

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

Wirral Site Specific Landscape Sensitivity Assessment

Final report
Prepared by LUC
November 2019



Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council

Wirral Site Specific Landscape Sensitivity Assessment

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council (WMBC) commissioned LUC in April 2019 to undertake a landscape sensitivity assessment (hereafter referred to as the ‘study’) of specific areas of the open countryside within the Borough.

Purpose of the study

1.1 The purpose of this study is to provide an assessment of the extent to which the character and quality of the landscape of these sites would, in principle, be susceptible to change as a result of the introduction of built development.

1.2 This study forms part of the evidence base to support the emerging Local Plan, which is in the early stages of preparation by WMBC.

1.3 The outputs of this work will be used by the Council to:

- Inform the evaluation of potential development locations;
- Identify land where development would be most appropriate to minimise impact on landscape i.e. by identifying areas of least sensitivity; and
- Provide a tool for informing mitigation for any future changes to the landscape.

Assessment scope

1.4 This study considers the landscape sensitivity of 53 specific areas of land identified for further investigation within the Green Belt in the Council’s review of development options published for public comment in September 2018¹.

1.5 To assess landscape sensitivity, it was agreed with WMBC that some smaller sites could be amalgamated. These amalgamations were ‘nested’ within the spatial framework of the Wirral Landscape Character Assessment (2019)² so that only areas of consistent landscape character were amalgamated.

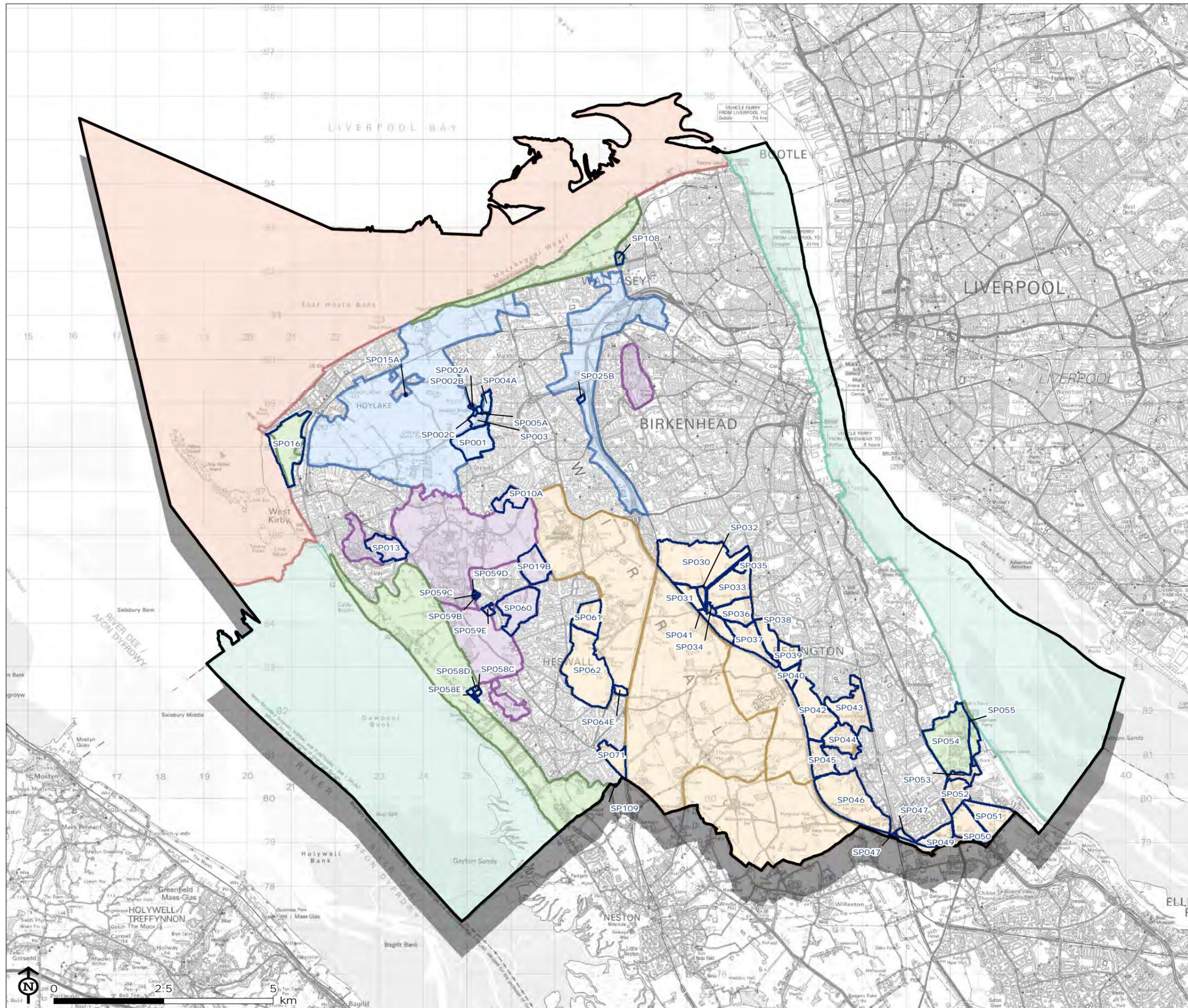
1.6 **Figure 1.1** below, illustrates the sites that have been assessed, grouped within their associated Landscape Character Type and Landscape Character Areas.

