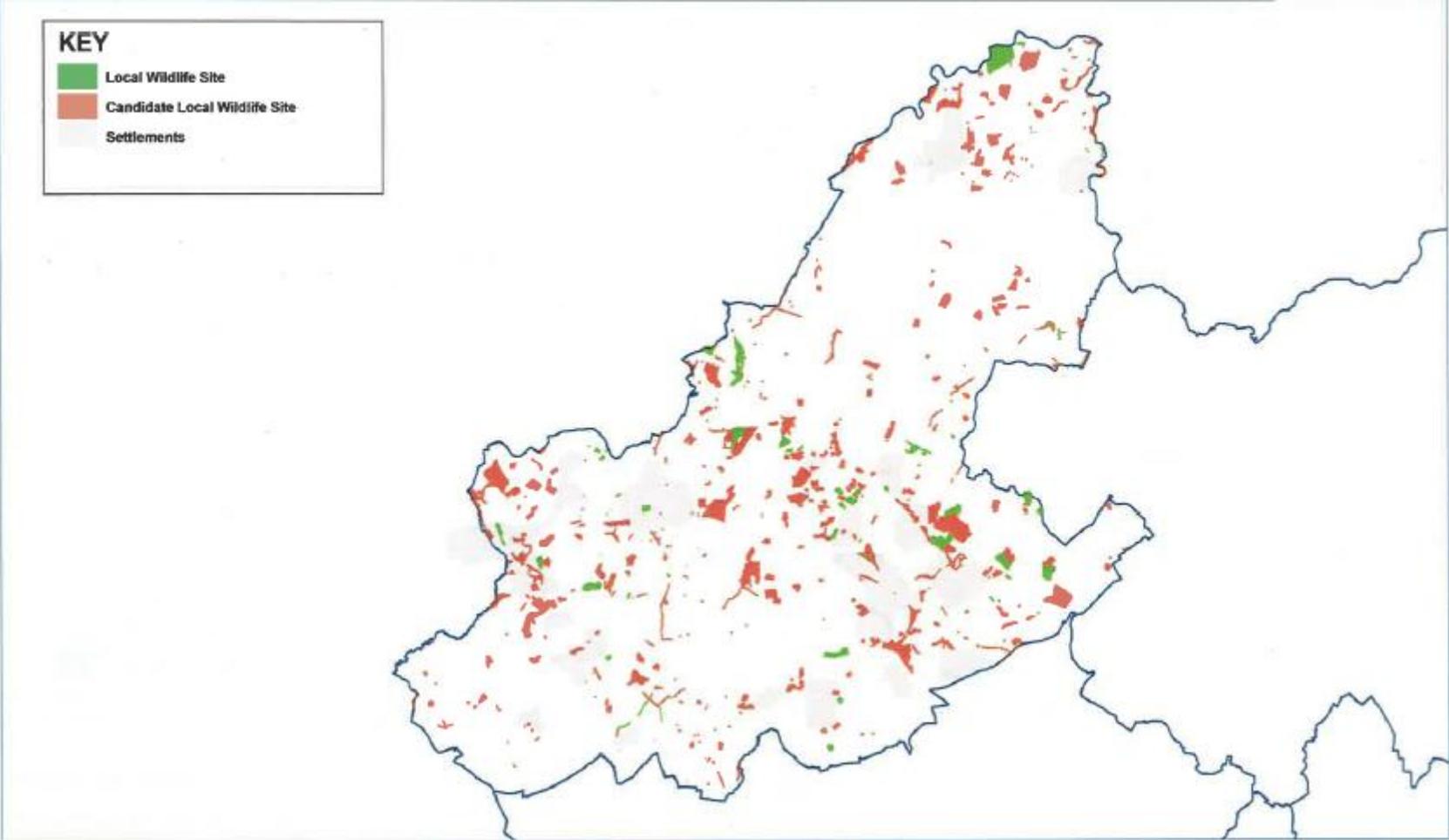
- 5.1 The ecological network does not stop at a planning authority's boundaries, and the network map takes account of the ecological resource over the boundary with a neighbouring authority.
- 5.2 Most wildlife corridors cross administrative boundaries, and some (such as the Rivers Soar and Trent) form part of the boundary of NWL. Their value and importance may not be all that clear when viewed in isolation, and those at the boundaries of the administrative area may be undervalued and forgotten.
- 5.3 The significance of the River Mease SAC is hard to understand when the NWL section is viewed in isolation. Over the border into Staffordshire it is a much more significant landscape and biodiversity feature. However, much of its headwaters come for NWL, so it is extremely important for its conservation to ensure that these are protected.
- 5.4 A further example is the Ashby Canal, which just extends into Leicestershire for a short distance at Snarestone. However, over the boundary into Hinckley & Bosworth, it is extremely important wildlife corridor of national value, as part of it is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Decisions near the short section of the Ashby Canal in NWL need to take this into account.

