

5. Natural and semi natural open space

Introduction and definition

- 5.1 This type of open space includes woodlands, urban forestry, scrubland, grasslands (eg downlands, commons and meadows), wetlands, nature reserves and wastelands with a primary purpose of wildlife conservation and biodiversity. Examples of such sites in Charnwood include Watermead Country Park (Thurmaston), Ruskin Field Meadow (Anstey), Gorse Covert Wood (Loughborough) and the pond adjacent to Beardsley Road (Quorn).
- 5.2 Natural and semi natural open space can frequently be found within other open space types, and in some instances there may be some sites classified as amenity green space or parks that have a secondary function as natural and semi natural open space sites. This serves to highlight the overlap between typologies. Natural open spaces also fulfil similar roles to parks, as highlighted in Section 4.
- 5.3 Although natural and semi natural open space plays a key role in wildlife conservation and biodiversity, the recreational opportunities provided by these spaces are also important. It is essential that an appropriate balance between recreational use, biodiversity and conservation is achieved.
- 5.4 Charnwood Forest is a particularly important resource in the Borough. This resource covers circa 12,500 ha and consists of woodland, farmland, country parks, nature reserves and villages. The Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust is working alongside Charnwood Borough Council, Natural England, Leicestershire County Council and others to restore this area. Many areas of the Charnwood Forest are considered within this discussion of natural and semi natural open space.
- 5.5 This section therefore outlines the context and key consultation findings relating to natural and semi natural open space across Charnwood and the recommended local standards. These local standards are then applied in order to understand local issues and priorities.

Context

- 5.6 The importance of natural and semi natural open space in Charnwood is recognised within the local plan, in which key aims focus upon the protection and enhancement of the environment and to ensure that development is sustainable and has the least possible impact on the environment. As such, policy EV 18 sets out that planning permission will not be granted for developments which would result in the loss of important areas of open land retained in public or private ownership which contribute to the character of a settlement either individually or as part of a wider network of open space.
- 5.7 In addition, the Charnwood Sustainable Community Strategy (2008) has key objectives which include:
 - SO11: to protect the special and distinctive qualities of all landscapes, and to pay special attention to impacts upon Charnwood Forest and its environs and to support the National Forest Strategy
 - SO12: to maintain and enhance the range of ecological sites, habitats and species found in Charnwood and seek to deliver biodiversity gain and reverse habitat fragmentation.

- 5.8 Like parks and gardens, natural open spaces also have a key role to play in the achievement of many local aims and objectives. Natural open spaces are central to the character of the Borough and, for many residents, are integral parts of a high quality of life. Bradgate Park, Prestwold Hall and Garendon Park are recognised on the English Heritage Register of historical parks and gardens, thus emphasising the importance of these sites to the context of the area.

Assessing local needs

- 5.9 Consultation undertaken as part of the study indicated that natural and semi natural open space is particularly valuable to local residents. This type of open space is well used in the borough, with 80% of household survey respondents using natural and semi natural open space on a regular basis and 45% doing so at least once per week.

Current position

Quantity

- 5.10 There is an abundance of natural and semi natural open space in Charnwood which is complemented by the local countryside. Accessible natural and semi natural open space (within or in close proximity of settlement boundaries) totals 903.58 hectares.
- 5.11 There are however six sites over 50 hectares which skew this total, specifically Outwoods and Jubilee Woods, Loughborough Meadows (both Loughborough), Bradgate Park Swithland Wood (both in Newtown Linford), Watermead Country Park (Thurmaston), and Beacon Hill Country Park (Woodhouse). Excluding these sites, total provision equates to 518.35 hectares, with provision predominantly found within the smaller settlements.
- 5.12 In addition to the recreational function that these sites offer for residents there are numerous sites of particular importance for their nature conservation and wildlife value, specifically:
- 17 sites which have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) across the borough, ranging in size from just under 400 hectares to 1 hectare and covering over 4% of the borough
 - 218 Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) also previously known as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) – covering over 4% of the borough and including over 1,000 hectares and 100 kilometres of linear habitats
 - 3 local nature reserves (LNR) covering circa 27 hectares which support a rich variety of wildlife or geological features and are important to local people, by enabling contact with the natural world
 - 5 Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological (RIGS) Sites and although these do not have any formal statutory protection, they are taken into consideration by the planning authority.
- 5.13 The majority of these sites are excluded from consideration within this study as their primary purpose is wildlife and conservation, rather than recreational usage. Charnwood Borough Council is carrying out separate assessments of biodiversity and geological conservation in line with Planning Policy Statement 9. Lists of these sites can be found on the Natural England website (<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/>) and on the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust website (<http://www.lrwf.org.uk/>).

5.14 Table 5.1 summarises the distribution of natural and semi natural open space across Charnwood. In addition to the sites summarised in this table, there are 24 sites where the secondary function is natural and semi natural open space.

Table 5.1 - Natural and semi natural open space across Charnwood

Settlement hierarchy	Current provision (hectares)	Number of sites	Smallest site (hectares)	Largest site (Hectares)	LDF population (2021)	Provision per 1000 population (2021)
Larger settlements	361.55	20	0.81	152	101,368	3.567
Service centres	19.43	9	0.73	4.30	61,779	0.3145
Smaller settlements	522.60	8	0.09	335	12,253	42.602
Overall	903.58	37			175,400	5.1515

5.15 The key issues emerging from Table 5.1 and consultations relating to the quantity of provision of natural and semi natural open space across the borough include:

- as may be expected natural open spaces are unevenly distributed across the borough. Provision is much higher in the smaller settlements; particularly given the existence of Bradgate Park, and is also higher within the larger settlements than in the service centres. This is largely due to the provision of Watermead Country Park in Thurmaston
- overall, the quantity of natural and semi natural open space is perceived to be sufficient (64%) by household survey respondents. 12% consider there to be 'nearly enough' provision and 18% consider there to be 'not enough' provision
- findings within each of the settlement hierarchies mirror the borough wide results with over 60% of residents in each area indicating that the provision of natural and semi natural open space is sufficient. Perhaps surprisingly, the highest levels were evident in the larger more urban settlements where natural space is often at a premium:
 - **in the larger settlements** - the quantity of natural and semi natural open spaces in the town is perceived to be sufficient (about right or more than enough) by 58% of respondents. In contrast, 28% indicate that provision is insufficient
 - **in service centres** - the provision of natural open space is perceived to be sufficient (about right or more than enough) by 56% of residents. However, 30% of residents indicate that provision is insufficient
 - **smaller settlements** – a large proportion of respondents to the household survey consider the provision of natural open space to be sufficient (48%). 36% of residents indicate that provision is inadequate. It is in the smaller settlements where the highest quantity of natural and semi natural open space is located.

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- general comments from respondents to the household survey support the perception that provision is sufficient. Most residents who indicated that provision was insufficient suggested that too much natural open space had been lost to development and that natural open spaces should be protected. Many residents indicated that the character of Charnwood is defined by the countryside around the villages and the natural environment
- the variety and amount of natural open spaces was seen as a key feature of Charnwood during the stakeholder workshop. In particular Charnwood Forest, the wetlands and the presence of large quantities of SSSI and SINCS were referenced. Attendees at the Parish Council workshop reinforced this, indicating that a variety of open spaces are available to residents. Spaces are particularly diverse as they are owned by a wide variety of organisations.

