

## NCA 62 Cheshire Sandstone Ridge

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### *Overview*

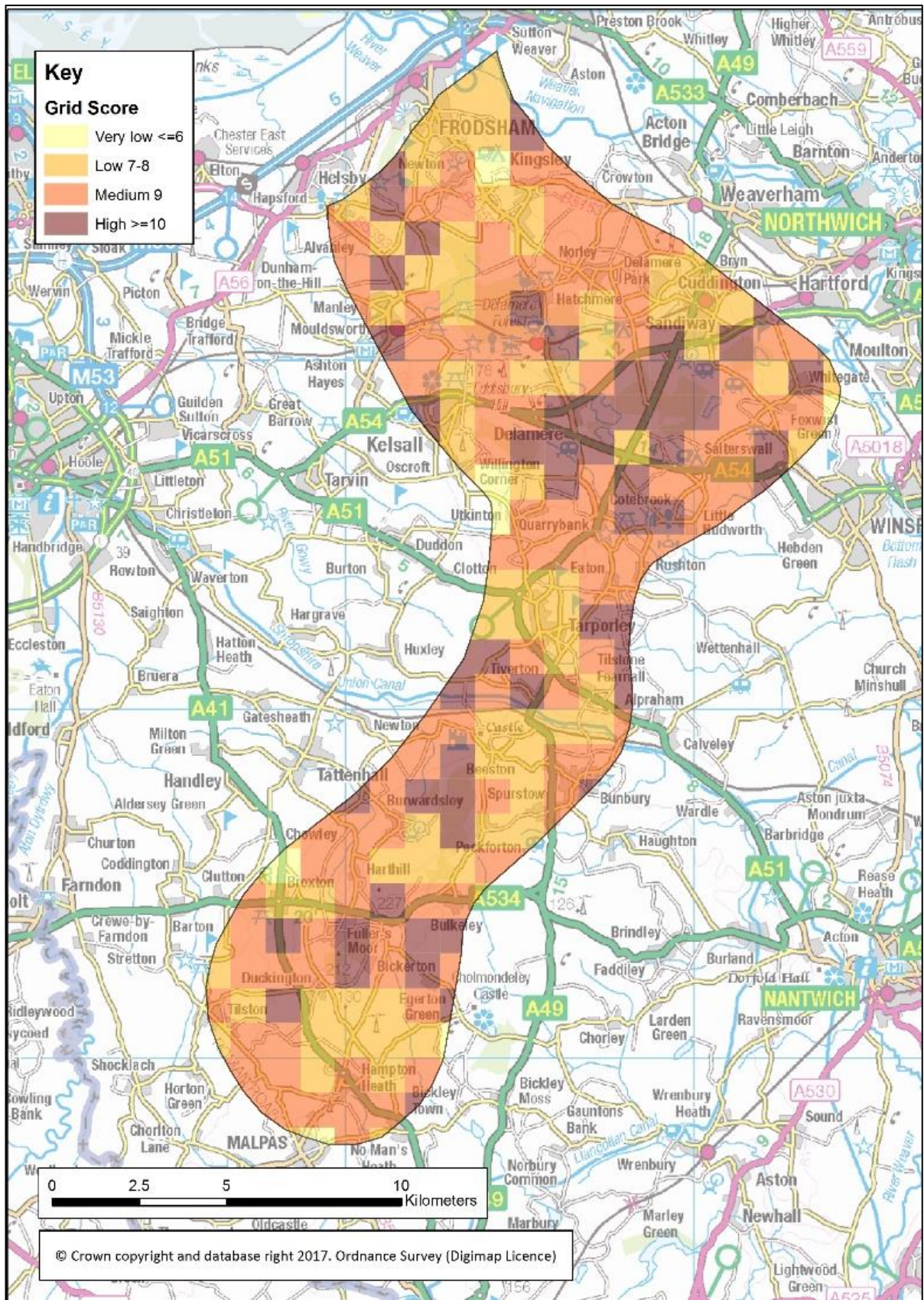
The NCA is a small area, surrounded on three sides by the Shropshire, Cheshire and Staffordshire Plain NCA. The Sandstone ridge is a prominent landscape feature, forming a discontinuous range of hills extending from Malpas in the south to the high point at Peckforton where it appears as a dramatic bluff overlooking the valley of the River Gowy which cuts through the area. It continues further north in a series of hills to Helsby, where the ridge terminates in a bluff overlooking the Mersey Estuary. It is included within the Western Mixed Agricultural Landscape Type, and whilst the lower slopes are suitable for arable cultivation, much of the ridge has poor quality, thin soils and are covered in permanent pasture, woodland and fragmented heath. Fields are small to medium in size, regular in form and enclosed by hedges at lower elevations and sandstone walls higher up. The settlement pattern is diverse, with hamlets and villages on the lower slopes, but a more dispersed pattern of farmsteads and hamlets on the ridges. Although the settlement pattern is a rural one, the NCA is crossed by several main routes, linking the urban areas such as Chester, Nantwich and Crewe, in the surrounding area. It is a well-wooded area, with 13% of the NCA under woodland, though only 12% of this is ancient woodland. There are extensive tracts of woodland, for example in Delamere Forest, once a legal forest but now part of the Forestry Commission. Woodland here comprises mostly oak and pine with some birch as well as conifer plantations. Peckforton Woods still retains the largest tract of sessile oak in Cheshire.

### *The Historic Environment Character*

There is evidence for prehistoric occupations on the ridge in the form of burial mounds, fortifications and artefacts from the Bronze Age and Iron Age. In the later medieval period, significant parts of the area appear to have been hunting preserves, whilst the northern part fell within the Royal Forest of Delamere and was administered under forest law. The area was also strategically important, as it lies close to the English-Welsh border, and Beeston Castle was built on a discrete hill top in the Gowy Valley, guarding the route through the ridge south-east from Chester. Agriculture was traditionally cattle-rearing and dairying, and the area was gradually enclosed to provide improved grazing.

### *Opportunities for Woodland Expansion*

The well-wooded character of the NCA is reflected by the high potential for extending woodland cover in the mapping of historic and natural environment attributes. This is supported by the NCA profile, which highlights the opportunities for extending woodland around Delamere Forest and along the Sandstone ridge, linking habitats to reduce fragmentation. The NCA profile also highlights environmental opportunities for linking fragmented heathland habitats, however, and which forms part of the historic landscape character of the area, and proposals for new woodland need to take this into account, along with potential impact on prehistoric monuments and their settings.



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