¹ Wirral Council, Development Options Review: Proposed Green Belt Sites for Further Investigation (2018)

² LUC Wirral Landscape Character Assessment (2019)

Fig 1.1: Landscape Sensitivity Parcels

-  Wirral Borough boundary
-  LCT 1: Coastal/Estuarine Edge
-  LCT 2: River Floodplains
-  LCT 3: Sandstone Hills
-  LCT 4: Lowland Farmland and Estates
-  LCT 5: Coastal Waters
-  LCT 6: Estuaries
-  Landscape Sensitivity Parcels



Map Scale @A3: 1:85,000



Policy context

National

1.7 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)³ 2019 is explicit in its requirement for development plan policies to protect and where appropriate, enhance the natural environment.

Key NPPF policies in relation to landscape sensitivity

1.8 Paragraph 170 states that planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes and “...**recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside...**” (para 170.b).

1.9 At paragraph 127(c) it states that “Planning policies and decisions should ensure that developments ... are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding environment and landscape setting”.

1.10 Paragraph 180 of the NPPF contains one reference to sensitivity as follows:

“Planning policies and decisions should also ensure that new development is appropriate for its location taking into account the likely effects (including cumulative effects) of pollution on health, living conditions and the natural environment, as well as **the potential sensitivity of the site or the wider area to impacts that could arise from the development...**”

1.11 Landscape sensitivity can inform policy development and appropriate locations for development, and can also be one of the considerations to be taken into account when making decisions on planning applications.

Landscape context

1.12 Extending between the Dee and Mersey Estuaries, the landscape of Wirral is a mixture of rural areas, formal landscapes of former large country estates, natural coastal scenery and wooded sandstone ridges. Urban and industrial areas of Birkenhead lie east of the M53 and the mid-Wirral sandstone ridge, while to the west a rich pastoral landscape is interspersed with smaller settlements.

1.13 Landscape considered to be amongst the most outstanding within the borough were identified within the existing Unitary Development Plan (UDP), adopted in February 2000, in Proposal LA2 as Areas of Special

Landscape Value (ASLV). These local landscape designations are illustrated on **Figure 1.2**.

1.14 The Wirral Landscape Character Assessment (2019) identifies six Landscape Character Types and 16 Landscape Character Areas, which form the primary evidence base for this Landscape Sensitivity Assessment. **Figure 1.1** illustrates the landscape character framework.

Using this study

Limitation of the landscape sensitivity assessment

1.15 This study provides an assessment of the relative landscape sensitivities of the different sites to notional residential and/or employment development, without knowing the exact location, layout, design or mitigation proposed. It therefore should not be interpreted as a definitive statement on the suitability of a certain location for a particular development and it is not a replacement for detailed studies for specific siting and design, as any final developments will need to be assessed on their individual merits.