Setting provision standards

- 5.16 The recommended local quantity standard for natural and semi natural open space has been derived from the local needs consultation and audit of provision and is summarised overleaf. Full justification for the local standard is provided within Appendix E.
- 5.17 In addition to taking on board the consultation findings, the standard also draws on other local targets, looking at the importance of natural open space from both a recreational and wider benefit perspective. In particular, open spaces are instrumental in the drive to mitigate climate change.
- 5.18 Given the large amounts of existing provision of natural and semi-natural open space, a borough wide standard has been set in line with Natural England standards. This standard should be applied to new development only. In order to preserve the quantity of natural space across the Borough, existing space will be protected. Provision of this level of natural and semi natural open space will be very challenging in some parts of the Borough, in particular in the service centres, where current provision is significantly lower than in other areas.

Quantity Standard (see Appendices D and E – standards and justification, worksheet and calculator)

Existing level of provision (hectares per 1000)	Recommended standard (hectares per 1000)
Larger settlements – 3.97	2.0
Service centres – 0.35	2.0
Smaller settlements – 47.44	2.0
Justification	
<p>Local consultation highlighted that a significant proportion of residents consider the current provision of natural and semi-natural open space to be sufficient. However, some residents perceive there to be insufficient natural and semi-natural open spaces in the borough and also emphasised the importance of protecting the existing spaces. The amount of natural open space was seen as a key feature of Charnwood.</p> <p>The quantity standard has been set at the level recommended by Natural England to allow the Council to identify opportunities for new provision, but to ensure that levels of provision required as part of new development are realistic. The standard has been set consistently across the three areas of the Borough given the similarities in perception in all settlement hierarchies. It will however be a challenging standard to deliver, particularly in the service centres where current provision is significantly below that in other parts of the Borough.</p> <p>This standard should be treated as a minimum standard. In areas which are part of important wildlife corridors, provision of natural and semi natural open space may be required.</p> <p>Outside of areas of new development, policies will focus on the protection and enhancement of existing sites within the Borough. A challenging accessibility standard has been set to increase accessibility to natural and semi natural open space. This may be partially delivered through the provision of semi natural spaces in larger parks</p>	

Quality

Current position

- 5.19 The quality of existing natural and semi natural open space was assessed by site visits undertaken the Borough Council. The findings are summarised in Table 5.2. The scores achieved at each site are recorded in Appendix D. Key issues at sites are set out in Appendix J.
- 5.20 This table summarises the total percentage achieved at each site (in accordance with the methodology set out in Section 2). The overall quality rating in line with the local standard is discussed later in this section.

Table 5.2 - Quality of natural and semi natural open space in Charnwood

Settlement hierarchy	Range of quality scores (%)	Average Quality Score (%)
Larger settlements	20% - 100%	49%
Service centres	26% - 68%	48%
Smaller settlements	31% - 100%	61%
Overall	20% - 100%	53%

5.21 The key issues arising from consultation and Table 5.2 with regards to the quality of natural and semi natural open space are as follows:

- 56% of residents consider the quality of this type of open space to be good while 34% of respondents suggest that the quality of natural and semi natural open space is average. Few residents believe the quality to be poor
- site assessments indicate that the quality of natural and semi natural open space is lower than consultations suggest, with an average quality percentage of 53%. Quality perceptions of residents may be influenced by the abundance of countryside and by the high quality standards at the well known country parks, such as Bradgate (Newtown Linford) and Outwoods (Loughborough)
- the majority of respondents within all sizes of settlement consider the quality of this typology to be good, although the proportion is significantly higher amongst respondents from the rural communities:
 - in the **larger settlements** 55% of residents indicated that the quality of natural open space is good, 35% average and just 3% deem it to be poor
 - in the **service centres** the responses were very similar, with 52% rating the quality of natural open space as good, 37% average and 4% poor
 - unsurprisingly given the rural nature of **smaller settlements**, residents in these areas portrayed the greatest satisfaction with the quality of natural open space, with 84% of residents indicating that the quality of this typology is good and 16% average
- dog fouling and litter problems are considered to be problems by users of this type of open space. Grass cutting and the maintenance of seating or footpaths are not identified as being problematic

- site visits indicate that planted areas and cleanliness is good across the Borough. Sites are overall considered to be relatively clean, although a lack of litter bins and dog bins emerges as a key issue. Information boards, seating and bins are identified as key areas for improvement. 14 existing sites contain information boards, and 10 provide education. 20 have either parking at the site or in close proximity
- responses from other surveys and workshop sessions with key stakeholders also highlighted some good quality provision in the borough, with a range of attractive sites providing different experiences.

Setting quality standards

- 5.22 The recommended local quality standard for natural and semi natural open space is summarised below. This standard sets out the essential elements of a high quality natural open space. These findings are derived from the key themes of local consultations. Full justification and consultation relating to the quality of provision is provided within Appendix E.
- 5.23 The key criteria set out in the local standards will then be incorporated with the quality scores during the application of local standards.

Quality standard (see Appendix E)

Recommended standard – Natural and semi natural open space	
Local consultation, national guidance and best practice suggest that the following features are essential and desirable to local residents:	
Essential	Desirable
Clean and litter free	Water features
Nature features	Parking facilities
Well kept and even footpaths	Dog and litter bins and dog walking facilities
Appropriate planting	Provision of toilets (within the site or nearby)
	Seating
	Information

Accessibility

- 5.24 The local accessibility standard is set in the form of a distance threshold and is derived directly from the findings of the local consultations. It considers the distance that residents are willing to travel to access different types of facilities as well as the mode of transport that they would anticipate using.
- 5.25 Household survey results show that 51% of current users of natural and semi natural open space walk to access a site, whilst 44% travel by car.
- 5.26 Consistent with the travel patterns indicated by current users, the majority of residents expect to walk to access a natural or semi natural open space (51%). 41% of residents would prefer to drive.

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- 5.27 Residents highlight the need for open access to natural open space and some respondents indicate that there are such spaces on the doorstep to their home. Access to local natural and semi natural open space is an important aspect of life in some of the more rural settlements.
- 5.28 The importance of providing appropriate parking for those who do wish to drive was discussed at the stakeholder workshop. In addition, access to some sites for residents not wishing to travel by car was considered to be poor. Specific examples given include Charnwood Forest and Bradgate Park (Newtown Linford).
- 5.29 Perceived security issues were also highlighted as a barrier to access by residents and it was indicated that there are access issues to Charnwood Forest although. Leicestershire Wildlife Trust provides public access to certain sites.
- 5.30 Some sites, such as Bradgate Park (Newtown Linford), Watermead Country Park (Thurmaston), Beacon Hill Country Park (Woodhouse), Castle Hill Country Park (Anstey) have a wider catchment area, attracting residents from outside of the Borough as well as local people. While it is important to ensure that all residents are able to access a local resource, these sites provide additional opportunities for locals and visitors to the area.
- 5.31 As well as highlighting specific issues relating to access to natural open space, stakeholders indicate that the rights of way network effectively provides access to the countryside.

