

Response to Christleton and Littleton Neighbourhood Plan

The Mersey Forest Team welcomes the opportunity to comment on Christleton and Littleton Neighbourhood Plan. Our feedback is within the context of The Mersey Forest Plan (<https://merseyforest.org.uk/our-plan/>) and the Tree Atlas, its associated online mapping tool (<https://merseyforest.org.uk/tree-atlas/>). Later in our response we have also included suggestions for specific policies and sections of the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Mersey Forest is Cheshire and Merseyside's Community Forest, established in the early 1990s. We work with trees for the benefit of people, nature, and climate. For the past 30 years, we have been growing the network of well looked after trees and woods, as well as other habitats, and encouraging people to get involved. As a result, more than 10 million new trees have been established, or 4 trees for every person living here. We work with lots of people and organisations to make this happen – partners, landowners, managers, and farmers, and local communities, businesses and schools. Together, we are bringing change for the benefit of all. We are one of England's 15 Community Forests and part of the Northern Forest initiative.

The Mersey Forest Plan is the long-term and strategic guide to the work of The Mersey Forest team and partners, extending to 2050 and beyond. It has recently been refreshed with input from all local authority partners. Cheshire West and Chester Council is a core Partner in The Mersey Forest.

Under paragraph 152 of the [National Planning Policy Framework](#): "Community Forests offer valuable opportunities for improving the environment around towns and cities, by upgrading the landscape and providing for recreation and wildlife... An approved Community Forest Plan may be a material consideration in preparing development plans and in deciding planning applications. Any development proposals within... Community Forests in the Green Belt should be subject to the normal policies for controlling development in Green Belts".

The Mersey Forest Plan can contribute to neighbourhood planning, setting out and supporting local priorities and aspirations.

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: We would welcome the strengthening of connections between this Neighbourhood Plan and The Mersey Forest Plan, so aspirations in the Neighbourhood Plan area, and any development coming forward in the area, also help to deliver key aspects of The Mersey Forest, bringing benefits for people, nature, and climate.

The Mersey Forest Plan vision

"More with Trees

Acting together to grow and care for trees and woods, as part of a thriving mosaic of habitats in and around Cheshire and Merseyside's cities, towns and villages.

Intertwining cherished trees with people's lives and livelihoods, flourishing nature, and strengthened climate resilience.

Inspiring action and spreading hope for our future."

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: We would welcome reference to The Mersey Forest Plan in the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Plan also contains a number of key principles that are of relevance to this neighbourhood plan (there will be other relevant principles too):

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 4. Establish trees, woods, and other habitats

4.1 Aim to reach 15% tree cover across Cheshire and Merseyside by 2050 (from a 2025 baseline of 13.7%), pushing beyond this if possible towards our long-term ambition of 30% tree cover. Our “[Where principles](#)” map how this longer-term 30% tree cover ambition might look across The Mersey Forest (see principle 16 below).

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: The neighbourhood plan includes policy HDC3 on trees and planting, which we welcome. We suggest that a tree cover ambition could be set for the Neighbourhood Plan area. Increasing tree cover is vital in so many ways, bringing benefits for people’s lives and livelihoods, nature, and climate. An increase in tree cover would contribute to the delivery of the wider ambitions set out in The Mersey Forest Plan.

Christleton and Littleton Parishes have tree covers of 7% and 12%, respectively. The vast majority of this is from trees outside of woodlands, rather than from woodlands. Below is a screenshot from our Tree Atlas showing the location of this tree cover in the area.

