

National Character Area 67

Cannock Chase and Cank Wood - Summary and Headline Statements of Environmental Opportunity

Summary

Cannock Chase and Cank Wood National Character Area (NCA) covers much of the Black Country conurbation and its northern setting. It forms a plateau, rising above its surroundings. This is due to the areas contrasting geology of Sandstone and the Coal Measures of the South Staffordshire Coalfield.

The NCA broadly coincides with the historical hunting forest of Cannock Chase. Major natural remnants of this have survived. This includes heathland of international importance. This is found at Sutton Park National Nature Reserve and Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC). It forms a key part of the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

There are no major rivers within the area, but canals are a key feature. Major transport routes, such as the M6 cross the NCA. The current landscape is highly varied. Urban development dominates the south. In contrast, the north of the NCA is far more open. Here, conifer plantations and heathland sit between areas of farmland. The Forest of Mercia, a Community Forest, lies in the heart of the NCA. Outstanding geodiversity is found throughout the NCA. Industrial archaeology and historic parks display a rich landscape history.

The NCA provides a wide range of ecosystem services. Agriculture and forestry provide food and timber. A large network of rights of way and open access land provides good recreational opportunities. This is highly valued in such a well populated area. However, high use can cause problems in sensitive locations. Cannock Chase SAC suffers from recreational pressure. Careful management of this and other sites is necessary. This is needed to ensure future development does not harm biodiversity.

Development has been a key force for change in the NCA in recent years. This seems likely to continue in future. This provides a chance to increase landscape quality and biodiversity. Improved green infrastructure could enhance the qualities that make the NCA special. The Forest of Mercia and the Cannock Chase AONB have a key role to play in this.



Heathland on Cannock Chase, looking towards Bevin's Birches and Rugeley power station at the eastern boundary of the NCA just visible on the skyline. © A.Ratcliffe Natural England



Canals provide the blue infrastructure in the Black Country and contribute to the local tourist economy. © West Midlands Geodiversity Partnership

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Cannock Chase and Cank Wood - Detailed Statements of Environmental Opportunity

This section expands on the [Headline Statements of Environmental Opportunity](#) and provides further detail on each of the Statements of Environmental Opportunity.

SEO 1



SEO 1: Expand lowland heathland to increase habitat connectivity, improve resilience to climate change and improve water quality.

For example by:

- Maintaining the current extent of heathland and improving its management, for example by grazing, to increase biodiversity value.
- Planning the restoration of areas of former heathland and expanding the extent of heathland to improve filtration of clean water to the underlying aquifer, and improving habitat connectivity to increase resilience to climate change.
- Conserving and increasing the extent of habitats associated with heathland, such as acid grassland, to enhance the biodiversity value.
- Protecting below-ground archaeological deposits and upstanding features such as bronze-age barrows, iron-age hill forts, ridge and furrow and the military camps on Cannock Chase.
- Investigating ways of securing better management of designated heritage assets, which contribute to landscape character – particularly those that have been identified as 'heritage at risk'.



Interpretation of the heathland restoration on Cannock Chase. © A.Ratcliffe Natural England

SEO 2



SEO 2: Manage, enhance and expand the network of green infrastructure, such as woodlands, restored mining sites, parklands and canal routes, to increase biodiversity, access and recreational use and increase understanding of the area's rich industrial heritage, particularly geodiversity.

For example by:

- Reinforcing and expanding the existing green infrastructure network of open spaces, parks, farmland and countryside, woods, wetlands, reclaimed sites and access routes throughout the Black Country, the wider urban area, the adjoining urban fringe and in and around the freestanding towns.
- Taking advantage of opportunities to enhance educational access, particularly to nationally important geodiversity sites.
- Conserving and managing the outstanding geodiversity interest, particularly at the area's eight geological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and within the Black Country, and identifying opportunities to enhance the geodiversity resource linked so closely to the area's cultural heritage.
- Retaining and enhancing the biodiversity value of urban areas, and expanding and improving habitat connectivity.
- Increasing the extent of native woodland and managing existing woodlands, for example as a source of wood fuel, to improve landscape, increase recreational opportunities, increase carbon storage for climate regulation and improve water filtration to the underlying aquifer for water quality.
- Creating new wetlands, enhancing existing watercourses and ensuring public access to these features as part of sustainable urban drainage systems in urban areas and close to new developments.
- Managing and expanding access to the networks of rights of way, cycle routes, canal towpaths and access land and enhancing recreational opportunities.
- Maintaining and improving the existing rights of way network and the Staffordshire Way, Heart of England Way and Beacon Way long-distance routes.
- Planning new or improved links between urban areas and the wider countryside or major open spaces within or near the conurbation such as Sandwell Valley, Barr Beacon, Sutton Park and Chasewater.
- Improving access to a wider range of local sites so as to reduce recreational pressure at sensitive locations.
- Improving links to or within the wider network of canal towpaths and cycle routes.
- Conserving the industrial archaeology of the Black Country and the South Staffordshire Coalfield, particularly buildings and sites associated with the iron, manufacturing and mining industries, and the canal network, and promoting access and awareness.
- Protecting and managing historic parks and urban parks to conserve significant historic landscapes and important features and habitats such as veteran trees, wood pasture and urban trees and the associated invertebrate populations.