1.16 The study is based on an assessment of landscape character using carefully defined criteria. Landscape sensitivity is the result of a complex interplay of often unequally weighted variables (or ‘criteria’). We have sought to address this in our summary of overall landscape sensitivity given for each assessment area – which considers how the criteria based assessments combine to give an overall sensitivity result for the development type under consideration. The assessments are based on professional judgement, taking account of the interplay between criteria, as well as those which might be more important to the landscape character of the area being assessed.

1.17 The assessment considers:

- The natural character of the landscape but not specific ecological issues in relation to species or habitats;
- The historic and cultural character of the landscape but not the specific cultural heritage or archaeological issues associated with individual designated heritage assets and their settings; and
- The visual character of the landscape but not visual amenity issues associated with specific receptors i.e. local residents.

1.18 These are all issues that will need to be taken into account and any additional specific impacts will need to be reported at the time when individual proposals or site allocations are put forward.

³ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government National Planning Policy Framework (June 2019)

1.19 This study concentrates on understanding the sensitivities of each area to development and does not address the capacity of each area or density of development. The final capacity of each area is a further stage of assessment that requires the relative consideration of cumulative development, landscape objectives, and thresholds of acceptable change.

Structure of this report

1.20 This report is set out as follows:

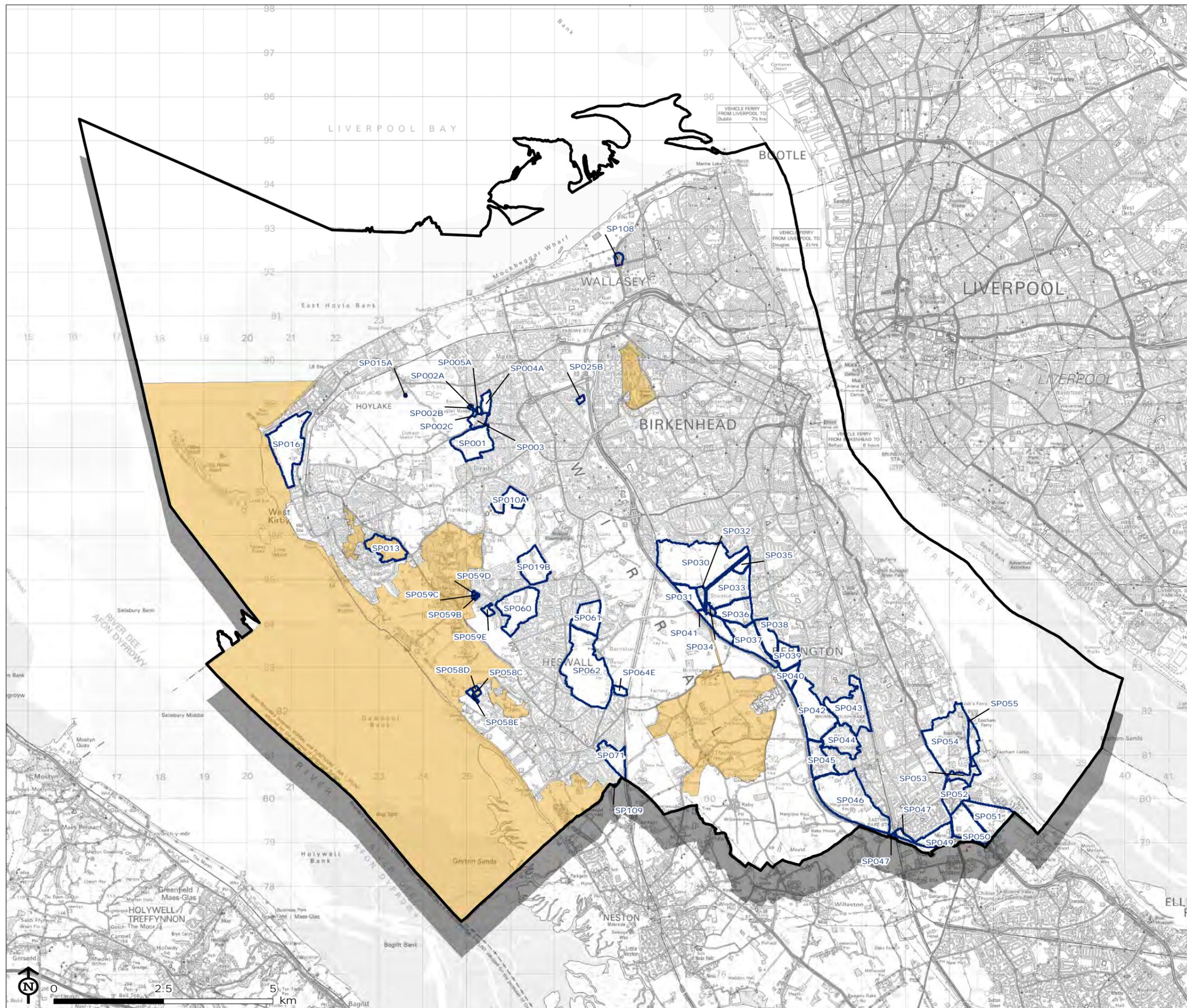
- **Chapter 1:** presents an introduction and policy context;
- **Chapter 2** presents the methodology and approach to the landscape sensitivity assessment, together with the assessment criteria;
- **Chapter 3** presents the overall landscape sensitivity assessment results.