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- 5.32 Parish Council representatives reinforced the findings of the stakeholder workshop, indicating that public transport links are not adequate at present. It was suggested that links need to be more flexible and included within facility plans. While it was also suggested that cycle ways were good where they exist, there were perceived to be insufficient and there is a need to raise awareness of opportunities that do exist. Green linkages between villages (footpaths and cycleways) were considered to be of particular importance. Parish Councils suggested that qualitative improvements and the protection of existing facilities were a particular priority for natural and semi natural open spaces.

Setting accessibility standards

- 5.33 The recommended local accessibility standard for natural and semi natural open space is summarised below. Full justification for the local standard is provided within Appendix E.
- 5.34 The standard places an emphasis on local access to natural spaces, something that was perceived to be particularly important to residents in light of the characteristics of the area and is reflective of the high expectations. This should be applied to both existing and new provision to identify areas where access to existing natural open space is in need of improvement.

Accessibility standard (see Appendix E)

Recommended standard – Natural and semi natural open space
10 minute walk time (480m) and access to sites by public transport
<p>Consultation emphasises the importance of local access to natural and semi natural open spaces, with many residents suggesting that natural open space is part of the character of the area. There is a split between those who would expect to walk (larger settlements) and those in smaller settlements who would travel by car to reach natural areas. Other consultations highlight the importance of providing appropriate linkages to sites for residents who wish to walk.</p> <p>In recognition of the importance of promoting sustainable modes of transport and in light of the desire for localised natural open spaces a 10 minute walk time standard has been set as an aspirational target. This can be delivered through a variety of means, including green corridors and creation of semi natural areas within larger open space. This also draws upon the need to create habitats and promote biodiversity. Based on the location of many natural open space sites outside of settlement boundaries, a public transport time has also been set.</p>

Applying provision standards

- 5.35 The application of the recommended quality, quantity and accessibility standards is essential to understand the existing distribution of open space, sport and recreation facilities and identify areas where provision is insufficient to meet local need.

Quantity

- 5.36 In light of the uneven distribution of natural and semi natural open space, and the high levels of provision, the recommended quantity standard is to be applied to new provision only. It is therefore inappropriate to state areas of existing deficiency using the measure of 2ha per 1000 population. The need for additional natural open space as part of new housing developments should however be considered using the 2ha per 1000 population standard.
- 5.37 Assuming that the population of Charnwood grows by circa 20,000 residents as projected up to 2026, an additional 40 hectares of accessible semi natural open space would therefore be required.

Accessibility

- 5.38 Application of the recommended accessibility standard for natural and semi natural open space should be used to guide decision making on areas where new provision may be required, or where access routes to natural space and to the nearby countryside are of particular importance.
- 5.39 Map 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate the distribution of existing sites. While there are clusters of residents who are not able to access natural and semi natural spaces within the targeted 10 minute walk time, almost all are within a 10 minute drive time. Map 5.3 evaluates the interrelationship between natural and semi natural open spaces and sites designated for nature conservation.
- 5.40 As highlighted previously, some sites, such as Bradgate Park, Watermead Country Park and Beacon Hill Country Park have a wider catchment area, attracting residents from outside of the Borough as well as local people. While it is important to ensure that all residents are able to access a local resource, these sites provide additional opportunities for locals and visitors to the area.

Quality

- 5.41 The overall quality rating for each site is based on the overall quality score achieved (outlined in Table 5.2) and the presence of essential and desirable criteria listed in the quality standard. This is summarised in Table 5.3 overleaf.

Table 5.3 – Measuring the overall achievement of the quality standard

Overall Quality Rating	Minimum	Average Score
Excellent	All essential criteria 3 or above All desirable criteria 3 or above	80% or above
Very Good	All essential criteria 3 or above	70 – 79%
Good	All essential criteria 3 or above	60 – 69%
Average		50 – 59%
Poor		Below 50%.

5.42 Table 5.4 therefore summarises the application of the quality standard based on the quality criteria set out in Table 5.3.

Table 5.4 – Quality Ratings

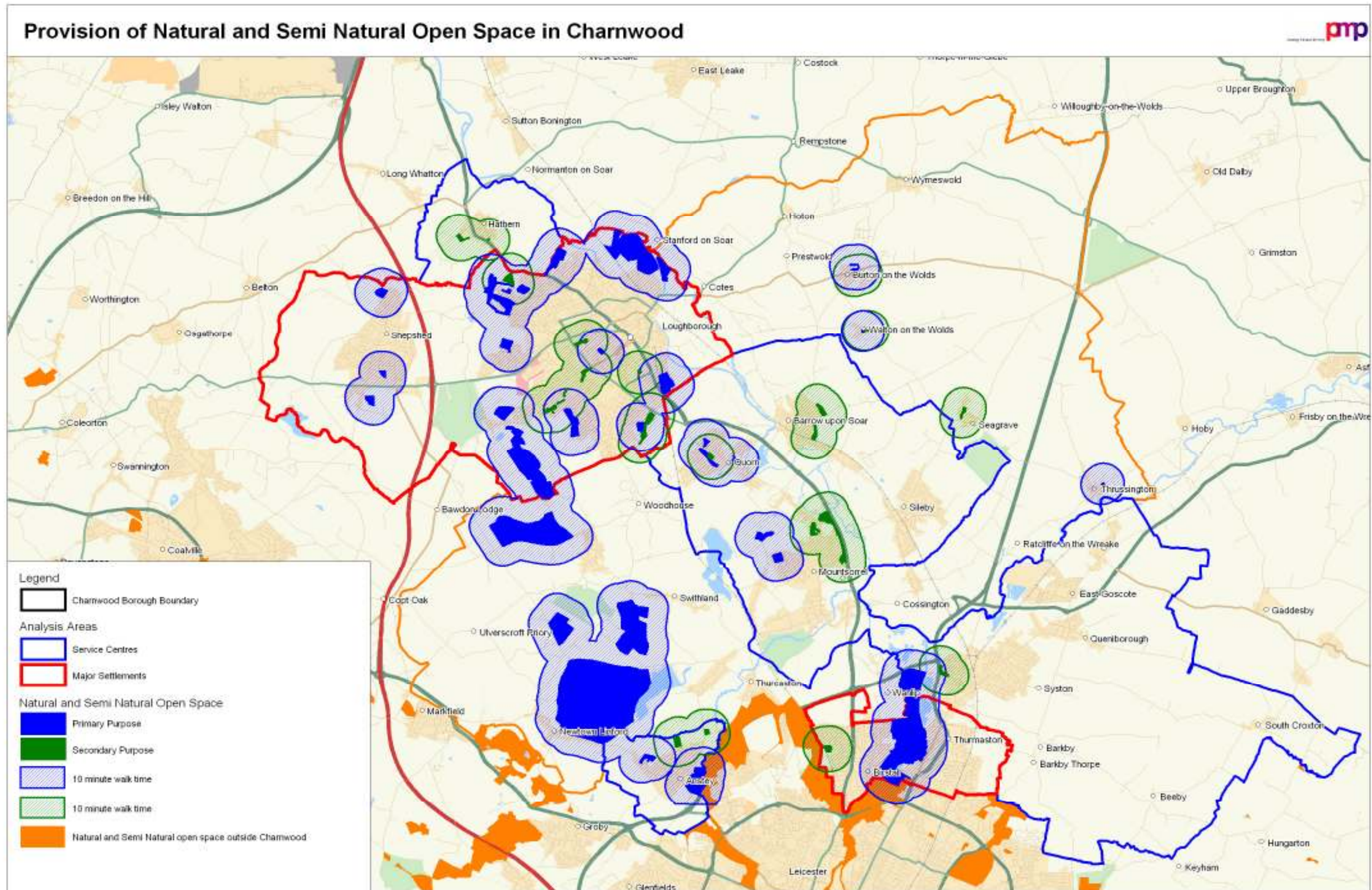
Settlement hierarchy	% of sites excellent	% of sites very good	% of sites good	% of sites average	% of sites poor
Larger settlements	11	0	0	26	63
Service centres	0	0	0	56	44
Smaller settlements	33	0	0	22	44
Overall	14	0	0	31	55