Brocton Coppice; a woodpasture site with a wealth of ancient and veteran trees. © Shaun Wiles/Cannock Chase AONB

SEO 3: Conserve and enhance the essential character of this varied landscape, which includes the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the Forest of Mercia and the urban conurbation of the Black Country, to maintain food and timber production where possible; enhance landscape, sense of place and tranquillity; and increase resilience to climate change.

For example by:

- Protecting and managing the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), to maintain its special qualities as a protected landscape, working within the framework of the AONB Management Plan.
- Conserving and enhancing the distinctive unenclosed landscape of the AONB to retain the sense of wildness and tranquillity.
- Supporting the continued provision of forestry and agriculture within the area as appropriate, and ensuring they are sustainably managed to bring benefits for carbon sequestration and biodiversity networks.
- Protecting and managing the historic and cultural heritage of the area to further its conservation and promote access and understanding.
- Protecting and appropriately managing the mixed landscape of fields, woodlands and unenclosed land found outside the urban areas to retain the historic contrast between different areas, enhance landscape character, improve biodiversity and maintain food production.
- Retaining the mixed land use pattern of pasture, arable and woodland, and conserving and restoring landscape character, particularly in urban fringe areas.
- Maintaining and enhancing the distinctive enclosure patterns to conserve the historical record of regular enclosure to the west, irregular small- to medium-sized fields between Cannock Chase and Lichfield, and 19th century enclosure around the mining settlements.
- Planting new hedgerows, hedgerow trees and associated grassland buffer strips to restore landscape character and improve habitat connectivity, particularly where this can assist in regulating soil erosion.
- Managing hedgerows in traditional local style to enhance landscape character and improve biodiversity value.
- Conserving ridge and furrow and other archaeological features.



Huntington Walk. © R J Treadwell

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Cannock Chase and Cank Wood - Key Characteristics

- A varied landscape ranging from the open heathlands and plantations of Cannock Chase, through towns, reclaimed mining sites and new developments, to dense urban areas.
- The dominant rounded central plateau is mainly formed of the Coal Measures of the South Staffordshire Coalfield, with other prominent hills in the south at Wren's Nest, Castle Hill, Rowley Hills and Barr Beacon.
- Extensive coniferous plantations, woodlands and historic parklands occur across the NCA, even within the urban areas where they are predominantly small and include lots of young plantations.
- Away from the unenclosed landscape of Cannock Chase, fields generally have a regular pattern and are frequently enclosed by mature hedgerows with some hedgerow trees. Here farming is generally mixed with arable cultivation in large fields. Livery is concentrated around the flanks of the Chase.
- Heathland and associated acid grassland were once much more extensive, although significant tracts still remain. Post-industrial sites and remnant countryside within the urban areas provide a mosaic of additional valuable habitats.
- The major rivers of the Trent and Tame lie adjacent to the NCA, both of which lie in broad flood plains. Streams and small rivers such as the Sow and the Penk drain radially from the higher ground into these rivers.
- The canal network is a notable feature and contributes significantly to the drainage of the urban areas.
- Industrial archaeology from the industrial revolution is a characteristic feature.
- The predominant building material of the 19th- and early 20thcentury buildings is red brick, with more modern structures within the urban areas.
- The settlement pattern is complex and contrasting, with some areas densely populated and others relatively sparse. The conurbation includes a mosaic of urban areas, former industrial land and patches of farmland, with an extensive urban fringe.
- The extensive networks of canals and railways reflect the industrial history of the area. Major roads include the M6, the M6 Toll and the A5.