

section two

Context Appraisal

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An aerial photograph of a town, showing a central street lined with buildings and houses. A prominent church tower is visible on the left side. The town is surrounded by green fields and trees. The text "Context Appraisal" is overlaid in the center of the image.

Context Appraisal

2.1 Purpose of the Context Appraisal

Understanding the unique character and sense of place of the region as a whole and of the three towns and surrounding villages, is a vital prerequisite to regenerating, creating and developing new places.

This context appraisal, based on fieldwork and a study of the existing literature, expands on the particular features of the towns of Northampton, Daventry and Towcester and a number of surrounding villages.

The section begins with an analysis of West Northamptonshire at the national and regional levels. It covers the geographical, historic, socio-economic and spatial features that shaped its development and led to the current conditions. This is followed by a review of each town, examining the typology of movement; the historic development; and the streetscape, townscape and architecture of the various areas within each town. Together these elements embody the local distinctiveness of Northampton, Daventry and Towcester and their surrounding villages.

The information contained in this section is not only applicable to development within the WNDC's boundary but can also be drawn upon in the consideration of new development within the jurisdiction of the individual Local Authorities.



A selection of images from the West Northamptonshire region, providing an essence of the character of its towns and countryside

Figure 1: Bird's eye view of Towcester's compact High Street

2.2 The National Context

Northamptonshire is located within the East Midlands Region and is well connected to the East of England, the South East and the West Midlands Regions by road and rail.

The East Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy identifies Northampton as a Regional Centre and Daventry as a Sub-Regional Centre. It also identifies West Northamptonshire as part of a broader area to be considered in a sub-regional strategy.

The M1 and the London-Birmingham Rail Corridor provide the region with a good degree of connectivity to the UK's two largest cities and are identified as Regional Priorities. Plans for the improvement of these connections will facilitate increased growth in Northampton, Daventry and Towcester.



Figure 2: Geographical location of the East Midlands highlighting the region of Northamptonshire

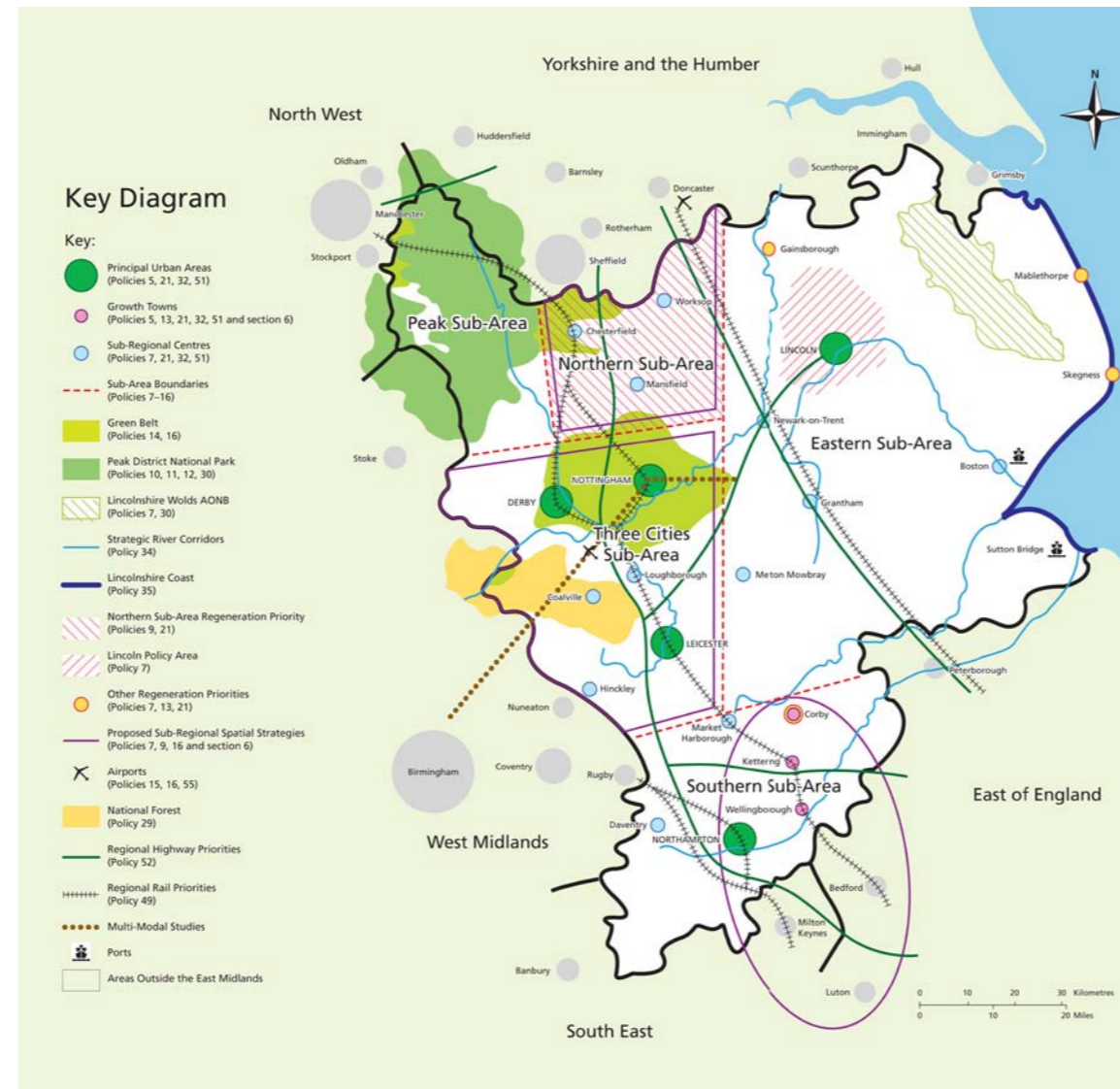


Figure 3: Key Diagram of the Regional Spatial Strategy

National Context

- West Northamptonshire is located in the centre of England within a major hub of the national road and rail networks
- National Policy, set out in RSS8, has identified West Northamptonshire, and in particular Northampton, Daventry and Towcester as growth areas within the Milton Keynes Sub Region
- Growth will be facilitated through improvements to both the strategic rail and road networks which connect the region to the rest of England

2.3.1 Historical Significance

Historical development of the three Towns

West Northamptonshire's central location has played a significant part in its development as a place.

