

network has been created using data which describes the underpinning conditions which are suitable for wetlands, including geology and soil characteristics. It is able to predict where the ground is suitable for wetlands and as such allows decisions around where and what type of wetland, both natural and more artificial structures such as Sustainable Drainage Systems, could and should be located across the Borough. The Council will continue to work with Natural England to identify a full ecological network; with the Local Nature Partnership to produce a Local Nature Recovery Strategy; and give consideration to the need for the preparation of an SPD that will map out the ecological network and set out the Council's considerations and expectations when such sites are proposed for development or impacted by proposed development nearby.

- 8.3.20 The NPPF indicates that when determining planning applications local planning authorities should apply the avoidance, mitigation, compensation hierarchy, as outlined in paragraph 180(a). This indicates that if significant harm to biodiversity resulting from a development cannot be avoided (through locating on an alternative site with less harmful impacts), adequately mitigated, or, as a last resort, compensated for, then planning permission should be refused.
- 8.3.21 Securing net gains in biodiversity should follow the most up to date good practice guidance. This includes securing the best outcomes for biodiversity that demonstrably exceed existing obligations (i.e. do not deliver something that would occur anyway). The Council will set out the detail of how BNG measures will operate and it could be delivered in a future SPD.

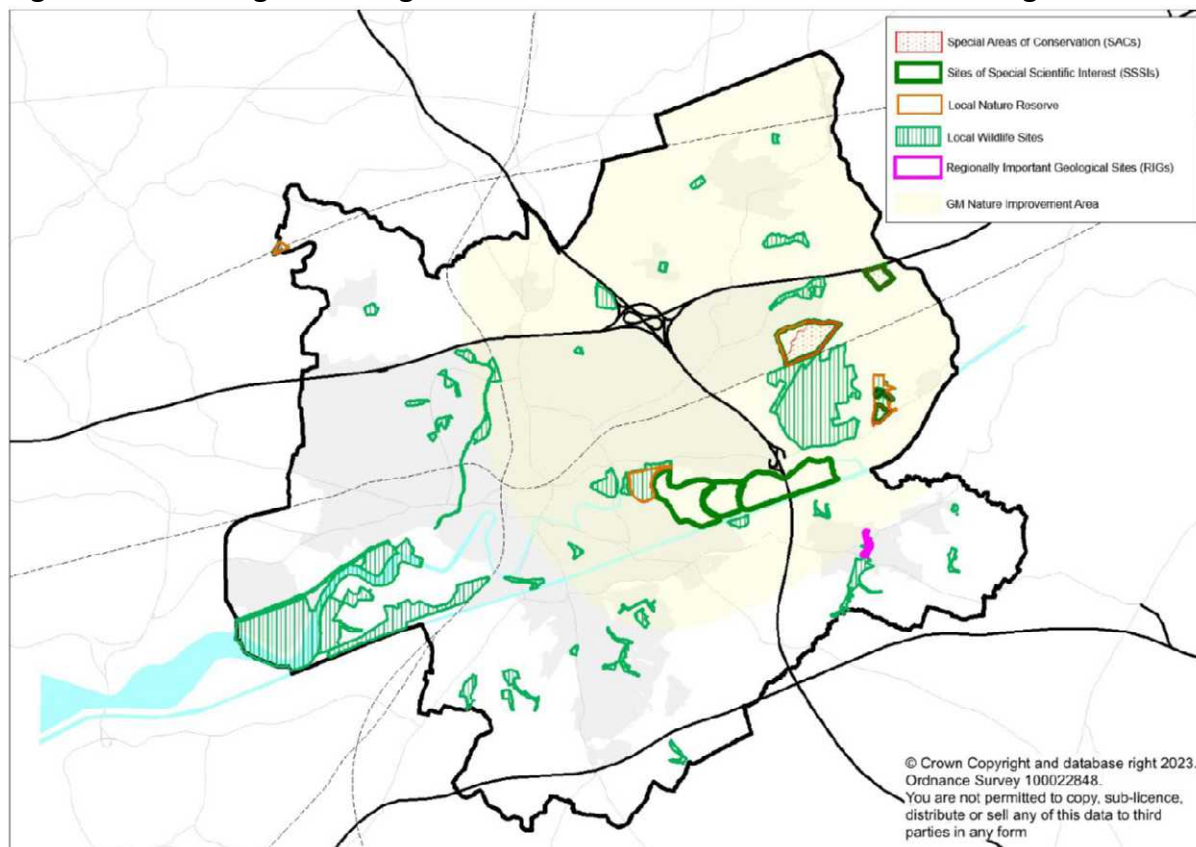
8.4 Biodiversity and Geodiversity in Warrington