Nb. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding

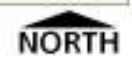
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- 5.43 Over half of all natural and semi natural sites are considered poor when measured against the recommended quality standard. In contrast, 14% of sites are rated as excellent. The quality of provision is varied across the three settlement hierarchies. Provision is poorest in the larger settlements, where 63% of sites are poor overall, although 11% are considered excellent. This serves to illustrate the contrast in the quality of sites. While fewer sites in the service centres are considered to poor, overall, the quality of provision is highest in the smaller settlements. 33% of sites in the smaller settlements are rated as excellent.
- 5.44 Map 5.4 summarises the quality of natural and semi natural open space .It is clear that the poor and high quality sites are sporadically located across the Borough.

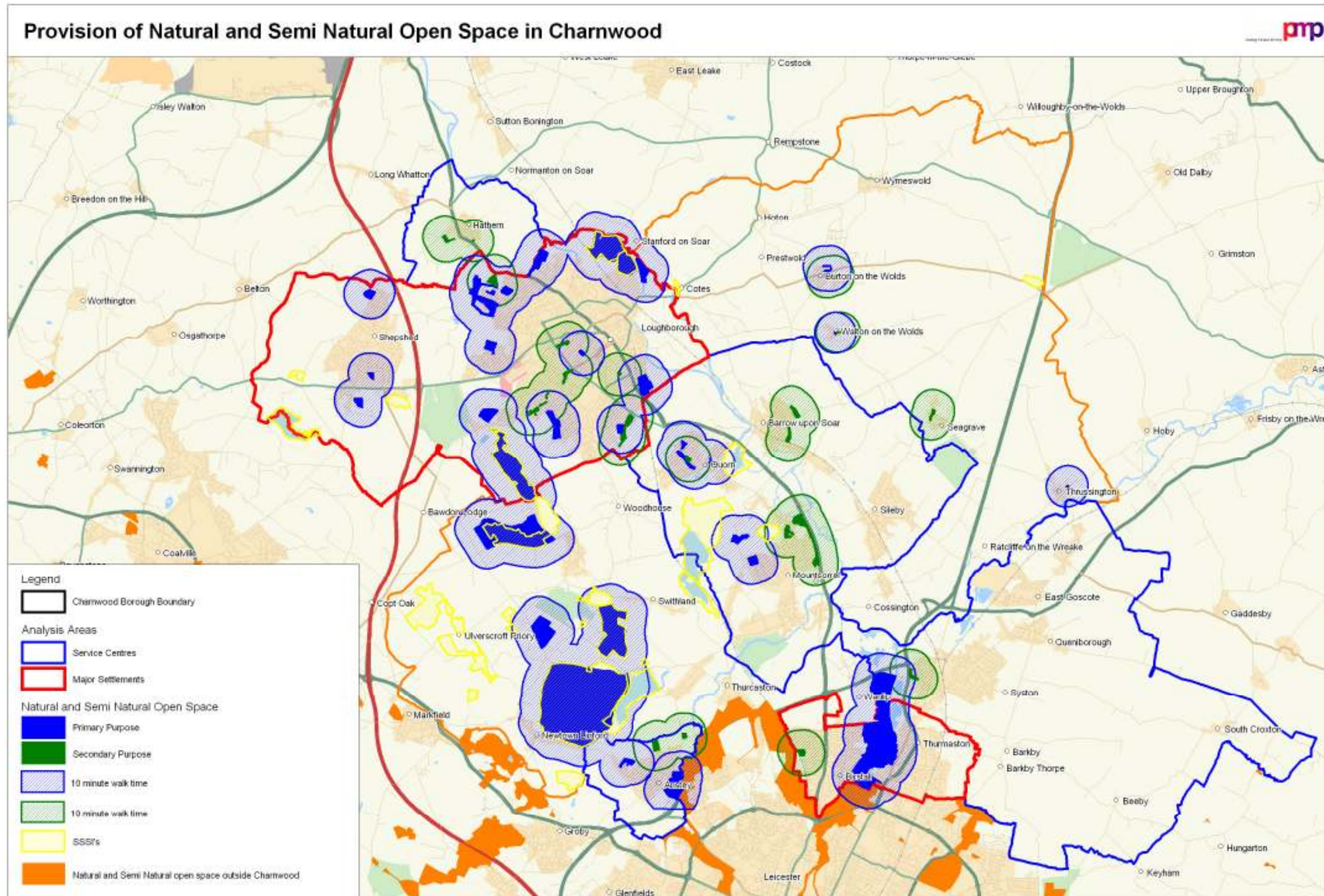
Map 5.1 - Natural and semi natural open space in Charnwood



