

Cheshire Landscape Character Assessment

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Cheshire County Council
Transport & Regeneration Service



CHESHIRE COUNTY LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

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Introduction

1.1 Background & Scope

The Landscape Character Assessment replaces the Landscape Assessment of Cheshire (Cheshire County Council 1994). It is intended to provide an overview of the landscape of Cheshire. The study comprises the extent of the Shire County of Cheshire and therefore includes the six Districts of: Chester, Congleton, Crewe, Ellesmere Port, Macclesfield and Vale Royal. It is the first part of a body of work that will consist of two separate documents: a Landscape Character Assessment and a Landscape Strategy.

The Landscape Character Assessment has 3 objectives:

- To encourage a greater awareness of local landscape character
- To help to recognise contemporary pressures
- To stimulate debate about the future

The Landscape Character Assessment was originally published as a consultation draft in order to seek the views of those who have an interest in the Cheshire landscape, and was adopted by Cheshire County Council on 28 February 2009. Through its publication it is hoped to stimulate a wide-ranging debate to consider the most important issues affecting the Cheshire landscape. This informed discussion will assist the formulation of policies and guidance to ensure the planning and management of sustainable future landscapes.

A number of local authorities in England have published a Landscape Strategy, setting out policies and providing the basis for guidance to planners, developers and landowners. The primary objective of such a strategy is to ensure that an appreciation of landscape character is at the heart of development and land management decisions. A Landscape Strategy will not seek to suppress change but will make sustainable environmental quality the priority over short-term advantage or gain. Cheshire County Council intend to progress beyond the publication of a Landscape Character Assessment in 2009 towards the formulation of a Landscape Strategy.

The Cheshire Landscape Character Assessment follows closely the guidelines in Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland published in 2002 by the Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage.

1.2 The Importance of Landscape Character

Character is defined as a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements that make each place different. Landscape character is essentially that which makes a place unique and gives a locality its “sense of place”. Landscape Character is

influenced by particular combinations of visual, natural and historic elements together with settlement patterns and built components. Intangible aspects such as tranquillity and sense of place also have a strong influence upon the way the landscape is perceived.

Landscape has:

- **economic value**, providing the setting for economic activity and often becoming a central factor in attracting business and tourism.....
- **social and community value**, as an important part of people's lives, contributing to our sense of identity and wellbeing, bringing enjoyment and inspiration.....
- **environmental value**, as a home for wildlife and cultural record of society's use of the land.....

So it is crucial that we understand the character of the landscape when we consider how it might change – so any change is for the better.

Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland (2002)
Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage.

The distinctive character of our surroundings has a fundamental impact on our quality of life. An understanding of landscape character can inform the day to day decisions of individual land managers, farmers and foresters. Identifying, protecting and enhancing the natural, historic and cultural elements that contribute to character are key activities contributing to sustainability.

1.3 Policy Context

Government guidance outlined in *Planning Policy Statement (PPS1): Creating Sustainable Communities* and *Planning Policy Statement (PPS12): Local Development Framework* firmly places high quality sustainable development and an appreciation of the importance of landscape character at the heart of the new planning system. (See box below)

Cheshire County Council seeks to protect and enhance those aspects of landscape character which are valued and appreciated. This is an important element of current county council policies and strategies covering a wide range of issues such as spatial planning, biodiversity, the rural economy, tourism, mineral extraction and waste disposal. The borough and district councils in Cheshire have published plans and strategies with similar aims and objectives.

Planning Policy Statement (PPS1): Creating Sustainable Communities

Planning should facilitate and promote sustainable and inclusive patterns of urban and rural development by:

- making suitable land available for development in line with economic, social and environmental objectives to improve people's quality of life;
- contributing to sustainable economic development;
- **protecting and enhancing the natural and historic environment, the quality and character of the countryside**, and existing communities;
- ensuring high quality development through good and inclusive design, and the efficient use of resources.....

At a national level Government Agencies such as Natural England or the Environment Agency support a range of actions or initiatives to protect important or valued landscapes. The need to develop an appreciation of landscape character is confirmed in the Regional Spatial Strategy (see box below)

Regional Spatial Strategy for the North West of England September 2008

Policy EM1 (A): Landscape

Plans, strategies, proposals and schemes should identify, protect, maintain and enhance natural, historic and other distinctive features that contribute to the character of landscapes and places in the North West.

They should be informed by and recognise the importance of:

Detailed landscape character assessments and strategies, which local authorities should produce, set in the context of the North West Joint Character Area Map.

