

# SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT



Prepared for South Oxfordshire District Council

by

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SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL



# PREFACE

## Preface

The South Oxfordshire Landscape Assessment was undertaken by Atlantic Consultants on behalf of the Council in 1998. Public consultation was carried out by the Council for a six week period between 21 June and 2 August 2002, at the same time as the consultation on the First Draft Deposit South Oxfordshire Local Plan, which includes a landscape character-based policy framework. The consultation document was widely distributed and copies were sent to parish and town councils, amenity groups, societies and individuals. Full details of the consultation are available on request.

The Council considered its response to the comments made and resolved to make a number of changes to the Assessment which are listed in the erratum. The Assessment was adopted as supplementary planning guidance with these changes on 24 July 2003.

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

## GENERAL TERMS

### Balance and proportion

The relative quantities and relationship of different elements within the landscape which can affect its aesthetic qualities.

### Character

A distinct pattern or combination of characteristics that occurs consistently in a particular landscape.

### Characteristic

An element or group of elements that are typical of a particular landscape

### Dipslope

The gently sloping backslope of an escarpment landform

### Diversity

The number of landscape components and the way in which they inter-relate, creating complexity or uniformity in the landscape.

### Enclosure

The density and arrangement of structural elements in the landscape (eg. landform, trees, hedges, woods, walls) so that they enclose space and create visual and physical containment

### Escarpment

A distinctive whaleback-shaped hill or landform unit (typically of chalk) which comprises a steep face and gently sloping dipslope.

### Evaluation

The process of weighing up and attaching a non-monetary, subjective value to landscape by reference to specified criteria.

### Floodplain

The very flat land adjacent to a river or watercourse, generally underlain by alluvium and which would be naturally prone to flooding without specific flood alleviation measures (NB this definition is broader than that used by the

Environment Agency to define the Statutory Flood Plain).

### Heritage values

Features of archaeological, cultural or ecological significance.

### Enhancement strategy

The most appropriate type of landscape improvement or management (conservation, repair, restoration or reconstruction) based on intrinsic landscape quality and condition and enhancement needs.

### Intrusive influences

Features (eg. buildings, structures, electricity pylons) and non-agricultural land uses which are out of keeping with the typical, unspoilt or distinctive character of the landscape.

### Landcover

Combinations of land use and vegetation that cover the land surface.

### Landform

Combinations of slope and elevation that produce the shape and form of the land surface.

### Landscape assessment

An umbrella term used to encompass all the many different ways of looking at, describing and analysing landscape.

### Landscape character area

A geographic area with a consistent character or coherent identity.

### Landscape structure

Structural components of the landscape, eg hedgerows, trees, woods, walls etc.

### Landscape type

A generic term for a landscape with a consistent character, resulting from different combinations of landform and landcover.

### Landscape vernacular

The combination of elements or components which are locally distinctive to a particular area of landscape.

### Linear settlements

Settlements where buildings are typically arranged in a linear form (eg. along a road, ridgeline or valley bottom).

### Local distinctiveness

The special character of a place or area which gives it a particular and recognisable identity.

### Nucleated settlements

Settlements where buildings are typically arranged in a nucleated or clustered form around a central feature (eg. around a village green, common, church, road junction etc.).

### Riparian

A character which is specifically associated with rivers.

### Rolling

Landform which is characterised by pronounced topography of soft hills.

### Scale

The typical size, scale or grain of elements and patterns within the landscape, which have a close bearing on such factors as balance, proportion and enclosure.

### Scenic quality

A subjective judgement of the aesthetic appeal of different landscape types, influenced by such factors as balance, proportion, diversity, harmony, unspoilt character, cultural preferences etc.

### Sense of place (or 'Genius Loci')

The essential character and spirit of a landscape or area (Genius Loci means literally 'spirit of the place').

### Sensitivity to change

A subjective overall assessment of landscape sensitivity and vulnerability to change, based on a combination of factors including landscape quality and visual sensitivity.

### Settlement pattern

The typical pattern of settlement, eg. scattered evenly across the countryside or concentrated within one area or along a particular line (eg. valley side).

### Suburbanisation

A process whereby the intrusion of more urban land uses or features gradually erodes the rural character of landscape and settlements to produce a 'suburban' character.

### Undulating

Landform which is characterised by gentle topography of shallow hills and valleys.

### Visual sensitivity

The degree to which the landscape is open or enclosed by landform or vegetation and therefore exposed to views.

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## Relevant experience

Atlantic Consultants is a professional consultancy with specialist expertise in town and country planning, landscape architecture, urban design, ecology, environmental planning and economic development.

The team responsible for producing the South Oxfordshire Landscape Assessment includes acknowledged experts in this field, who have been involved in the development of landscape assessment methodologies for many years. We had a significant input into the original (CCP423) and recently up-dated (CAX 84) guidance on landscape character assessment prepared for the Countryside Commission/Agency and studies undertaken by our team members are included in these documents as examples of good practice.

This strong theoretical basis for landscape assessment is matched by our very extensive practical experience. This includes a large number of landscape assessments undertaken for local authorities, at both county and district level, to assist in the course of Local Plan reviews or issues relating to landscape designations. At the county level, we have prepared assessments which provide a framework for landscape policies and designations within county Structure Plans. Team members have also been responsible for a large number of district-wide landscape character assessments, including assessments for Cherwell District and West Oxfordshire, which have been prepared specifically to provide an input to Local Plan reviews. They have all involved the characterisation of the district into distinctive areas, evaluation of landscape quality and the preparation of planning and management guidelines in accordance with best practice guidance.

Consideration of the issue of local designations - both as a matter of policy and in defining appropriate boundaries - has been a key element of our work in many areas. We are, therefore, very familiar with both the policy background and the practical application of designation and boundary criteria, as well as Government guidance and current thinking on the appropriateness of local designations or character-based approaches to landscape policies in development plans. Several of our projects have included more detailed appraisal of urban fringe areas and the ability of landscapes to accommodate change, in order to guide planning decisions relating to development around the fringes of settlements.

We have extensive experience in the assessment of landscape and visual impacts and played a central role in the preparation of the original guidelines on this subject on behalf of the Landscape Institute and Institute of Environmental Assessment. We have undertaken several development capacity and urban expansion studies which have involved assessment of landscape implications and have informed the identification of appropriate development options. Other projects have specifically involved advising on the ability of different landscapes to accommodate development and the preparation of design guidance, to influence the form and character of new development in order to reinforce local distinctiveness.

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# PART ONE

## STUDY CONTEXT



## Background

Over recent years, there has been growing recognition of the role of landscape assessment as a basis for countryside planning and management. In particular, the use of landscape assessment as a tool for describing the character of our landscapes is increasingly recognised as an important first step in conserving and enhancing them, and for planning for sustainable development in rural areas.

The impetus for landscape assessment at a district level has come from two main directions:

- the Countryside Commission actively encourages local planning authorities to undertake district-wide assessments to provide an informed background for policy and development control decisions and for countryside management. It has published detailed guidance on landscape assessment [1] and has recently produced a 'New Map of England' which provides a broad context for defining landscape character at a local level. It also promotes the concept of local distinctiveness through its 'Design in the Countryside' initiative.
- Government advice contained within the revised PPG7 (February 1997) [2] takes forward these approaches and encourages planning authorities to undertake comprehensive landscape assessments as part of the local plan review process. The extent and effectiveness of local landscape designations is to be given particular consideration in such reviews.

In response to this background, South Oxfordshire District Council commissioned Atlantic Consultants to prepare a District-wide landscape assessment. Its main objective is to increase understanding of the landscape resources of the District, to assist with policy formulation and development control and to assist with the targeting of resources for enhancement and management.

Whilst the assessment is primarily intended to assist the District Council, it is also considered to be of relevance to a wide range of organisations and individuals whose activities may have an effect upon the landscape of South Oxfordshire. These will include landowners, farmers, private developers, community organisations and other local interest groups.

The brief outlined the following main requirements of the study:

- to provide a breakdown of the district into areas of distinctive landscape character;
- to analyse and describe the components of the landscape that contribute to local distinctiveness;
- to identify variations in landscape quality and condition across the District and its sensitivity to change;
- to identify key landscape management and enhancement priorities, and to advise the council on the appropriateness of new development within different parts of the district.

## Structure of the document

This document is divided into two main parts:

- **Part One** provides the overall background and context to the study, including an explanation of the approach and methodology employed and a brief overview of the District landscape, its formative influences and overall character;
- **Part Two** deals with the individual Character Areas, describing in detail their landscape and settlement character together with appropriate guidelines for landscape enhancement, planning and development.

## APPROACH AND RATIONALE

### Landscape character assessment

Over recent years, there has been a general trend away from quantitative systems of landscape evaluation towards an approach based upon understanding the intrinsic character of a locality and its distinctive features, allowing land use planning and management to respond to the local 'landscape vernacular'. This approach is explained within the landscape assessment guidance published by the Countryside Commission (CCP423) [1], which forms the basis for this study.

The approach recognises that the character of the landscape is not simply a scenic or visual phenomenon but is the product of its physiography, history and land management. It recognises that factors such as ecology, history and culture, can have a bearing upon the way landscape is experienced and valued and that these factors should also be taken into account within the assessment process. Overall, the approach relies upon a mix of objective recording and subjective judgement, used in a systematic and iterative way.

The assessment process involves the following main stages of work:

- **Desk study** - this stage involved the collation of a wide range of existing information on the physical and human influences that have shaped the landscape of the District. The process involved 'overlay mapping' of key factors (eg. geology, topography, drainage, woodland cover, and sites of ecological/historical importance etc.) as well as detailed examination of other documentary, map-based or photographic evidence. Other landscape assessments (eg. the New Map of England and Chilterns AONB assessment) were also consulted to provide context and consistency.

**Field survey** - this part of the study involved travelling extensively throughout the District, recording detailed variations in landscape character and key features onto 1:25,000 base maps. Other factors, such as evidence of pressures on the landscape and key management or enhancement needs, were also recorded during the field survey.

- **Analysis** - this stage involved combining the results of the desk and field studies to produce a breakdown of the District into areas of distinctive character.

The assessment examines landscape character at two levels. At the first level, it looks at the way in which particular landform and landcover elements combine to produce distinctive **landscape types**. These are generic descriptions and the types can repeat across the District without necessarily being related to geographical location.

Landscape types are particularly useful as a tool for understanding the detailed pattern of landscape variation that occurs across the District as a whole. However, in planning and management terms, it is often more important to understand the landscape character and qualities of particular places or areas, so that appropriate policies and action can be applied at a local level. Therefore, at the second level, it is common practice to define **landscape character areas**. These are units of landscape which may embrace a number of different landscape types but which in some way have a coherent and recognisable 'sense of place' or local identity.

It is important to stress that the boundaries between landscape types or between character areas are rarely distinct. Instead, the boundaries tend to be best approximations of a gradual but discernible change in character. It is also important to stress that landscape character rarely stops at the District boundary and will usually extend beyond into neighbouring Districts.

The basis for the division of South Oxfordshire District into distinctive landscape types and character areas, is explained in the 'landscape overview' section.

## Guidelines for landscape enhancement

### *Approach to evaluation*

The second part of the study involves identifying variations in **landscape quality and condition** across the District, primarily to allow appropriate guidelines for landscape conservation, management and enhancement to be defined. South Oxfordshire remains a predominantly rural District with a high proportion of attractive countryside and large areas lying within nationally designated AONB landscapes. Even in these areas, however, there are local differences in landscape quality and condition which may require different enhancement strategies.