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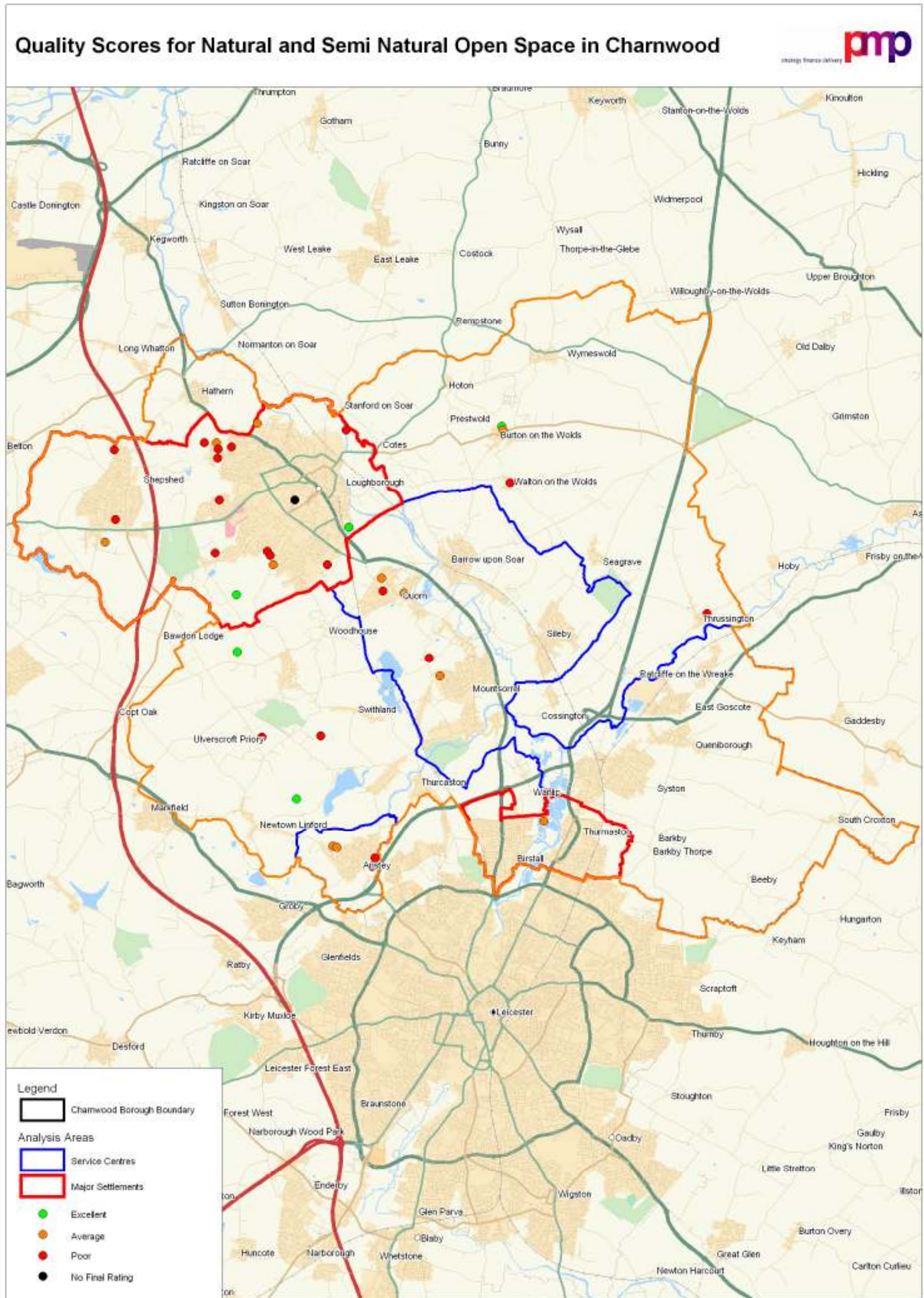
Map 5.3 – Interrelationship between natural and semi natural open spaces and sites designated for nature conservation



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Map 5.4- Quality of natural and semi natural open spaces



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Priorities for Future Delivery

Borough Wide Issues

5.45 This section considers the borough wide issues that need to be addressed. Consideration is then given to issues within specific settlements.

Protecting existing Natural and Semi Natural Open Space

5.46 Nearly two thirds of respondents (64%) considered the provision of natural and semi natural open space to be sufficient. This type of open space was perceived to be particularly valuable to residents in terms of recreational use and is also considered to be integral to the character of the Borough. Attendees at the Parish Council workshop suggest that natural open space and countryside should be protected as it ensures that villages retain their independence and do not merge into each other.

5.47 The majority of residents indicating that provision is insufficient highlighted the importance of natural open space and indicated that it is important that these sites are not lost to development. The importance of protecting this type of open space was a key theme throughout consultation. Residents and stakeholders indicated that the variety of natural space, which occurs as a result of the range of providers, was one of the main successes of the Borough.

5.48 In consideration of the importance of this type of open space both from a recreational and conservation perspective, all sites should therefore be offered protection through the LDF.

5.49 Application of the Woodland Trust accessibility standards further reinforces the need to protect existing woodlands and natural space. Table 5.5 summarises the implications of the application of the Woodland Trust Access to Woodlands Standards. The table takes in to account accessible woodland and also looks at the impact of improving access to woods that are currently inaccessible. It considers the improvements required to ensure that all residents have access to an accessible woodland within 500m of their home (231 additional hectares of woodlands required as well as improvements to access arrangements at existing woodlands). It also evaluates actions required to provide access to woodland within 4km of all homes.

Table 5.5 – Application of Woodland Trust Standard

Category	Indicator	Charnwood
Woodland within 500m	% population with access to 2ha+ wood within 500m	1.72%
	% extra population with access to 2ha+ wood within 500m if existing woods opened	24.39%
	% population requiring new woodland creation for access to a 2ha+ wood within 500m	73.89%
	Minimum area of new woodland required for 2ha+ woods within 500m (ha)	231ha
Woodland within 4km	% population with access to 20ha+ wood within 4km	49.49%

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Category	Indicator	Charnwood
	% extra population with access to 20ha+ wood within 4km if existing woods opened	32.07%
	% population requiring new woodland creation for access to a 20ha+ wood within 4km	18.44%

NSN1	Protect all valuable natural and semi natural open spaces and the green corridors which link them from development through policies in the Local Development Framework. New provision (or contributions towards the quality of existing spaces) should be required as part of housing developments and should be based on the recommended 2ha per 1000 population.
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Improving access to existing spaces

- 5.50 The provision of additional natural and semi natural open space may not be possible, particularly in the larger towns and in this case attention should be given to improving accessibility to sites and through improved connectivity between different areas of open space.
- 5.51 As well as improving linkages between sites, consultation suggested that although there is high public use of some parts of Charnwood Forest (for example Bradgate Park, Beacon Hill), some parts of the Charnwood Forest are not accessible to residents. In addition, parts of Charnwood Forest are “no cycle” routes.
- 5.52 Negotiating access to these areas would improve overall quantities of provision in the Borough. Priorities for improved access to natural open space / new open space will be highlighted later in this section.
- 5.53 As well as formal natural spaces, Charnwood is blessed with large areas of countryside. This provides a further opportunity to increase access to natural environments for residents. This is also discussed in Section 13.

NSN2	Establish new green corridors and improve existing corridors to provide effective links between towns, natural and semi natural sites and other types of local open space as well as wider strategic sites. Negotiate public access to parts of Charnwood Forest which are currently inaccessible and maximise the links to open countryside. As well as improving linkages, it should be ensure that larger sites offer facilities for those who cycle to the site (i.e. bike storage).
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Maximising Biodiversity

- 5.54 Natural and semi natural open space provides a valuable resource from both a recreational and biodiversity perspective. While the recreational value of these sites is important, it is essential to consider the balance between biodiversity and recreation (as reflected in local strategic documents).

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- 5.55 Promotion of recreational opportunities on site should be balanced with the wider functions of the site and ensure that recreation and wildlife uses are in equilibrium. This will require sympathetic management and maintenance and should be considered when priorities are identified.
- 5.56 The Leicestershire and Rutland Biodiversity Action Plan identifies a series of key habitats, many of which are found in the natural and semi natural open space in the Borough, including mature trees (22 sites) hedgerows (16 sites), grassland (16 sites), deciduous woodland (10 sites) mixed wood (12 sites) and scrub (12 sites). The Strategic Green Infrastructure Study (2009) indicates that the woodlands of Charnwood Forest are particularly important in terms of biodiversity. It is part of the National Forest Sub-Regional Biodiversity Conservation and Enhancement Area.

NSN3

Ensure that all improvements to natural and semi natural open space take into account the requirement to balance biodiversity and recreation. Promote sympathetic management of natural and semi natural open spaces.

- 5.57 As highlighted in the quantity standard, where new development is located on a wildlife corridor, effective natural and semi natural open space takes on greater importance and additional space of this nature should be required. Investigation should also give regard to the impact of development on the existing natural space and existing wildlife networks.
- 5.58 Sufficient natural space should be provided to link with existing spaces and continue and enhance the existing corridors.

