

## **Semi-natural and natural open space**

### **Definition**

- 6.1 This type of open space includes woodlands, urban forestry, scrub, grasslands (e.g. downlands, commons, meadows), wetlands, open and running water, nature reserves and wastelands with a primary purpose of wildlife conservation and biodiversity.

**Picture 6.1 – Tilton SSSI – an example of a natural and semi-natural area**



### **Specific strategic context and consultations**

#### ***Conservation importance***

- 6.2 Among the natural and semi-natural areas there are 19 countryside sites that Vale Royal Borough Council manage. The sites cover 156 hectares and hold a wide variety of habitats ranging from waterside meadows to ancient woodland including:
- 12 sites of significant ecological value
  - 2 local nature reserves
  - one nationally important site of specific scientific interest
  - one regional important geological site
  - 2 sites of biological interest

- 6.3 The most popular sites are classified as 'First Tier' sites in the hierarchical classification system, and they tend to be the larger and better used sites, including:
- Marshall's Arm LNR – this was Vale Royal's first local nature reserve and was designated in 1998. The site comprises of three distinct habitats, including woodland, grassland/meadows and wetland/open water
  - Furey Woodland – a reclaimed site which, was once a tip, used by the chemical industry. The site has two areas of grassland and a woodland spreading down the slope to the River Weaver
  - Leftwich Meadows – the site was once part of a larger privately owned estate and is divided into two main areas with a linear woodland and grassland running down to a wetland area
  - Helsby Quarry LNR - it was once a working quarry called Mountskill Quarry and is now a designated regional important geological site. It consists mainly of woodland, grassland and rock faces.
  - Rilshaw Meadows – the residents of Winsford have used this historic site for recreational purposes for over 100 years. The site is made up of four main habitats including woodland, grassland, hedgerow and margins of the flash. KM

6.4 Four of the sites discussed above, and an additional site; Launde Park Wood are either owned or managed by the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust:

- Great Merrible Wood
- Tilton Railway Cutting
- Launde Big Wood

6.5 Despite the presence of these sites, The Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust believe that there is an urgent need for more open space sites of high quality within the district.

6.6 The Harborough District Community Plan states the intention to increase the number of Local Nature Reserves from one to five by 2010, a target that is supported by English Nature.

6.7 Policies in the existing Harborough District Local Plan consider recreational development at reservoirs, and permit such development providing the use does not have an adverse effect upon the amenities of the area. It is suggested that suitable development of these areas may include nature trails, picnic areas, improved footpaths and bridleway and cycle access, along with adequate parking provision.

### **Consultation**

6.8 The Local Plan Review Issues Papers raised a number of comments specifically relating to natural and semi-natural open spaces.

6.9 The production of a Biodiversity Strategy is supported, and in general encouraging biodiversity by appropriately landscaping open spaces is considered a good idea.

Biodiversity would also be encouraged by the retention and protection of hedgerows, trees, old railway lines, rivers and wetland areas.

- 6.10 There were a number of habitats that were deemed in need of protection including woods and trees, open areas, dismantled railway lines, waterways and bog areas.

### **Quantity**

#### **Setting provision standards**

- 6.11 The process for setting local quantitative standards is described within PPG 17 Companion Guide 'Assessing Needs and Opportunities' and this process has been followed in order to set a local standard for the district of Harborough. A diagrammatic format of this process is provided within Appendix C – 'Quantity Standards' along with a summary of all calculations.
- 6.12 The only definitive national standards for natural and semi-natural areas have been produced by English Nature. This suggests that there should be 1 ha of Local Nature Reserves per 1,000 population. There is no national or local standard that covers the whole of this category of open space although English Nature does approve other greenspace standards set by other organisations.
- 6.13 The total provision of natural and semi natural open space within the district amounts to a total of 682.53 hectares. This represents 8.92 hectares per 1000 population.
- 6.14 Although Harborough is largely a rural district, levels of provision differed between rural and more urban areas significantly. The areas of Market Harborough and Lubenham and the Western Area consisting of Lutterworth and Broughton Astley have been considered to be the more urban areas. These areas contain the main towns and the majority of the districts population (60%).
- 6.15 As expected, due to the fact that this typology occurs naturally within rural areas, the rural area does contain much more natural and semi-natural land such as woodlands, natural areas and reservoirs and so realistically a larger provision standard could be expected. Hence separate standards have been set for the urban and rural area. It is also important to emphasise the role of larger sites (e.g. woodland sites) within rural areas in meeting local needs and the contribution they make towards providing district wide facilities.
- 6.16 However it is important to ensure that such larger sites should not influence or skew any analysis which otherwise would result in the setting of high provision standards that are likely to be unrealistic to achieve across the district.
- 6.17 Across the district, 73% of questionnaire responses across the district indicated that levels of provision of natural and semi natural open space was about right, 21% indicated that was a deficiency and only 6% felt there was a surplus of provision.
- 6.18 More specifically, and similar to parks and gardens, in Market Harborough and Lubenham which has a current provision of 1.19 ha per 1,000 population all consultation questionnaire responses indicated this was about right. In the other urban area (Western area) where the provision was 1.82 ha per 1,000 population the majority of responses (70%) also indicated provision was about right. Again, more qualitative consultation through the neighbourhood drop-in sessions also supports this outcome.