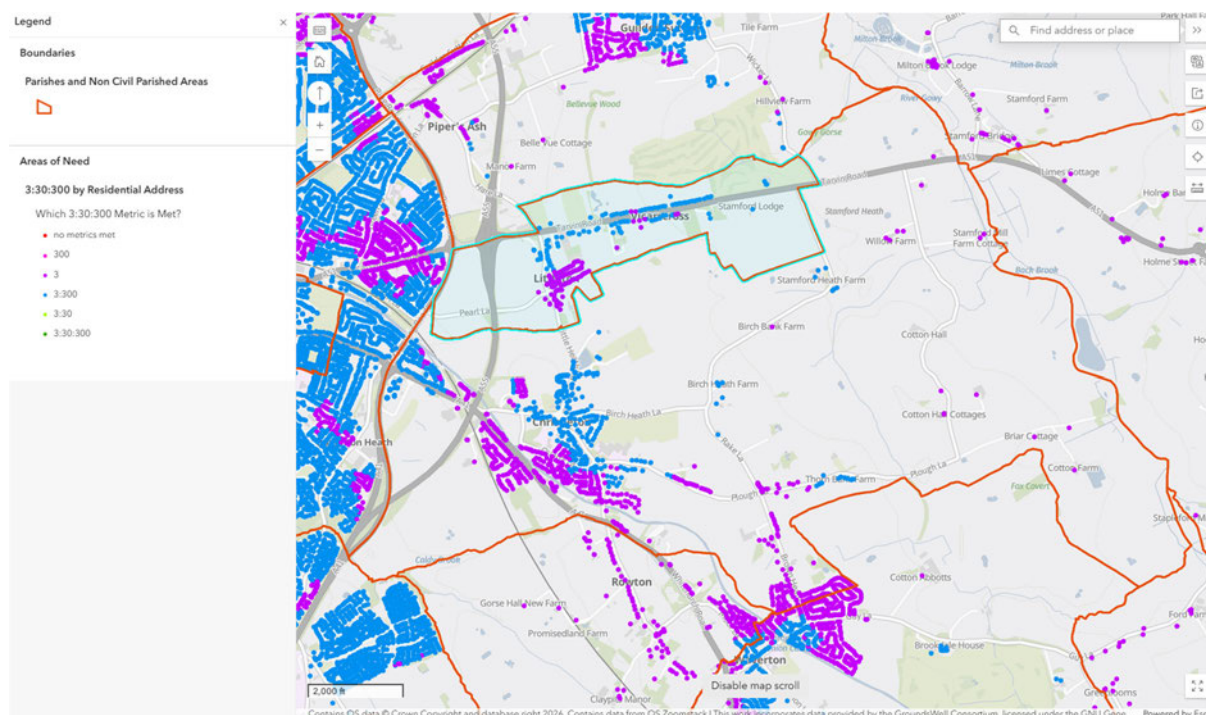


4.2 Aspire to meet the 3+30+300 ambition, within our urban areas in particular. Where every home can see 3 trees, every neighbourhood has 30% tree cover, and everyone lives within 300m of an accessible green space with trees. Individual local authorities have their own adopted accessible greenspace standards, so this aspiration does not override these. Tree cover ambitions also vary across our area.

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: We would encourage the neighbourhood plan to aspire to this 3:30:300 ambition, especially in policy HDC3. Often plans focus on the 300 part, considering proximity of green spaces. But research has demonstrated how vital the 3 and 30 aspects are for our mental health and wellbeing (recent research as part of the GroundsWell project by the University of Liverpool linking health data to 3:30:300 mapping), regulating heat and reducing heat stress (very important with climate change, as we see

excess deaths during heatwaves, including in the North West of England), air pollution removal (air quality is highlighted as an issue in the Neighbourhood Plan), etc.

Our Tree Atlas (<https://merseyforest.org.uk/tree-atlas/>) includes a 3:30:300 map layer showing that no residential addresses in the Neighbourhood Plan area achieve all three elements of 3:30:300. All addresses seem to meet the 3 element OR the 3 and 300 elements. Tree planting could be targeted to improve on these metrics. Please see screenshot below of this layer for the Neighbourhood Plan area.



The Mersey Forest Plan principle 7. The Mersey Forest team and partners

7.3 Work with a wide range of public, private, research, charitable, and community organisations, from local to national and international levels, and from delivery, to knowledge, strategy, and funding.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 8. Communities

8.1 Work alongside people to help them achieve what is needed in their local communities.

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: We would welcome the opportunity to work with you on this to ensure support for The Mersey Forest Plan in the Neighbourhood Plan and to enable delivery. Our Tree Atlas, detailed in principle 16 below, can be used to help prioritise where increased tree cover may be most needed within the local area. We have included comments later about suggested amendments to specific policies and sections of the Neighbourhood Plan to strengthen this connection.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 12. Strategy and policy

12.4 Contribute to neighbourhood planning, setting out and supporting local priorities and aspirations.

Key points for this neighbourhood plan: We see neighbourhood plans as a key opportunity to set out local aspiration with regard to the establishment and management of trees, woods, and other habitats. The Mersey Forest Plan and associated Tree Atlas can help to frame and provide context for some of these aspirations – again, please see later comments on specific policies and sections of the Neighbourhood Plan.