The aim is, therefore, not to identify the 'best' or 'worst' quality landscapes within the District but to examine the intrinsic quality and condition of individual landscape types so that enhancement can be targeted to the most needy areas. This approach has therefore been applied across the whole of the District landscape irrespective of the presence of existing landscape designations.

Using the experience and judgement of the study team, each landscape type was assessed in terms of the following attributes (based upon Countryside Commission guidelines):

- **Scenic quality** - the degree to which the landscape is attractive with pleasing patterns and combinations of landscape features;
- **Sense of place** - the extent to which the landscape has a distinctive character and a 'sense of place';
- **Unspoilt character** - the degree to which landscape structure is 'intact' and the extent to which the landscape is affected by intrusive or detracting influences;
- **Landscape as a resource** - whether the landscape type represents a scarce or especially fragile landscape resource;
- **Conservation interests** - whether there are other notable conservation interests that contribute to landscape quality and value.

The landscape types were then assigned one of the following enhancement strategies:

- **Conserve** - this strategy applies where the landscape is of particularly high scenic quality, is unspoilt, retains a strong, intact landscape structure and sense of place, and often contains areas or features of ecological or cultural heritage significance. In these landscapes, conservation is an overwhelming priority in order to maintain landscape character and quality.
- **Repair** - this strategy applies to those landscapes which have a positive rural character, attractive qualities and where character, landscape structure and sense of place are still comparatively strong but which are not 'special' or distinctive to quite the same degree as those in the above category. These landscapes are also important to conserve but would benefit from some enhancement, in order to repair slightly weakened landscape structure and quality, and to reinforce and strengthen local distinctiveness.
- **Restore** - this strategy applies to those landscapes which retain a rural and essentially attractive character but where landscape elements and structure are in decline, largely through intensive farming practices. Field enlargement, removal or deterioration of boundary walls and hedges, and the loss of trees, woodlands and other vegetation have substantially weakened landscape structure and sense of place. The priority in these landscapes is to restore landscape structure and diversity and to strengthen local distinctiveness.
- **Reconstruct** - this strategy applies in those areas where the character and quality of the landscape has been substantially modified by poor land management, non-agricultural land uses, or intrusive features, eg. airfields, built development, mineral extraction, roads, power lines etc. They require more significant intervention to mitigate the influence of detracting land uses or features, to raise landscape quality and to reconstruct landscape character and identity.

It is important to stress that these strategies do not equate with any nationally established system or yardstick but are adapted from Countryside Commission guidance to suit the particular

circumstances of South Oxfordshire District. They should therefore be regarded as indicative of differences in quality and condition which occur within the context of the District and comparisons should not be made with similar strategies applied elsewhere. The variations in landscape quality and the application of enhancement strategies across the District are explained on page 14.

### ***Landscape enhancement principles***

The guidelines for landscape enhancement are intended to provide advice on the most appropriate type of management or enhancement needed to maintain or raise landscape quality within each character area. As a general rule, they are aimed at reinforcing or strengthening existing characteristics in the landscape rather than promoting widespread landscape change. Specific guidelines on enhancement priorities are set out for each character area but a number of more general principles are outlined opposite.

### ***Mechanisms***

Clearly, most of these objectives can only be achieved through voluntary co-operation. However, there are a number of potential ways in which the guidelines can be taken forward, including:

- through various initiatives, grants and incentive schemes operated by local authorities and other statutory agencies;
- through the work of countryside management services (eg. in the Chilterns AONB);
- through the work of voluntary bodies and community groups involved in local environmental or landscape projects;
- through the activities of farmers and other private landowners;
- through development control and the use of landscape conditions, legal agreements and planning gain.

#### **General principles for enhancement:**

- management or enhancement should aim to reinforce or restore the local landscape 'vernacular', ie. those characteristics which contribute to local distinctiveness;
- in general, intervention should aim to restore diversity and structure to the landscape (eg. through hedgerow, tree planting, habitat creation etc);
- the more 'intact' examples of landscape types described within this assessment, and historical maps and records, can be used as a guide to the most appropriate form of enhancement;
- new planting and habitat creation should also reflect the ecological character of the local area to reinforce local distinctiveness and maximise wildlife benefits;
- particular priority should be given to the mitigation of intrusive features or influences which detract from the rural character of the landscape (eg. hard urban edges, unsightly buildings or structures, poorly managed or degraded land on the fringes of settlements or associated with quarrying or landfill activities, insensitive highway improvements etc.);
- special attention should also be given to the enhancement of settlement fringes and road corridors to reduce their impact and to provide a clear definition between built areas and open countryside;
- strong landscape frameworks should be an integral part of any new development.

## Guidelines for planning and development

The third part of the study focuses on the inherent characteristics and qualities of the landscape that will determine its sensitivity to change and, in particular, its ability to accommodate new development.

### *Policy context*

Current Government advice contained within **PPG7** (revised February 1997) [2] places a firm emphasis on protection of the countryside for its own sake, even in areas of no special designation, and advises that development in the countryside should maintain and enhance the environment. This advice is reflected in policies contained within the **Oxfordshire County Structure Plan** [3] and the **South Oxfordshire Local Plan** (adopted in April 1997) [4].

The Structure Plan and the Local Plan are the starting point for the consideration of any new development proposal and contain a number of policies which specifically seek to protect the character and quality of the landscape from potentially adverse impacts of development. The importance of protecting all landscapes, including non-designated areas is recognised although emphasis is also placed upon the protection of statutorily designated areas, ie. the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (see Figure 1). The policy framework also recognises the need to protect the landscape setting of settlements or otherwise safeguard the landscape from adverse impacts of development.

Generally, development in the countryside will be restrained but where development is permitted the aim is to ensure that it can be integrated sensitively without adverse impact on the landscape. This landscape assessment aims to provide as much information as possible to enable the local authority and others to make such judgements. Although it will clearly be too coarse a tool to deal with many site-specific issues, the principles and considerations outlined within the assessment can equally be applied at a more local level.

### *Ability to accommodate development*

The effect of development proposals on the landscape is only one of many factors to be taken into account in dealing with planning applications. The comments in this assessment are made purely on the basis of the likely ability of the landscape to accommodate development and do not imply that a particular proposal may be acceptable in planning terms.

Large-scale development of any kind is likely to be inappropriate within the essentially rural and unspoilt landscape of South Oxfordshire. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-scale development will depend upon a combination of different factors. The nature and scale of the development itself will be crucial, along with:

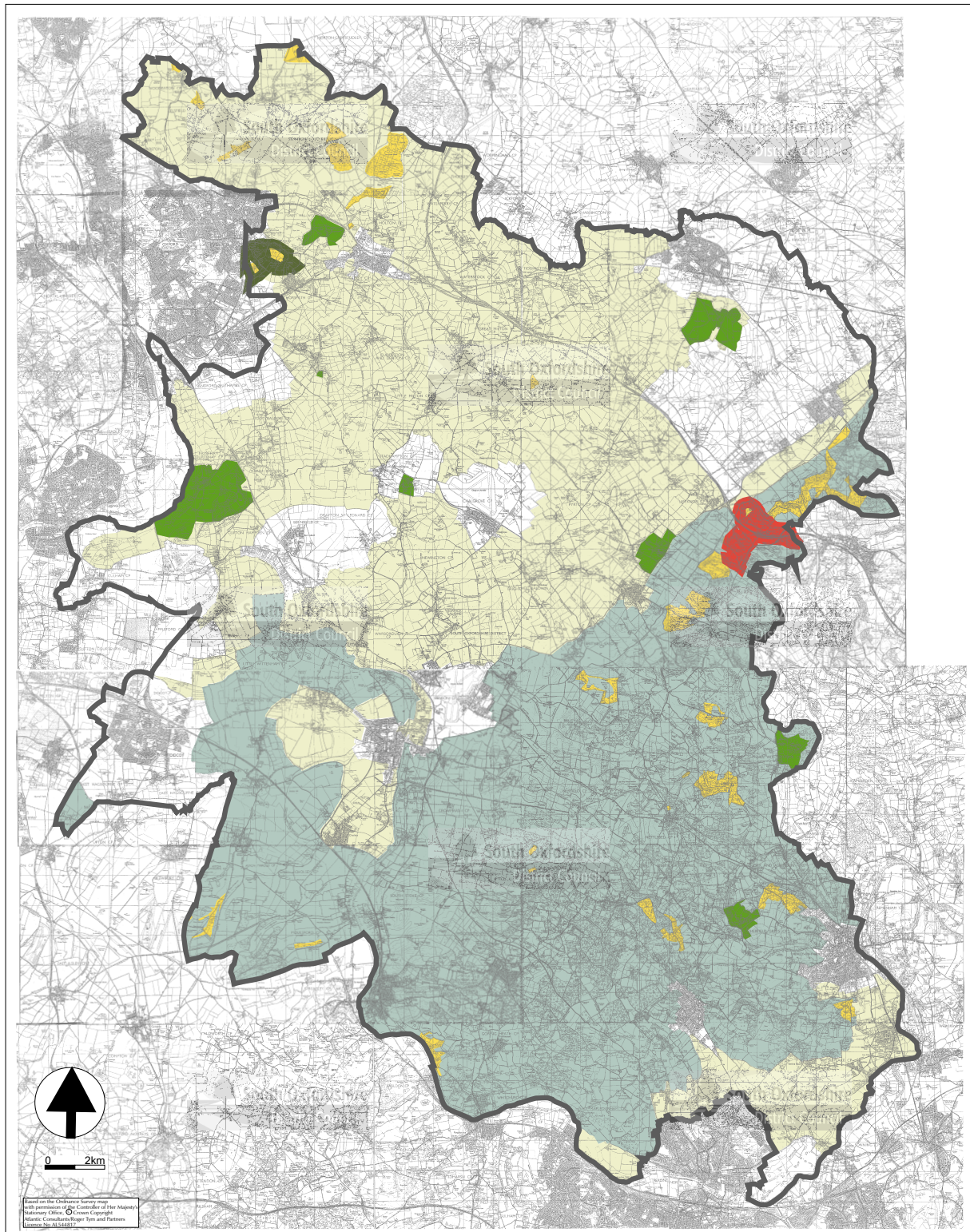
- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall **sensitivity of the landscape to change**;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the landscape, ie. the degree to which it benefits from screening or filtering of views.








Much of this information is implicit within the landscape character descriptions and quality evaluations for the individual character areas. However, further assistance is given in the form of a **matrix** for each character area, under the headings of 'landscape character', 'settlement character' and 'landscape quality and sensitivity', which may help to guide the acceptability of development proposals within different parts of the District landscape (see over for explanation of terms). Used in conjunction with the character area descriptions, a range of key characteristics (eg. scale, pattern, boundary types, building materials, visual sensitivity and scenic quality) can be identified for individual landscape types.

While this additional background information should help in assessing the appropriateness of development proposals, it is clearly still too generalised to provide all of the answers. The main purpose of the tables is, therefore, to instil a discipline in the assessment of potential impacts of any development proposal and to enable a degree of transparency to be applied to development control decisions.