1.21 This report is supported by:

- **Appendix A** which presents the landscape sensitivity assessment area profiles.
- **Appendix B** which provides a glossary of terms.

Fig 1.2: Areas of Special Landscape Value

-  Wirral Borough boundary
-  Area of Special Landscape Value
-  Landscape Sensitivity Parcel



Map Scale @A3: 1:85,000



Chapter 2

Methodology

2.1 This section sets out the methodology for the landscape sensitivity assessment. This includes information on approach, the assessment criteria and process followed.

Assessment approach

Defining assessment criteria

2.2 The approach taken in this study builds on the process set out in An Approach to Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (Natural England, 2019) which has replaced Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland Topic Paper 6: Techniques and Criteria for Judging Capacity and Sensitivity (Scottish Heritage and the former Countryside Agency, 2004), as well as LUC's considerable experience from previous and on-going studies of a similar nature. LUC sensitivity assessments have been accepted at Local Plan examination and used to inform development appeal decisions.

2.3 In the Natural England approach, landscape sensitivity is defined as follows:

Landscape sensitivity may be regarded as a measure of the resilience, or robustness, of a landscape to withstand specified change arising from development types or land management practices, without undue negative effects on the landscape and visual baseline and their value.

A criteria-based assessment

2.4 In line with Natural England's An Approach to Landscape Sensitivity Assessment, this study uses carefully defined criteria so that judgements can be clearly traced back to the underlying landscape and visual baseline. These indicators of landscape sensitivity are set out in **Table 2.1**.

2.5 Criteria selection is based on the attributes of the landscape most likely to be affected by residential and employment development. It considers both 'landscape' and 'visual' aspects of landscape sensitivity and those relating to value. The criteria provide examples of the types of landscape character or features that could indicate low, moderate or high sensitivity under each criterion.

2.6 The Natural England approach suggests that the indicators of value may include designations, sense of place,

valued attributes, community values, recreational value and ecosystem services.

2.7 The landscape of each assessment area and its surroundings is appraised against the individual criteria (in **Table 2.1**) to provide an indication of the relative sensitivity of the landscape to new development.

Making an overall judgement on levels of sensitivity

2.8 A five-point rating from 'low' to 'high' landscape sensitivity is used to indicate overall levels of landscape sensitivity within each assessment area, with supporting justification. Definitions for each of these ratings are provided in **Table 2.2**. The overall rating is based on professional judgement, taking account of all the individual criteria set out in **Table 2.1**. In some cases, one criterion alone may be sufficient to result in a judgement of high sensitivity but more often the judgement is informed by a number of criteria.