12.3 Contribute to place making, new development, regeneration and restructuring, by securing recognition to it within Local Plans.

- Paragraph 152 of the National Planning Policy Framework says “Community Forests offer valuable opportunities for improving the environment around towns and cities, by upgrading the landscape and providing for recreation and wildlife... An approved Community Forest Plan may be a material consideration in preparing development plans and in deciding planning applications. Any development proposals within... Community Forests in the Green Belt should be subject to the normal policies for controlling development in Green Belts”.
- Trees and woods should create the setting for, and be a key part of, new development, regeneration and restructuring.
- Existing irreplaceable and mature trees should be retained wherever possible, and appropriate replacement ratios developed for any trees lost.
- Trees should be incorporated as an effective and safe part of new street scenes and highways.
- Secure private sector conditional funding for this green infrastructure and its maintenance (principle 13.2 specifies that this includes funding secured through the planning system, such as section 106 agreements, Community Infrastructure Levies, and Biodiversity Net Gain).

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: Support for The Mersey Forest Plan in the neighbourhood plan can help to unlock funding through planning for delivery. The Mersey Forest Team can assist with advising on tree planting/establishment scheme designs and delivery. The Mersey Forest has a number of flexible delivery programmes to facilitate tree planting and habitat establishment, such as Trees for Climate and Northern Forest. The Forest can also support delivery through Section 106 agreements or Community Infrastructure Levies where it can be shown that our funds provide additionality in terms of the delivery of The Mersey Forest Plan. This can support the Neighbourhood Plan’s policy HDC3.

There has been some tree planting in recent years in the surrounding areas, including at Guilden Sutton, funded through the Trees for Climate scheme.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 16. Right tree, right place, right reason – area-specific principles

16.1 Use the area-specific principles, and their associated long term tree cover ambitions, to guide what our longer-term 30% tree cover ambition might look like across our area. They are not binding targets for each area, but they do help to guide our work. These area-specific principles are displayed in the map (at <https://merseyforest.org.uk/our-plan/principles-where/>), in our [Tree Atlas](#), and in a downloadable pdf. They:

- Use landscape character as their basis.
- Build on work from the original 1994 Mersey Forest Plan and subsequent development with our local authority partners.

- Take into account constraints to new trees and woodland, such as peatland, other habitats, high quality agricultural land, and urban areas.

This Neighbourhood Plan falls within the area specific principles CW01 Settlement, CW15 Cheshire Plain West, and a small amount in CW17 River Valleys. Although these principles cover areas larger than the Neighbourhood Plan area. These principles can be used to help guide tree establishment in specific areas.

CW01 Settlement: Has a long term tree cover ambition of 30%. Tree cover is currently 12%, of which 3% is woodlands and 10% is trees outside of woodlands. Its description is “Plant individual trees, groups of trees and small woodlands on appropriate and available urban areas, settlements and employment sites, such as school playing fields, open spaces, streets, highway verges, in the grounds of large institutions, derelict land, and development sites, including buffering their edges and the surrounding landscape. Target planting to meet identified needs.”

CW15 Cheshire Plain West: Has a long term tree cover ambition of 30%. Tree cover is currently 8%, of which 2% is woodlands and 6% is trees outside of woodlands. Its description is “Manage small woodlands and coverts to ensure a diverse structure and ground flora. Establish pockets of trees and small woodland blocks in field corners, which are declining features. Soften built edges with small scale native broadleaved planting, and to provide a recreation resource near to settlements. Screen major highways and views towards Stanlow. Maintain hedges and plant hedgerow trees and orchards. Better integrate golf courses through maintenance of hedgerow field boundaries and existing woodland rather than establishing ornamental species. Ensure land use respects traditional field patterns.”

CW17 River Valleys: Has a long term tree cover ambition of 40%. Tree cover is currently 20%, of which 13% is woodlands and 7% is trees outside of woodlands. Its description is “Manage woodland, hedgerows and hedgerow trees, including ancient woodland, clough woodland on valley sides, and riparian trees, to ensure a diverse species and age structure. Establish woodland on valley shoulders and sides, next to ancient woodland, to connect wooded blocks, and where tree loss has occurred. Wet woodland along rivers should not block valley lines. Reconnect floodplain habitats such as semi-improved grassland, meadows, and riverside trees, particularly Black Poplar. In the Dee and Wych Valleys minimise the impact of built development. Extend hedgerow tree planting, particularly to the north of the Grindley Valley. In the Goway Valley, new woodland could screen the Stanlow Refinery but be distant from ground nesting birds. Plant in and around the landfill and derelict land, maintaining the open Goway Meadows.”