# PLANNING CONTEXT



KEY	
	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
	Area of Great Landscape Value
	National Nature Reserve
	Site of Special Scientific Interest
	Historic Park or Garden
	Shotover Country Park
	District Boundary

Note: See Local Plan for more detailed boundaries

## **LANDSCAPE CHARACTER:**

**Scale** - scale of field pattern and landscape elements, related to proportion and enclosure.

**Diversity** - the number and complexity of components that define landscape character

**Structure** - the condition/strength of structural components, eg hedgerows, trees, walls etc.

**Enclosure** - the degree to which the landscape structure or landform creates visual and physical containment.

**Boundaries** - characteristic field and property boundaries found in open countryside.

## **SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER:**

**Location** - the characteristic siting of settlement in the area, usually influenced by physical factors.

**Size** - the scale of settlements found within the area, from towns to individual dwellings.

**Pattern** - the typical pattern of settlement, eg. dispersed or concentrated within one area.

**Form** - typical settlement form, eg. nucleated around a village green or linear along roads.

**Materials** - the building/walling materials which are most characteristic of settlements in the area.

## **LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY:**

**Scenic quality** - a subjective judgement of the aesthetic appeal of different landscape types.

**Sense of place** - the strength of the essential character and spirit of a landscape.

**Other heritage values** - the presence of features of archaeological, cultural or ecological value.

**Visual sensitivity** - the degree to which the landscape is exposed to views.

**Sensitivity to change** - a subjective overall assessment of sensitivity based on a combination of the above qualities.

**Management strategy** - the most appropriate type of intervention based on intrinsic landscape quality and condition and enhancement needs.

Importantly, they are also intended to help encourage those proposing development in the countryside to view landscape in a more holistic way and to consider not only the potential visual impacts of a development but also its impact upon the intrinsic character and quality of the receiving landscape.

For further guidance, some general conclusions on the ability of the landscape to accommodate development are summarised for each character area. In addition, a number of broad principles for development in the countryside are given on the following page which apply across the District as a whole.

#### General principles for development:

- as a rule, those landscapes of particularly high quality and unspoilt character (ie those within the conserve and repair categories) are least suitable for new development;
- development should also be avoided in areas of unspoilt countryside (in the conserve, repair and restore categories) which are particularly open and visually exposed especially on prominent ridgelines, hilltops or valley sides/escarpments);
- in other open or visually sensitive landscapes, new development should be closely related to existing built form or well-integrated within existing or new landscape frameworks;
- in visual terms, landscapes enclosed by landform or vegetation are generally more able to absorb new development but can be highly sensitive to change because of their intrinsic landscape quality or their ecological and archaeological value;
- extra care is required to maintain the quality of vulnerable landscapes on the fringes of settlements and along road corridors and to prevent ribbon development and the coalescence of settlements;
- all new development should respond to the characteristics of the landscape and built environment within which it is located, to reinforce local distinctiveness and to minimise any adverse impacts;
- development should not erode the rural character of landscape and settlements (eg. introducing lighting into remote countryside, insensitive/urbanised highway treatments, fencing, signage etc.)



# A LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

## Introduction

South Oxfordshire is a predominantly rural District which covers a land area of 253 square miles (65,521ha) [4]. It embraces large areas of unspoilt countryside within its boundaries and a diverse pattern of landscapes, including rolling downland, extensively wooded hills, historic parkland, low-lying farmland and riverside meadows, with a scattering of rural villages and some larger settlements.

This patterning is the product of the interaction between the physical structure of the landscape and the nature of the vegetation and land uses that cover it. To understand what makes places distinctive, it is helpful to summarise the main physical and human influences which have shaped the District's landscape over time.

## Physical influences

Between its northern and southern boundaries, South Oxfordshire District spans three distinct geological formations that have a profound influence upon topography, soils, vegetation and landscape character (see Figures 2 and 3).

In the north, the **Oxford Heights** are a series of low limestone hills that surround Oxford and form part of the 'Mid-vale Ridge', an irregular band of limestone which stretches from Wiltshire to Buckinghamshire across the otherwise low-lying plain of the Thames and Avon clay vales. The hills are composed of Upper Jurassic Corallian limestones and sands, which are widely used as building stone in this area, and which form porous, calcareous soils. In places, these rocks are overlain by Kimmeridge Clay and a capping of Lower Greensand which forms the higher ground at Shotover Hill, Forest Hill and above Garsington. These rocks are almost devoid of lime and form thin, sandy soils.

Across the centre of the District, the limestone gives way to the **Upper Thames Clay Vale**, which forms part of a broad lowland valley that links the Vale of White Horse to the west with the

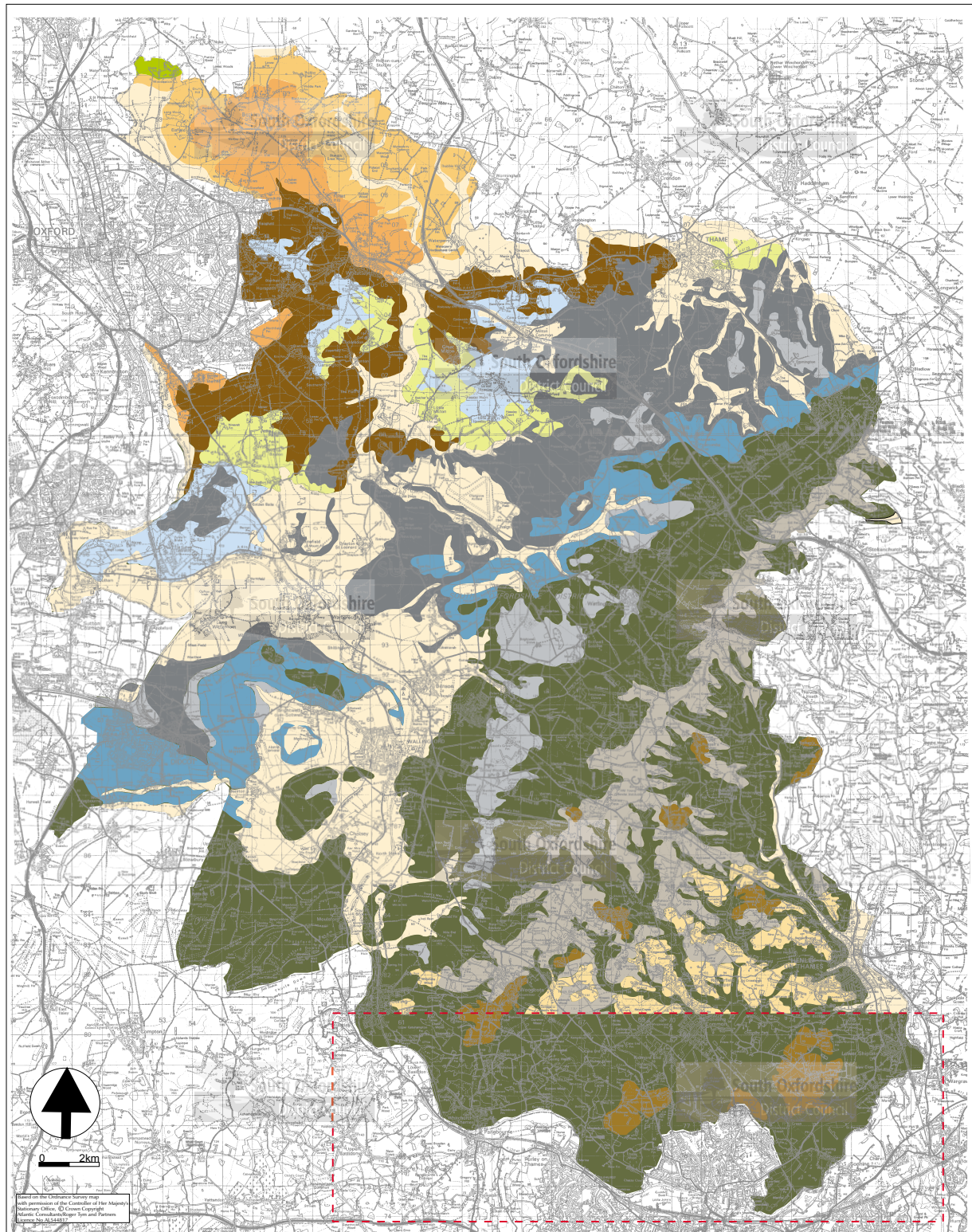
Aylesbury Vale in the east. Much of the vale is underlain by bands of Kimmeridge Clay and Gault Clay, characterised by subdued relief and stiff, heavy soils. The vale is drained by the rivers Thames and Thame, which meet at Dorchester, and are surrounded by extensive, low-lying alluvial flats with naturally impeded drainage. Within this alluvial floodplain, however, deposits of terrace gravels produce lenses of drier, raised ground more suited to settlement and cultivation. Along the southern edge of the vale, a band of Upper Greensand ('or Malmstone') is marked by more pronounced, rolling landform and lighter, calcareous and more fertile soils.

Across the south of the District sweeps a broad belt of **chalk uplands**, part of the more extensive cretaceous chalk belt of southern England. To the east, the **Chiltern Hills** form a highly distinct land mass with its steep escarpment facing the vale to the north and its dip slope descending gently into the Thames Valley to the south. Where the chalk is exposed along the escarpment and valley sides, the soils are thin and calcareous and support remnant chalk grassland and scrub woodland. On the plateau and dip slope, however, the chalk is overlain by extensive deposits of clay-with-flints, producing more acid soils which support extensive woodlands, medium grade farmland and even remnant heath.

The River Thames cuts through the chalk belt at Goring and separates the Chilterns from the **North Wessex Downs** to the west. These open, rounded chalk downs form an elevated plateau of smoothly rolling or undulating topography, incised by dry valleys or combes, often with scrub woodland on the steeper slopes. Soils are predominantly light, free-draining and thin except where clay-with-flints cap the chalk, creating localised areas of damp, heavier soils.

Traditional building materials closely reflect these broad geological differences, with local Wheatley limestone predominating in the Oxford Heights, brick and tile on the clays of the vale, and brick and flint (with locally grown timber) characterising the Chilterns and Wessex Downs.