Table 2.1: Sensitivity assessment criteria and definitions

Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Criteria				
Physical character (including topography and scale)				
This considers the shape and scale of the landform, landscape pattern and landscape elements in relation to the scale of potential development. Smooth, gently undulating or flat landforms are likely to be less sensitive to development than a landscape with a more dramatic landform, distinct landform features or incised valleys with prominent slopes.				
This criterion considers how developments fit with the scale of the landform (understanding the scale of the development proposed is important when applying this criterion). Larger scale, simple landforms are likely to be less sensitive to larger scale developments than smaller scale, enclosed landforms (where large scale developments could appear out of scale with the underlying landform). Conversely, smaller developments may be able to be screened within enclosed landforms, therefore reducing landscape sensitivity. Existing small-scale features in the landscape in the form of existing buildings or trees will influence the scale of development that can be accommodated in the landscape.				
Low sensitivity	Low-moderate sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity	Moderate-high sensitivity	High sensitivity
<i>e.g. the landscape has smooth, gently undulating or featureless landform with uniform large-scale landscape pattern and low density of overlying landscape features.</i>		<i>e.g. the landscape has an undulating landform and some distinct landform features; it is overlain by a mixture of small-scale and larger scale field patterns and a moderate density of small-scale landscape features.</i>		<i>e.g. the landscape has a dramatic landform or distinct landform features that contribute positively to landscape character; the area has a high density of small-scale landscape features and is overlain by a small-scale field pattern.</i>

Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Criteria				
<p>Natural character</p> <p>This criterion considers the 'natural' qualities of the landscape in terms of coverage of semi-natural habitats and valued natural features (e.g. trees, hedgerows) which could be vulnerable to loss from development. Areas with frequent natural features (including large areas of nationally or internationally designated habitats) result in increased sensitivity to development, while landscapes with limited natural features (including intensively farmed areas or areas with high levels of existing development) will be less sensitive. This criterion also looks at role as part of a wider network of natural features (Nature Recovery Network).</p>				
Low sensitivity	Low-moderate sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity	Moderate-high sensitivity	High sensitivity
<i>e.g. much of the landscape is intensively farmed or developed with little semi-natural habitat coverage and few valued natural features.</i>		<i>e.g. there are areas of valued semi-natural habitats and features found in parts of the landscape, whilst other parts are intensively farmed or developed.</i>		<i>e.g. large areas of the landscape are nationally or internationally designated for their nature conservation interest; there is a frequent occurrence of valued natural features across the landscape.</i>
<p>Historic landscape character</p> <p>This considers the extent to which the landscape has 'time-depth' (a sense of being an historic landscape, with reference to the Cheshire Historic Landscape Characterisation) and/or the presence of heritage assets that are important to landscape character (i.e. Conservation Areas, Scheduled Monuments, listed buildings, archaeological features and remains or other features listed in the landscape character assessment).</p> <p>Landscapes with small-scale, more irregular field patterns of historic origin are likely to be more sensitive to the introduction of modern development than landscapes with large, regular scale parliamentary field patterns.</p>				
Low sensitivity	Low-moderate sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity	Moderate-high sensitivity	High sensitivity
<i>e.g. A landscape with relatively few historic features important to the character of the area and little time depth (i.e. large intensively farmed fields).</i>		<i>e.g. A landscape with some visible historic features of importance to character, and a variety of time depths.</i>		<i>e.g. A landscape with a high density of historic features important to the character of the area and great time depth (i.e. piecemeal enclosure with irregular boundaries, ridge and furrow)</i>
<p>Character and setting of existing settlement</p> <p>This considers the overall settlement form and character of existing settlement and considers whether development in the landscape would be in accordance with the general pattern, setting and form of current development and relationship with the existing settlement edge. It includes an understanding of the landscape pattern associated with settlement edges (where relevant), for example if it is well integrated by woodland cover or open and exposed to form a 'hard edge' to the adjoining landscape.</p> <p>This criterion also considers the extent to which the landscape contributes to the identity and distinctiveness of settlements, by way of its character and/or scenic quality, for example by providing a backdrop/ setting, or playing an important part in views from a settlement. This also considers the extent to which the area contributes to a perceived gap between settlements (the loss of which would increase coalescence).</p>				
Low sensitivity	Low-moderate sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity	Moderate-high sensitivity	High sensitivity
<i>e.g. the area does not contribute positively to the setting of the settlement or play a separation role. Development in the assessment area would have a good relationship with the existing settlement form/ pattern, and could provide the opportunity to improve an existing settlement edge.</i>		<i>e.g. the area provides some contribution to the setting of the settlement by providing, or plays some part in views from the settlement, or play a role in the perception of a gap between settlements. Development in the assessment area may be slightly at odds with the settlement form/ pattern, and may adversely affect the existing edge to some extent.</i>		<i>e.g. the area provides an attractive backdrop/ setting to the settlement, plays an important part in views from the settlement, or forms an important part in the perception of a gap between settlements. Development in the assessment area would have a poor relationship with the existing settlement form/pattern, and would adversely affect an existing settlement edge (which may be historic or distinctive).</i>