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: It would be welcome if the neighbourhood plan aspired to the tree cover ambitions set out for CW01, CW15, and CW17, and identified local areas where tree planting may be most appropriate/desirable. Please see below points about constraints for tree planting, and areas where trees may be most needed.

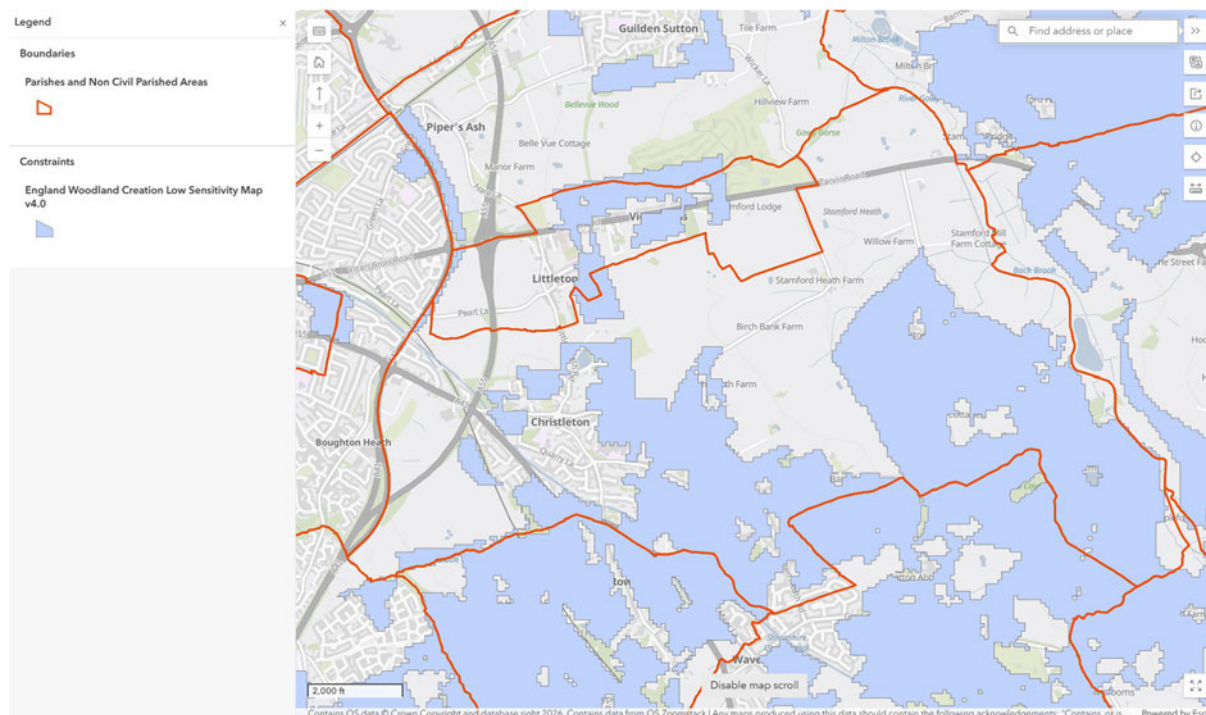
16.2 Consider constraints for trees and woodland, as part of any tree and woodland establishment and management.

- Constraints have been built into our area-specific principles, and their associated long term tree cover ambitions.
- Further to this our team considers a full range of constraints for each potential establishment or management site. Some of these constraints are included in our Tree Atlas, but we consider a wider range including location of utilities, and using data that we are not licensed to display on the Tree Atlas.

- In some instances, a constraint will mean that trees and woodlands are not appropriate at a given location. In many, the constraint will influence the nature of the trees and woodlands that are appropriate.

Key point for this neighbourhood plan: Please refer to the [Tree Atlas](#) for constraints for the neighbourhood area.

There are significant areas mapped by the Forestry Commission as “low sensitivity to woodland creation”, which means that there are no immediate constraints to new woodland. These could be good areas in which to target non-urban tree planting. These maps do not rule out tree planting in other areas, it just may require more careful consideration.