# GEOLOGY

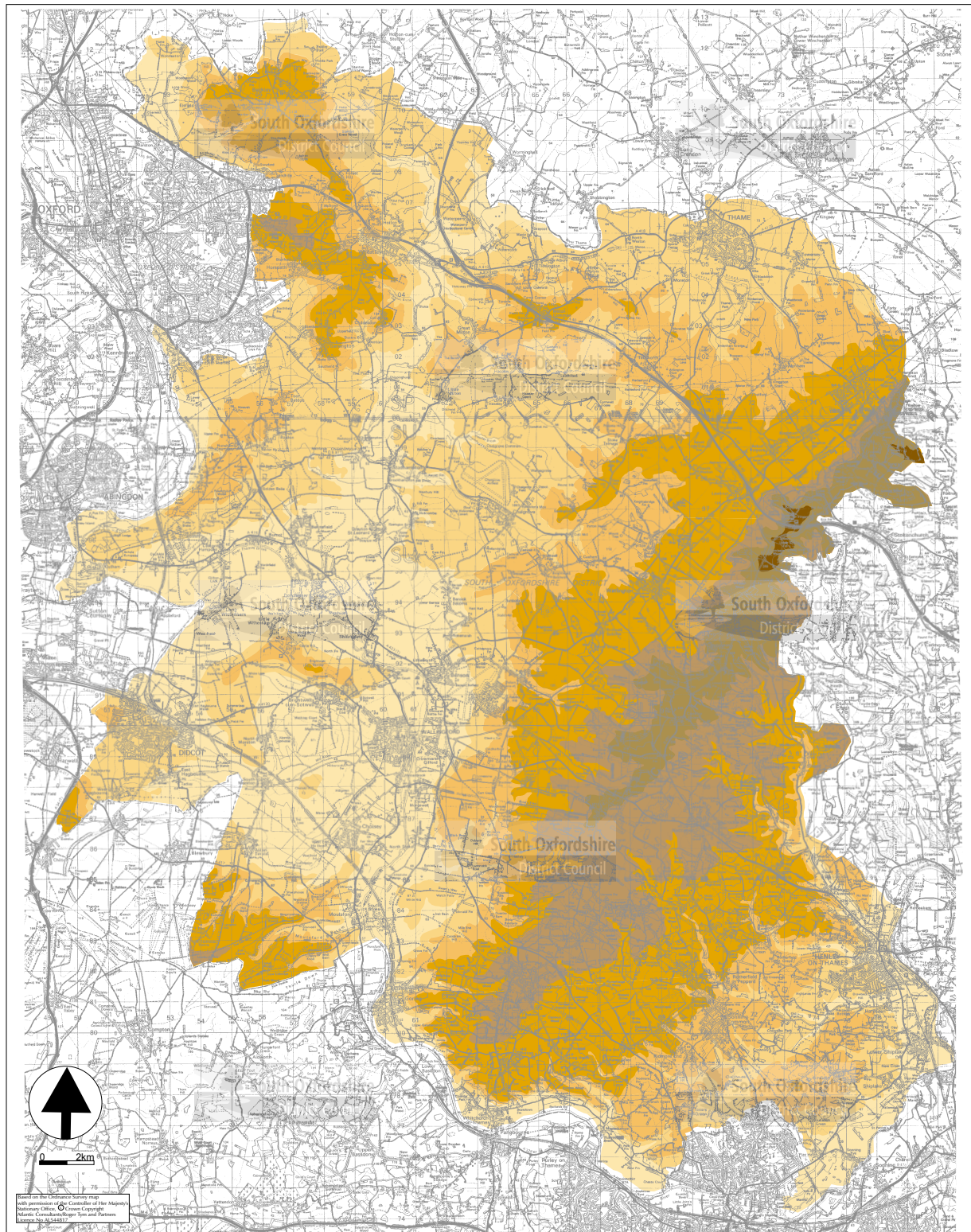


## KEY

	Solid geology London Clay/ Reading Beds		Lower Greensand		Oxford Clay		Older River Gravels
	Cretaceous Chalk		Portland Beds		Oolitic Limestone		Head and Coombe Deposits
	Upper Greensand		Kimmeridge Clay/ Amphill Sands		Drift geology		Clay with Flints
	Gault Clay		Corallian Beds		Alluvium/Younger River Gravels		Solid geology only shown in this area



# TOPOGRAPHY



## KEY

	0-60m AOD		150-200m
	60-80m		200-250m
	80-100m		Above 250m
	100-150m		

## Human influences

The basic physical structure of the landscape has also had a strong influence on patterns of human occupation and activity within South Oxfordshire. In particular, slope, elevation and the supply of water have influenced the selection of sites for settlement, while the workability of soils and their potential for improvement has influenced patterns of agriculture and land use.

Although evidence of **prehistoric settlement** is sparse, it indicates that early settlers had a distinct preference for sites on higher ground less prone to flooding, with more easily worked soils and access to springs or other supplies of water. Favoured sites are found on the Thames-side terraced gravels, the open Chiltern chalklands and the Corallian limestones and sands of the Oxford Heights. By contrast, the heavy, wet soils and woodland cover of the clay lowlands and areas underlain by clay-with-flints were less attractive. Important prehistoric thoroughfares, like the Icknield Way, also followed the outcrops of dry, permeable rocks and formed a focus for early settlement in the District.

Prehistoric farmers were responsible for radical changes in the landscape, progressively creating clearings in the dense forests to create extensive open pastures or croplands. Early forest clearance was concentrated on areas of higher land with lighter soils but later extended to the heavier soils of the vale, using iron tools for axes and ploughshares.

The **Romans** also brought great changes to South Oxfordshire, creating an integrated pattern of new settlements, planned roads, farming estates and kilns for manufacturing pottery [5]. The growth in population demanded further woodland clearance, to make way for farmsteads, villages and trackways at the foot of the downs and in the river valleys, and to provide wood as fuel for their potteries, iron-smelting activities, brick industry, and bath houses. A major north-south Roman Road also developed at this time along the route of Grim's Ditch, crossing the Thames at Dorchester, which developed as a frontier post succeeding an earlier Iron Age village.

Many of South Oxfordshire's other villages originated from the **Saxon** period, particularly those alongside the Thames (eg. Mapledurham, Goring, Shillingford and the original Nuneham Courtney), those on the Oxford Heights (eg. Headington, Cuddesdon and Holton) and those along the favoured loamy soils of the Chalk shelf below the Chiltern scarp (eg. Pyrton, Watlington, Benson and Lewknor) [5]. This period of settlement established a pattern which is still very much in evidence today.

The Saxons were also responsible for establishing extensive hunting preserves or parks, the management of which was later codified by the Normans who introduced forest law. South Oxfordshire District includes part of the Royal Forest of Shotover, with dense woodland cover formerly extending from Islip to Cuddesdon across the Oxford Heights [6]. Some remnants of this forest survive today.

The early **middle ages** also saw enclosure and clearance of 'wastes' and colonisation of previously unpopulated areas, such as the wooded Chilterns dip slope and marshy valley bottoms (eg. at Marsh Baldon), during a period of relative prosperity and rapid population growth [6]. In the Chilterns, clusters of loosely grouped farmsteads were established on the plateau and new small fields were carved out of the extensive common woods, a process known as 'assarting'. Elsewhere, nucleated villages were typically surrounded by a farming system of large open fields divided into a number of strips, individually owned but farmed together. Many of the medieval villages outside of the Chilterns subsequently became deserted or shrunk to a single farm or group of houses (eg. at Clare) [5].

Open farmland was steadily enclosed by hedges, banks and sometimes ditches during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, these earlier and more irregular enclosures were largely overwhelmed by the major parliamentary enclosures of the **eighteenth and nineteenth centuries** which transformed the landscape of much of South Oxfordshire and endowed it with an almost 'blueprinted' pattern of square or rectangular fields surrounded by straight thorn hedges. New straight roads were also introduced with wide grass verges, instead of the narrow winding lanes. The Chiltern Hills largely escaped

this revolution and still display many typical characteristics of 'ancient countryside' which contrast with the 'planned landscape' of the Vale.

The process of early enclosure through the Tudor and Jacobean period was accompanied by the development of grand mansions and manor houses, particularly in the Chilterns and Thames Valley, such as Mapledurham House, Hardwick House, Rotherfield Greys and Stonor Park. The formal parks which surrounded these houses had a considerable impact on the landscape but not so dramatic as the designed landscapes of the eighteenth century. These include 'Capability' Brown's dramatic transformation of Nuneham Park and a succession of beautiful parks created along the Chiltern reaches of the Thames Valley, including Mongewell House, Caversham Park and Fawley Court as well as the re-design of the parks at Mapledurham and Hardwick House.

A feature of the Victorian period, which brought the expansion of many settlements in South Oxfordshire, was the distinction between 'closed' and 'open' villages. Changes in the Poor Law meant that members of a parish became financially responsible for its paupers. As a result, parishes with few landowners actively sought to keep out the immigration of new people who may fall destitute, by building only enough houses for their existing workforce. This placed the burden of housing provision upon the 'open villages' (eg. Tetsworth) which expanded at a considerable rate in a sprawling and haphazard fashion, unlike the compact order of the closed settlements. Another legacy of the Victorian period was the arrival of the railway in 1840, which stimulated the expansion of Didcot and made parts of the District more accessible.

Changes to the landscape and settlements of South Oxfordshire during the twentieth century have resulted mainly from the pressures of modern farming and the growth in demand for new housing and more efficient communications. The increasing mechanisation of post-war agriculture has obliterated many miles of hedgerows and woodlands and transformed many of the former enclosure landscapes back, as Malcolm Emery puts it, into the "bare, open vistas of the ancient common fields: see the lifeless prairies at Ipsden in the Chilterns, or Great Milton in the Vale..." [5].

The ecological and visual impoverishment that has resulted seems to be widely regretted, and recent initiatives (eg. Countryside Stewardship) and agri-environment policies seek to reverse these trends and, in effect, to replace some of the lost structure of the former enclosure landscapes. However, these changes are slow to materialise and, in the meantime, farming practice is still primarily dictated by market forces and financial subsidies. The recent growth in extensive pig rearing, which has a significant landscape impact, is an example of this response [7].

This century has also seen the growth and expansion of towns and villages throughout southern England. The proximity of South Oxfordshire to London and improvements in road and rail communications have placed significant pressures on the District to accommodate new housing. Some settlements, such as Didcot, have expanded rapidly with a significant effect upon the local landscape character. Elsewhere, however, much of this pressure has been successfully resisted, particularly in the smaller rural settlements.

A less obvious effect of the prosperity of this area, however, is the gradual 'suburbanisation' and 'gentrification' of many of the District's villages and a gradual erosion of local distinctiveness. The same effects are evident across the District and are manifested in more 'urban' types of fencing, surfacing, buildings, lighting and highway treatments, which cumulatively detract from the traditional, rural character of the village or hamlet. A design guide for South Oxfordshire is being produced specifically to encourage more sensitive, high quality and appropriate design in the countryside and settlements of the District. Other changes in the landscape have been wrought by the construction of new roads, especially the M40 motorway which carves its way through the Chiltern escarpment, and by mineral extraction, which has transformed the Thames Valley around Dorchester.

In planning for future change within South Oxfordshire, the main challenge is to provide a suitable balance between the contrasting claims for housing and business expansion on the one hand and maintenance of the generally unspoilt rural qualities of the landscape on the other.

## Variations in landscape and visual character

Having explained the underlying physical and human influences that have shaped the overall landscape of South Oxfordshire, the process of sorting the landscape into units of distinctive character helps further to unravel the factors that contribute to local landscape character.

The process of characterisation has been informed by other landscape assessments which apply to South Oxfordshire. In particular, the study aims to be broadly consistent with the Countryside Commission's 'Countryside Character Map of England', which provides a national/regional context for defining character areas, and the Chilterns AONB landscape assessment [7], which provides a more localised breakdown of character within the Chilterns.

### *Landscape character areas*

The Countryside Character Map identifies four **regional character areas** within the boundaries of South Oxfordshire (see Figure 4):

- the Mid-vale Ridge;
- the Upper Thames Clay Vale;
- the Chilterns;
- the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs.