Historically the main coaching routes from the south east to the north west passed through this region. The current A5 used to be a Roman route and was called Watling Street where the Roman garrison of Lactodurum was established laying down the origins of present day Towcester.

Through history, connections to this region have remained strong. Between 1793 and 1815, the Northampton Branch of the Grand Union Canal was constructed and was followed shortly by the rail road connecting Northampton, London and Birmingham. The growth of Northampton's shoe industry flourished as a result of these new connections.

Until the 18th century, Daventry and Towcester were both market towns for their surrounding agricultural districts. During the late 18th and early 19th century, these towns grew significantly because of their location midway on the roads from London to Chester, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, and Dublin via Holyhead. During the Georgian era, coaching traffic was the main business supporting these towns, bringing wealth through supporting local service industries. In Towcester, nearly every other establishment on Watling Street was either an inn or an alehouse. Other supporting industries for coaching, such as whip making, also flourished.

The opening of the London to Birmingham Railway from Euston in 1839 bypassed the towns of Daventry and Towcester. This marked a strong decline in the two towns which reverted back to their pre-Georgian economy as small agricultural market towns.

Northampton however underwent major expansion due to the process of industrialisation during the Victorian era and much of this is as a result of the shoe industry.

Daventry and Towcester's growth only resumed with the opening of the M1 motorway in 1958 and with the greater affordability of the private motor vehicle. This brought increased accessibility and facilitated their urban expansion.

Planned expansion was introduced in the 1960s. Daventry was designated as an overspill to accommodate the growing population of Birmingham and Northampton.

In recent years the geographical location of the three towns, within commuting distance from many metropolitan centres such as London, Birmingham, Leicester, Oxford and Cambridge, has further influenced their development, shaping and changing their inherent identities.

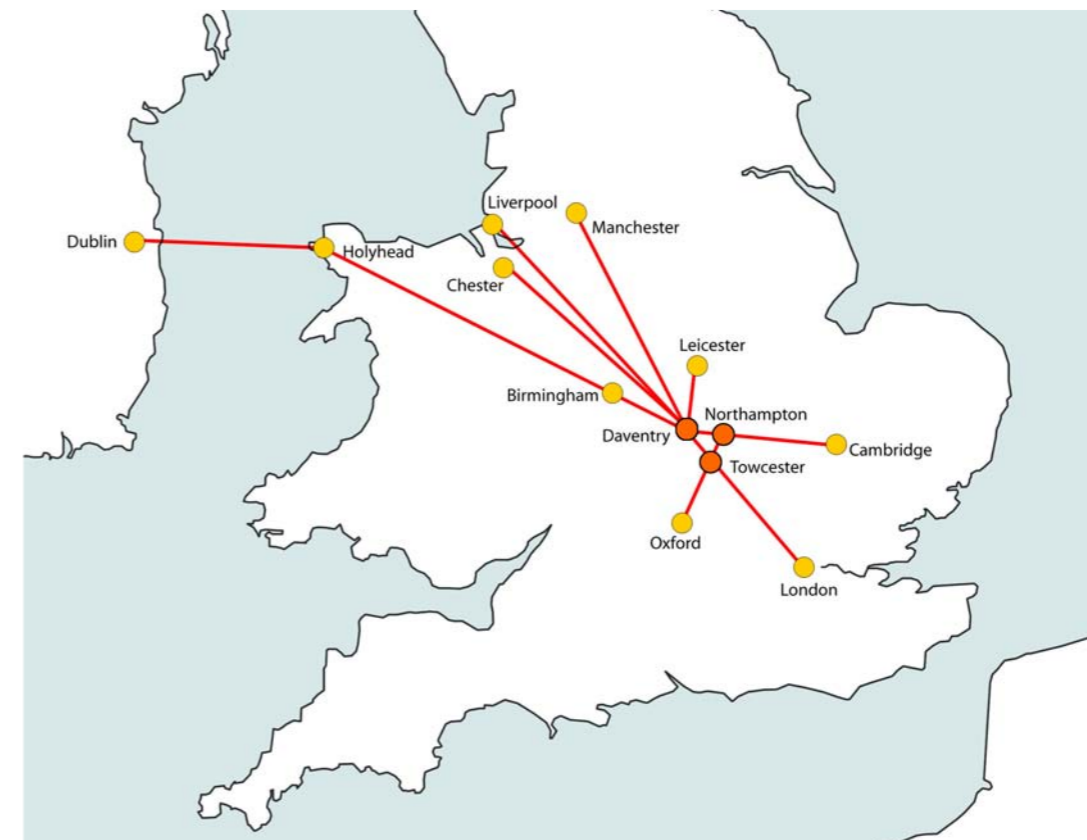


Figure 5: Historic Movement: Coaching routes



Figure 6: Location of the three towns within the West Northamptonshire region

History of the Landscape

Examining the history of the landscape surrounding and shaping the three towns and the villages enables an understanding of their inherent characteristics.

Historically, as the climate grew warmer and wetter, the County became progressively covered with forest, initially dominated by birch and other pioneer species. Over time, however, climax species of oak and ash would have dominated the 'wild wood'. With the beginning of farming in the Neolithic period and its subsequent development, forest clearance gradually spread. Indeed during the following few thousand years, woodland removal and subsequent soil erosion resulted in the washing of massive quantities of material into the County's rivers and streams.

The Romans and Saxons brought with them improved plough technology allowing them to clear and cultivate even the heavier clays. Substantial areas of woodland were lost, such as the large Saxon forest of Bromswold in the east of the County, leaving often only place names as the only obvious evidence of their presence and extent. By the time of the Domesday Survey of 1086 AD, Northamptonshire had just 8.8% woodland cover.