Mapping currently in the Tree Atlas suggests that there are grade 2 and 3a agricultural lands; whilst the provisional agricultural land classification puts much of the land in grades 2 and 3. The recent [Land Use Framework for England](#) includes updates to the mapping of agricultural land grades (see page 39). This mapping has not yet been released but, looking at the static map, it appears that land in the area may be classed as “Best and Most Versatile” land category for agricultural production, consisting of grades 1-3a. We will update the Tree Atlas when this new mapping is made available. On the “Best and Most Versatile” agricultural land, it might be better to avoid significant woodland creation in favour of agricultural production. It is still possible to incorporate trees onto productive farmland, in boundaries, hedgerows, and through agroforestry.

16.3 Consider what needs there are for trees and woodland, as part of any establishment and management.

- This can inform the nature of trees and woodland, and their management, as appropriate for each location.
- Some needs mapping has been included in our Tree Atlas, but it is not an exhaustive list.

Key points for this neighbourhood plan: Please refer to the [Tree Atlas](#) for needs mapping for the neighbourhood area. These include:

- Please see previous comment on principle 4 with regard to 3:30:300 mapping, showcasing where more tree planting could help to improve these metrics.
- Forestry Commission's historic environment opportunity map for new woodland shows most of the area as unclassified, but some areas as "neutral" from this perspective, some as "unsuitable", and small pockets as "favourable" where there may be historic woodlands on early 20th Century OS maps that have since been lost.
- The Environment Agency (EA) have mapped the Finchetts Gutter River Catchment, the west of the Neighbourhood Plan area, as a high priority for Natural Flood Management (NFM) interventions. Further to this EA NFM priority map, The Mersey Forest has mapped our highest priority catchments within our area to protect existing communities at risk of flooding. EA has approved this for display in our Tree Atlas, but we are awaiting the license in order to do this. This highlights a similar part of the Neighbourhood Plan area as of the highest priority for us for NFM interventions, to help resolve downstream flooding at Abbot's Mead. The Mersey Forest is in the unique position of having in-house technical expertise on appraisal, design, project management of delivery and monitoring of NFM schemes through our NFM Manager, and we would welcome the opportunity to work with new and existing partners to further reduce flood risk, improve water quality and enhance water resources in the area.
- The area is flagged as being exposed to increased heat with climate change, though not in the top 20% of socially vulnerable neighbourhoods. It may still be appropriate to target tree planting to areas where you will want to manage higher temperatures, with trees providing cooling through evapotranspiration and shading. This especially important in settlements and places where people will gather, including school grounds. But also in farmland to provide shade for livestock, and next to rivers and watercourses to keep water temperatures lower and benefit aquatic wildlife.
- Other priorities for tree planting, not currently in the Tree Atlas include:
 - Proximity to schools
 - In areas with poorer air quality (flagged as an issue in the Neighbourhood Plan), water quality, or in need of noise regulation.
 - Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) mapping
<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/5356942a5aa54cb0a656379a65a25947/>. This mapping shows Core Nature Sites within the neighbourhood plan area, as well as opportunity areas for nature recovery. This includes mapped actions for trees, woodland and hedgerows. Buffering and connecting existing trees and woods should be a consideration. The LNRS mapping also maps actions for other habitats: grassland and heathland, watercourses, and for urban and nature based solutions. These should also be taken into consideration in the Neighbourhood Plan.
- Mapping suggests that the existing small woodlands in the area are currently not accessible, with few rights of way in or by them.

The Mersey Forest Plan principle 20. Call for locations

20.1 Encourage people to use our Tree Atlas to suggest locations where they would like to see more trees and woods.

20.2 Follow up on suggested locations to see if there is potential to establish trees and woods there or nearby and, if possible, work with the people who suggested it to make it happen.

Key points for this neighbourhood plan: Our Tree Atlas includes locations where people would like to see more trees established. Whilst there are currently no locations included in the Neighbourhood Plan area, there is potential for the Neighbourhood Plan group to add other locations to this map.

Finally, taking the above comments into account, we have included some suggestions below for the specific Neighbourhood Plan Policies and sections:

HDC2 – Green infrastructure. We would encourage this policy to incorporate the multiple benefits of green infrastructure here, not just recreation and biodiversity. This includes, but is not limited to, improving air quality, regulating extreme heat, reducing flood risk.