In the past the emphasis has been upon the preservation of designated landscapes, such as National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty etc. with their exceptional natural resources and high amenity and cultural values. All current development plans for Cheshire (Structure Plan, Local Plans etc.) feature the local designation of Areas of Special County Value (ASCV). These were designated in the mid-seventies for their aesthetic value, i.e. they are regarded as the most attractive areas of the Cheshire countryside. This traditional approach has been reasonably effective in protecting and conserving intact, highly regarded landscapes. However there is also a need to target efforts at those landscapes which are currently undervalued due to a perceived degeneration or breakdown. Areas of disturbed or degraded land are often considered to be unattractive and underused. The reasons

for landscape deterioration can be many and varied: fragmentation of landownership, cessation of traditional land management, or radical change in use, often allied to a new economic functionality. Degraded land can attract further misuse or nuisance activities. The appearance of the landscape has a direct affect upon the way it is perceived and it is widely recognised that degraded landscapes have an adverse affect upon local pride.

Policies are needed which positively address all landscapes, not just the most valued. There is a need to promote positive landscape change by seeking new uses for disturbed or degraded land. In the most extreme cases where landscapes have been lost or transformed this may require a conscious decision to create new landscapes with a new economic function and appropriate land management.

Current Government guidance also emphasises the importance of good design and recognises that design policies should be based on a proper assessment of the character of the surrounding built and natural environment. This approach relies upon good quality design to retain and promote local distinctiveness and a sense of place. (See box below)

Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas (2004)

1.(VI). All development in rural areas should be well designed and inclusive, in keeping and scale with its location, and **sensitive to the character of the countryside and local distinctiveness.**

13. Local planning authorities should prepare policies and guidance that encourage good quality design throughout their rural areas, in accordance with Annex C to PPS1, and **utilising tools such as Landscape Character Assessments** and Village or Town Design Statements, and the design elements of Village or Parish Plans prepared by local communities.

24. The Government recognises and accepts that there are areas of landscape outside nationally designated areas that are particularly highly valued locally. The Government believes that carefully drafted, criteria-based policies in LDDs, **utilising tools such as landscape character assessment**, should provide sufficient protection for these areas, without the need for rigid local designations that may unduly restrict acceptable, sustainable development and the economic activity that underpins the vitality of rural areas.

1.4 Purpose of a Landscape Strategy

The purpose of the Landscape Strategy is to conserve and enhance the character and diversity of the Cheshire landscape. The aims of a Landscape Strategy are:

- To inform new planning policies on landscape, as well as Supplementary Planning Documents.
- To guide and inform the development control process.
- To promote public awareness of landscape character and the importance of conservation and enhancement of the landscape.
- To guide and inform project planning by local and national agencies.
- To assist the formulation of landscape management policies.

The appreciation of landscape character is essential to inform responsible decision making and is a pre-requisite for the planning of sustainable future landscapes. A comprehensive Landscape Character Assessment is therefore the first stage in the formulation of a Landscape Strategy.

A Landscape Strategy is a non-statutory plan which addresses issues that affect the landscape and sets out objectives for their conservation and enhancement. In the case of a shire county such as Cheshire many of these issues are considered in other plans and strategies produced by a number of local authorities or regional agencies. A Cheshire Landscape Strategy will also overlap geographically with area-based plans such as the Mersey Forest Plan. A primary function of the Cheshire Landscape Strategy will be to bring together into a single document, information which is currently available in a range of publications and media, and consider the significance and connectivity of existing projects and initiatives. It is intended that the strategy should support and complement existing plans and environmental strategies to encourage partnership working and promote coordinated action on the environment.

Landscape character assessment will inform a Landscape Strategy, which in turn should protect the environment while accommodating and influencing change. A Landscape Strategy can assist in the targeting of land management initiatives and agri-environmental schemes. A Landscape Strategy can identify priorities for conservation, renewal or restoration in the landscape. It will inform existing environmental improvement and regeneration initiatives like the Mersey Forest, Weaver Valley Regional Park and Sandstone Ridge Environmental Project (SREP) A Landscape Strategy can also encourage the conception of a range of secondary strategies and action plans, e.g. a separate and distinct strategy to encourage and direct the expansion of woodlands and forestry in the county.

1.5 Approach and methodology

The landscape characterisation process has involved extensive research, analysis, evaluation and consultation. This has been undertaken by an in-house team of qualified and experienced landscape architects and planners, with specialised input from ecologists, archaeologist and foresters. The process has required the utilisation and assessment of a wide body of information including: topography, geology and soils, land cover and settlement pattern, vegetation types, hydrology, contemporary air photos and historical maps.

