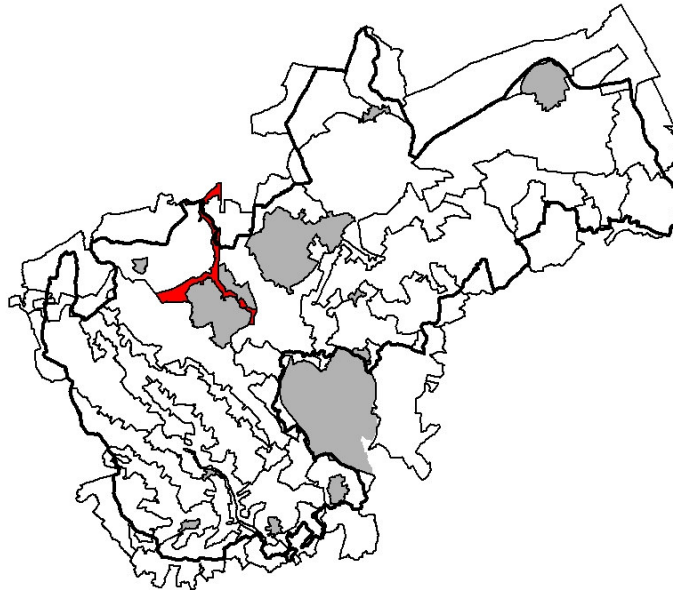


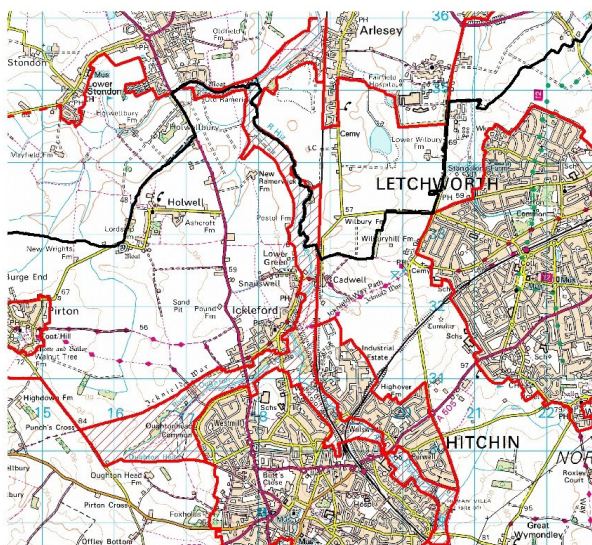
LOCATION



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LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

The Purwell rises to the south east of Hitchin running broadly northward to join the River Hiz, beyond the District boundary. The River Oughton is a tributary of the Purwell running along the northern boundary to Hitchin. The District boundary follows the northern length of the water course.



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LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Traditionally cattle grazed water meadows with poplar, willow and ash trees along the watercourses. Self seeded mature hawthorn also randomly distributed. Mature landscape character well defined by urban development (Hitchin). Trees restrict views. General change of land use adjacent to Ickleford where land is predominantly used for horse grazing and stabling. Paddocks are defined by post and barbed wire fencing. Character Area is crossed, in several locations, by the mainline railway which runs on embankment. Oughtonhead Common, to the west, managed as a local nature reserve.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Grazed water meadows
- Meandering water course with associated ponds and water bodies
- Linear woodland belts following the water course

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- Mainline railway on embankment
- Public parkland at Ickleford
- Oughtonhead Common Nature Reserve
- Purwell Mill Nature Reserve

ASSESSMENT**PHYSICAL INFLUENCES****Geology & soils**

Poor draining gleyed soils over alluvial drift predominate.

Topography

Flat valley bottom.

Degree of slope

Negligible.

Altitude range

45m to 63m.

Hydrology

Well defined water courses of the rivers Oughton and Purwell with multiple channels and associated water bodies.

Land cover and land use

The dominant land use is grazing land within a patchwork of copses. Sheep grazing on dryer land, cattle on wetter areas and horse grazing adjacent to urban fringe.