By the 16th century, much of Northamptonshire was farmland, with the largest woodlands located in areas that are still wooded today. These constituted part of a once much more extensive Royal Forest that stretched from Oxford to the edge of the fen landscape around Stamford. It is important to recognise that the term 'forest' in this instance does not imply a heavily wooded landscape, rather it describes an area subject to Forest Law and would have comprised a matrix of open lawns, coppice and ancient woodland.

Today there are few large ancient woodland sites within the County, although a number of small woodlands are scattered through the area. The distribution of ancient woodland is influenced by the historic Forests and Chases or Royal hunting grounds, with significant areas of ancient woodland located in the Forests of Rockingham, Salcey and Whittlewood. Scattered sites occur elsewhere, including important areas to the south of Daventry such as Badby Wood, Everdon Stubbs and Mantles Heath.

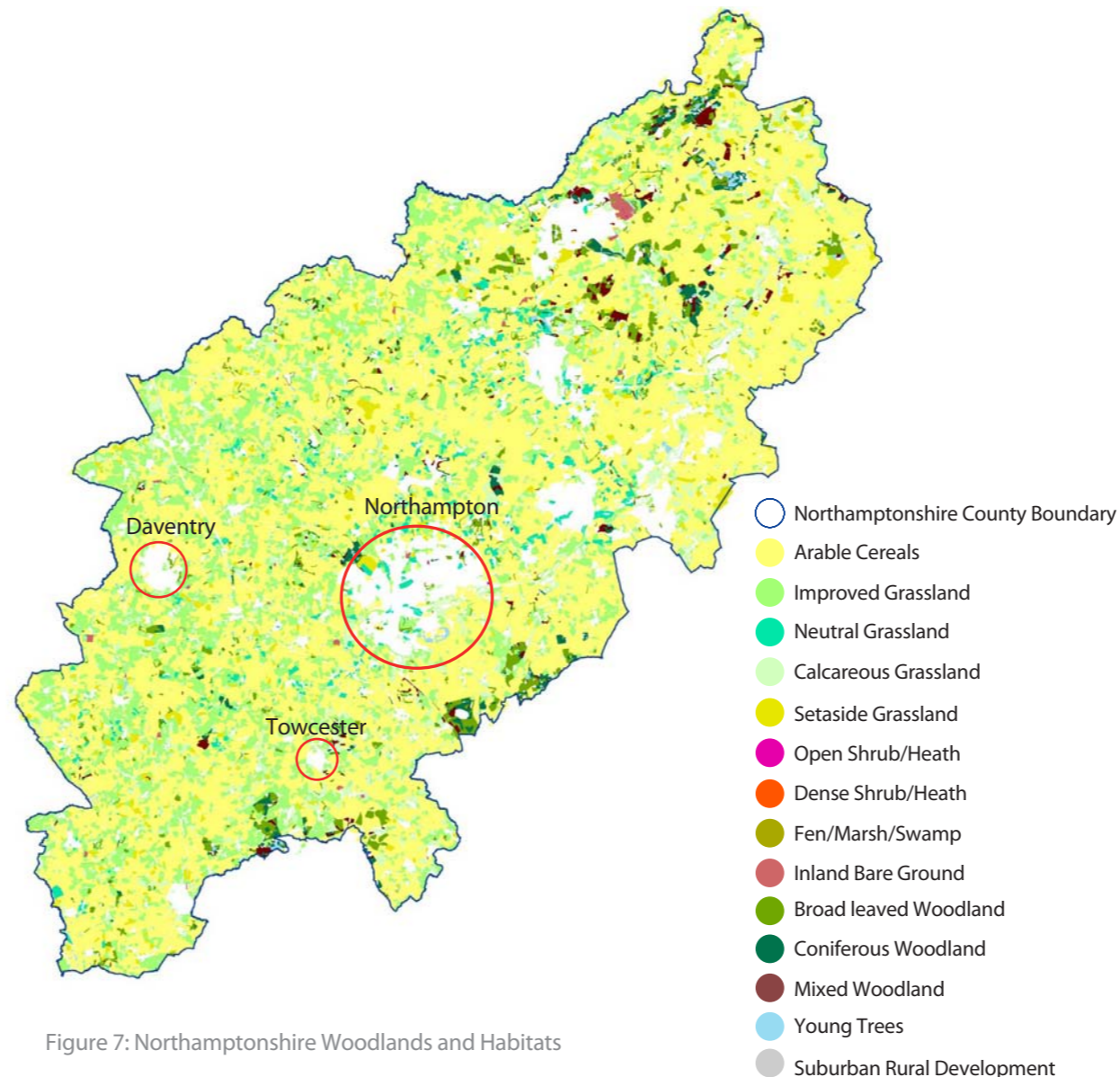


Figure 7: Northamptonshire Woodlands and Habitats

Regional History

- Historic growth of the region has been dependent on connections and accessibility to other parts of the Country
- Northampton's historic growth is based on its successful shoe industry during the Victorian era
- Historic coaching routes play an important role in the origins of Towcester and Daventry
- In 1839, the railway bypassed Daventry and Towcester leading to their decline
- In 1958, the building of the M1 led to the growth of private transportation and improved connectivity with the towns
- In the 1960s, Northampton was designated as a New Town for London, and Daventry an overspill town for Birmingham, leading to rapid residential growth, and thereby changing the character of each town

Northamptonshire Landscape History

- Prior to the Neolithic period, Northamptonshire was largely a forested area
- Technologies brought by Roman settlers allowed the cultivation of clay soils, leading to deforestation
- By the 16th century, the County was largely agricultural, taking on much of the character it has today

2.3.2 Landscape Character

Northamptonshire is a rural County with a rich and varied landscape heritage. Whilst not widely regarded for its scenic beauty, the County contains a wealth of attractive rural landscapes, the most notable of which are located in close proximity to the River Nene, the County's principal river, and its tributary, the River Ise.

A number of urban areas occur within the County. Beyond the three principal urban centres, the built environment is evocative, with numerous picturesque villages and market towns contributing significantly to the character of their immediate surroundings and wider setting. Of particular importance are the many distinctive church spires often visible for many miles around. These landmarks, often found on knolls or ridges, punctuate the horizon and provide a dramatic architectural statement and orientation point to those travelling through the County.