Appendix A

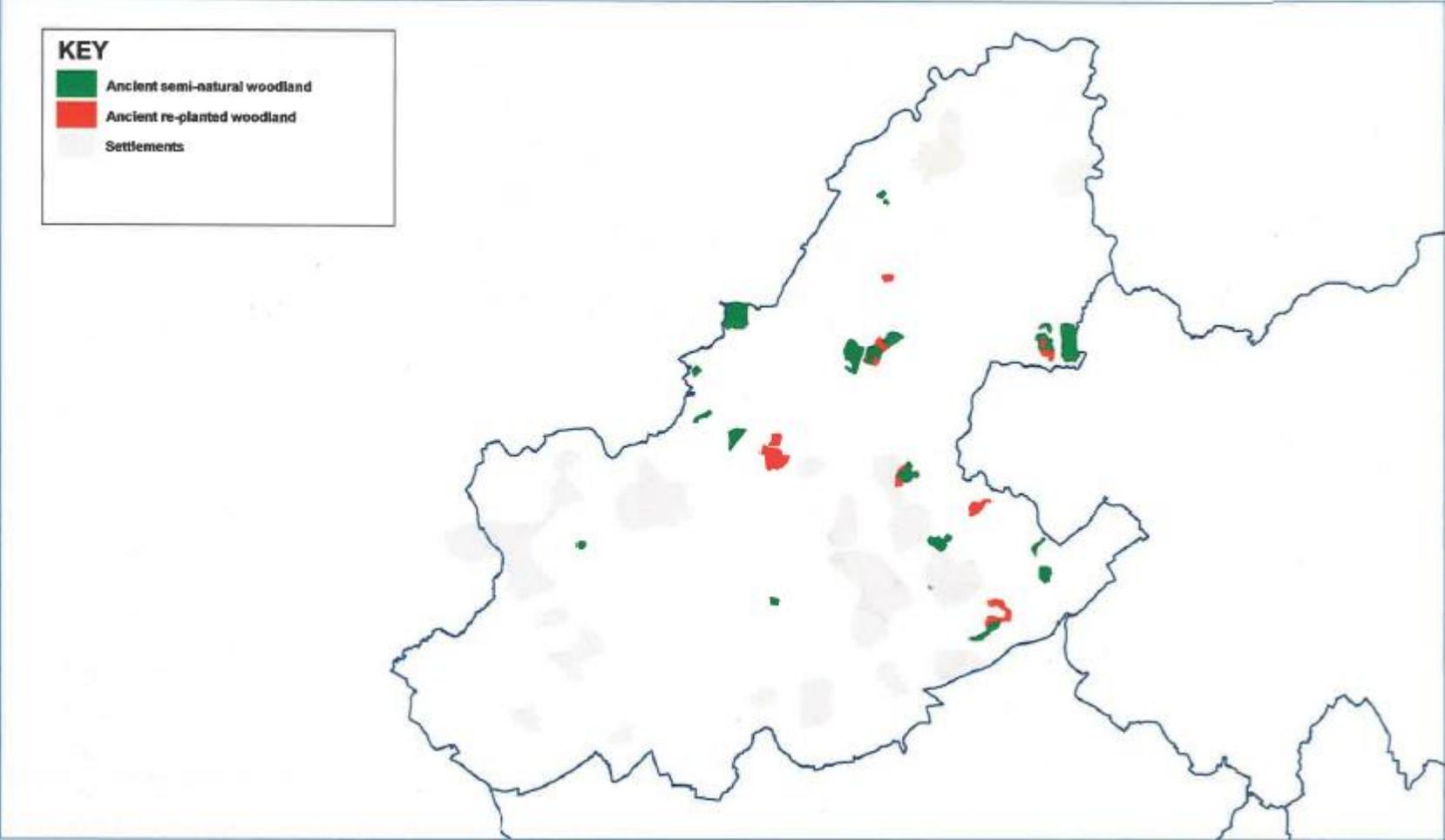
Map 1 – Natural Areas and Statutory Site Designations