Data was drawn from a large number of sources including Ordnance Survey data. Much of the database was accessed via a comprehensive Geographical Information System (G.I.S.) that allowed the process of overlay mapping. This desk-based analysis was followed by field surveys, both to test and revise the emerging character type boundaries and also to provide a description of visual characteristics. Collation and evaluation of all the information thus gathered allowed the identification of generic landscape types and individual landscape character areas.

Landscape character: A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another, rather than better or worse

Landscape character types are generic types which possess broadly similar patterns of geology, landform, soils, vegetation, land use, settlement and field pattern in every area where they occur.

The same landscape character types may occur in different parts of the county.

Landscape character areas are the unique individual geographical areas in which landscape types occur. They share generic characterisations with other areas of the same type but also have their own particular identity.

Character area names are geographically specific, attributed to a single, unique area.

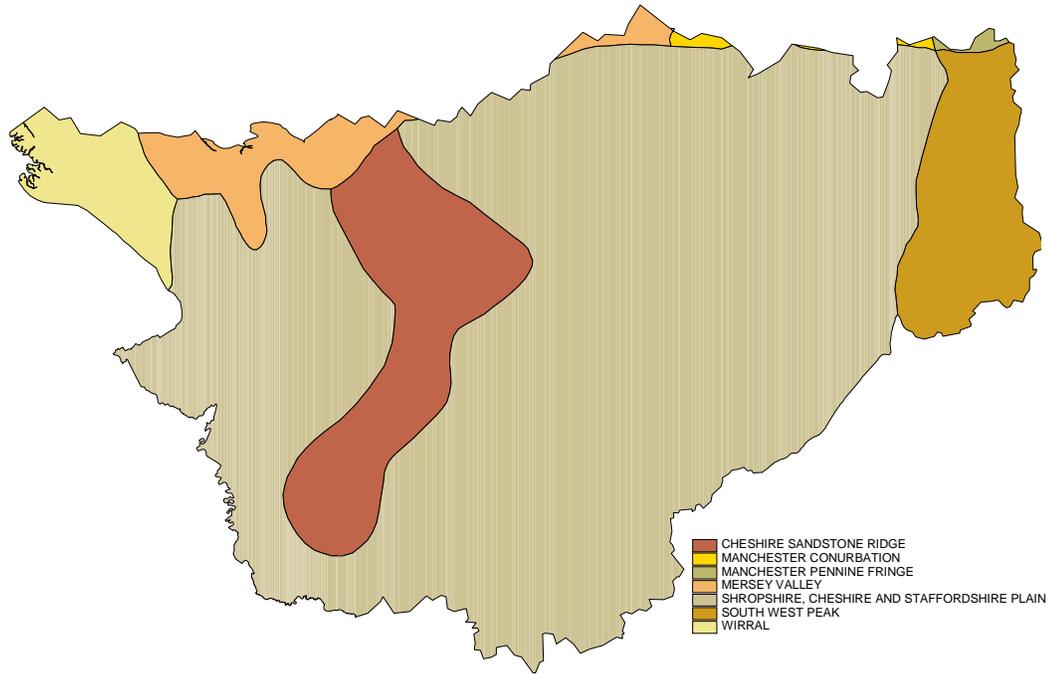
*(Ref: Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland
Countryside Agency & Scottish Natural Heritage 2002)*

The National Character Map - Joint Character Areas

The starting point for the Cheshire Landscape Character Assessment was the Joint Character Areas - identified by the Countryside Commission, English Nature and English Heritage in 1996. This mapping provided the context to understand the Cheshire landscape at the national and regional level. The Joint Character Areas (J.C.A.s) that are identified for Cheshire as follows:

- JCA 53 - South West Peak
- JCA 54 - Manchester Pennine Fringe
- JCA 55 - Manchester Conurbation
- JCA 59 - Wirral
- JCA 60 - Mersey Valley
- JCA 61 - Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain
- JCA 62 - Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

Broadly speaking the J.C.A approach breaks Cheshire down into the low-lying flat and gently undulating Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain, the distinctive Cheshire Sandstone Ridge, which runs north-south through this expansive areas; the South Peak upland slopes and moorland plateau; and the flat drained marsh and mudflats and saltmarsh of the Mersey Valley.



Given the scale of the J.C.A. it is perhaps not surprising to find that, under close scrutiny, the boundaries identified are not a faithful representation of the Cheshire landscape. For example, sections of the sandstone ridge are omitted from JCA 62. However, this was a tool designed for specific purposes at a regional and national level, which the county level Landscape Character Assessment is intended to build upon and improve.