Further details on the landscape character types can be found in the Northamptonshire Current Landscape Character Assessment, a study conducted in 2003 and available on the following website: <http://www.rnrpenvironmentalcharacter.org.uk>.

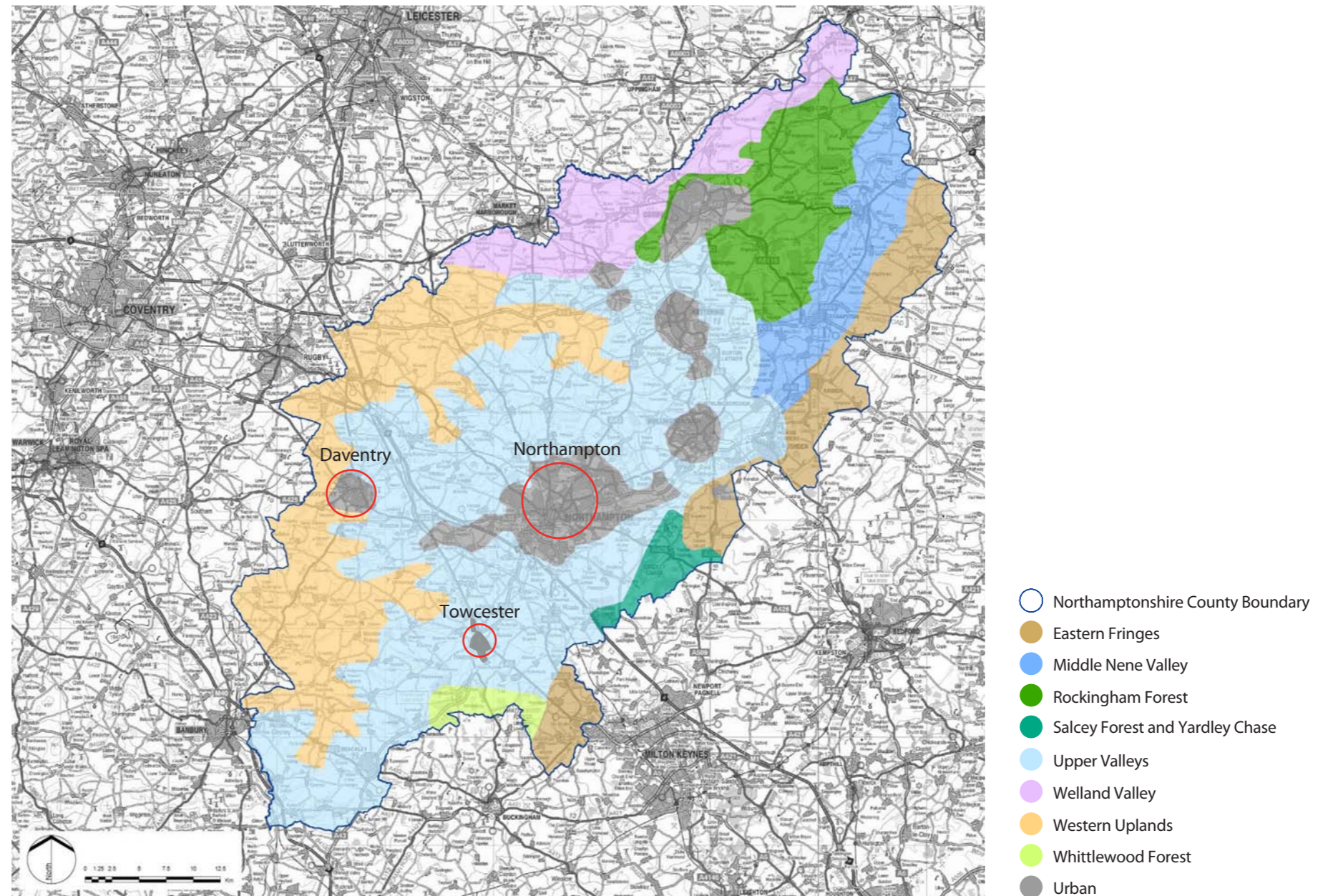


Figure 8: Northamptonshire Landscape Character Zones 1992

Countryside Character Areas

There are three dominant Countryside character areas in Northamptonshire: the Northamptonshire Uplands to the west, the Northamptonshire Vales running through the centre and Rockingham Forest forming a wedge to the north.

Northampton and Towcester are located in the Northamptonshire Vales, the landscape of which is characterised by gently undulating clay vales and river valleys as well as small woodlands. The Nene Valley to the south constitutes a prominent feature with its well-defined terraces and numerous tributaries which form side valleys. The Northamptonshire Vales contain an equally diverse pattern of settlement with large towns such as Northampton and Towcester as well as smaller towns and villages.

Towcester is adjacent to the Yardley and Whittlewood Ridge character area, which is predominantly agricultural and constituted by a broad plateau. Pastoral farming predominates to the west of the character area. It gives way to arable and woodland as the land gently slopes down to the east.

Daventry is located within a bowl, surrounded by hills within the Northamptonshire Uplands. The latter are characterised by undulating hills with wide views from edges across ridgetops, little woodland in general but prominent coverts on higher grounds, as well as open arable land and pasture land enclosed by hedges and hedgerow trees. Villages are sparse and generally located on hilltops or valleyheads. To the south of Daventry, the landscape tends to be more hilly with sharper undulations.