These conform to the main topographical and geological regions and provide the broad context for defining a total of eleven **local character areas** within the District. These are tracts of landscape which may be quite diverse in character but have some unifying or consistent elements which are related to their physical form or geographical location (see Figure 5), namely:

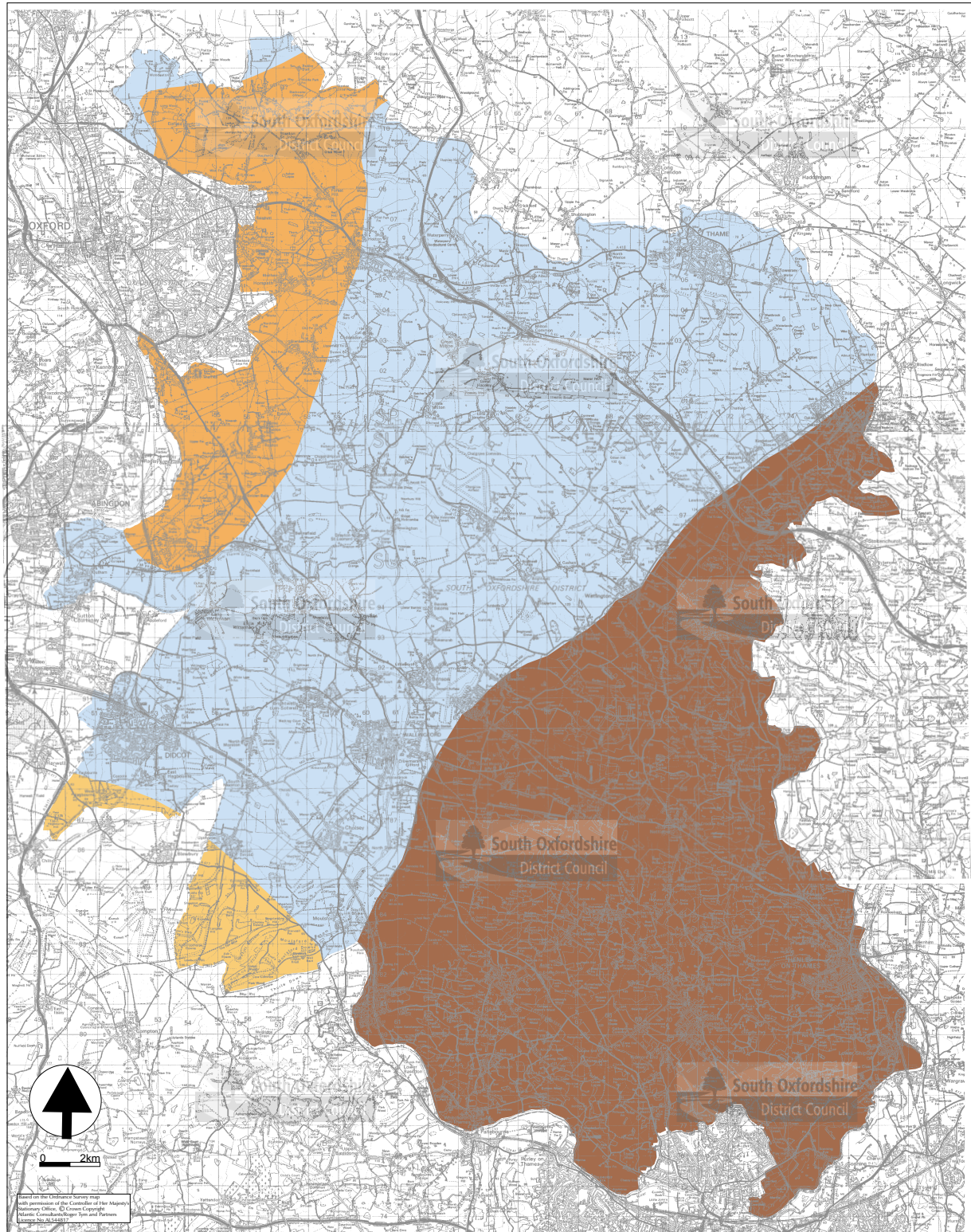
- the **Oxford Heights** - focused upon the northerly, higher hills of the Mid-vale Ridge which surround Oxford to the east, and including the fringing lowlands of Otmoor and the Rivers Ray and Thame;
- the **Nuneham Courtney Ridge** - comprising the southerly part of the low limestone hills of the Mid-vale Ridge, which appears as a prominent spur of higher land above the

River Thames which bounds it to the west and south;

- the **Clay Vale** - embracing the low-lying, gentle landscape which overlies the Gault Clay across the centre of the District;
- the **River Thames Corridor** - the flat, low-lying alluvial land which forms the corridor of the River Thames between Long Wittenham and Goring and includes the lower reaches of its main tributary, the River Thame;
- the **Eastern Vale Fringes** - the easterly part of the 'shelf' of Lower Chalk and Upper Greensand which forms a belt of higher rolling ground between the low-lying vale and the steep Chilterns escarpment;
- the **Central Vale Fringes** - the continuation of the Chalk shelf, sandwiched between the Chilterns escarpment and the central clay vale and Thames Valley, focused upon the denuded arable landscapes around Ipsden;
- the **Wessex Downs and Western Vale Fringes** - a tract of mixed landscape lying between the River Thames and the District boundary at the western end of the clay vale, comprising an area of low-lying land encircled by the chalk hills of the Wessex Downs and the outlying Sinodun Hills;
- the **Chilterns Escarpment** - the distinctive north-west facing slopes and top of the Chilterns escarpment;
- the **Chiltern Ridges and Valleys** - the heavily incised dip slope of the Chiltern hills to the north-west of Henley, which forms a distinctive landscape of ridges and valleys;
- the **Chilterns Plateau and Valleys** - the southern part of the Chilterns dip slope formed by a gently dipping plateau dissected by an irregular pattern of shallow valleys;
- the **Thames Valley and Fringes** - focused upon the corridor of the River Thames around the southern fringes of the Chilterns, including the flat valley floor, the steep valley sides below Goring and the more gentle slopes between Caversham and Henley.



# 'NEW MAP OF ENGLAND' CHARACTER AREAS



## KEY

- 108 Upper Thames Clay Vale
- 109 Mid-vale Ridge
- 110 Chilterns
- 116 Berkshire and Marlborough Downs

More detailed descriptions of the individual character areas are given in Part Two.

## *Landscape Types*

Although the character areas have a definable physical context and coherent identity, they are inevitably quite diverse in themselves. Even subtle differences in landform, land-use, landscape structure, the degree of visual enclosure and the influence of built development or specific land uses, can create variations in landscape character and local distinctiveness.

Landscape types are classified into the following groups, reflecting broad distinctions in landscape character but with sub-types reflecting degrees of character variation within them:

- **Chiltern** landscapes;
- **Downs and vale fringe** landscapes;
- **Clay vale** landscapes;
- **Mid-vale ridge** landscapes;
- **Floodplain** landscapes;
- **Parkland** landscapes;
- **Other** landscapes related to specific land uses.

### **Chiltern landscapes**

There are several landscape types which are unique to the Chilterns. These include:

- the *escarpment* landscapes, distinguished by their dramatic landform and 'semi-natural' vegetation, sub-divided into open grassland and enclosed, wooded sections;
- the *dipslope* landscapes, distinguished by a complex landform of plateau, ridge and valleys and an enclosed, intimate and well-wooded character, with only a few localised areas of more open farmland;
- small areas of *commons and heaths*, with a distinctively open, 'communal' character.

### **Downs and Vale Fringe landscapes**

These are the highly distinctive *downs* landscapes of the chalk or upper greensand, distinguished by their smoothly rounded landform of hills and shallow valleys, grey and flinty soils and typically large-scale field pattern.

The main type is sub-divided between areas which retain a landscape structure of hedges and trees and those which have been significantly denuded by intensive farming.

## **South Oxfordshire Landscape Types:**

### **Chiltern landscapes**

- Open escarpment
- Enclosed escarpment
- Open dipslope
- Semi-enclosed dipslope
- Wooded dipslope
- Commons and heaths

### **Downs and Vale Fringe landscapes**

- Open rolling downs
- Semi-enclosed rolling downs

### **Clay Vale landscapes**

- Undulating open vale
- Undulating, semi-enclosed vale
- Undulating wooded vale

### **Mid-vale Ridge landscapes**

- Open farmed hills and valleys
- Semi-enclosed farmed hills and valleys
- Wooded hills and valleys

### **Floodplain landscapes**

- Flat open farmland
- Flat, semi-enclosed farmland
- Flat floodplain pasture
- Floodplain wetland

### **Parkland landscapes**

- Parkland and estate farmland

### **Other landscapes**

- Amenity landscapes
- Minerals/landfill sites
- Airfields/MOD sites
- Institutions



## Clay Vale landscapes

The *vale* landscape is characterised by a patchwork of arable fields and pastures, hedgerows, trees and woodland blocks typical of much of lowland England. It is distinguished from other parts of the District by its subdued and low-lying relief which sets it apart from the pronounced landform of the Chilterns, Mid-vale ridge, downs and vale fringe landscapes and the very flat floodplain farmland. Sub-divisions reflect differences between very open, denuded farmland to landscapes with an enclosed character and those with a strong structure of woodland.

## Mid-vale Ridge landscapes

These landscapes contain similar elements to those of the clay vale but are distinguished by a distinctive landform of hills and valleys. Again, the main sub-divisions within this type reflect differences in landscape structure and the degree of enclosure provided by hedgerows, trees and woods.

## Floodplain landscapes

These landscapes occupy the 'natural' floodplains of the main river systems within the District and are distinguished by their extremely flat relief and low-lying character (mostly below 60m AOD) with a propensity to flooding. They are sub-divided between:

- *flat farmland* which has been drained, cultivated and is intensively farmed, with an open or semi-enclosed character;
- *flat floodplain pasture* with a pastoral and riparian character and distinctive network of willow-lined ditches;
- *floodplain wetlands*, areas of open water which have been created as a result of sand and gravel extraction within the river corridor.

## Parkland landscapes

These are highly distinctive landscapes associated, in the main, with large country houses and estates where a formal or designed character has been imposed upon the underlying landscape. They include the formal designed

landscapes of the C18, with their parkland trees, avenues, woods, lakes and other formal features, as well as areas of 'estate' farmland which have a mature, well-managed and usually well-wooded character.

## Other landscapes

These represent areas of landscape where the underlying character is overwhelmed by specific land uses or management regimes to produce distinctive landscape types. They include:

- *amenity* landscapes, such as golf courses and playing fields, which have an intensively managed character, often unrelated to their landscape context;
- *minerals and landfill sites*, where the landscape is in the process of being physically altered through quarrying, tipping or restoration;
- active or disused *airfields*, with a highly distinctive character of flat open landscape, large-scale sheds, security fencing etc.;
- large-scale *institutions*, such as Culham laboratories, which comprise large institutional buildings within landscaped grounds.

Figure 6 illustrates the distribution of these landscape types across the District as a whole and further details of their distinguishing features are given within the individual character area descriptions. It is important to emphasise, however, that the 'grain' of characterisation within a District-wide assessment is too coarse to map the more localised variations in character that will inevitably occur, especially around the fringes of settlements. It is also important to note that only the general extent of the larger settlements, ie. those with a population greater than approximately 3,000, have been excluded from the landscape types. This means that many landscape types will include settlements and areas of built form which will not appear within the landscape type description.

## Variations in landscape quality and condition

South Oxfordshire remains a predominantly rural District with a high proportion of attractive, unspoilt countryside. The high quality of its landscape is confirmed by the designation of nearly half of the District within the Chilterns and the North Wessex Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (a national designation) and by the inclusion of most of the remainder within the Area of Great Landscape Value (a local designation in the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 1997).

Given that most of the District's landscape is intrinsically of high quality there are, nonetheless, some subtle variations in condition within it. The distribution of different enhancement strategies illustrated in Figure 7 (and at a larger scale in the individual character area sections in Part 2) provides an indication of these variations. However, it must be stressed that the differences are subtle and even those landscapes within the 'reconstruct' category are not seriously degraded by the standards of other landscapes which have been assessed within other parts of the country.

Not surprisingly, most of the Chiltern Hills landscape falls within the **conserve** category, reflecting the area's unspoilt, 'ancient' character, its diverse and intact landscape structure, its high aesthetic appeal and its valued habitats and archaeological resources. Other areas of exceptional landscape quality include:

- the more scenically diverse and semi-enclosed parts of the chalk downs and the outlying chalk hills around Wittenham;
- the main areas of formal parkland and estate landscape, such as Nuneham Courtney;
- the unspoilt, pastoral and tranquil floodplain landscapes of the Rivers Thames, Thame and their main tributaries;
- the more heavily wooded and enclosed 'hilly' landscapes associated with outcrops of limestone and upper greensand in the Oxford Heights and northern Clay Vale.