1.6 Relationship to other studies

A number of pre-existing bodies of work provided useful additional information to inform the characterisation process.

The Cheshire Historic Landscape Character Assessment,

The Cheshire Historic Landscape Characterisation was completed in 2005. This project has recorded the visible evidence of human history, which forms the modern landscape. This has been achieved by identifying landscape attributes

from a range of historical maps. These attributes are categorised into a series of Groups, Types and Sub-types and their extent mapped and analysed using a Geographic Information System (GIS).

This work enables the historic character of any given area, together with the historic processes which formed it, to be shown cartographically. Thus the distinctive historic dimension of the County's rural environment can be appreciated, providing a significant contribution to both the identification of the boundaries of character types and areas as well as adding invaluable detail to the description of individual character areas.

The detailed study into the time-depth of the landscape includes the size, scale and shape of enclosure, information essential to the identification of certain historic land uses such as former parks and commons but extremely helpful with all landscape types. For instance, in the upland areas where enclosure occurred from the 18th century onwards fields are generally regular in form, with stone walls on the higher elevations. In the steep sided valleys and the transitional slopes at a lower elevation, hedgerow boundaries are more frequent and fields are older in date. Such differences in landscape features have therefore contributed to the identification of different types in this upland area.

Across much of the rest of the County, for example on the Lowland Plain, boundaries typically comprise hedgerows with standard trees. There is however, a great variation in pattern depending upon the date of the field system. For example, relict medieval fields are typically small and irregular in shape, while later re-organisation and improvement are typically larger, more regular in plan and tend to overlie earlier landscape features such as ridge and furrow. Where there are clearly surviving areas of medieval fields and post medieval enclosure it has been possible to break large character types down into individual landscape character areas with well defined local characteristics.

Ecoscapes

Professor John Rodwell's ecological evaluation of the County - Ecoscapes - which combines study of geology, terrain, soils and drainage patterns with the mapping of potential natural vegetation has been invaluable as a tool for understanding the landscape of Cheshire. The study also considers the influence of cultural factors, such as landscape management, exploitation and intervention, and their influence upon the overall character represented as spatial patterns of vegetation types.

This body of work identified five zonal ecotypes: Peak Plateau, Peak Fringe, Peak Foothills, Driftland Plain, Sandy Ridge and Terrace.

These ecotypes account for approx. 84% of the land area of the county. The work also identified azonal types determined by hydrology, which cut across geological and climatic boundaries, and proved particularly useful for the identification of key water bodies, mosslands, and the distinctive "wich saltlands".

District Level Landscape Character Assessments

Three of the six districts councils within Cheshire have completed LCA studies.

These are:

- Chester City Council (1998)
- Congleton Borough Council (2002)
- Vale Royal Borough Council (2007)

These studies have been consulted and have provided useful background information.

2.00 Forces for Change

2.1 General

The countryside is constantly changing in response to human activity and natural processes. In certain areas the cumulative effect of change has become more obvious in recent years, generating a concern for the erosion or loss of local character. The perception of what is considered “appropriate” development in the countryside may also change over time. Similarly change which is regarded as positive by some may be considered as negative by others.

Cheshire County Council completed the *Cheshire Historic Landscape Characterisation Project* in 2005 and this has provided a wealth of useful information. It has contributed significantly to our understanding of how the Cheshire countryside, with its inherent landscape, ecological and historical resources, has changed in response to human activity and natural processes.

There is a perception that the pace of change is now much more rapid compared with previous centuries and the demands upon the landscape are more diverse. New patterns of agricultural use and land management combine with demands for new highways and infrastructure, retail and residential development on the edge of towns. Ease of transport and improved communication technology have fuelled the desire to live in the countryside and intensified the pressure to expand or infill our villages. The current commercial incentive to convert or improve traditional buildings is evident to anyone travelling through the countryside.

Many diverse factors can contribute to change in the landscape:

- Changes to agriculture and land management
- Built development
- Infrastructure
- Mineral extraction and waste disposal
- Recreation and tourism
- Climate change
- Small scale incremental change

The landscape character assessment identifies the Key Forces for Change within each landscape character type and considers the implications for each type in terms of the impact upon landscape character and the key environmental features.