## SECTION 6 – SEMI-NATURAL AND NATURAL OPEN SPACE

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6.19 In the rural area, it is easy for the analysis to be skewed by large sites that act as a district-wide provision. However with :

- the overall provision being 8.4 ha per 1,000 population and the majority (73%) suggesting this was about right; and
- the rural area of Peatling and Bosworth, that didn't have large district-wide provision sites that would skew the analysis, with a provision of 8.54 ha per 1,000 population and majority of responses suggesting that this also was about right, even though some suggested deficiencies and some suggesting a surplus

it would be realistic to suggest a rural provision standard of 8.5 ha per 1,000 population.

6.20 Based on the results from the analysis it is therefore suggested that for the district of Harborough provision standards of **1.5 ha per 1,000 population for the urban area** and **8.5 hectares for the rural areas** are applied.

6.21 The larger standard for the rural area takes into account the ability of this area to provide larger areas of natural and semi natural open space. It is recognised that planning for new natural greenspace, particularly in established urban areas, has to be largely opportunity led.

6.22 In addition, PPG17 promotes the development of Local Biodiversity Action Plans to help determine desirable levels of provision of wildlife habitats and species populations that reflect regional and national conservation objectives. These should be undertaken on a site-by-site basis.

### **Applying provision standards**

6.23 The application of these provision standards illustrates that there is a total oversupply of natural and semi natural open space within the district.

6.24 Although Harborough is primarily a rural district, and even the larger settlements within the district are relatively rural, with no individual settlement containing a population of over 20,000, provision of natural and semi natural open space varies between the urban and rural area.

6.25 The analysis areas of Market Harborough and Lubenham, and the Western area containing Lutterworth and Broughton Astley, which are the largest conurbations in the district, as explained in section two, are considered to be the urban areas within the district.

6.26 The main themes emerging from the analysis of the provision of natural and semi natural open space are:

- of the total 682 hectares audited, 79% was located in the North East Rural area, hence based on the local standard, this area has a large oversupply of natural and semi natural open spaces. It is important however that it is acknowledged that a number of large sites are located within this area, including lakes and reservoirs. Provision is very high however, equivalent to 45.44 hectares per 1000 hence the numerical oversupply is 440 hectares