NSN4

Ensure that where development takes place on wildlife corridors, natural open space above and beyond the minimum quantity standard is provided. This space should link with existing spaces and continue and improve existing corridors.

- 5.59 The remainder of this section considers the key issues for natural open space in each of the three settlement hierarchies.

Education

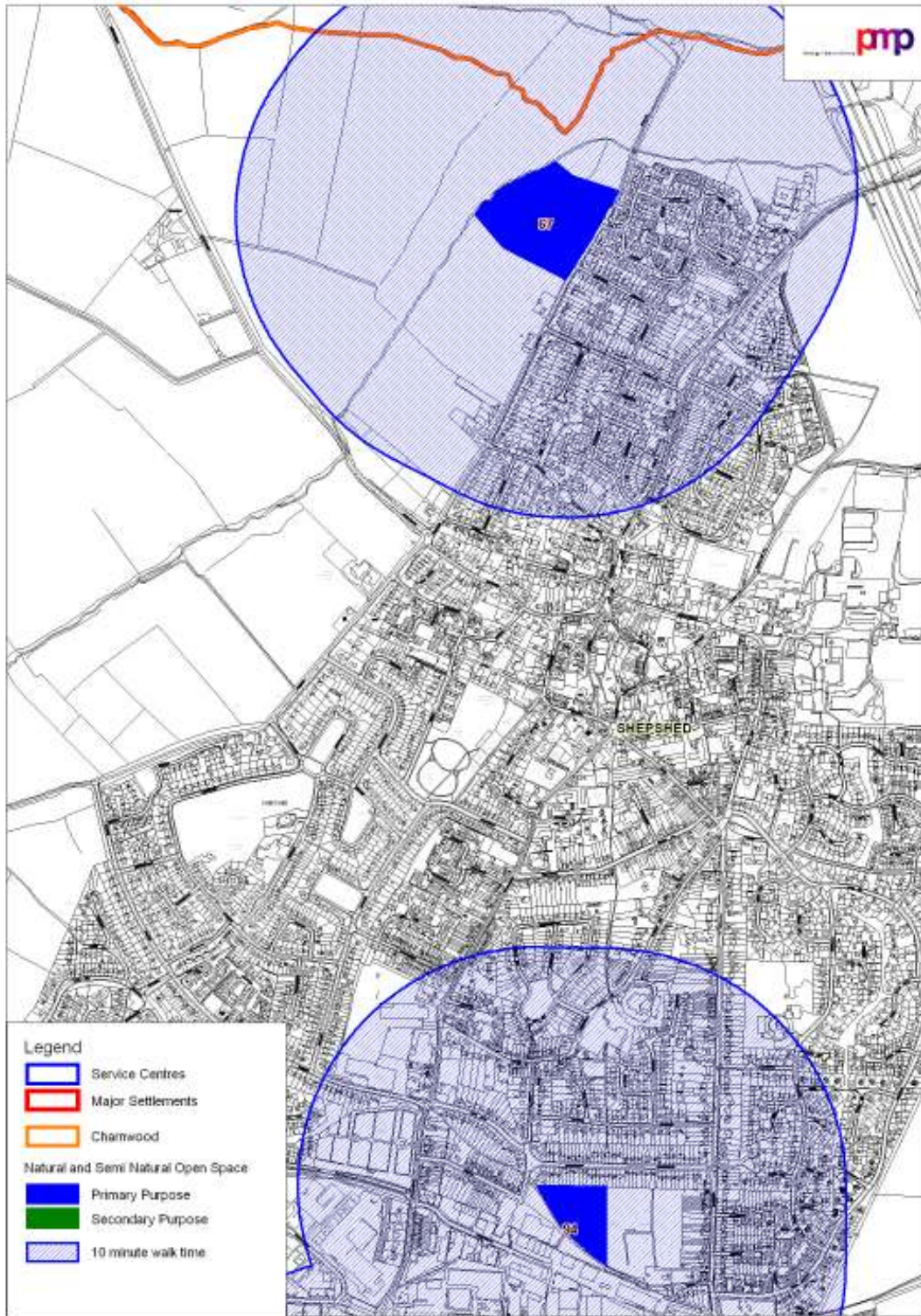
- 5.60 The opportunity to educate residents on the natural environment was a key theme of stakeholder workshops, with many highlighting examples of good practice at larger sites in the Borough, including information boards and visitor centres.
- 5.61 Furthermore, signage to many sites was perceived to be limited. A lack of awareness of the presence of existing sites was a key issue arising from the household survey relating to both parks and natural spaces. The need to promote the variety of natural and semi natural open spaces available for residents to enjoy was also raised during the Parish Council workshop.
- 5.62 Consultations with the County Council revealed that schools are committed to the education of their children with regards wildlife and biodiversity, with many creating natural areas within school grounds.

NSN5	Work in partnership to implement signage (to raise awareness of sites) as well as information boards at large sites in the Borough. Consider also a programme of marketing to maximise awareness of opportunities available to residents across the Borough.
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Larger Settlements

- 5.63 Over 138 hectares of natural and semi natural open space is located in the larger settlements. This equates to 1.52 hectares per 1000 population. While this level of provision is high for more urban settlements, it falls below the recommended Natural England standards of 2ha per 1000 population.
- 5.64 Analysis of the quantity of existing provision indicates that while provision actually exceeds 2ha per 1000 population in Loughborough and Thurmaston, it is significantly below this level in Birstall and Shepshed.
- 5.65 Application of the accessibility standard indicates that on the whole, there is good access to natural and semi natural open space in the larger settlements (taking into account sites of both primary and secondary purpose). However, areas of deficiency can be found in Shepshed, Loughborough and East Thurmaston (Maps 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7 respectively). These areas of deficiency are even more pronounced when considering the impact of railway lines, which effectively reduces the catchment areas that existing sites serve.