Vegetation and wildlife

Dominant trees are poplar, willow, ash and hawthorn. Scrub dog rose on dryer ground. Hawthorn often grazed to form a standard tree

This Character Area is characterised by a series of river valleys and associated wetland communities. The wetland habitats associated with the Rivers Hiz and Oughton are highlighted as being of high biodiversity status and ecological importance by the Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan.

Ickleford Common is a rare example of an unimproved and traditionally managed grassland and is important for great crested newts. It is recognised as a key neutral grassland habitat by the Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan.

Watercress beds and a number of rough unimproved/semi-improved wet grassland communities are located adjacent to the River Hiz. Some of these meadows are old, and have relict ditches and hedgebanks. Diverse wetland habitats including sedge-beds and reedbeds, marsh communities and spring-fed pools can be found at Cadwell Marsh and Bury Mead Springs Nature Reserve. Unimproved damp grasslands, spring-fed wetland communities and watercress beds occur around the River Purwell and its tributaries.

Oughtonhead Common and Nature Reserve contains

one of the largest fen woodlands in Hertfordshire, and is of considerable ecological interest. In particular it is important for carr woodland habitat with associated birds, bats and harvest mouse. The rivers Oughton and Hiz both have unusual habitat, and is probably the single most important feature of the site. Also present are areas of marshy grassland and fen. The rivers Purwell and Oughton are important for water voles and grass snake. Snipe roost in Purwell Meadows in winter. Purwell Ninesprings is another ecologically valuable wetland with mature alder woodland, sedge and reed beds.

Typical wetland species include southern marsh orchid, marsh valerian and tussock sedge, whilst fauna includes water rail, kingfisher, water vole and water shrew and the nationally notable musk beetle.

Railway sidings that run through this Character Area typically have scrub communities that can be of value to wildlife.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

A cropmark of a sub-rectangular enclosure is situated to the northwest of Hitchin.

Field patterns

The historic agricultural landscape is composed of a mixture of enclosed meadow pasture, prairie fields where abutting neighbouring Pirton Lowlands (LCA 218) with relict elements within 18th century and later enclosure, commons with an open margin to the north of Hitchin. On the periphery of Hitchin lies a mixture of 19th-20th century plantation, allotments, post-1950s enclosure, prairie fields with post-1950s boundary loss and commons with an open margin. On the southern edge of Ickleford lies an area of informal medieval parkland. Today there is no apparent field pattern due to the use of this area for pasture. Where horse paddocks have been introduced post and wire fencing is dominant.

Transport pattern

The Character Area is crossed a number of times by the mainline railway on embankment. The A505 crosses the Character Area in the centre of Hitchin.

Settlements and built form

The historic settlement pattern is sparse containing no documented traditional buildings. The urban edge of Hitchin defined the extent of the river corridor. Railway infrastructure also dominates.

EVALUATION**VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION**

A mature water meadow landscape enclosed over part of its length by urban development. North of Hitchin the river flows across an open large scale arable landscape. The tree cover and pastureland provide a welcome contrast with the surrounding landscape. Railway noise is an issue.

Rarity & distinctiveness

This landscape type is not uncommon within the county.

VISUAL IMPACT

Views are restricted along the river corridor by well established blocks of vegetation. The urban fringe dominates/intrudes where tree cover is less well established.

ACCESSIBILITY

Only local sections are public accessible, there is no continuous public right of way following the water courses. The Icknield Way long distance path crosses the river and railway at Ickleford. North of Ickleford there is no access to the river.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) have undertaken Tier B (Community of Place) consultations. Views of the local community have been sought and contributor's responses to each of the Character Areas will be analysed and a summary of the responses provided by HCC.