2.2 Agriculture

Our agricultural landscapes experienced major changes to character and biodiversity in the second half of the twentieth century under the influence of national and European Community legislation. The desire for increased productivity through technological improvements resulted in the loss of many traditional landscape features and a drastic reduction in wildlife and habitats. In recent decades the increasing awareness of the wider environmental impact of such policies has led to a fundamental change in emphasis, with efforts directed towards a more sustainable approach.

The key forces for change in agriculture are likely to be:

- ❖ Certain forms of development associated with farm diversification can have a negative impact upon landscape character. This may involve the loss of traditional buildings and the re-use of existing buildings and their surrounds for industrial, commercial and storage uses. New uses can contribute to the loss of tranquillity in rural areas, e.g. new retail uses attracting increased levels of road traffic.
- ❖ Continuing change in the pattern of land ownership with a move towards larger land holdings. A likely demand for more centralised and larger buildings with increased visual intrusion and associated changes to landscape character.
- ❖ Continuing decline in the traditional management of hedgerows, leading to the loss of the historic field pattern and increasing use of fencing.
- ❖ Increase in part-time “hobby farming” with associated changes to land ownership, fragmentation of traditional landholdings and decline in traditional farming practices.
- ❖ Pressure for new uses for marginal land in some areas, such as horse paddocks or leisure use.
- ❖ Increase in areas under arable crops and a trend towards silage production. Possible move towards energy crops with associated changes to landscape character.
- ❖ Continuing decline in traditional land management practices leading to reduction, fragmentation and deterioration of habitats. Loss of ponds through drainage and in-fill plus nutrient run-off from surrounding farmland. Decline in

- species-rich hedgerows at some locations. Intensification of grassland management leading to loss of species-rich grassland.
- ❖ Increased uptake in agri-environmental schemes such as Environmental Stewardship targeted at traditional features contributing to landscape character, i.e. field boundaries, ponds etc.
 - ❖ In uplands areas reduction or abandonment of grazing, often evident in smaller marginal enclosures, may lead to scrub encroachment.
 - ❖ Lack of a sustainable grazing regime for the moorland areas. Over-grazing can lead to species impoverishment and soil erosion. Under-grazing can lead to natural succession to scrub and woodland at inappropriate locations
 - ❖ Farmland in the urban fringe is often subject to additional pressures such as recreational activities, trespass, vandalism and fly tipping. New road schemes can lead to fragmentation of ownership making the movement of stock more difficult. Increased traffic levels contribute to the loss of tranquillity and erosion of rural character.

2.3 Woodland and Forestry

Cheshire is a sparsely wooded county with less than 4% woodland cover. Many smaller woodlands are not actively managed. The key forces for change related to woodland and forestry are likely to be:

- ❖ A number of existing environmental initiatives such as the Mersey Forest, S.R.E.P. provide localised support for landowners to encourage tree planting to reinforce landscape character. It is likely such projects, or similar efforts, will continue in the future. However elsewhere across the county the financial incentives remain insufficient to encourage a change of land use from agriculture to forestry.
- ❖ Continuing decline in woodland management. The continued health of woodland depends upon suitable management to ensure a succession of growth, productivity and the maintenance of habitat diversity. Traditional management techniques, e.g. coppicing, have been abandoned for some time. Lack of management may allow invasive alien or introduced species to overwhelm the original woodland plant community. The small size of the majority of farm woodlands in Cheshire (less than 2ha in size) means they are vulnerable to damage and encroachment from surrounding land uses.
- ❖ The isolation and fragmentation of relic areas of ancient woodland means they are highly susceptible to pressure from surrounding land uses such as intensive agriculture, built development or industry. In such situations the lack of protection or positive intervention may lead to further decline and shrinkage.

- ❖ The historic introduction of conifers into ancient woodlands presents continuing management problems and threat to traditional ground flora.
- ❖ Where woods are grazed there is little natural regeneration and an impoverished ground flora, leading to loss of biodiversity and eventual decline.
- ❖ A continuing search for alternative recreational activities for existing woodlands such as paint-balling, 4x4 driving courses etc. Such activities can create unsightly scars within the landscape, in addition to the adverse impact upon biodiversity and natural regeneration.
- ❖ A change in the key management objectives for Forestry Commission landholdings, moving away from primarily timber production towards leisure and biodiversity objectives. The designation of Delamere Forest Park and the new management regime has already had positive implications for the appearance of this landscape.