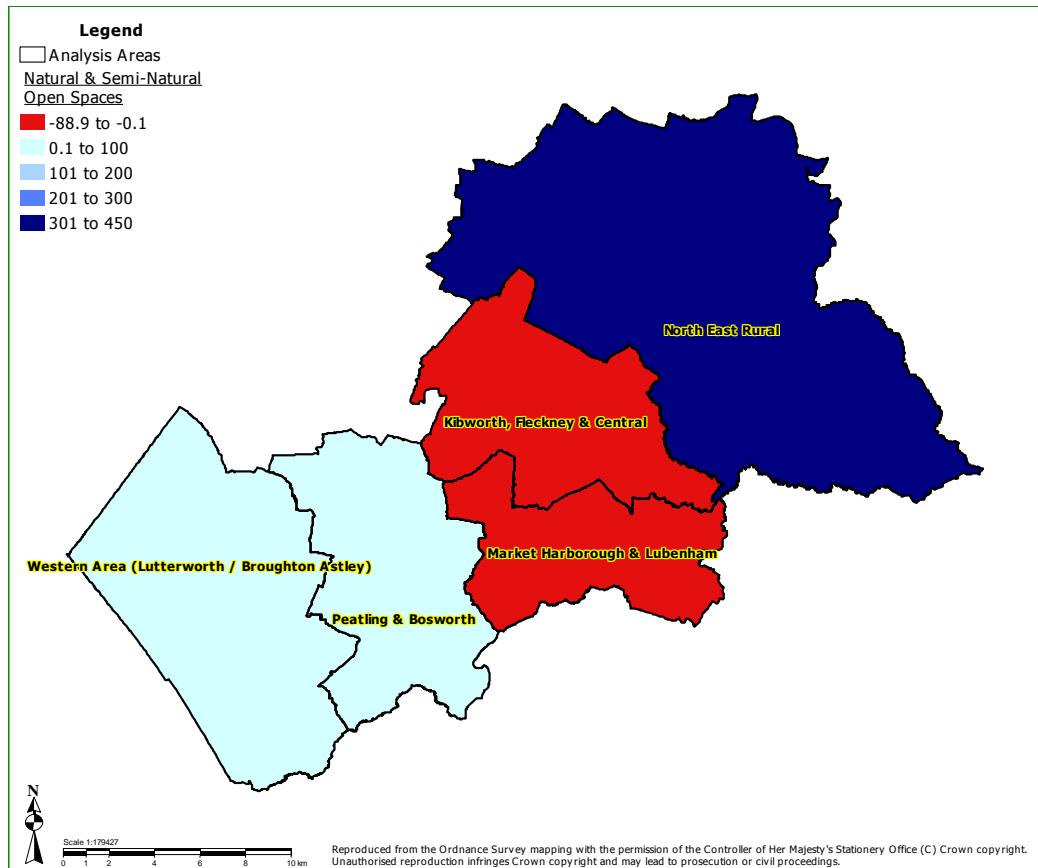
## **SECTION 6 – SEMI-NATURAL AND NATURAL OPEN SPACE**

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- there are also small oversupplies of natural and semi natural open space in the some rural areas. These oversupplies will reduce in future years. It is important to note that although the oversupplies indicate that there is little requirement for future development, it is important to maintain the character of the area
- within the two urban areas, supply in the western area of Broughton Astley and Lutterworth is over the local standard by the equivalent of 7.35 hectares. In contrast, the Market Harborough and Lubenham area has a deficiency of 7.04 hectares at present, which is predicted to rise in future years to 13.98 hectares.

6.27 Figure 6.2 overleaf demonstrates the surplus / deficiencies within each analysis area based on the provision standards of 1.5 ha per 1,000 population for the urban area and 8.5 ha per 1,000 population for the rural area. All maps are provided in Appendix O including projection surplus and deficiency maps for 2016 based on future populations.

**Figure 6.2 - Current Surplus & Deficiency of Natural and Semi-Natural Open Space by Analysis Area (2004)**



6.28 The full results of the application of quantity standards can be found in Appendix C.

**Quality**

6.29 Overall, across the district, the quality of 53% of sites is considered to be good or very good while 32% of sites are rated as average and 15% of sites are poor or very poor quality.

6.30 In Market Harborough and Lubenham half the sites are rated as good or very good and only 7% are thought to be poor. The North East Rural area has the highest incidence of natural and semi-natural sites rated as poor, 27%. War Field Nature Reserve in Scraftoft and Gaulby Lane Pond in Stoughton were cited as very poor quality sites.

6.31 Kibworth, Fleckney and Central have 25% of sites rated as poor or below and the Western Area has 20%. This suggests that if improvements to natural and semi natural open space sites are undertaken, it may be appropriate to prioritise sites within the rural areas and Lutterworth and Broughton Astley.

6.32 Only Peatling and Bosworth has no sites which are considered to be poor or very poor. In addition, 75% of sites in this area are considered to be of good or very good quality. These include Brickfield Spinney, Husbands Bosworth and the fishing lakes in both Willoughby Waterleys and Peatling Parva.

### **Accessibility**

- 6.33 Within the district, 44% of natural and semi natural areas are considered to have good or very good accessibility. In contrast, 35% of sites are considered to be poorly accessible – indicating that the accessibility of natural and semi natural areas is the worst of all types of open space.
- 6.34 There maybe viable reasons for this. For example, the location of natural and semi-natural sites such as woodlands and wetlands can be remote from the local community. There also needs to be a balance between the accessibility and conservation of such sites.
- 6.35 Some of those facilities regarded as high quality sites within the district have very poor accessibility and this problem needs addressing. Despite high ratings of quality within Peatling and Bosworth, this area had the highest rated open space sites in terms of quality but also has the worst rating for accessibility, with 56% of sites deemed as poorly accessible.
- 6.36 The most urban analysis area, Market Harborough and Lubenham is the only area to have no sites rated as very poor in terms of accessibility, although 27% of sites are rated poor.