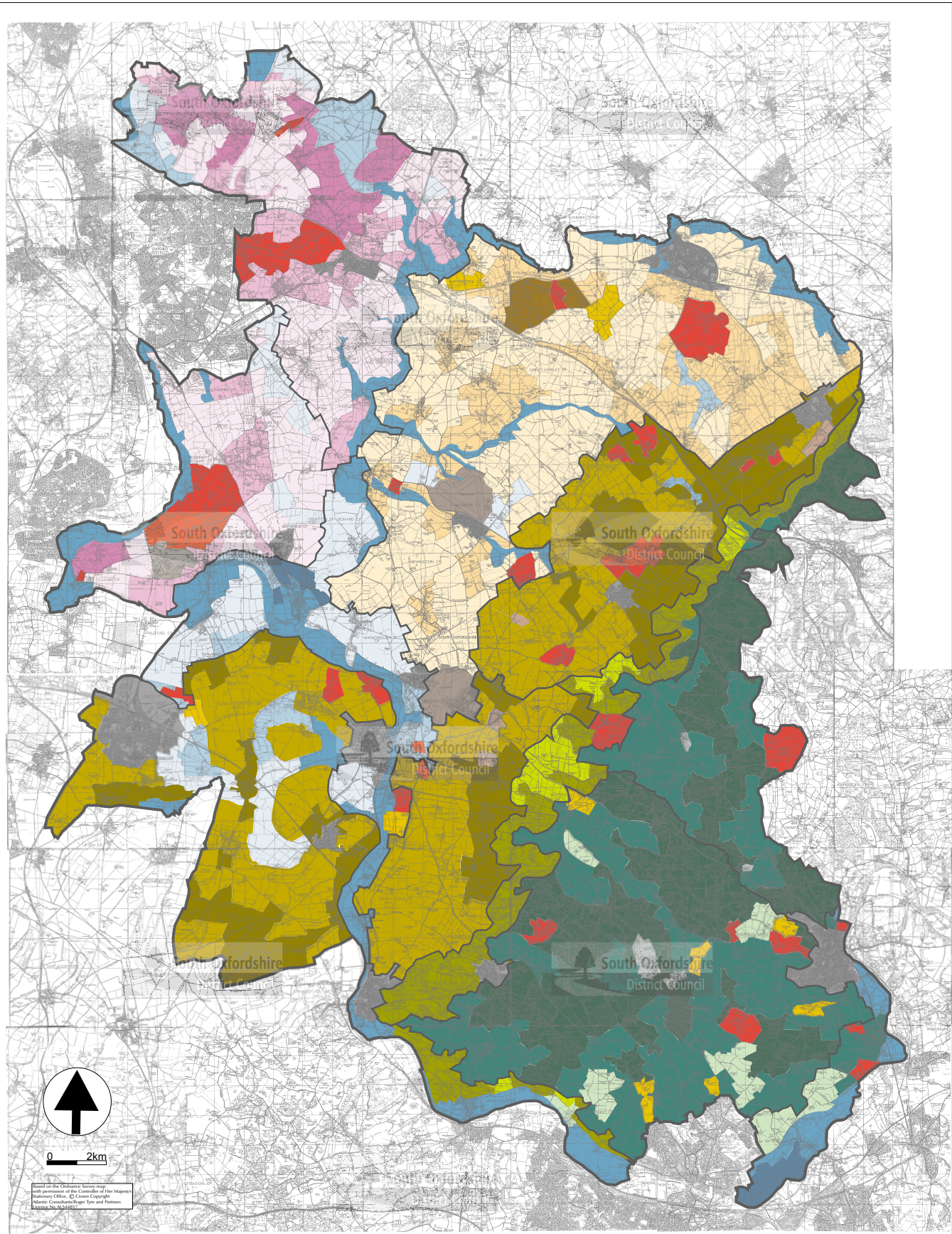
Large parts of the District also fall within the **repair** category and represent rural, attractive landscapes with a reasonably intact structure but which are not quite so special as those listed above. Concentrations of these landscapes occur within the hills and valleys of the southern Oxford Heights, along the upper greensand ridge of the Eastern Vale Fringes and across much of the attractive, undulating farmed landscape of the Clay Vale.

Landscapes within the **restore** category tend to be those which have a particularly denuded character, such as the arable 'prairie' landscapes of the Central Vale Fringes, the open rolling farmland of the central Clay Vale and the very flat, open arable farmland of the river floodplains.

Finally, small pockets of landscape fall within the **reconstruct** category. These occur primarily within the Clay Vale and Vale Fringes and include the two major airfield sites at Chalgrove and Benson and a number of small parcels of land associated with landfill or mineral sites or affected by non-agricultural land uses, such as golf courses.

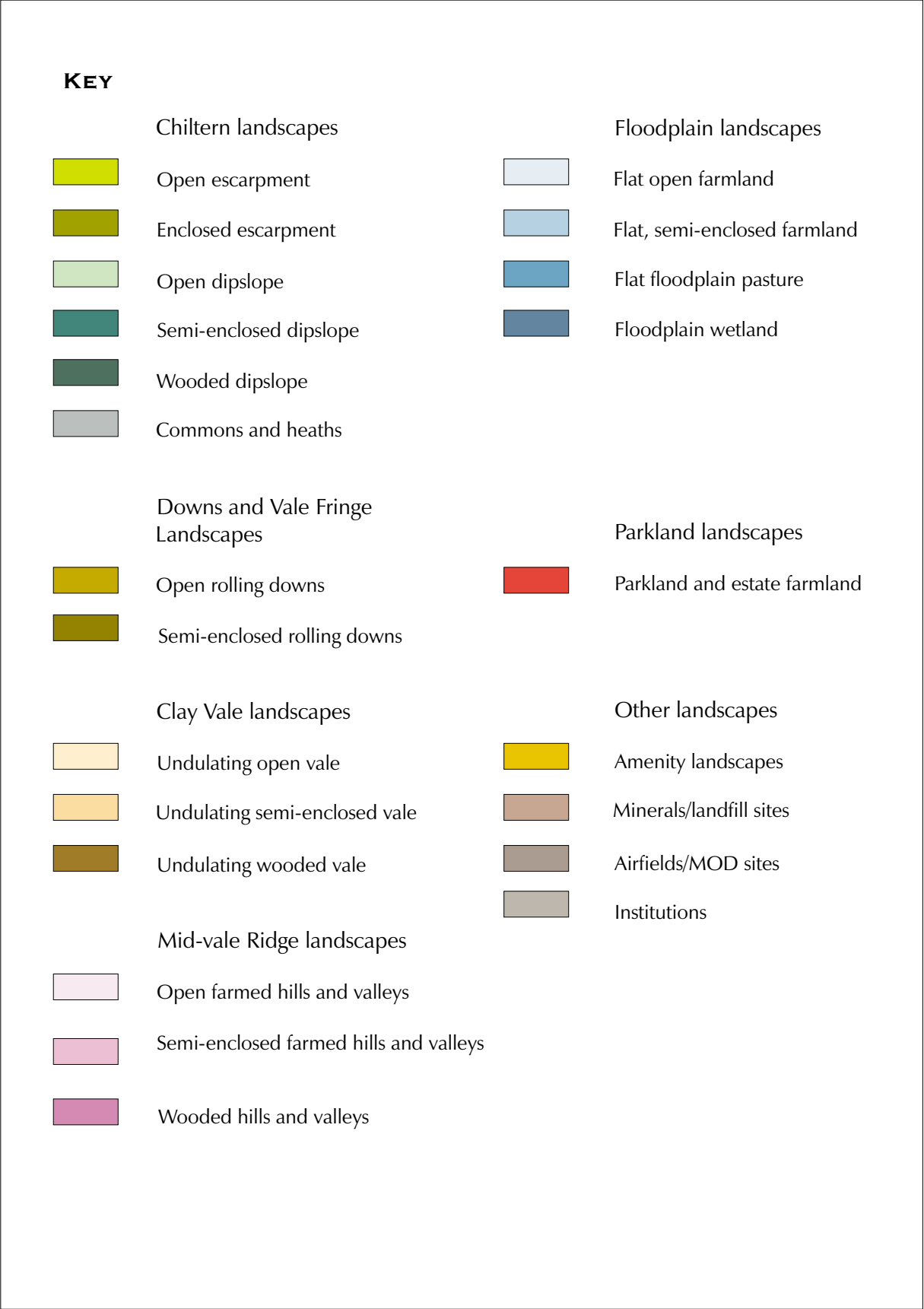


LANDSCAPE TYPES



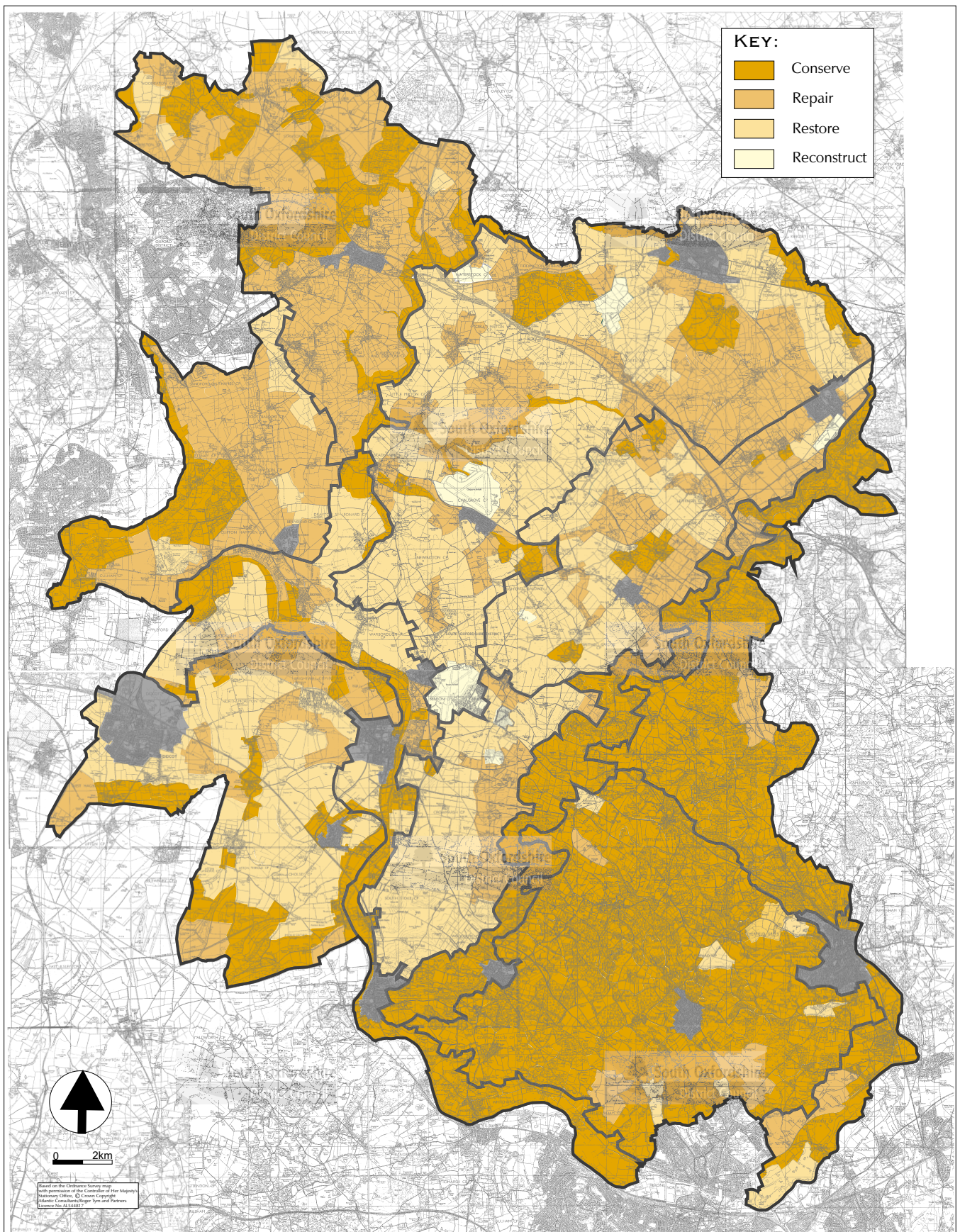
▲ For key to Landscape Types, see fold-out flap on reverse ▲