2.4 Built Development and Infrastructure

The location of Cheshire, as a predominantly rural county on the margins of the major conurbations of Greater Manchester, Merseyside and the Potteries, has generated a great demand for built development and improved communications. The key forces for change related to built development and infrastructure are likely to be:

- ❖ Expansion of suburbs and infill development in rural areas where the scale and pattern of the new build is not in sympathy with traditional development or existing landscape character.
- ❖ The use of standard designs or inappropriate building materials which fail to reflect traditional building styles and materials and contribute to the erosion of local distinctiveness and character.
- ❖ The expansion of retail, leisure, commercial and industrial developments on the outskirts of towns, where the larger scale and introduction of new building materials diminishes the rural character of the surrounding area.
- ❖ The demand for new highways to bypass settlements or urban centres leading to disruption of landholdings and field patterns. The resulting isolation and fragmentation can lead to loss of historic features and habitats. Higher traffic levels can lead to higher noise levels and visual impact with associated loss of tranquillity in rural areas.
- ❖ New overhead power lines and pylons can cause substantial visual disruption leading to loss of tranquillity and erosion of rural character.

2.5 Minerals & Waste

Cheshire possesses mineral resources of regional and national importance in the form of silica sand and building sand. The major extraction areas are located in the centre of the county near Delamere and towards the eastern margins in the vicinity of Congleton and Macclesfield. The county council is also under pressure to identify additional landfill waste disposal facilities to satisfy the future needs of community and industry. The key forces for change related to minerals and waste are likely to be:

- ❖ The large sites required for waste disposal operations and mineral extraction sites can result in the loss of extensive areas of land. In the case of agricultural land this may involve the loss of historic landscapes with their ancient field patterns, traditional features such as hedgerows and ponds and associated habitats.
- ❖ The restoration of mineral extraction or waste disposal sites can provide an opportunity for the creation of new habitats and landscapes. Sensitive planning and design can replicate some of the features lost to the development and reinforce the character of the surrounding landscape. Such sites may provide new opportunities for public access and enjoyment.
- ❖ The machinery and traffic associated with the site during the operational period may generate noise or visual intrusion leading to loss of tranquillity and rural character.

2.6 Recreation and Tourism

Many visitors are drawn to particular parts of the county by the attractive character of the countryside. The elevated landscapes of Cheshire's hills and ridges, the river valleys, the larger meres and historic parklands are all particularly popular for informal countryside recreation. The key forces for change related to recreation and tourism are likely to be:

- ❖ Increased demand for additional recreational facilities at popular locations. The visual intrusion associated with car-parks, visitor centres etc. can have an adverse affect upon landscape character.
- ❖ Increased recreational activity can lead to erosion, disturbance and disruption of sensitive habitats and species.
- ❖ Increased demand within certain areas for visitor accommodation such as caravan parks, holiday villages etc. The change of land use and the potential

visual intrusion of the new development can lead to the loss of agricultural landscapes with consequential changes in landscape character.

2.7 Climate change

There is increasing evidence of global climate change. The government has been advised that the implications for the UK climate could include the following scenarios:

- An increase in average temperatures.
- Milder-wetter winters with fewer frosts and less snow.
- Hotter, drier summers with more frequent droughts
- More frequent occurrence of extreme events such as floods and storms

The exact changes are difficult to ascertain at a local level but there are likely to be both direct and indirect impacts upon the Cheshire landscape. The key forces for change related to climate change are likely to be:

- ❖ Higher temperatures and changes in rainfall patterns are likely to affect the biodiversity of the county, with the loss or adaptation of certain habitats or species on the edge of their range. This may involve the localised extinction of some species and the introduction of new plants and animals. There may be possible gains in some areas as the milder climate allows the northern expansion of certain species within the UK.
- ❖ Drier summers may lead to a reduction in groundwater levels and a drying out of ponds and wetlands. Fragile habitats such as blanket bog, lowland raised mire and wet woodlands may be particularly vulnerable. Veteran and mature trees that are already under stress from other factors such as close ploughing or compaction are likely to be very vulnerable to periods of drought.
- ❖ Increased frequencies of winter storms may result in more storm damage to woodland.
- ❖ Warmer drier summers may lead to an increase in the incidence of fires in moorland, heathland and woodland.
- ❖ Increased investment in irrigation reservoirs to store winter rainfall, with associated issues of visual intrusion within the countryside.
- ❖ Rising sea levels may affect coastal habitats and could result in the loss of certain areas such as saltmarsh.
- ❖ Increased investment in coastal defences and flood protection measures, with associated issues of visual intrusion and change in character.