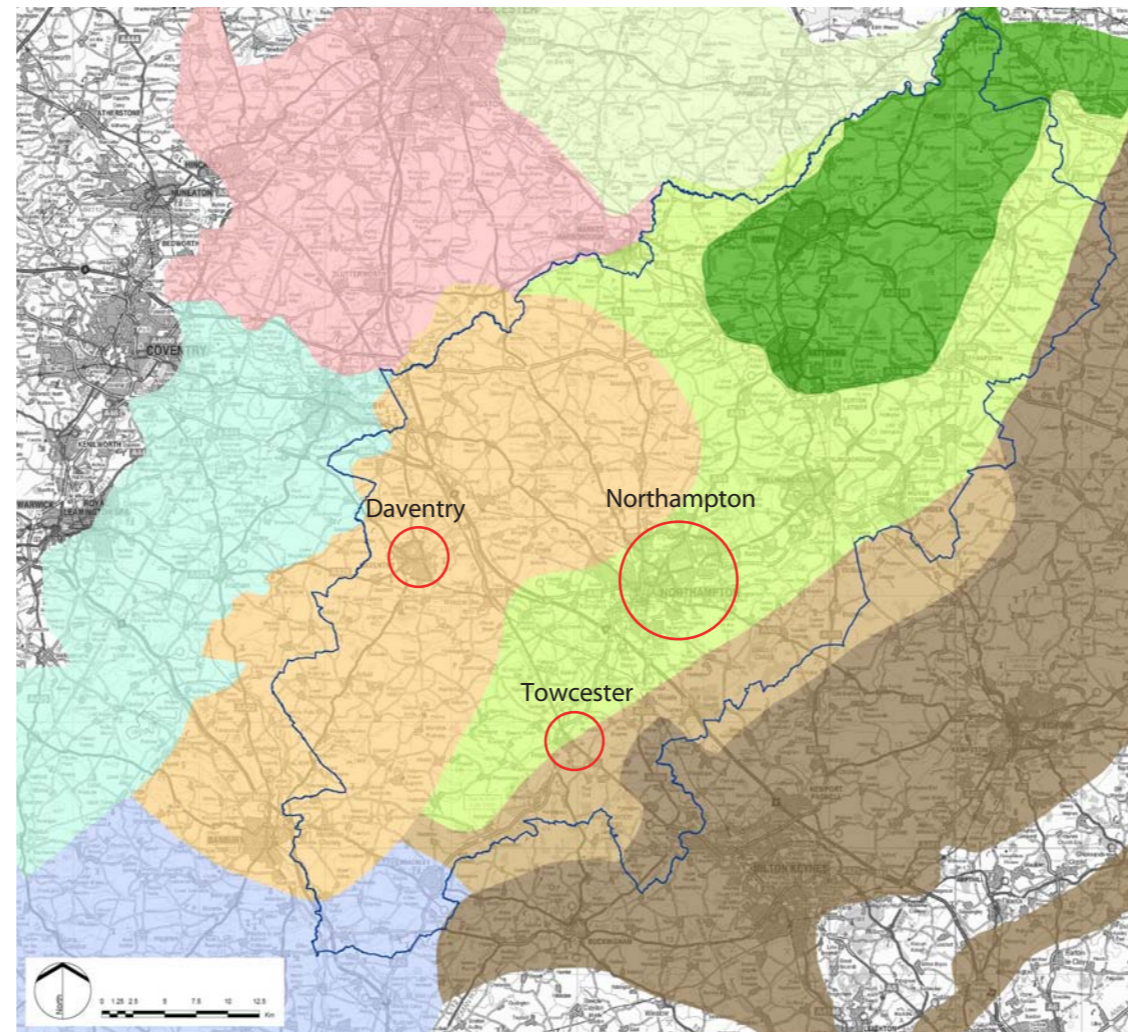


Figure 9: Northamptonshire Countryside Character Areas

- Northamptonshire County Boundary
- Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands
- Cotswolds
- Dunsmore and Feldon
- High Leicestershire
- Leicestershire Vales
- Northamptonshire Uplands
- Northamptonshire Vales
- Rockingham Forest
- Yardley-Whittlewood Ridge

Northamptonshire Landscape Character Types

- Characterised by scenic rural landscape
- There are few urban centres, but many small villages in prominent locations with visible church spires
- Daventry is located in the Northamptonshire Uplands and is surrounded by several hills
- Towcester and Northampton are located in the Northamptonshire Vales, characterised by rolling pastoral hills

Northamptonshire Landform & Geology

Landform within Northamptonshire closely reflects the underlying structure of the landscape, with features and variations often indicating the properties of the underlying solid geology, the patterns of glacial and post-glacial erosion and deposition. Across much of the County, those landform variations are subtle, with drift deposits cloaking much of the lowlands, resulting in gently undulating landscapes and flatter areas on upland plateaux and across floodplain meadows.

The Nene Valley forms a well-defined topographic feature through the centre of the County. As it progresses through Northamptonshire, the Valley broadens out significantly from about 3km wide at Northampton to approximately 5km wide around Warmington. Its main tributaries, the River Ise, Harpers Brook and Willow Brook extend to the north forming smaller steeper-sided valleys.

Indeed, many of the County's 'valleys' are so subtle that they are not recognizable as such and are interpreted in the assessment as forming part of a wider landscape of undulations. In many instances, the presence of a linear belt of trees, riparian species and occasional brick or stone bridges at crossing points are the only means of identifying the course of a stream or brook.

Perhaps the most distinctive of landscape character areas are the ironstone landscapes that occupy the heart and the western fringes of the County. Here, ironstone villages, often integrated within the hill slopes, are a key characteristic. The broad floodplains of the Nene and Welland are also key landscapes in the County. The Nene is particularly important, being a major transportation route through the County and the location for many of Northamptonshire's larger urban centres.