HDC3 – Trees and planting. We would encourage you to set an appropriate tree cover target for the area, and aspire towards the 3:30:300 ambition in the settlements (see previous comments). There could be an ambition for tree lined streets, more trees in hedgerows and field boundaries, as part of agroforestry schemes, and along riparian corridors such as the River Gow. New trees could be targeting using some of the mapping presented in the Tree Atlas. We note that currently the exclusive use of native trees is specified. Whilst native trees are very important and should be a significant part of the mix, it is also worth broadening this to help with climate resilience. We suggest amending wording to be more in line with The Mersey Forest Plan principle 4.3 which reads “... Use a mix of species, including native, non-native, broadleaf, coniferous, fruit, nut, and climate-resilient trees, as appropriate to each location...”.

HDC5 – Water and drainage. Other Natural Flood Management as well as SuDS could be included here. See our previous comments on Natural Flood Management.

HDC7 – Public space and HDC8 – Squares, parks and greens. Trees should be incorporated into this spaces. They provide shade and cooling which will be important features of spaces where people gather in a changing climate.

HDC9 – The street network. Encourage an aspiration towards streets being tree lined.

HDC10 – Walking and cycling routes. Encourage inclusion of trees here to make routes more attractive and thermally comfortable in a changing climate.

HWB1 – Health and wellbeing. We welcome the inclusion of promoting high quality greenspace and access here. Please see our comments regarding 3:30:300, and how the 3 and 30 aspects are crucial for mental health and wellbeing, not just green spaces. It is really important to weave trees and greenery throughout neighbourhoods, and not just within green spaces, so that people can benefit from them as they go about their daily lives.

GG1-5 – Green Gaps. It might be worth also adding an aspiration to increase the functionality of these green gaps so that they support local communities even more. Increasing tree cover and hedgerows, increasing public access, improving wildlife habitats.

LGS1-11 – Local Green Spaces. Would welcome an aspiration to not just protect these spaces but to enhance them, for the benefits they can bring for people, nature and climate. This could include some targeted tree planting, where appropriate, as well as creation of other habitats.

IOS1-3 – Incidental open spaces. Again, consider opportunities to enhance these spaces not just protect them.

C1-4 – Conservation corridors and wildlife reserve. Consider how these can be enhanced to aid nature recovery. Please see the LNRS actions and mapping, referred to in a previous comment.

Section 6.9 Heritage Assets. We would encourage you to also consider natural heritage here alongside the built heritage. For example, are there any ancient or veteran trees, or other significant trees? Traditional field patterns divided with hedgerows, orchards, etc.

PROW1-3. Consider if there are any areas where the public rights of way could be expanded to increase access.

CWT1 – Wildlife and biodiversity and CWT2 – Wildlife corridors. The recently published LNRS could be referred to here as well (please see previous comment). The justification here refers to England Trees Action Plan. We suggest that The Mersey Forest Plan and accompanying Tree Atlas should also be referred to here. The Mersey Forest Plan is a local plan that covers this area and can be a material consideration in planning. It contains area-specific principles which cover this Neighbourhood Plan area, setting out the type of trees/woods which may be most appropriate. The Tree Atlas includes some constraints mapping which can be considered in targeting any tree planting. The wording in the justification currently suggests there should be no planting by watercourses, but appropriately placed riparian woodlands provide shade which can be very important for aquatic ecosystems, especially in a changing climate. We suggest rewording this section so that it is more in line with principle 2.3 in The Mersey Forest Plan, which reads “Ensure that tree and woodland establishment and care is not at the expense of other existing habitats. Give careful consideration to areas prioritised for other habitats in the Local Nature Recovery Strategies, including peatlands. Assess sites prior to establishment, and incorporate other habitats into schemes. Trees and scrub, at appropriate levels, can be vital components of other habitats, including grasslands, heathlands and wetlands, adding structure, diversity and resources for birds, invertebrates and mammals. In some places the best approach for nature will be no trees at all.” We suggest that an aspiration to improve the hedgerow network in the area, including hedgerow trees, would help to create wildlife corridors. The new Trees Outside of Woodlands mapping layer from Forest Research, included in the Tree Atlas, shows areas where this network could be improved. We understand that there is a new national hedgerow dataset being developed as well.

Section 7.1 Air Quality. Consider the role of trees and green infrastructure in helping to improve air quality, and target areas to enhance this.

Section 7.2 Flooding. Consider the role of Natural Flood Management and Sustainable Drainage Systems in helping to resolve these local flooding issues. Please see previous comments on NFM.

Many thanks again for the opportunity to comment on the draft Neighbourhood Plan. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Susannah Gill, Research and Policy Lead, The Mersey Forest

