

LOW CONISCLIFFE & MERRYBENT PARISH NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

Biodiversity Background Paper



**Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group
September 2018**

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Background	4
3. Biodiversity within the Plan Area	6
4. Conclusions	9

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this paper is to provide further detail with regard to the biodiversity across the Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan area. It was prepared following feedback received during the feedback on the Pre-Submission Draft Neighbourhood Plan.
- 1.2 It forms part of the evidence base supporting the Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan. It sets out the current national and local policy context relating to biodiversity and details the important biodiversity assets present within the Plan area.

2. Background

The Development Plan

- 2.1 The current Development Plan for the Plan area comprises the: Darlington Core Strategy (2011) and the saved policies of the Darlington Local Plan (1997).
- 2.2 Local Plan policy E21 identifies that development which would materially harm the wildlife habitat value of linear features providing corridors within which wildlife can move and live will not be permitted. Linear features are referred to as: continuous corridors, rivers, streams, road and rail corridors, woodlands, hedgerows and green lanes. It specifies that harm will be assessed according to the impact of the development on the value of the habitat.
- 2.3 Core Strategy policy CS15 seeks to protect, restore, extend and manage the biodiversity network. It refers to the strategic wildlife corridors along the River Tees, local nature reserves and wildlife sites. It seeks to ensure that development will not result in any net loss of existing biodiversity value and highlights the importance of habitat networks.

National Policy and Guidance

- 2.4 National planning policy and guidance is set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) respectively. The NPPF is clear that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. These roles should not be undertaken in isolation, because they are mutually dependent.

National Planning Policy Framework

- 2.5 The NPPF makes a clear commitment to conserving the natural environment in the planning system. The natural environment is regarded as having a key role to play in achieving sustainable development (paragraph 8).
- 2.6 Section 8 deals with healthy communities. It highlights the importance of high quality open spaces and the need to base plan policies on up to date assessments. It also introduces the concept of Local Green Spaces where areas of open green space, that are important to local communities, can be recognised and protected through this specific designation. The strength of protection is as strong as for Green Belt, it needs to be consistent with sustainable development and spaces must meet three prescribed criteria to be successfully designated (paragraph 100).
- 2.7 Section 12 looks at good design and identifies that planning policies should: create and sustain an appropriate mix of uses including the incorporation of green and other public space and address the connections between people and places and integrate new development into the natural environment.
- 2.8 Section 15 deals with the natural environment and states that local plans should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment:
 - Maintain the objective of sustainable development;
 - Protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, geological conservation interests and soils;
 - Recognising the wider benefits of ecosystem services;
 - Minimising impacts on biodiversity and providing net gains in biodiversity where possible;
 - Plan positively for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of networks;
 - Identify and record all components of the ecological network;

- Include policies to conserving and enhancing the natural environment;
- Identify areas where development may be inappropriate;
- Contain a clear strategy for enhancing the natural environment;
- Retain and enhance all publicly accessible open space unless prescribed tests are met.

National Planning Policy Guidance

- 2.9 The NPPG also contains guidance on the natural environment, subdivided into sections on landscape, biodiversity and ecosystems, green infrastructure and brownfield land, soils and agricultural land.
- 2.10 With regard to biodiversity and ecosystems, NPPG states that there is a requirement to have an understanding of the nature and distribution of local ecological networks and look for opportunities for habitat enhancement or restoration. If necessary, undertake a green space audit. It highlights that green infrastructure must be well planned, designed and maintained to provide a range of benefits.

3. Biodiversity within the Plan Area

3.1 Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Parish boasts a wide range of species and habitats¹. There are areas of: woodland priority habitat which is predominantly along the River Tees, areas of deciduous woodland, as well as other areas of woodland, including the designated Merrybent Community Forest. The photographs within this section have all been taken within the last year across the Parish.

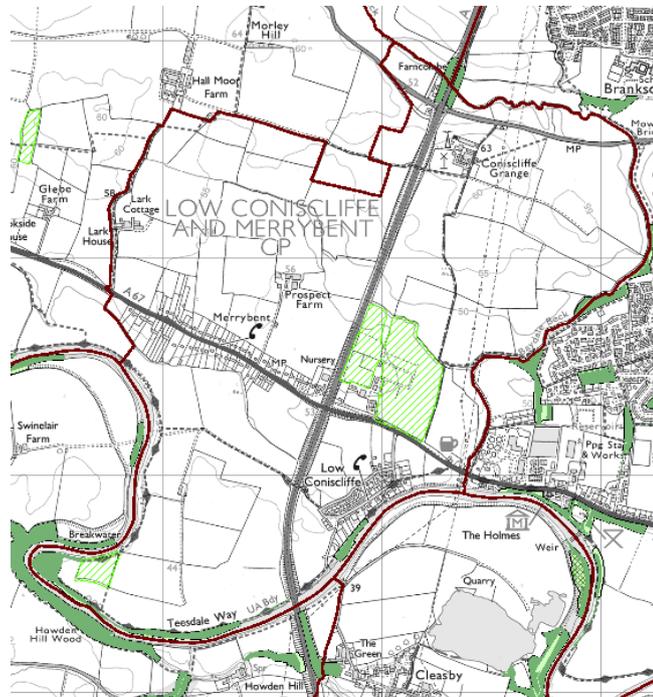


Figure 1: Habitats (dark green = deciduous woodland, light green = woodland)

3.2 The Low Coniscliffe Tees Bank Local Wildlife site lies between the River Tees and Low Coniscliffe. The Baydale Beck is also an important habitat, which is adjacent to an important and significant population of great crested newts. In addition, there are frequent sightings of various species of wildlife including: otter, water vole, deer, hedgehog, fox, badger, stoat/mink, hare and other mammals. Also, there are regular sightings of kingfisher, heron, red kite, jay, sparrow hawk, buzzard, sky lark, sand marten, swift, swallow, house martin, mallard, goosander, dipper, wagtail, cormorant, meadow pipit, treecreeper, greenfinch, rook, jackdaw, cuckoo and a variety of species of bats throughout the Parish. The Parish lies within an area identified for priority species targeting for curlew and lapwing.



¹ Information obtained from: Natural England (Magic Map) and the Environmental Records Information Centre North East



- 3.3 There are a number of important biodiversity networks across the Plan area, including:
- River Tees embankment – an unspoiled riparian woodland landscape which is a strategic green corridor, rich in a variety of wildlife;
 - Northern and southern boundaries of Merrybent – traversing the length of the village, wooded area and pastoral land providing a wildlife corridor for fox, hare and badgers;
 - Baydale Beck, western embankment – running along the eastern boundary of the Plan area, a strategic green corridor which is rich in varieties of wildlife including newts and otters;
 - A67 verges and embankments – mature hedgerows, trees and shrubs which are home to many species of wildlife, including bats;
 - A67, north – mature hedgerows and trees which are home to many species of wildlife and provide hibernation sites for a local colony of newts;
 - Coniscliffe Moor, public rights of way – dating back hundreds of years the routes cross the rural landscape and contain mature hedging and trees which are home to many species of wildlife and provide hibernation sites for a local colony of newts;
 - North of Low Coniscliffe – includes an unbroken stretch of medieval stone walling and grassed verge, an important part of the green infrastructure of the Plan area.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 This background paper has sought to provide additional evidence to identify the importance of biodiversity across the Parish to support the proposed policy approach and allocations within the Low Coniscliffe and Merrybent Neighbourhood Plan.