LANDSCAPE TYPES MASTER KEY





# LANDSCAPE ENHANCEMENT STRATEGY

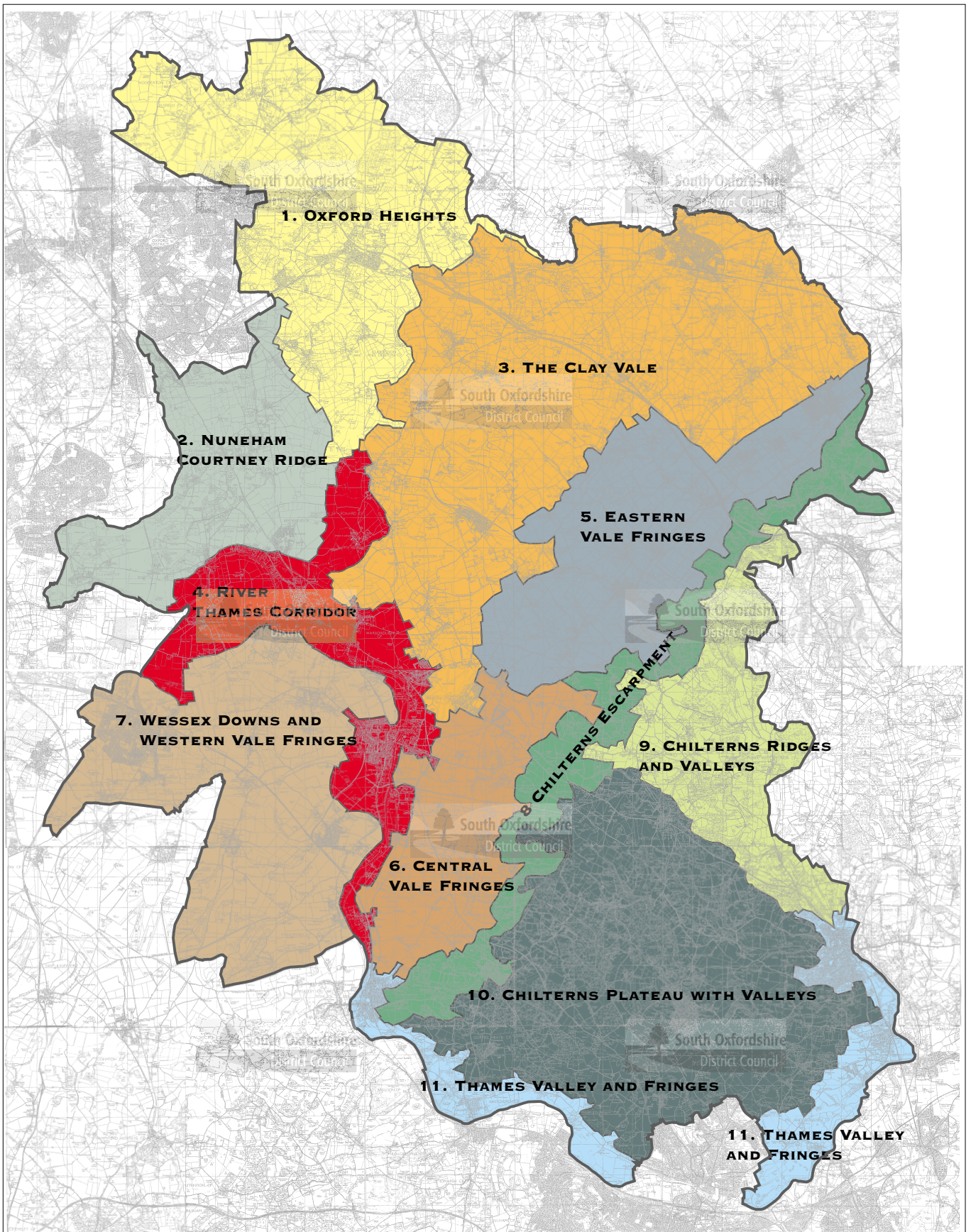


## PART TWO

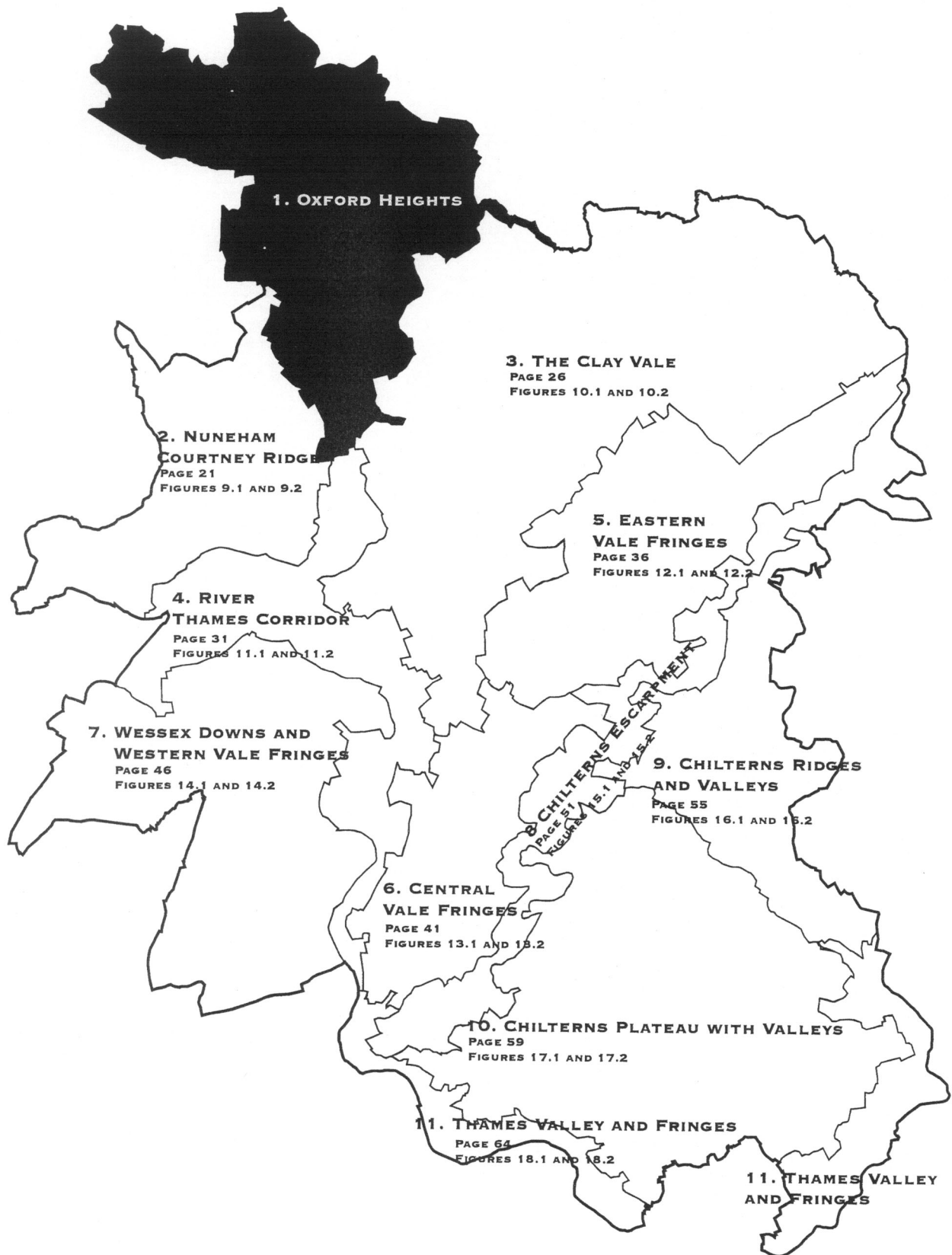
### THE CHARACTER AREAS



## CHARACTER AREAS: KEY DIAGRAM



# CHARACTER AREA 1: OXFORD HEIGHTS





## Landform and landcover

The character area occupies the northerly part of a belt of low limestone hills that surround Oxford and separates the low-lying clay vales which lie to the north and south. This is an area of prominent relief and complex geology and soils, which contrasts markedly with the adjoining clay vales.

The hills are composed of Upper Jurassic Corallian limestones and sands which outcrop in a broad belt from Wheatley north-westwards to Beckley and have historically been the source of superior building stone. Elsewhere these rocks are overlain by Kimmeridge Clay and a capping of Lower Greensand which forms the higher ground at Shotover Hill (170m AOD), Forest Hill (134m AOD) and above Garsington (130m AOD). In the north, the hills descend sharply into the low-lying Cherwell Valley and Otmoor lowlands which are overlain by extensive deposits of Oxford Clay, while to the east and south the hills descend into the alluvial floodplain of the River Thames and its tributary, Baldon Brook.

The area was once part of the medieval Royal Forest of Shotover, with dense woodland cover extending from Islip to Cuddesdon until 'disafforestation' in 1660. A number of important remnants of ancient semi-natural woodland remain, particularly on the steeper hillsides near Stanton St John and at Shotover Hill, where important remnants of calcareous grass-heath also occur. Over much of the area, the free-draining and easily cultivated soils have historically been suited to growing arable crops while permanent pasture and wet woodland are more common on the heavy clay soils of the floodplains.

## Settlement and buildings

The Oxford Heights have been a favoured area for settlement since prehistoric times and villages such as Wheatley, Horspath, Garsington, Cuddesdon, Holton and, particularly, Headington (a 'royal village') were some of the primary settlements in Oxfordshire during the Saxon period. The original settlements took advantage of the higher ground and the water supply provided by springs which emerge at the junction of the limestone and clay or, in the case of Beckley, from the freshwater marshes of Otmoor to the north [5]. Some settlements, such as Wheatley and Horspath, later 'migrated' into nearby valleys but the distinctive pattern of villages perched on hilltops and ridges is still evident with only isolated farms occupying the surrounding lowlands.

Buildings in the villages reflect the underlying geology, with many older houses constructed from the distinctive local Corallian limestone. Red tiles or thatch are common as roofing materials. Buildings were typically clustered around a church and village green but modern expansion of many villages has resulted in a more linear or sprawling form, particularly at Wheatley. The villages are typically connected by a network of small, sunken lanes with low trimmed hedges and hedgerow trees that wind up the slopes towards the hills and ridges.

Other distinctive buildings in the landscape include Beckley Lower Park, a moated Tudor brick house on the site of a medieval hunting lodge, and Shotover House with its eighteenth century formal parkland designed by William Kent.



## OXFORD HEIGHTS



1 Air photograph showing the 'parkland and estate landscape' of Shotover Hill and surrounding 'farmed hills and valleys'.

2 'Floodplain pasture' of the Otmoor lowlands backed by the 'semi-enclosed hills and valleys' landscape near Beckley.



3 'Open farmed hills and valleys' landscape near Garsington.