- ❖ Increased periods of saturation and flooding in heavy, poorly drained or retentive soils such as clays.
- ❖ An increase in the length of the growing season and changing patterns of rainfall may lead to changes in agriculture. This could involve an increase in arable cultivation and the replacement of traditional crops by drought tolerant species such as maize. Land management practices in the upland fringes may adapt to the warmer climate with an increase in arable crops and new patterns of animal husbandry.
- ❖ A warmer climate may lead to an increase in the occurrence and severity of pest infection and disease.
- ❖ Warmer drier summers may lead to increased demand for outdoor recreational use of the countryside and facilities such as holiday villages etc with associated problems such as erosion, visual intrusion and loss of tranquillity.
- ❖ It is possible that certain locations in the more elevated parts of Cheshire will be targeted for the location of wind turbines. Such structures are likely to be highly contentious due to their prominent location and the associated visual impact.

2.8 Small scale incremental change

By their nature small-scale developments are usually low profile and do not often feature in the headlines or public debate. Over time however, the incremental impact of a series of poor quality developments or inappropriate changes to landscape character arising from different management regimes, can have a major impact upon the quality of the environment. The key forces for change related to small-scale incremental change include:

- ❖ The erosion of the built environment character by failing to respect local building styles and vernacular materials when undertaking property improvements. The use of inappropriate building materials can diminish local distinctiveness and contribute to the gradual imposition of a bland homogeneous building style across the county. The “improvement” of the surroundings to rural buildings may be carried out in an inappropriate suburban style which further diminishes rural character.
- ❖ Increased traffic in some rural areas can create a demand for small scale road improvements, often required because of concerns for safety and improved visibility. Some engineering works can lead to the loss of existing features such as roadside trees or field boundaries. Others may require new signage or lighting. All such efforts can contribute to the loss of local distinctiveness and the erosion of landscape character. The cumulative effect is often the urbanisation of the countryside.

- ❖ The localised introduction of inappropriate species on field boundaries, such as conifer windbreaks in the vicinity of fruit farms, resulting in locally dominant but alien features within the landscape.
- ❖ Higher traffic levels in some rural areas can lead to impromptu widening of lanes or damage to banks. The resulting erosion and loss of vegetation is often unsightly and may encourage fly tipping.
- ❖ Poor or inappropriate management of field boundaries can have a subtle, almost intangible but ultimately insidious affect upon landscape character. In many Cheshire landscapes the field pattern and associated hedgerows or dry-stone walls are an essential component of the local character. Any loss or decline in these features would lead to a fundamental change in the landscape and the erosion of local distinctiveness.

3.00 The Landscape Character of Cheshire - An Overview

Cheshire has a rich and diverse landscape with a unique character. This character is based upon the intimate proximity of a range of contrasting landscapes. In the popular perception Cheshire is associated with a simple landscape structure: An extensive lowland plain characterised by flat pastureland devoted to dairy farming, with a prominent centrally located sandstone ridge. Meanwhile in the east the land rises steadily in the direction of the Pennine foothills and the Shropshire and Derbyshire boundaries, becoming more remote and exposed as altitude increases.

In reality the Cheshire landscape is much more complex. Much of the county is covered with glacial deposits which are varied in nature and determine different soil types and drainage characteristics. The lowland plain is incised with river valleys with characteristic wooded cloughs. Relic natural landscapes such as mosses, heaths and meres are dispersed throughout the county. The many and varied natural influences upon the landscape are complemented by different approaches to land management. Areas that share the same natural influences of geology, soil and drainage have acquired a distinct and different appearance due to the way the landscape has been managed in the past. For example, where the drive for nineteenth century farming improvements was at its most intense the landscape developed a very different character. This legacy remains in the form of a simplified field pattern and the many impressive farmsteads and cottages.

Topography has been a key feature in the process of breaking the County down into character types. Clearly there is a link between topography and geology - with the higher elevations defined by sandstone protrusions and the millstone and grit stone outcrops. The mid-Cheshire Sandstone Ridge and the hills of east Cheshire provide distinctive features in the landscape when compared with the flat and

gently rolling topography that defines much of the County. These elevated parts of Cheshire are characterised by long views which allow a wider appreciation of the strong contrasts in landscape character due to the difference in topography. On a clear day it is possible to appreciate the full extent of the low lying Cheshire Plain and its regional context, surrounded by the higher ground of the Clwydian Hills to the west and the Pennines to the east.