- 8.4.1 In addition, to the strategic green links the Borough's green infrastructure network incorporates a range of designated sites of nature conservation value. These include: Public Rights of Way (PROW); Local Nature Reserves; Local Wildlife Sites; Special Areas of Conservation (SACs); Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs); Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGs); and the Great Manchester Wetlands Nature Improvement Area (NIA) (see Figure 14).
- 8.4.2 Warrington Borough contains numerous old marl ponds and several former mineral extraction sites, together with significant areas of open countryside that provide important wildlife habitats and are of high nature conservation value.
- 8.4.3 There are three designated European sites of international importance for nature conservation in the east of the Borough. The sites at Risley Moss and Holcroft Moss are two of three sites which make up the Manchester Mosses Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designated for their value as degraded raised peat bogs still capable of natural regeneration. The nearby Rixton Clay Pits comprises part of an extensive disused brickworks excavated for glacial boulder clay which have filled with water since workings ceased in the 1960s. The site is also a SAC designated for its value as habitat for Great Crested Newts. The site also supports species-rich

grassland, scrub and mature secondary woodland. All three of these sites together with Woolston Eyes are also nationally protected as a UK Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), the only such sites in the Borough.

- 8.4.4 Warrington has four Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) and 55 Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs). LNRs are a statutory designation made under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. Two of these, Risley Moss and Rixton Claypits, are also sites of international importance for nature conservation (SACs). LNRs are for both people and wildlife offering convenient access to nature and providing special opportunities to study or learn about nature or simply to enjoy it. LWSs are the most important non-statutory wildlife sites in Warrington and cover a wide variety of habitats such as ancient woodland, grassland, and wetlands. The quality and interconnectivity of these sites is vital to sustain wildlife in the context of pressures arising from urbanisation, agricultural intensification and climate change.
- 8.4.5 Warrington also has two Regionally Important Geological Sites (RIGs) (formerly Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation - SINCs) identified for their indigenous woodland species and geology outside statutorily protected sites such as SSSIs. They are important as an educational, historical and recreational resource.
- 8.4.6 The Great Manchester Wetlands NIA was adopted by the Greater Manchester and Cheshire Local Nature Partnerships in May 2013 and covers around 40,000 hectares extending across parts of Salford, Trafford, Wigan and Warrington. The area of the NIA within Warrington is shown on the Policies Map. The vision is for the NIA to become an exemplar of biodiversity restoration, enhancement and the delivery of landscape-scale ecological wetland network for wildlife and people.
- 8.4.7 The NIA designation does not prevent new development, and some of the allocations in this Local Plan are within the NIA. However, a location within the NIA makes it essential that a high level of appropriate green infrastructure is incorporated within any development site in order to increase the area of priority habitats, improve connectivity between habitats and species populations and enable the movement of key species within the NIA and beyond. Also the NIA includes extensive areas of peat deposits in the east of the Borough (see Figure 17), which are valuable elements of natural capital for the purposes of carbon storage in the form of restorable peat. Opportunities should be taken to restore the degraded bogs, wherever possible.

Figure 14 – Warrington’s Designated Sites of Nature Conservation and Geological Value



8.4.8 A number of species of plants, birds and animals are specifically protected by European or national legislation due to their significance or vulnerability. There are a number of protected animals that are found in the Borough. These include bats, water voles, owls, otters and Great Crested Newts.

Policy DC4 - Ecological Network

1. The Council will work with partners to protect, conserve, and restore biodiversity, secure a measurable net gain for biodiversity and enhance public access to nature across the Plan area. These efforts will be guided by national planning policy, the strategic approach to the care and management of the Borough’s Green Infrastructure contained in Policy DC3 and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

2. Designated sites and areas that make up the Borough’s ecological network and are recognised for their nature and geological value are shown on the Policies Map and include:

- a. European Sites of International Importance;
- b. Sites of Special Scientific Interest;
- c. Regionally Important Geological Sites;
- d. Local Nature Reserves;
- e. Local Wildlife Sites; and
- f. Wildlife Corridors/Nature Improvement Areas;

Other elements that make up the Borough's ecological network and are recognised for their nature and geological value include:

- g. irreplaceable, protected and priority habitats;
- h. ecological stepping stones and restoration areas; and
- i. other areas identified in the Borough's Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

The specific designated sites at the time of publication are detailed in Appendix 4.