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

LC1 Landscape Conservation Area
LNR Purwell Meadows

EVALUATION

CONDITION

Land cover change: Localised
 Age structure of tree cover: Mature
 Extent of semi-natural habitat survival: Widespread
 Management of semi-natural habitat: Good
 Survival of cultural pattern: Declining/Relic
 Impact of built development: High
 Impact of land-use change: Moderate

Matrix Score: Moderate

ROBUSTNESS

Impact of landform: Apparent
 Impact of land cover: Prominent
 Impact of historic pattern: Insignificant
 Visibility from outside: Locally visible
 Sense of enclosure: Contained
 Visual unity: Unified
 Distinctiveness/rarity: Unusual

Matrix Score: Moderate

CONDITION	GOOD	Strengthen and reinforce	Conserve and strengthen	Safeguard and manage
	MODERATE	Improve and reinforce	Improve and conserve	Conserve and restore
	POOR	Reconstruct	Improve and restore	Restore condition to maintain character
		WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG
ROBUSTNESS				

EVALUATION

INHERENT LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY

Landscape Character Sensitivities

- A valley floor character area, including the River Purwell, Hiz and Oughton, defined in part by the urban development of Hitchin. The character area would be sensitive to any development, which diluted the character of the river valley landscape
- The watercourses are meandering and associated with ponds and water bodies. The character area would be vulnerable to the loss of these features
- The valley is characterised by water meadows, which are grazed by cattle. The character area would be sensitive to any loss of or development on the water meadows
- Land use adjacent to Ickleford has changed to horsiculture, resulting in hedgerow field boundaries being replaced by post and wire fences. This practice should be discouraged as it is detrimental to the character of River Oughton and Purwell Valleys
- The river corridor is well vegetate and dominated by Willow, Poplar and Ash. The character area would be vulnerable to the removal of the vegetation
- The vegetation associated with the River Oughton is less mature than the majority of the character area. The young vegetation is vulnerable to lack of management
- River Oughton and Purwell Valleys are characterised by areas of open landscape, including Oughtonhead, Walsworth and Ickleford common and Purwell Mill Nature Reserve. The character area would be vulnerable to the loss or lack of management of these important sites
- The character area provides significant recreation facilities including, sports pitches, skate parks and play areas. The character would be vulnerable excessive facilities diluting the natural character of the area
- Watercress beds are a historic element within the character area, found adjacent to the River Hiz. The character area is vulnerable to lack of management or

removal of such historic characteristics

- The character area is affected by the roads and railway line, which create frequent disturbance in the area. Some of the open spaces are divided by the roads and the rivers have been culverted in areas, which is detrimental to the natural character of River Oughton and Purwell Valleys
- The urban development of Hitchin defines parts of the character area but is also intrusive, where there is limited vegetation. The character area is vulnerable to inappropriate or unsympathetic development
- There is reasonable public access through River Oughton and Purwell Valleys including the Icknield Way

Overall River Oughton and Purwell Valleys is considered to be of **moderate sensitivity**. The character area provides an informal and naturalistic landscape with recreational facilities within and surrounding Hitchin. However there has been some degradation of character due to the road and rail connections

Visual Sensitivities

- There are few views of the river corridor from the urban housing areas
- Views of the river from the open landscape are frequent along the river corridor

In visual terms, River Oughton and Purwell Valleys is considered to be of **moderate sensitivity**. Views along the valley and of the river would be sensitive to degradation.

LANDSCAPE VALUE

Overall River Oughton and Purwell Valleys is considered to be of **moderate low landscape value**. Aspects of particular value within the Character Area are the variety in scale and texture, the relative sense of remoteness and extensive vegetation. However, built development in Hitchin heavily influences the area.

EVALUATION

CAPACITY TO ACCOMMODATE DEVELOPMENT

Large urban extensions and new settlements (>5ha)

This type of development would not be appropriate within this Character Area, due to the natural character, features and presence of the rivers within River Oughton and Purwell Valleys. A proportion of the character area is within the Environment Agency’s designated floodplain, further restricting the landscape capacity for such development.

The landscape capacity for major urban extensions or new settlements is considered to be low.

Smaller urban extensions (<5ha)

This type of development would not be appropriate within this Character Area, due to the presence of the rivers. A proportion of the character area is within the Environment Agency’s designated floodplain, further restricting the landscape capacity for such development.

The landscape capacity for small urban extensions is considered to be low.