Landscape Sensitivity Assessment Criteria				
<p>Views and visual character including skylines</p> <p>This considers the visual prominence of the assessment area, reflecting the extent of openness or enclosure in the landscape (due to landform or land cover), and the degree of inter-visibility with the surrounding landscape (i.e. the extent to which potential development would be visible).</p> <p>Visually prominent landscapes are likely to be more sensitive to development than those which are not so visually prominent. Landscapes which are visually prominent and inter-visible with adjacent landscapes (both urban and rural) are likely to be more sensitive to development than those which are more hidden or less widely visible.</p> <p>It also considers the skyline character of the area including whether it forms a visually distinctive skyline or an important undeveloped skyline. Prominent and distinctive and/or undeveloped skylines, or skylines with important landmark features, are likely to be more sensitive to development because new buildings/structures may detract from these skylines as features in the landscape. Important landmark features on the skyline might include historic features or monuments.</p>				
Low sensitivity	Low-moderate sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity	Moderate-high sensitivity	High sensitivity
e.g. the area is enclosed/visually contained and/or has a low degree of visibility from surrounding landscapes and the area does not form a visually distinctive or important undeveloped skyline		e.g. the area is semi-enclosed or has some enclosed and some open areas. It is likely to have some inter-visibility with surrounding landscapes, and may have some visually distinctive or undeveloped skylines within the area.		e.g. the area is open and/or has a high degree of visibility from surrounding landscapes, and/or the area forms a visually distinctive skyline or an important undeveloped skyline.
<p>Perceptual and experiential qualities</p> <p>This considers qualities such as the rural character of the landscape (traditional land uses with few modern human influences), sense of remoteness or tranquillity. Landscapes that are relatively remote or tranquil (due to freedom from human activity and disturbance and having a perceived naturalness or a traditional rural feel with few modern human influences) tend to increase levels of sensitivity to development compared to landscapes that contain signs of modern development. High scenic value and dark night skies also add to sensitivity in relation to this criterion. This is because development will introduce new and uncharacteristic features which may detract from a sense of tranquillity and or remoteness/naturalness.</p>				
Low sensitivity	Low-moderate sensitivity	Moderate sensitivity	Moderate-high sensitivity	High sensitivity
e.g. the area is significantly influenced by development/human activity, where new development would not be out of character.		e.g. A landscape with some sense of rural character, but with some modern elements and human influences.		e.g. A tranquil or highly rural landscape, lacking strong intrusive elements. A landscape of high scenic value with dark skies and a high perceived degree of rural character and naturalness with few modern human influences.

Table 2.2: Five-point scale of landscape sensitivity

Sensitivity Judgement	Definition
High	Landscape and/or visual characteristics of the assessment unit are very susceptible to change and /or its values are high or moderate-high and it is unable to accommodate the relevant type of development without significant change or adverse effects. Thresholds for significant change are very low.
Moderate-high	Landscape and/or visual characteristics of the assessment unit are susceptible to change and /or its values are moderate through to high. It may be able to accommodate the relevant type of development but only in limited situations without significant change or adverse effects. Thresholds for significant change are low.

Moderate	Landscape and/or visual characteristics of the assessment unit are susceptible to change and /or its values are low-moderate through to moderate-high, or it <i>may</i> have some potential to accommodate the relevant type of development in some <i>defined</i> situations without significant change or adverse effects. Thresholds for significant change are intermediate.
Moderate-low	Landscape and/or visual characteristics of the assessment unit are resilient and of low susceptibility to change and /or its values are low-moderate or low and it can accommodate the relevant type of development in many situations without significant change or adverse effects. Thresholds for significant change are high.
Low	Landscape and/or visual characteristics of the assessment unit are robust or degraded and are not susceptible to change and /or its values are low and it can accommodate the relevant type of development without significant change or adverse effects. Thresholds for significant change are very high.