Development affecting Sites of International Importance

3. Proposals for development, which may affect European Sites of International Importance will be subject to the most rigorous examination in accordance with the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended). Development or land use change not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site and which is likely to have significant effects on the site (either individually or in combination with other plans or projects) and which would affect the integrity of the site, will not be permitted unless the Council is satisfied that:

- a. there is no alternative solution; and
- b. there are imperative reasons of over-riding public interest for the development or land use change and where the biodiversity harm avoidance, mitigation and compensation hierarchy (set out in Part 8 of Policy DC4) has been followed. Any mitigation or compensatory provision must be assessed in a project related Habitats Regulations Assessment and be fully functional before any likely adverse effect arises.

Development affecting Sites of National Importance

4. Proposals for development in or likely to affect Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) will be subject to special scrutiny. Where such development may have an adverse effect, directly or indirectly, on the SSSI it will not be permitted unless the reasons for the development clearly outweigh the nature conservation value of the site itself and the national policy to safeguard the national network of such sites and the biodiversity harm avoidance, mitigation and compensation hierarchy (set out in Part 8 of this Policy) has been followed.

Development affecting Sites of Regional and Local Importance

5. Proposals for development likely to have an adverse effect on regionally and locally designated sites will not be permitted unless it can be clearly demonstrated that there are reasons for the development which outweigh the need to safeguard the substantive nature conservation value of the site or feature and the biodiversity harm avoidance, mitigation and compensation hierarchy (set out in Part 8 of this Policy) has been followed.

Development affecting Protected and/or Priority Species and Priority Habitats

6. Proposals for development which may adversely affect the integrity or continuity of UK priority habitats, irreplaceable habitats, or other habitats of local importance, or adversely affect EU Protected Species, UK Priority Species or other species of local importance, or which are the subject of Local Biodiversity Action Plans will only be permitted if it can be shown that the reasons for the development clearly outweigh the need to retain the

habitats or species affected and that the biodiversity harm avoidance, mitigation and compensation hierarchy (set out in Part 8 of this Policy) has been followed.

7. All development proposals affecting protected sites, wildlife corridors, priority habitats, irreplaceable habitats, EU Protected Species or priority species (as identified in Local Biodiversity Action Plans) should be accompanied by information proportionate to their nature conservation value as outlined in Part 5 of Policy DC3. Proposals must also be supported by a Preliminary Ecological Appraisal or, where potential significant effects to important ecological features are identified, an Ecological Impact Assessment.

8. Where a loss of, or harm to biodiversity, an ecological network and/or green infrastructure functionality is considered to be unavoidable, development proposals must include mitigation or, as a last resort, compensation measures. Following the application of the mitigation hierarchy, a measurable net gain in biodiversity assessed against the latest version of the DEFRA Metric must be secured. All proposals for off-site compensatory net gain/green infrastructure must be deployed strategically and as closely as possible to the affected ecological/GI asset and following good practice guidance.

9. Where development is permitted, the Council will consider the use of conditions or planning obligations to ensure the protection and enhancement of the site's nature conservation interest and/or to provide appropriate compensatory measures.

Why we have taken this approach

Biodiversity and Geodiversity

8.4.9 Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006¹ places a duty on all public authorities in England and Wales to have regard, in the exercise of their functions, to the purpose of conserving and enhancing biodiversity. Local planning authorities should take a pragmatic approach, with the aim of fulfilling statutory obligations in a way that minimises delays and burdens, whilst protecting the environment.

8.4.10 Conserving biodiversity is an important element of sustainable development. Government guidance in the NPPF (2021) and PPG indicates that in delivering sustainable development local authorities should enhance as well as protect biodiversity and natural habitats.

8.4.11 Paragraph 8 of the NPPF states that achieving sustainable development means that the planning system has three overarching objectives, which are interdependent and need to be pursued in mutually supportive ways (so that opportunities can be taken to secure net gains across each of the different objectives):

a) an economic objective – to help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right types is available in the right

¹ As amended by paragraph 102 (Part 6) of the Environment Act 2021.

places and at the right time to support growth, innovation and improved productivity; and by identifying and coordinating the provision of infrastructure;

b) a social objective – to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by ensuring that a sufficient number and range of homes can be provided to meet the needs of present and future generations; and by fostering a well-designed and safe built environment, with accessible services and open spaces that reflect current and future needs and support communities' health, social and cultural well-being; and

c) an environmental objective – to contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, helping to improve biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.

8.4.12 In addition, paragraph 174 of the NPPF states that the planning system should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

- protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity and geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan);
- recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland;
- maintaining the character of the undeveloped coast, while improving public access to it where appropriate;
- minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures;
- preventing new and existing development from contributing to, being put at unacceptable risk from, or being adversely affected by, unacceptable levels of soil, air, water or noise pollution or land instability. Development should, wherever possible, help to improve local environmental conditions such as air and water quality, taking into account relevant information such as river basin management plans; and
- remediating and mitigating despoiled, degraded, derelict, contaminated and unstable land, where appropriate.