Major transport developments/improvements

This type of development would only be appropriate for improvements of the existing road and rail connections. However it would be imperative that any work was mitigated through the planting of appropriate shelterbelts.

The landscape capacity for major transport developments/improvements is considered to be moderate.

Commercial/warehouse estates

There is some limited capacity for this type of large scale development within the character area, adjacent to the railway line and with the existing development of this scale. However due to the existing character any proposals would need clear justification to avoid the erosion of the natural character of River Oughton and Purwell Valleys. The landscape capacity for commercial/warehouse estates is considered to be moderate to low.

Individual large/bulky buildings

There is some limited capacity for sympathetically located and designed individual large buildings within the character area, adjacent to the railway line, if in keeping with existing development of this scale. However due to the existing character any proposals would need clear justification to avoid the erosion of the natural character of River Oughton and Purwell Valleys. The landscape capacity for commercial/warehouse estates is considered to be moderate to low.

Large scale open storage

The landform and presence of the river and associated land uses in the character area would make it difficult to accommodate large scale ‘open’ uses. This would not be in keeping with the natural character of the area and likely to be very open to view and introduce new elements that would conflict with the existing characteristics.

The landscape capacity for large scale ‘open’ uses is considered to be low.

Mineral extraction/waste disposal

Some small scale mineral extraction could be accommodated with careful design and mitigation measures. Larger scale extraction or waste disposal would not be in keeping with the character of the area. For any consented schemes, restoration proposals could include wetland habitats and features and include for additional planting and access in keeping with existing patterns.

The landscape capacity for mineral extraction is considered to be low to moderate. Waste disposal would be a problem in all character areas due to the presence of aquifers.

EVALUATION

Incremental small scale development

There may be some very limited capacity for carefully located and designed individual properties within the Character Area, particularly if they were in keeping with the character of Hitchin. However the presence of the floodplain restricts the landscape capacity for such development.

The landscape capacity for incremental small scale developments is considered to be low.

Utilities developments e.g. masts, pylons, wind turbines

New utilities developments would have a major impact on the character of River Oughton and Purwell Valleys. Large scale developments, tall elements such as these would be highly visible within the Character Area, as well as potentially visible in surrounding Character Areas.

The landscape capacity for utilities developments is considered to be low.

GUIDELINES

Nb. These guidelines apply only to land within North Hertfordshire

STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE
Strategy: Improve and Conserve
Landscape management guidelines

- Promote and encourage maintenance of existing pasture land within the river valley
- Retain, manage, reinstate and extend water meadow and grazing pasture within and along the valley floor to provide connectivity and reduce nutrient leaching from arable to watercourses
- Restore and reinstate riparian features and vegetation including willow pollards, wet woodland and specimen native black poplar
- Manage and restore patterns of natural watercourses and associated habitats including secondary streams to valley sides, braided watercourses, cut offs
- Promote the creation of new and retention of existing ditches connecting to the river
- Promote and encourage the biodiversity of locally native species
- Promote and maintain semi-natural habitats along the river
- Promote the planting of trees including appropriate protection within grazing areas
- Restore and enhance ponds which provide valuable habitat for protected species
- Where appropriate promote and encourage public access to the river
- Avoid damage to the river banks as a result of agricultural or other practices
- Do not clear vegetation from river banks where evidence of use for perching and nesting
- Conserve, monitor and enhance river margin habitats for protected species
- Maintain and extend the rights of way network
- Promote the use of traditional field hedges in place of post and wire enclosures to new grazing areas

Built development guidelines

- Avoid any development in the floodplain of the Rivers
- Retain the character of River Oughton and Purwell Valleys, ensuring that any new development is appropriately sited and of a scale, form and style appropriate to the Character Area
- Planting should reflect existing patterns, to mitigate buildings
- Avoid the location of new development in visual intrusive locations
- Ensure that lighting associated with new development does not create additional urbanising influences on the character Area
- Manage and enhance the river valley as a corridor for green infrastructure proposals and habitat creation
- Create new and enhanced landscapes in visually prominent urban fringes softening the interface between urban and rural landscapes