Development types and scenarios considered

2.9 This study considers the sensitivity of the landscape to the principle of development without knowing the specific size or exact location of that development. However, two general development types are considered by this assessment, as described below:

Residential development

2.10 Scenario description: housing development including typical dwellings of 2 storeys with gardens, with some 3 storey flats along roads, at a density of around 30 dwellings per hectare (dph).

Employment development

2.11 Scenario description: large block warehouse-type buildings, typically two storeys high. These could be stand-alone buildings or located within a large complex of similar warehouses.

2.12 There are only two sites within this study with potential identified for employment development at Eastham, near Ellesmere Port (SP50/51).

Assessment process

Desk study

2.13 The first task in the assessment process, following the definition of the sites for assessment, was to carry out a desk-top analysis for each area. This involved the mapping of multiple data sets within ArcGIS (Geographical Information System) to identify the potential sensitivities of each area. An example of the data sets utilised for the study is shown in **Figure 2.1**.

Field verification

2.14 A structured process of field survey verification was undertaken by landscape environment experts in order to test and refine the outputs from the desk study. Each area for assessment was visited in turn to record information and take photographs. The field survey was undertaken from roads and public rights of way.

2.15 The survey work looked in particular at the visual relationships between the assessment area and adjoining settlement, landscape settings and wider views, the condition of individual landscape features, and perceptual qualities (i.e. levels of tranquillity).

Reporting

2.16 The report sets out the purpose, policy context and methodology of the study, and the Landscape Sensitivity Assessment for each assessment area.

2.17 The evaluation for each assessment area as part of this study includes the following information:

- A short description of the area including location and landscape character context;
- Landscape value context, in terms of any relevant national and local landscape designations;
- Analysis against the assessment criteria with a description given against each of the assessment criteria set out in **Table 2.1**;
- Evaluation of landscape sensitivity for the assessment area with an overall judgement/rating (as defined in **Table 2.2**; and
- Broad guidance applicable to potential development within each area.

2.18 Each area evaluation also includes:

Chapter 3

Project findings

Overall landscape sensitivity assessment results

3.1 A summary of the overall landscape sensitivity ratings for each of the assessment areas is provided in **Table 3.1**. These ratings are also mapped in **Figure 3.1**.

3.2 Detailed findings for each landscape assessment area are presented in **Appendix A**. Please note that the overall judgement scores should always be interpreted in conjunction with the information contained in the detailed profiles.