8.4.13 Whilst sites of importance for their nature and geological value fall within the wider remit of 'Green Infrastructure', the NPPF (paragraph 175) requires the specific identification of such sites and a distinct policy approach to ensure their protection as well as taking a strategic approach to maintaining and enhancing networks of habitats and green infrastructure. Policy DC4 responds to this by setting out the

formal designations active within the Borough and ranking these in order of their importance, in order to guide the degree of protection afforded to these designated sites.

8.4.14 These designated sites are not only important in their own right but collectively they form part of an ecological network. Ecological networks are habitat patches suitable for particular types of species connected by movement corridors through the intervening habitat matrix which are important for maintaining biodiversity. Some of these sites experience pressure from leisure uses, agricultural practices and development. We must manage the Borough's ecological resource to prevent damage and habitat fragmentation and give appropriate support for wider duties, such as the Water Framework Directive and Habitat Regulations.

8.4.15 The NPPG confirms that the relevant evidence in identifying and mapping local ecological networks can include:

- the broad geological, geomorphological and bio-geographical character of the area, creating its main landscapes types;
- key natural systems and processes within the area, including fluvial and coastal;
- the location and extent of internationally, nationally and locally designated sites;
- the distribution of protected and priority habitats and species;
- areas of irreplaceable natural habitat;
- habitats where specific land management practices are required for their conservation;
- main landscape features which, due to their linear or continuous nature, support migration, dispersal and gene flow, including any potential for new habitat corridors to link any isolated sites that hold nature conservation value, and therefore improve species distribution;
- areas identified by national or local partnerships with potential for habitat enhancement or restoration, including those necessary to help biodiversity adapt to climate change or which could assist with the habitat shifts and species migrations arising from climate change;
- audits of green infrastructure, such as open space within urban areas;
- information on the biodiversity and geodiversity value of previously developed land and the opportunities for incorporating this in developments; and
- areas of geological value which would benefit from enhancement and management.

8.4.16 These networks also form important Green Infrastructure links which Policy DC3 seeks to protect, enhance and extend. Collectively, they form a network of corridors and stepping stones, allowing the survival and dispersal of species of biodiversity priority.

8.4.17 Part 8 of Policy DC4 sets out the approach to avoidance, mitigation, and as a last resort, compensation. Compensation means compensatory provision and may include a financial contribution towards delivery of compensatory measures where appropriate. It is crucial to the priority of 'biodiversity net gain' that appropriate

mitigation or, as a last resort, compensatory provision is made. It is important that the location of appropriate mitigation, replacement or other compensatory provision follows the sequential approach set out in the Policy. This seeks to target measures as closely as possible to the development site. In some instances, the immediate locality may include nearby sites outside the Borough.

8.5 Open Space, Sport and Recreation Provision

- 8.5.1 Access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation contributes to the health, well-being and cohesion of our communities as well as providing opportunities for active travel. As the Borough's population increases, the pressure on current provision will mount and there will be a need to provide significant areas of new open space and long term management arrangements.
- 8.5.2 The Local Plan will help deliver aims and objectives of other Council strategies, such as the Corporate Strategy and the Active Warrington Strategy, which seek to improve the health and wellbeing of Warrington's population by ensuring good access to sport and recreation opportunities.

Policy DC5 - Open Space, Sport and Recreation Provision

Open Space Strategy

1. The Council will work with partners to ensure that a comprehensive range of sport and recreation facilities will be provided across Warrington to meet the needs of the existing and proposed population, including:

- a. Equipped play areas
- b. Informal play areas
- c. Parks & Gardens
- d. Natural/Semi-natural greenspaces
- e. Allotments
- f. Sports pitches and facilities

2. The Council will encourage partnership working to ensure that sufficient quantity and quality of, and convenient access to open space, sport and recreation provision is secured through the following measures:

- a. Protecting existing provision and ensuring that any new open space created will be afforded protection in accordance with Policy DC3 and criteria (7) below;
- b. Addressing existing deficiencies in provision through qualitative enhancement of existing provision, improving access to existing facilities or securing new provision; and
- c. Ensuring that proposals for new development contribute to open space, sport and recreation provision commensurate to the need generated by the proposals.

3. In determining the nature of new or improved provision the Council will be guided by the evidence base (Open Space Audit; Sports Facilities Strategic Needs Assessment; Playing