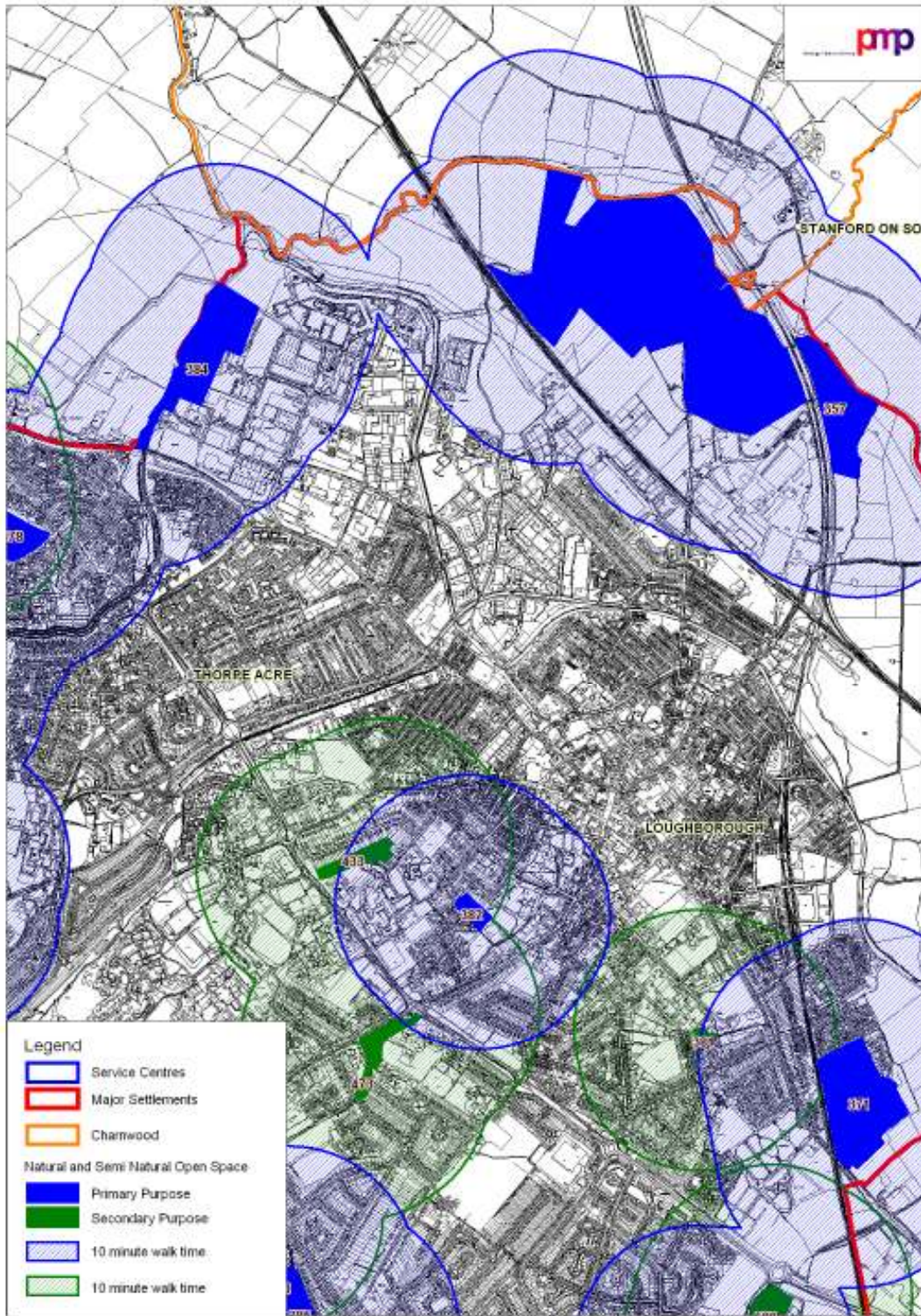
Map 5.5 – Access to natural open space in Shepshed



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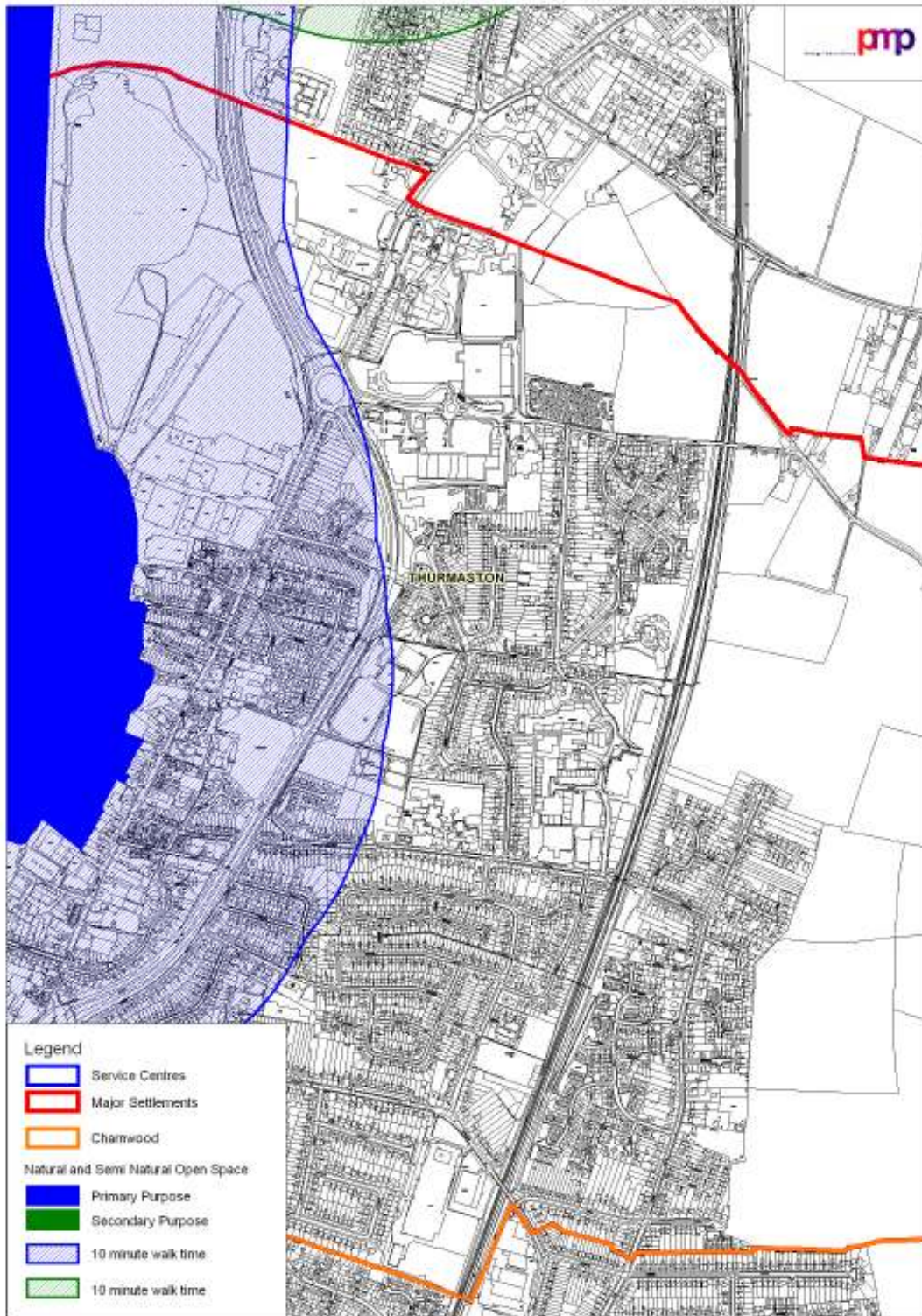
Map 5.6 – Access to natural open space in Loughborough



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Map 5.7 – Access to natural open Space in East Thurmaston



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- 5.66 Creating new natural open spaces in town centres is difficult due to a lack of space and opportunities and although residents in these areas of deficiency do not have access to natural or semi natural open space, they do have access to parks or amenity green space. Improved access to natural and semi natural space and countryside, particularly around the Loughborough Area is however a key priority of the 6 C's Growth Point Infrastructure Study meaning that this is particularly important.
- 5.67 This provides the opportunity to create natural areas within these other sites (for example wild flower meadows within a park) and also reduces the need to provide additional natural open space. In light of deficiencies however, if other natural open space is not provided, access to areas of nearby countryside and nearby natural and semi natural sites will be particularly important. A good example of this is in Thurmaston, where Watermead Country Park is located to the west of the village. Although many residents are outside of the catchment of this space, improved linkages will facilitate usage. Leicestershire County Council analysis of the Public Rights of Way Network indicates that there are particular gaps around Birstall.