The distinctive upland topographic features of the mid-Cheshire ridge have lent themselves to the identification of the **Sandstone Ridge** and **Sandstone Fringe** landscape character types. Both include key characteristics that set them apart from the rest of the County, but fundamentally the Sandstone Ridge type is identified as the upland sandstone outcrop that lies above 100m AOD, while the Sandstone Fringe includes the lower elevations and the outlying areas of sandstone that emerges from the Lowland Plain areas and Rolling Farmland. For example, given the scale of this assessment, the Sandstone Fringe character type includes Helsby Hill, which is not of substantial enough mass to be included as a character area in its own right.

In the east of the County the topography and geology have influenced the identification of the **Upland Footslopes** (100-370m AOD), **Upland Fringe** (160-480m AOD) and **Moorland Plateau** (280-560m AOD) landscape character types. The subtleties of land use and vegetation types have allowed these types to be further broken down; showing that elevation alone is not sufficient reason for the identification of landscape character types in this complex part of the County. Subtle differences in settlement pattern, boundary types, building materials and woodland cover account for the different and distinct character areas within these types.

Topography and geology in turn influence soil types, which for many centuries has been key to land use. A thick deposit of Devensian till overlies much of the lower lying parts of the County. These deep drift deposits from the last ice age are responsible for the surface relief of much of the present surface of lowland Cheshire. They are characterised by the poorly drained, heavy soils, of the **West Lowland Plain** and **East Lowland Plain** landscape character types which are suitable for grass and have proved ideal for large scale dairy farming. In both cases flat and almost flat topography has lent itself to dispersed settlement with low woodland cover.

Rolling Farmland shares many of the same characteristics as the Lowland Plain types but there is a greater variation in topography and this is also evidently a type with a greater occurrence of acid grassland.

Although not treated as full character types, for the sake of the mapping exercise: major Urban and Industrial areas have been identified. Where urban areas occur within character types - they are discussed under the settlement pattern section.

The exploitation of rock salt in Cheshire has left its mark in a number of ways across the County. Significant, and identified as a Landscape Character Type, are the **Salt Flashes** of Northwich and Sandbach, which together identify a combination of below ground geology and land use.

The deposition of glacial material across sections of the County has had a profound effect on both the physical appearance of the landscape and its land use. In the landscape character type **Sandy Woods** - glacial sands and gravel form hummocky terrain within which are naturally occurring meres and mosslands. Sand and gravel have been extracted from these locations and in some cases continue to be. Many worked quarries are now flooded and restored to provide nature habitats. These types combine natural environment characteristics with modern land uses including large conifer plantations and large regular fields.

Over much of Cheshire, woodland cover is very low - averaging approximately 4%. Across the Lowland Plain this is particularly evident but there is a slightly higher density in both the **Lower Farms and Woods** and **Higher Farms and Woods** landscape character types - hence the inclusion of this feature within the types' name due to the greater frequency of copses and coverts. The undulating nature of the topography in this part of the County combined with the increasing elevations compared with the Lowland Plains also contributes to the character of these types.

Across Cheshire there are a number of designed parklands within large managed estates which provide a distinctive aspect to the County's landscape. Typically parklands include high levels of woodland cover and water features - often natural meres that have been adapted for ornamental purposes. This is the **Estate, Woodland and Mere** landscape character type. With the exception of the extensive Tatton estate these character areas generally comprise more than one historic parkland.

Two estates form exceptions to this rule: Eaton - which is a flat area with a sandstone solid geology, hence a lack of water features and Lyme Park - an upland moorland area which combines open moor with an estate house and designed gardens. Both of these estates are identified in their own right as character types due to their unique combination of characteristics, hence the designation of the **Lowland Estate** and **Upland Estate** landscape character type.

There are a handful of isolated water-logged areas where mosslands remain, having avoided being drained out of the landscape. These have been identified as a **Mossland** landscape character type in their own right. Here, the soils and below ground geology combine with historic and current extractive land uses to provide distinctive landscape character.

The main river valleys in the County have been identified as a character type and where appropriate broken down into character areas. Most are identified as the

River Valleys landscape character type and form distinct physical features incised into the surrounding flat or gently rolling landscape. The steep valley slopes are often a refuge for ancient woodland and provide a linear feature that is rich in biodiversity due to the range of terrestrial and aquatic habitats. This often presents a strong contrast with the more intensively managed farmland of the surrounding areas.

The Gowy is identified as a **Shallow River Basin** landscape character type due to its particular low-lying topographical character comprising an extensive historic flood plain dissected by drainage channels.

Alluvial deposits are fundamental to the identification of the landscape character type of **Mudflats and Saltmarsh**, while **Drained Marshland**, as the name suggests, has been identified as a landscape character type where marsh has been both enclosed and drained by a network of water-filled ditches.