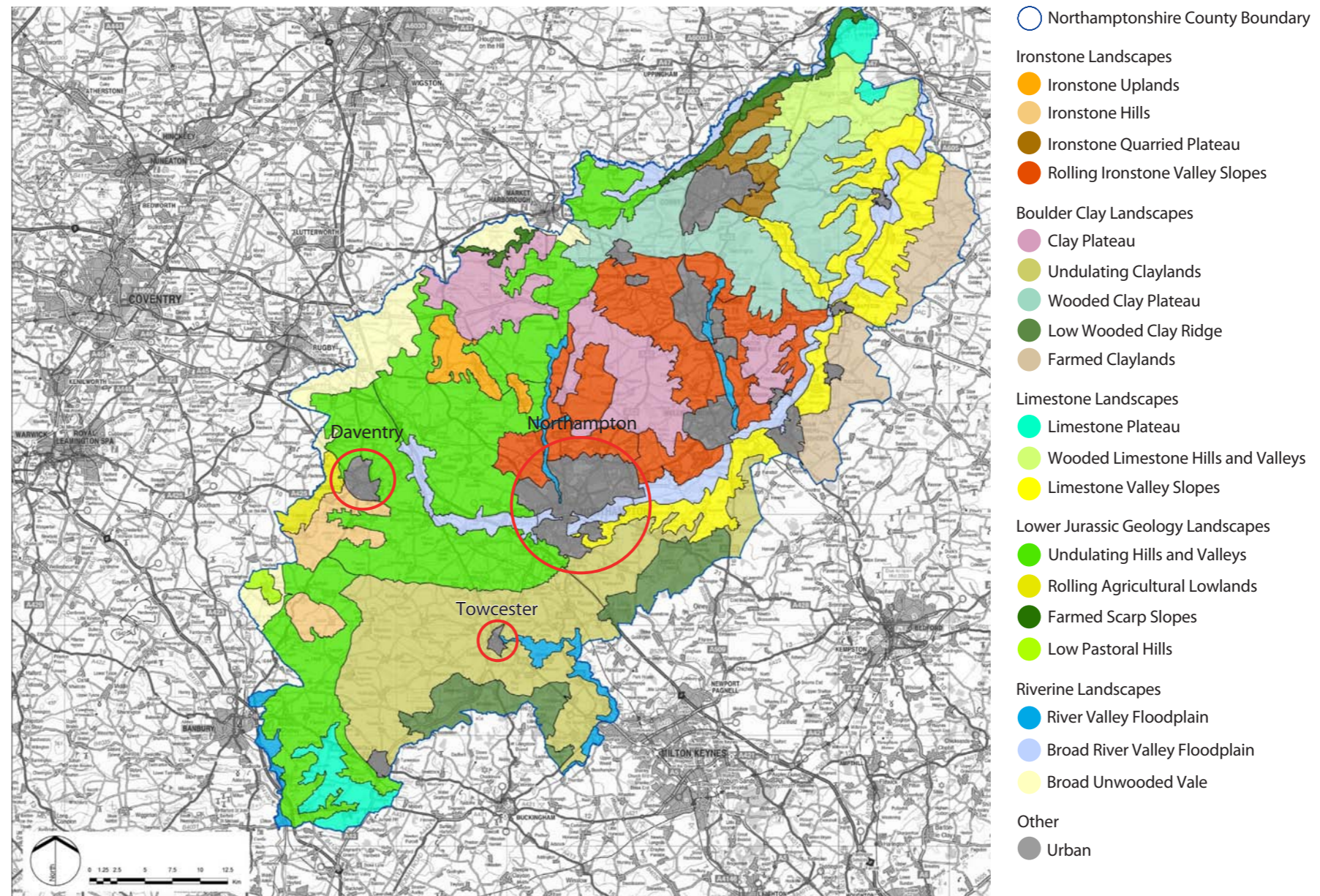


Figure 10: Landscape Character Types

Local Materials

The accompanying map indicates active quarries providing a source of local materials that could be used for the construction of new buildings within Northamptonshire. These local quarries provide a sustainable provision of material that would preserve and add to the existing character of the area.



Historical buildings such as the Town Church in Towcester, were constructed in the locally sourced ironstone