Table 3.1: Summary of results

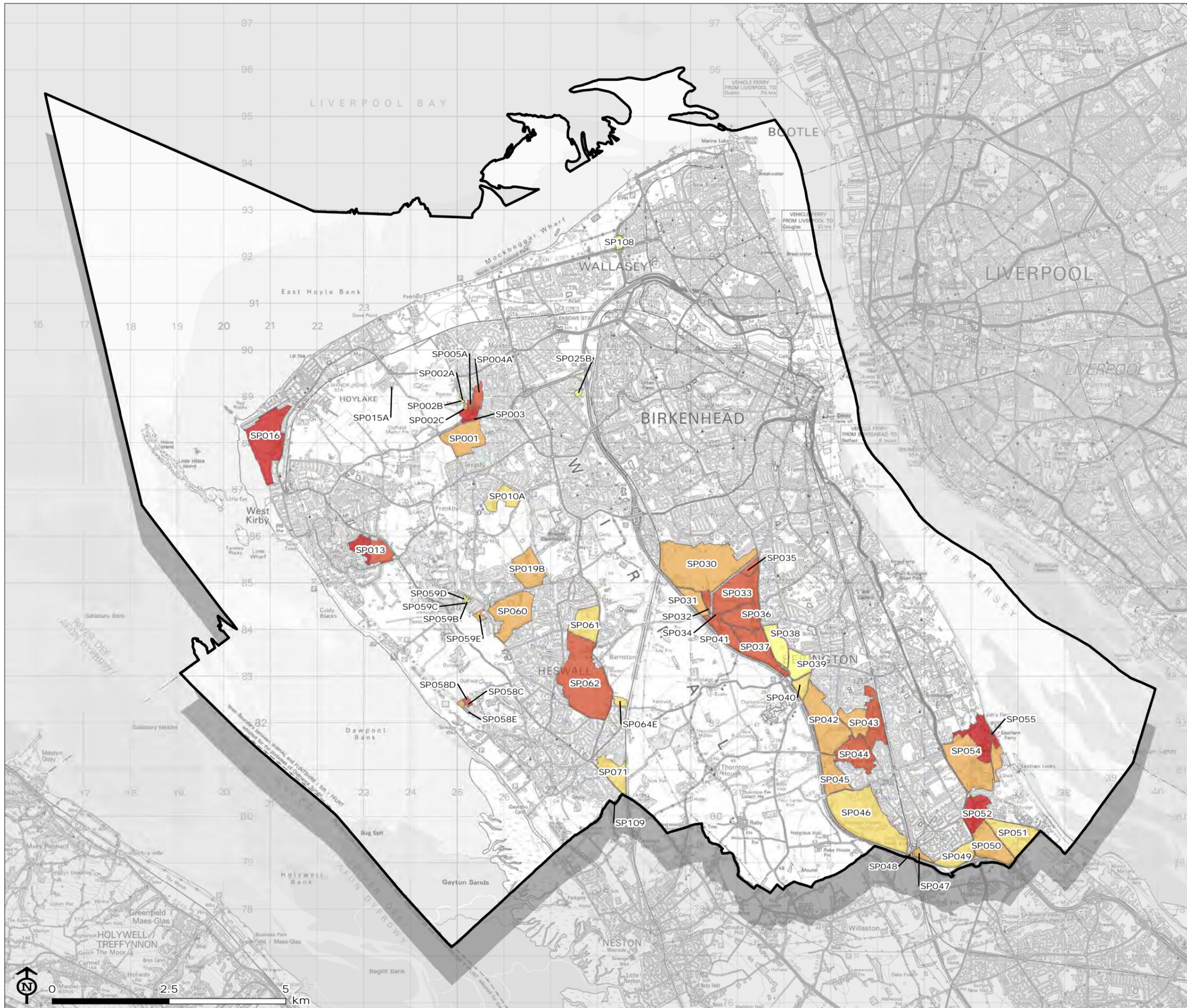
Landscape sensitivity area	Landscape sensitivity assessment
SP001	Moderate
SP002A	Low
SP002B	Low
SP002C	Moderate
SP003	High
SP004A	Moderate-High
SP005A	Moderate-High
SP010A	Low-Moderate
SP013	High / Moderate-High
SP0015A	Low
SP016	High
SP019B	Moderate
P025B	Low
SP030	Moderate
SP031	Moderate
SP032	Moderate-High
SP033	Moderate-High
SP034	Moderate-High

Landscape sensitivity area	Landscape sensitivity assessment
SP035	Moderate-High
SP036	Moderate-High
SP037	Moderate-High
SP038	Low
SP039	Low
SP040	Low-Moderate
SP041	Moderate-High
SP042	Moderate
SP043	Moderate-High / Moderate
SP044	Moderate-High
SP045	Moderate
SP046	Low-Moderate
SP047	Moderate
SP048	Moderate
SP049	Low-Moderate
SP050	Moderate
SP051	Low-Moderate
SP052	High
SP054	High / Moderate
SP055	Moderate
SP058C	Moderate-High
SP058D	Moderate-High
SP058E	Moderate
SP059B	Low
SP059C	Low
SP059D	Low
SP059E	Moderate
SP060	Moderate
SP061	Low-Moderate
SP062	Moderate-High
SP064E	Low-Moderate

Landscape sensitivity area	Landscape sensitivity assessment
SP071	Low-Moderate
SP108	Low
SP109	Low-Moderate

Fig 3.1: Landscape Sensitivity Overview

-  Wirral Borough Boundary
- Landscape sensitivity rating**
-  High
-  Moderate-High
-  Moderate
-  Low-Moderate
-  Low



Map Scale @A3: 1:80,000