Map 2- Locally Designated Sites



Map 3 – Ancient Woodland



Appendix B

Table 1: Hotspots with main sites and habitats

1	River Trent and River Soar and tributaries	River Trent, River Soar, Lockington Marshes SSSI, Ulley Gully, Lockington gravel pits	Large rivers and wetlands: flooded gravel pits, riparian habitats, marsh and wet grassland, wet woodland, small streams, waterfowl and wetland birds, otter
2	Castle Donington Park	Donington Park, River Trent	Parkland and veteran trees, ancient woodland, large river
3	Breedon Hill	Breedon Hill Quarry	Calcareous grassland
4	Piper and Oakley Woods	Piper Wood SSSI, Oakley Wood SSSI	Ancient semi-natural woodland
5	Cloud, Pasture and Asplin Woods	Cloud Wood, Pasture Wood, Asplin Wood, Breedon Cloud Quarry	Ancient semi-natural woodland and calcareous grassland
6	Staunton Harold and Lount	Staunton Harold Park and reservoir, Spring wood, Dimminsdale, Lount wood and Meadows, Rough Park	Ancient semi-natural and plantation woodlands, parkland, species-rich grassland
7	Coleorton and Swannington	Coleorton Park, Swannington Common, Caliphath Colliery, Hough Windmill and Gorse Field	Species-rich neutral grassland and ponds, parkland, amphibia
8	Heart of the National Forest	Albert Village lake, Moira Furnace, Donisthorpe, Willesley wood, Saltersford valley, Hicks Lodge, Newfield Colliery	Plantation woodland, post-industrial land, ponds, lakes and wetlands, secondary heathland
9	Alton and Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Wood	Alton Grange; Beech, Roecliffe and Quaker's wood, Springfield wood, Normanton Wood	Plantation woodland, species-rich grassland, small stream
10	Coalville and Ellistown post-industrial habitats	Ellistown tip, Hugglescote wet meadows, 'Nature Alive', Snibston, disused and active railway lines	Species-rich post-industrial habitats, ponds and small pools, recent plantation, great crested newts
11	Grace Dieu, Whitwick and High Sharpley	Grace Dieu Brook, Cademan Hill, High Sharpley, Holly Hayes Wood, Whitwick Quarry and Ratchett hill	Acid grasslands and heathland, rock outcrops, neutral species-rich grassland, ancient semi-natural woodland, fast flowing stream
12	Charnwood Forest and Blackbrook	Charnwood Lodge, Warren Hills, Burrow Wood, Black Brook and reservoir, Birch Hill, Holly Rock fields, Bardon Hill and Quarry	Heathland/acid grassland, woodland, rocky outcrops, species-rich neutral grassland; geology.
13	River Sence	Kelham Bridge nature reserve, Sence Valley Forest Park, Newton Burgoland Marshes	Small river and tributaries, wetlands, lakes and ponds, waterfowl and wetland birds, plantation woodland

Table 2: Wildlife Corridors

Corridor	Type	Importance	Connecting	Habitats, species
River Trent	Large watercourse	National	Staffordshire moorlands - Burton-on-Trent – Nottingham - Newark, Gainsborough – Humber estuary. Short section along NWL’s northern boundary	Waterfowl, floodplain wetlands, lakes, pools, marsh.
River Soar	Large watercourse	National/ Regional	South of Leicester to Trent confluence; boundary with Charnwood BC	Floodplain wetlands and riparian habitats; species-rich grassland
R Mease and tributaries	Small watercourse	International/ National	Measham – NE Staffs – R Tame	Otter, Water Vole, fish, crayfish, riparian habitats
Gilwiskaw Brook	Small watercourse	County	Tributary of R Mease: Ashby – Packington – Measham	
River Sence	Small watercourse	County	Bardon – Donington le Heath – Heather – Sheepy Magna – R. Anker	
Black Brook	Small watercourse	County	Tributary of Soar: Charnwood Lodge - Blackbrook Reservoir - Shepshed - Loughborough	
Grace Dieu Brook	Small watercourse	County	Tributary of Black Brook: Whitwick – Belton – Black Brook	Rocky ‘gorge’
Ashby Canal	Canal	County	Grand Union – Market Bosworth – Snarestone. Small section only in NWL but part of important corridor	Aquatic plants – parts are SSSI
Long Whatton, Diseworth and Westmeadow Brooks	Small watercourse	Local	Long Whatton and Diseworth – R Soar at Zouch	
Ramsley Brook	Small watercourse	Local	Worthington – Tonge – R Trent at King’s Newton	
Ivanhoe Railway	Freight line	Regional	Leicester – Coalville – Ashby – Moira - Burton	Species-rich grassland and post-industrial habitats
Measham Railway/Ivanhoe Way	Disused railway	County	Market Bosworth – Snarestone – Measham Donisthorpe - Moira	Species-rich grassland and post-industrial habitats
Swannington Railway/Cloud Trail	Disused railway	Local	Coalville – Swannington – Worthington – Tonge - Melbourne	Species-rich grassland and post-industrial habitats
M1	Motorway	Regional		Species rich roadside verges and roundabouts

M42/A42	Motorway/Trunk road	County		Species rich roadside verges and roundabouts
A511	Trunk road	Local	Leicester – Ashby de la Zouch	Species rich roadside verges and roundabouts
A512	Main road	Local	Ashby to Loughborough	Species rich roadside verges and roundabouts
*HS2	<i>Railway (proposed)</i>	<i>National</i>		<i>Potential to be a significant wildlife corridor</i>

**the current proposed route of HS2 will have great potential for wildlife corridor creation, if it is implemented.*