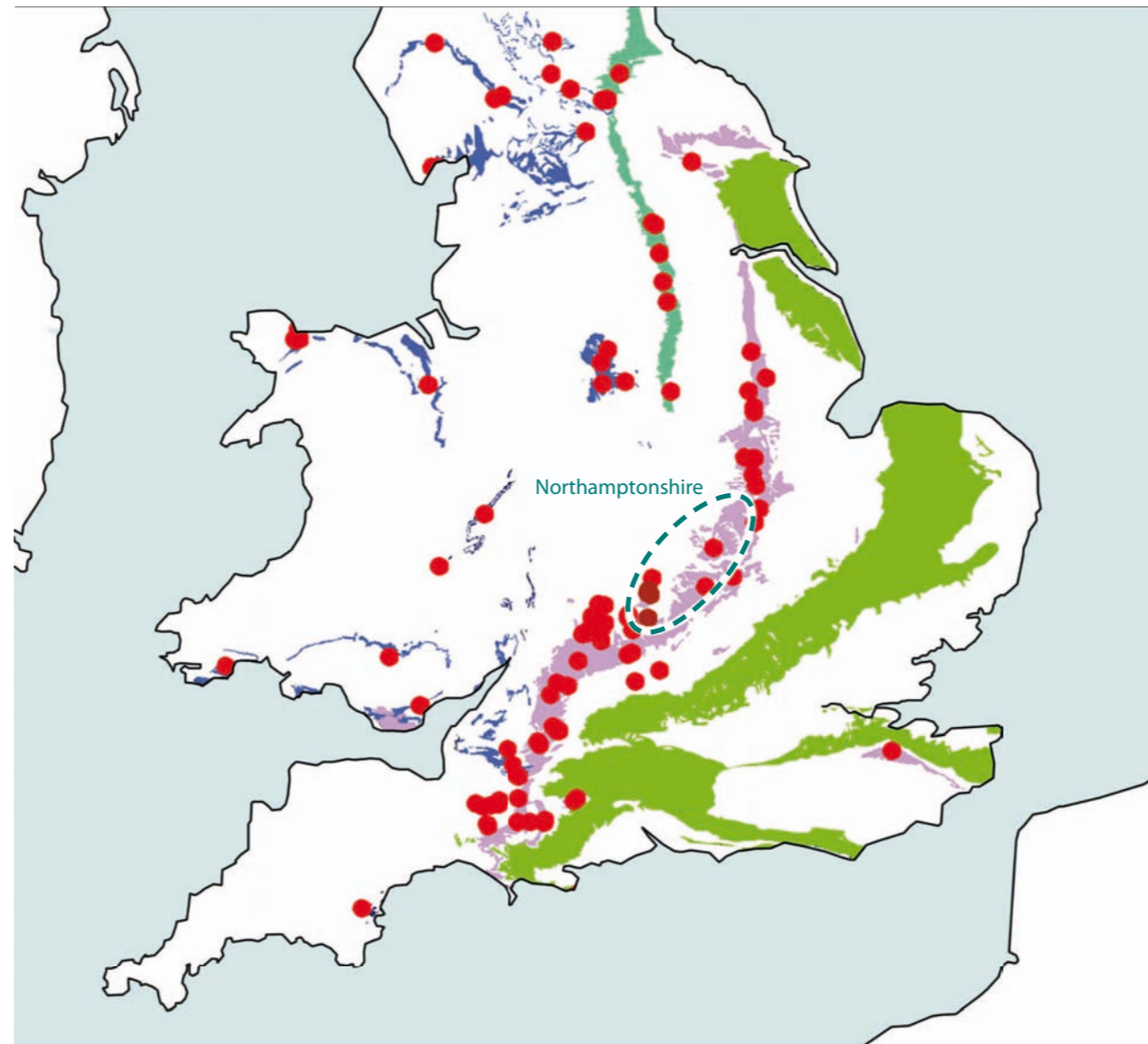


Figure 11: Active quarries in Northamptonshire

Limestone and Ironstone Building Stone Resources

- Active Limestone Quarry
- Active Ironstone Quarry
- Cretaceous Chalk
- Jurassic & Cretaceous Limestones and Jurassic (Ragstone)
- Permian Magnesium Limestone
- Carboniferous
- Precambrian, Ordovician, Silurian & Devonian

Northamptonshire Landform

- The Nene Valley is a prominent feature of Northamptonshire
- Ironstone hills around these three towns are prominent features
- Many historic buildings were constructed from locally sourced ironstone
- Active quarries are located within Northamptonshire which could be a source of local materials for new buildings

2.3.3 Strategic Issues

Movement

Much of the historic success of the region has been based on its strategic location along the main roads and rail roads of England.

The M1 is a major national link that cuts through the region and connects it to other parts of the Country. Regional connections across the local towns are provided by the A43, A45, A508 and the A5. The A43 further connects onto the M40 to the south.

Connections by rail are relatively good. Northampton is well connected to London, Milton Keynes, Rugby and Birmingham via the rail network with frequent and fast services.

Towcester lacks a rail station. Connections to the surroundings are from the A5 and the A43 as the town is located just off the junction of the two roads. The A5 is Watling Street, Towcester's historic High Street which suffers from congestion due to through traffic.

The nearest rail station to Daventry is Long Buckby, located 7km from the town and connected by a bus service with moderate frequency. In 1958, the passenger rail line to Daventry Town Centre was closed. Consequently Daventry, a largely out-commuting town, became dependent on private modes of transport.

From Long Buckby station, however it is possible to get direct connections to Rugby, Birmingham and Northampton. There is also a direct rail service from Long Buckby to London during morning peak times with a similar direct return service from London to Long Buckby during evening peak periods. Off peak services to London are however infrequent. There is potential for services to be improved at Long Buckby, including the reinstatement of an all day through service from Long Buckby to London Euston.

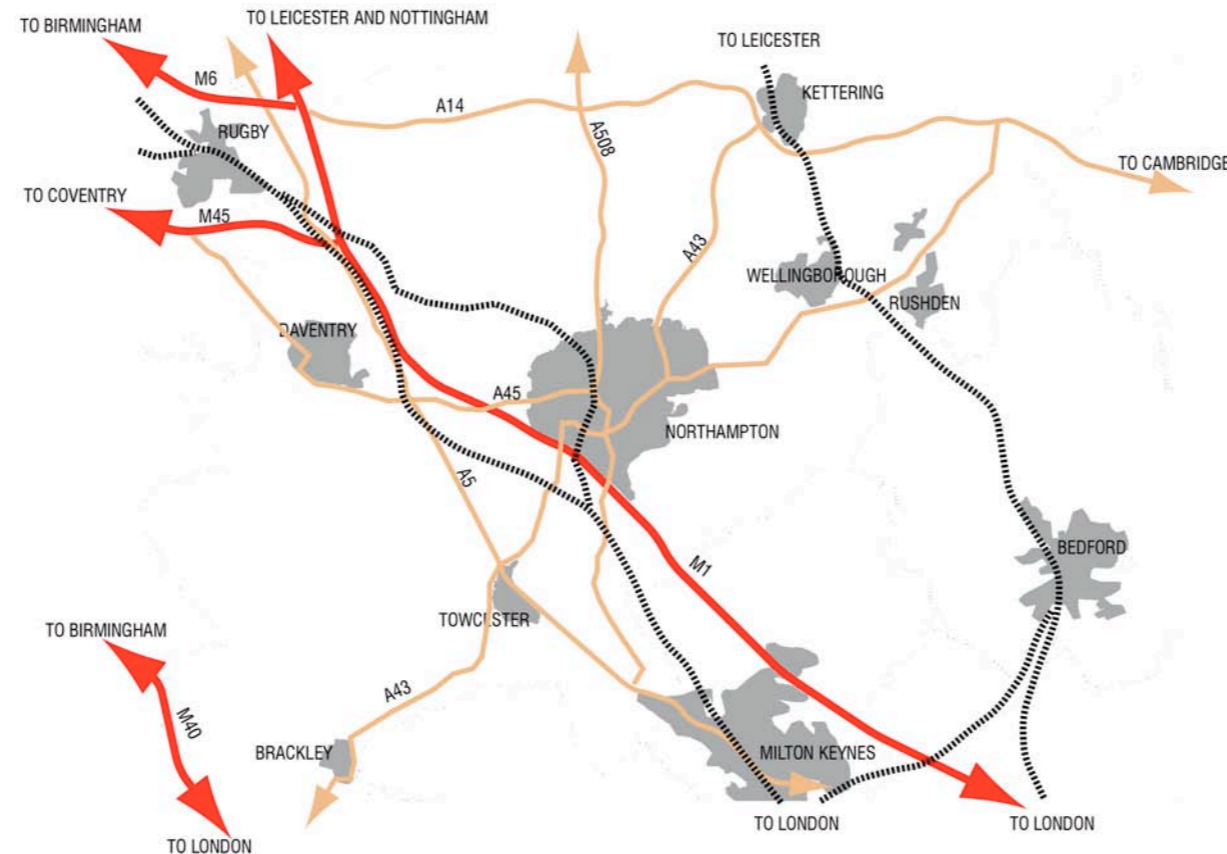


Figure 12: Regional Movement Diagram

Despite the rail network, the region does suffer from a lack of good public transport system which has led to a heavy reliance on the private vehicle, thereby putting pressure on the surrounding highways network.