### **Catchment**

- 6.37 Parish Clerks and Members were asked to comment on the most appropriate catchment area for natural and semi natural areas. This was combined with opinions of others consulted. Table 6.1 below summarises the mean, median and mode of responses.
- 6.38 The table indicates for how long 75% of respondents are willing to travel which according to PPG17 is the most appropriate means of defining a local accessibility standard for each type of open space.

**Table 6.1 – Time prepared to travel**

Overall - Harborough District - Parish Councils							Members
	Median	Mean	Mode	Min	Max	75% are willing to travel	General Consensus
<b>Walk</b>	15	14	20	5	30	20 minutes	
<b>Cycle</b>	7	8	5	2	15		
<b>Bus</b>	10	10	10	5	15		
<b>Car</b>	5	7	5	2	20	5 minutes	15 - 20 minutes

6.39 Like with a number of other types of open space opinion was divided on the time people are prepared to travel to natural and semi natural sites. Responses ranged from a 5 minute walk to a 20 minute drive.

6.40 Possibly due to the large numbers of natural and semi natural sites both numerically and in terms of cumulative size people are generally prepared to walk to such sites.

6.41 75% indicated that they would be willing to walk up to 20 minutes to reach a natural and semi natural open space. The recommended accessibility standard is therefore highlighted in the table below.

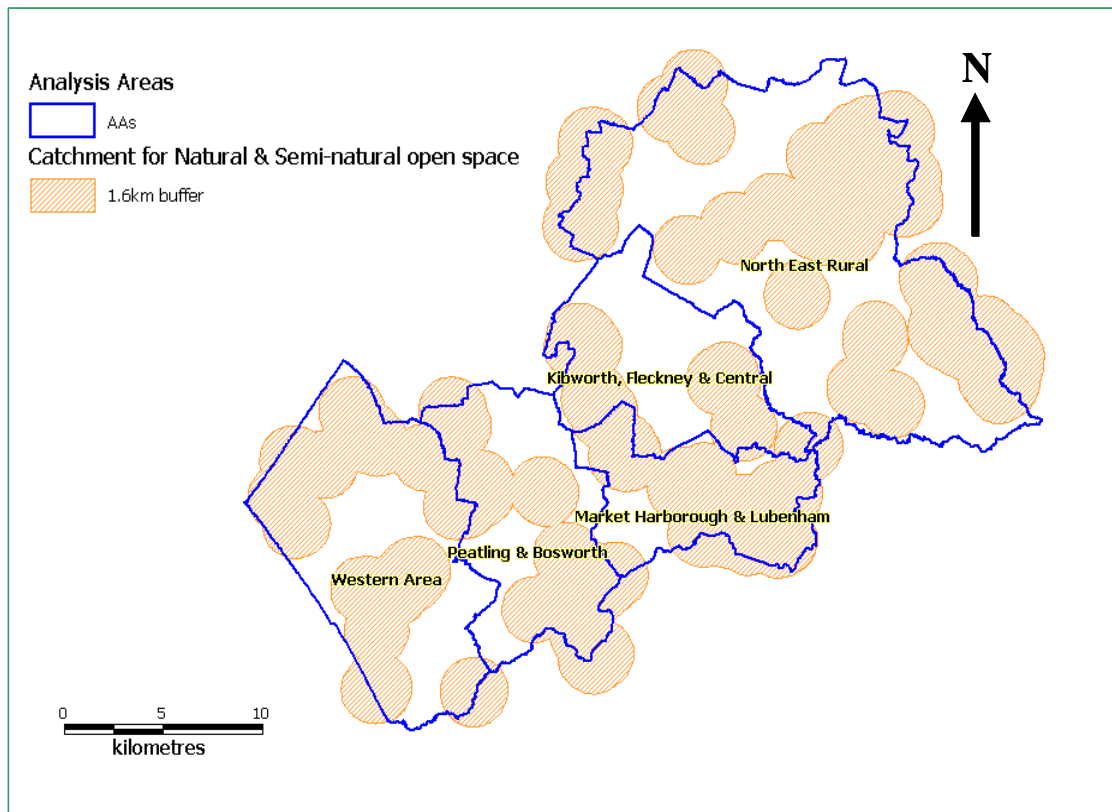
**Table 6.2 – Recommended Accessibility Standard**