NSN6	Provide additional natural and semi natural space in Loughborough, Shepshed and East Thurmaston either by creating natural areas within existing sites, creating new sites or improving access routes to countryside and other spaces.
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5.68 The quality of natural and semi natural open space in the larger settlements is also below average, with 63% of sites rated as poor. The quality of sites ranges significantly, however, 11% of sites are rated as excellent. Beacon Hill Country Park, Bradgate Park and Charnwood Water were all rated as excellent. The quality standard identifies a clean and litter free site and well maintained footpaths as two of the essential features of a natural or semi natural open space. Site visits reveal that there are also opportunities to increase the infrastructure at sites, including bins, seats and paths as well as provide educational information. Provision of educational information was perceived to be a key opportunity during workshops. The key issues and areas for improvement for each site are provided in Appendix J.

NSN7	Seek to enhance the quality of natural and semi natural open space in the larger settlements in line with the quality vision focusing on sites not achieving the recommended standards. Provide educational information at larger sites.
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Service Centres

- 5.69 The provision of natural and semi natural open space is significantly lower in the service centres (19.43 hectares) compared to the other settlements hierarchies in the borough.
- 5.70 Provision in Syston, Sileby, Mountsorrel and Barrow Upon Soar falls significantly below 2 hectares per 1000 population.
- 5.71 However, despite limited provision, sites are distributed across the service centres, which means that a large proportion of residents have access to this type of open space within the recommended 10 minute walk time (taking into account sites of both primary and secondary purpose).
- 5.72 Settlements containing no natural open space, and where residents are significantly out of the recommended catchment for a space are:
- East Goscote
 - Rothley
 - Queniborough
 - Rearsby
 - Sileby
 - Syston.
- 5.73 When considering the distribution of parks and gardens and amenity green space in this area of the borough, all residents located in those settlements identified above have access to at one of these types of open space within a 10 minute walk time. In addition to all residents having access to informal open space, there is also an abundance of nearby countryside near these settlements.

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- 5.74 Like in the larger settlements, this provides the opportunity to create natural areas within these other sites and also reduces the need to provide additional natural open space. In light of deficiencies however, if other natural open space is not provided, easy access to areas of nearby countryside will be particularly important. The presence of the River Soar running through many of the settlements of the Borough provides an importance opportunity to create multi functional linkages between settlements. The River Soar Strategy (Leicestershire Promotions 2009) emphasises the importance of this watercourse and sets out key priorities to maximise the value of this natural asset. This is also highlighted as a key opportunity within the 2009 6C's Growth Point Green Infrastructure Study.

NSN8	<p>Provide additional natural and semi natural space in Syston, Mountsorrel, Rothley and Barrow upon Soar either by creating natural areas within existing sites, creating new sites or improving access routes to countryside and other spaces. The River Soar provides a particular opportunity to create a high quality multi functional linkages in many of these villages.</p> <p>Identify opportunities to provide natural open spaces in areas currently lacking in this type of provision, particularly Sileby and Syston. There is also a lack of provision in East Goscote, Queniborough and Rearsby.</p>
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- 5.75 In light of the lack of provision in the area, it will be important that that the value of sites is maximised through qualitative enhancements.
- 5.76 In the service centres, natural and semi natural open space is also in need of improvement. 44% of all sites were considered poor and the remainder are rated as average. The key issues and areas for improvement for each site not achieving the quality score is provided in Appendix J.

NSN9	<p>Seek to enhance the quality of natural and semi natural open space in the Service Centres focusing particularly on those sites not meeting the recommended quality vision.</p>
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- 5.77 The quality vision identifies a clean and litter free site and well maintained footpaths as two of the essential features of a natural or semi natural open space. Site visits reveal that there are also opportunities to increase the infrastructure at sites, including bins, seats and paths as well as provide educational information.

Smaller Settlements

- 5.78 The smaller villages in Charnwood are located in close proximity to natural countryside and the highest amount of natural and semi natural open space is located in these villages. This level of provision equates to 47.4 hectares per 1000 population. Provision is particularly high in the Parishes of Newtown Linford and Woodhouse.
- 5.79 In addition to specific sites, there is an abundance of natural space outside of the settlement boundaries, the majority of which is accessible to local residents. Many of these sites are of strategic importance to the borough, attracting visitors from far afield as well as those who live in close proximity to the site.
- 5.80 The nature of the smaller settlements and the proximity to the countryside means that while specific natural areas are not required, links to the countryside are of particular

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importance. The quality of natural and semi natural open space in the smaller settlements is higher than that in larger settlements and service centres, with 33% of sites rated as excellent. Despite this, 44% of sites still achieved a rating of poor. The key issues and areas for improvement for each site are provided in Appendix J.

- 5.81 In consideration of the large number of SSSIs and SINCs in the area, it will be important that the biodiversity value of sites is taken into consideration when making any qualitative enhancements.

NSN10	Seek to enhance the quality of sites in line with the quality vision, taking into account the sensitive nature of environmentally important sites. Focus in particular on the sites not achieving the recommended standards.
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NSN11	Identify opportunities to link residents in the smaller settlements with areas of nearby countryside, focusing particularly in the larger villages where natural open space is limited, in particular Wymeswold, Cossington, Thrussington and Seagrave.
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Summary

- 5.82 Natural and semi natural open space is one of the most frequently visited types of open space with 80% of residents visiting natural open space at least once per month.
- 5.83 In addition to the recreational value of natural resources, residents also recognise the wider benefits of natural open spaces, particularly in terms of providing opportunities for biodiversity and habitat creation. The need to protect natural and semi natural open space from development was a key theme throughout consultation and while recreational opportunities should be encouraged, this should be balanced with conserving and promoting biodiversity. This was also reinforced through the stakeholder workshop as well as within local and regional strategic documents.
- 5.84 No quantity standard has been set for existing natural and semi natural open space, instead existing spaces should be protected and enhanced both in terms of quality for recreation and for biodiversity. When measuring access to natural open space, it can be seen that there are some residents with limited access, in particular in Shepshed. Some service centres also contain no provision.
- 5.85 Where opportunities arise, new semi natural space would be of benefit in these areas. This may be delivered through new sites, by creating natural areas within existing sites or by improving access to existing facilities. Natural open spaces will be required as part of new development, using the standard developed by Natural England in “Promoting Access to Nature” as a basis (2ha per 1000 population).
- 5.86 Improving the connectivity between sites will also be a key means of maximising access to natural spaces.
- 5.87 It is therefore recommended that the key priorities for the future delivery of provision of natural and semi natural open space that should be addressed through the Local Development Framework and/or other delivery mechanisms are to:

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- incorporate a policy protecting existing natural and semi natural open space within the Local Development Framework and a policy advocating improved biodiversity and conservation management
- ensure that new development contributes towards the provision of natural and semi natural open spaces, either through the creation of new sites or improvement of existing nearby natural spaces
- identify opportunities for improving the quality of natural and semi natural open spaces, both in terms of the wildlife and habitat values of the site, but also for recreational purposes
- promote sympathetic management of natural and semi natural open spaces and monitor the impact of recreation on these sites
- facilitate the development of new semi natural open spaces prioritising areas where access to natural open space is currently limited.