It is therefore essential that future growth within this region incorporates and supports sustainable means of transport.

Strategic Network

- The M1 serves as a major national link cutting through the County and connecting to other parts of the Country
- Local connections are provided by the A43, A45, A508 and A5. Northampton is well connected to London, Milton Keynes, Rugby and Birmingham by rail and road
- Northampton contains a rail station that provides frequent rail services to London, Rugby and Birmingham.
- Daventry benefits from its nearest rail station at Long Buckby that provides services to Rugby, Birmingham and Northampton
- Towcester has poor access to reliable regional public transport as it does not have a rail station
- In the absence of a good regional and local public transport system, there has been an increasing reliance on private means of transport
- There will be a greater pressure on the road network unless new development adopts sustainable means of transport

Economy & Society

Much of the region’s economic success is directly linked to its strategic location near London and the South East. The approach for future growth integrates transport improvements with housing and regeneration proposals. The following passage from the County Structure Plan sets out how the economic growth of Northamptonshire is directly linked to the expansion of its existing transport connections.

“The rapid expansion of the County in the past three decades has brought with it a diversified industrial and commercial base and Northamptonshire now has an economy that consistently grows well above national averages. The traditional industrial base, centred on footwear manufacturing, steel making and agriculture, is being supplanted by service, high technology, engineering and distribution sectors.

The distribution sector, in particular, has grown substantially because of Northamptonshire’s central location and good communications. The western half of the County has good north-south links, being on the spine of both the M1/M6 and West Coast rail line corridors, with Northampton itself on the Northampton Loop line. There are good links east to Cambridge and the Haven Ports through the A45 linking with the A14. The upgrading of the A43 south of Northampton will link the County with the M40 corridor and to Oxford and Southern England.”

(Source - Northamptonshire County Structure Plan 1996 - 2016, The County of Northamptonshire)

Northampton has approximately 200,000 residents, Daventry around 20,000 and Towcester approximately 10,000. Each town is expected to grow substantially as a result of planned growth to the period up to 2026 at least. In this regard, it is important that any future development in the area respects the historic urban form and character of the three towns.

It is also important that growth is regulated and propagates the concept of sustainable communities where identifiable local centres provide access to amenities such as shops, schools, play facilities and employment within a walking distance from houses. Densities within these neighbourhoods would need to provide the critical mass to support public transport, local facilities, and the provision of future services and sustainable forms of energy.

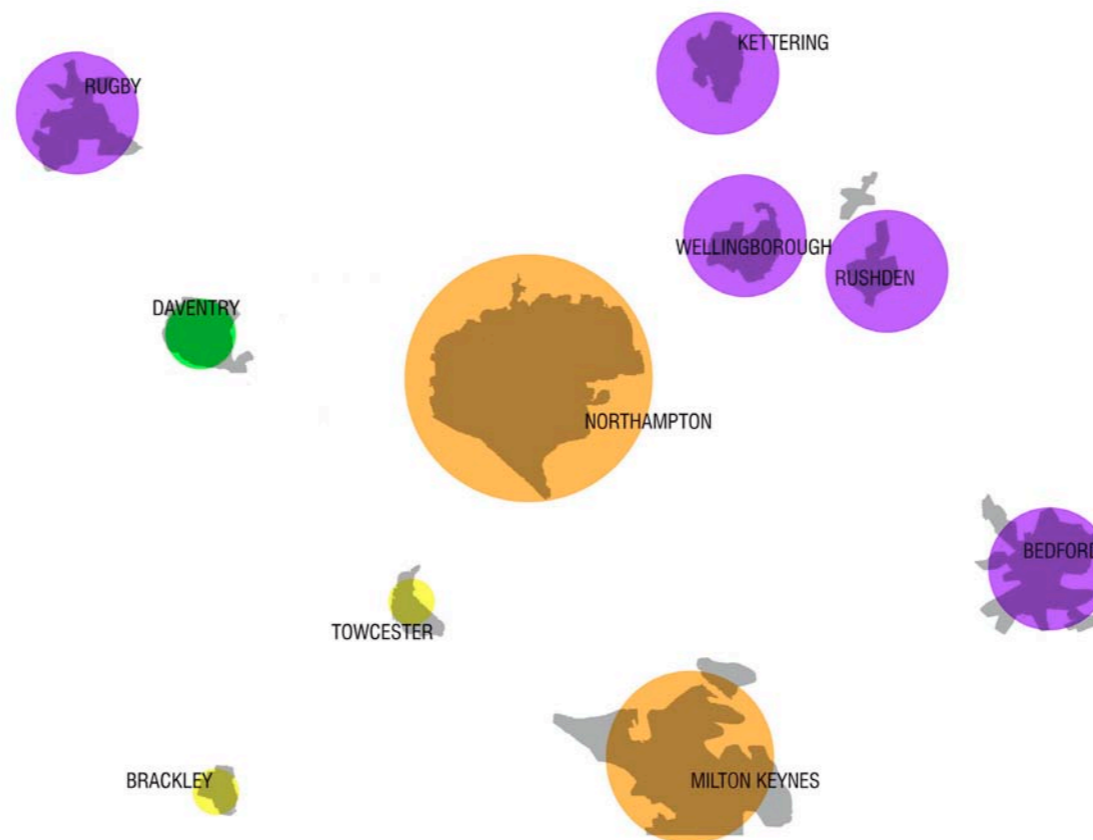


Figure 13: Main urban poles around Northampton

Economic & Social Issues

- The distribution sector has grown based on the connectivity of the area
- Rapid population growth has occurred in the past 50 years
- New development would impact on the character of the area
- Past improvements to the M1 and A43 may have accommodated unsustainable growth based on vehicular out-commuting
- Growth needs to be based on sustainable communities, with adequate provision of amenities, employment and education within a walking distance from individual houses
- Growth needs to be supported by sustainable means of transport