Local Standard – Natural and Semi Natural	
Recommended Travel Time	Estimated equivalent distance
20 minute walk	1.6km

6.42 Figure 6.3 overleaf illustrates the application of this standard to the provision of natural and semi-natural open spaces within the district. All maps are provided in Appendix O which demonstrate clearly the areas outside the recommended catchment area.



**Figure 6.3 - Accessibility Threshold – Natural and Semi-Natural Open Spaces**



6.43 As can be seen in Figure 6.2 above, there are some areas within the district that are outside of the recommended catchment area.

6.44 English Nature have adopted threshold standards although these relate mainly to Local Nature Reserve (LNR's) suggesting:

- no person shall live more than 300m from their nearest area of natural greenspace of at least 2ha in size
- provision of at least 1ha of LNR per 1,000 population
- should be at least one accessible site within 2km from home
- should be one accessible 100ha site within 5km
- should be one accessible 500ha site within 10km

6.45 It is acknowledged that these may not be achievable in the short term, particularly the larger site standards but provide threshold aspirations for the long term. Other open spaces also need to be taken into account as they provide multi-functional usage.

**Assessment of value (Usage v Quality v Accessibility)**

6.46 Most sites that have a high level of use would normally have a good or very good quality and accessibility rating. Most sites with a low level of use would have an average or poor quality and accessibility rating. This is because the factors are related and interlinked.

## **SECTION 6 – SEMI-NATURAL AND NATURAL OPEN SPACE**

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- 6.47 There are many sites that have high quality, high accessibility and high usage – these sites are of high value and importance and it may be appropriate to prioritise these sites for protection. These include Wistow Country Estate, Foxton Locks, Nethergreen - Great Bowden, Community Wood Great Bowden, The Hollow – Medbourn and Hackluits Pond.
- 6.48 In addition to 17 sites which are thought to have low or insignificant use, there are 14 sites which are deemed to be unused, of which eight are in Peatling and Bosworth. These are predominantly thought to have relatively poor accessibility, although they are of average or above quality.
- 6.49 There is only one site, Manor Field, located in Thurnby and Bushby where despite very high use, both quality and accessibility are perceived to be poor by local residents. Milestone Hollow in Claybrooke Magna is used often, despite both poor accessibility and quality.
- 6.50 This illustrates that where both quality and accessibility are rated as good or very good, usage is also generally high. There is only one example where usage is low despite high accessibility. This is the Upper Green in Great Bowden. Quality of this site is only average, suggesting it may be possible that it is the quality that is restricting the use of this site.
- 6.51 There are a few sites where there is no usage or low usage with the possible reasons being that quality and accessibility are poor. The following sites fall into this category:
- Fleckney Open Space
  - Warfield Nature Reserve
  - Fleckney Industrial Area Natural Open Space
- 6.52 This analysis suggests that most sites with good quality and good accessibility are also well used and valued, highlighting the importance of accessibility and quality.

### **Summary**

- 6.53 Due to the predominantly rural nature of natural and semi-natural sites it is necessary to have different local standards for rural and potentially more urban areas. Therefore a standard of 1.5 ha per 1000 population has been suggested for both analysis areas 1 and 4 which contain the main centres of population, Market Harborough, Lutterworth and Broughton Astley. A standard of 8.5 ha per 1000 population has been set for the more rural areas.
- 6.54 Consultation suggests that 75% are willing to travel up to 20 minutes or 1.6km.
- 6.55 When applying these standards all areas except Market Harborough and Lubenham and Kibworth, Fleckney and Central contain an oversupply. These two analysis areas of deficiency in quantity terms also have areas that lie outside the recommended accessibility catchment, mainly the north and central area of Kibworth, Fleckney and Central.
- 6.56 The quality of sites is a potential area for improvement in some areas and it may also be appropriate to investigate the protection of existing good quality sites.

6.57 Natural and semi natural sites are rated as the least accessible open space sites within the district. This is partly due to the remote location of such sites and also the discouragement of people to help conservation. The importance of balancing accessibility and conservation of such sites is recognised.