## Landscape and visual character

The overall landscape character of the area is defined by its distinctive landform of hills and ridges, which rise prominently above the surrounding vales and river valleys. While this complex relief is a unifying feature of the area, it also creates a landscape of contrasts - from open elevated hilltops and hillsides to enclosed intimate lowlands, with extensive areas of rolling countryside in-between. The landscape is also physically and visually fragmented by landform and roads and is consequently difficult to perceive as a coherent unified area.

Three broad variations in landscape character have been identified (see Fig. 8.1):

- the low-lying **floodplain** landscapes of the river valleys and the Otmoor lowlands;
- distinctive **parkland and estate** landscapes at Shotover and near Beckley;
- and the distinctive farmed **hills and valleys** of the Mid-vale Ridge which typify the majority of the area.

### *Floodplain landscapes*

The hills of the Oxford Heights are fringed on three sides by the low-lying floodplain landscapes of the River Thames and its tributaries to the east, the River Cherwell to the north-west and the distinctive Otmoor lowlands to the north. Within these areas, differences in land use and enclosure by vegetation create distinctive variations in landscape character.

#### *Flat floodplain pasture*

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying farmland (usually below 50 metres AOD), typically dominated by permanent pasture with a 'wet', riparian character;
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches ;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willow and alder conspicuous along watercourses and roadsides;
- intimate, semi-enclosed and pastoral character;
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the river valley may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas;

- M40, A40 and other main roads cause localised intrusion in Thame valley but otherwise, comparative inaccessibility creates a tranquil, remote character.

#### *Flat, open farmland*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively flat, low-lying farmland (usually below 50 metres AOD);
- typically located beyond immediate river-side pasture on land less prone to flooding and more easily drained and cultivated;
- large-scale rectilinear field pattern with distinctive network of drainage ditches;
- weak landscape structure with few trees, low or gappy hedges, open ditches and fences;
- rural and remote character;
- open, denuded character with high intervisibility.

#### *Flat, semi-enclosed farmland*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with stronger landscape structure and a semi-enclosed character;
- large-scale woodland blocks (including remnant ancient woodland of Shotover Forest) are a feature of the low-lying area to the east of Stanton St John and create a strong sense of remoteness and containment;
- the lower Cherwell valley is characterised by smaller-scale, irregular field pattern and an enclosed, intimate character;
- the area adjoining the Otmoor lowlands has a larger-scale, more open character but with a strong hedgerow structure;
- predominantly rural, tranquil, remote or intimate character with only localised intrusion from the A40 near Marston;
- regular pattern of ditches and rural roads;
- semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

### *Parkland and estate farmland*

These landscapes comprise the formal C18 designed parkland and associated estate landscape of Shotover and the smaller scale park associated with Woodperry House near Beckley.

## Parkland/Estate

### Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, clumps and blocks of woodland, exotic tree species, formal structures and boundary features;
- associated 'estate' landscape at Shotover Hill and Country Park characterised by large blocks of woodland, open grassland and mature trees and including ecologically important ancient woodland (remnants of the Forest of Shotover), scrub and calcareous grass-heath habitats;
- predominantly rural and unspoilt character but with some localised urban influences on the fringes of Headington, Horspath, Littleworth and Wheatley;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover, low intervisibility but with some visually prominent hilltop and hillside locations.

### Mid-vale ridge landscapes

The majority of this area is characterised by a comparatively homogenous landscape of farmed hills and valleys. Variations in character occur mostly as a result of differences in the degree of enclosure and the landscape structure afforded by woodlands, hedges and trees.

#### Open farmed hills and valleys

##### Key characteristics:

- rolling landform of hills and valleys;
- large-scale farmland, mostly in arable cultivation;
- typically large fields, with rectilinear pattern of field boundaries (predominantly hedgerows);
- weak structure of tightly clipped or gappy hedgerows, with few hedgerow trees;
- open, denuded and exposed character, with prominent skylines and hillsides and high intervisibility;
- distinctive elevated and expansive character on ridges and higher ground, with dominant sky and long views;
- predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads (including M40/A40), overhead power lines and built development.

#### Semi-enclosed farmed hills and valleys

##### Key characteristics:

- as above but with a stronger structure of hedgerows and trees which provide clearer definition of field pattern;
- occurs mostly in association with settlements and steeper hillsides, where a smaller-scale field pattern and the hedgerow structure remain more intact;
- predominantly intensive arable land use but some pockets of permanent pasture occur, particularly around settlements and on steep hillsides;
- landscape typically fragmented and intruded upon by roads and built development, particularly around Wheatley and Oxford fringes, although it retains a predominantly rural character;
- landform and landscape structure create enclosure and reduce intervisibility but long views possible from hillsides and higher ground across lower-lying vales (eg. from Beckley towards Otmoor).

#### Wooded hills and valleys

##### Key characteristics:

- as above but with a particularly strong structure of hedgerows, trees and woodlands (including remnant Ancient Semi-natural Woodland);
- varied relief, mixed land use and strong woodland and tree cover create an attractive, diverse, patchwork landscape;
- medium to large-sized fields sometimes with irregular field boundaries, especially on steep valley sides;
- intervisibility reduced by landform and landscape structure to create a more enclosed and intimate landscape, but long views possible from hillsides and higher ground across lower-lying vales;
- predominantly rural character with few detracting influences.

## Landscape management issues

Overall, the Oxford Heights have an attractive and unspoilt rural character. In particular, there are areas of landscape which have retained a strong structure of woods, hedgerows and trees, have a particularly rich, diverse and well-managed character, are of high scenic quality and include notable features of conservation value. These landscapes principally comprise the historic parkland and important woodlands and grasslands of the Shotover Hills, the attractive wooded hills and valleys around Stanton St John and to the west of Beckley and parts of the low-lying floodplain landscapes. Management to **conserve** and enhance these assets is the most appropriate strategy in these areas (see Figure 8.2).

Most of the remaining farmed landscape of the Oxford Heights, while still rural and attractive, is showing some signs of decline in condition and quality. Principally this is the result of a general weakening of landscape structure through intensive arable farming, and **repair** of this structure is the most appropriate management strategy. However, in areas of farmland which have a very open and denuded character (particularly in the area between Stanton St John and the fringes of Headington) more significant intervention is required to **restore** landscape structure and character.

Other general land management issues include the impact of 'horsiculture' and somewhat 'scruffy' or intrusive land uses on the fringes of villages, for example the telecommunications masts and smallholdings in the area around Beckley.

Key landscape enhancement priorities are to:

- manage important areas of semi-natural woodland and grassland habitats to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- encourage further woodland, hedge and tree planting on farmland to reinforce the distinctive patchwork of open fields, woods and strong hedgerows of the farmed hills and valleys landscape;
- encourage the management and restoration of historic parkland landscapes and features at Shotover, Beckley and Woodperry;
- encourage retention and management of permanent pasture in low-lying areas to reinforce its tranquil, pastoral character and wildlife value;
- encourage better maintenance of field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- reduce the impact of unsightly land uses through improved screening.

## Planning and development issues

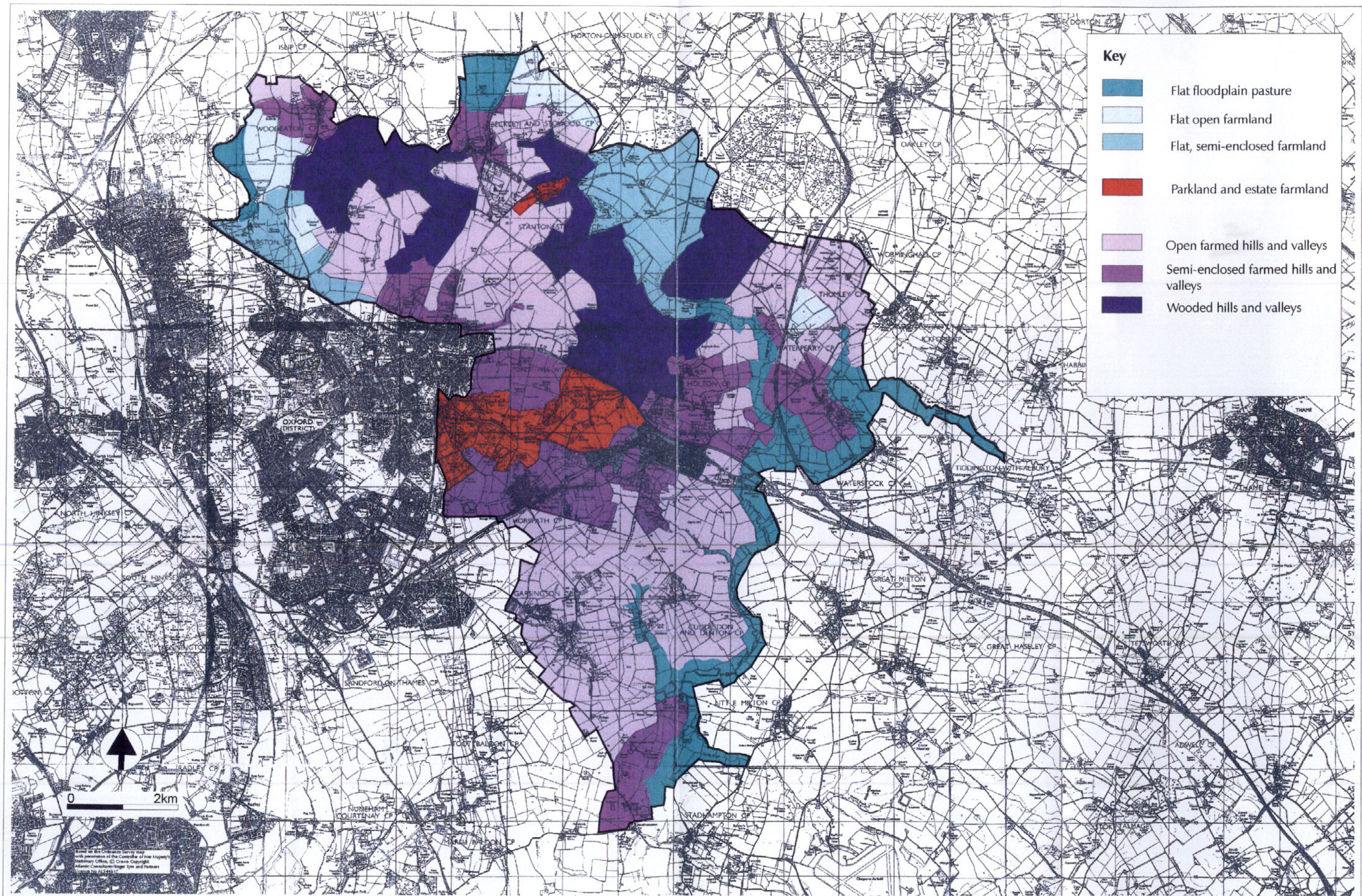
Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within this essentially rural and unspoilt landscape. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-scale development will depend upon:

- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and overall sensitivity to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the landscape.

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within this area, as explained on page 6. However, some general conclusions are that:

- the parkland/estate landscapes and low-lying floodplain farmland are particularly vulnerable to change and are unlikely to be suitable for built development;
- open landscapes and the tops of hills and ridges are very visually exposed and unsuitable for development (unless closely integrated with existing built form);
- landscapes with strong landform and a mature structure of woods and hedgerows are less visually exposed and may be more able to absorb change but they are generally of higher landscape quality and therefore sensitive to development;
- landscapes on the fringes of settlements are particularly vulnerable to change and special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent the coalescence of settlements.

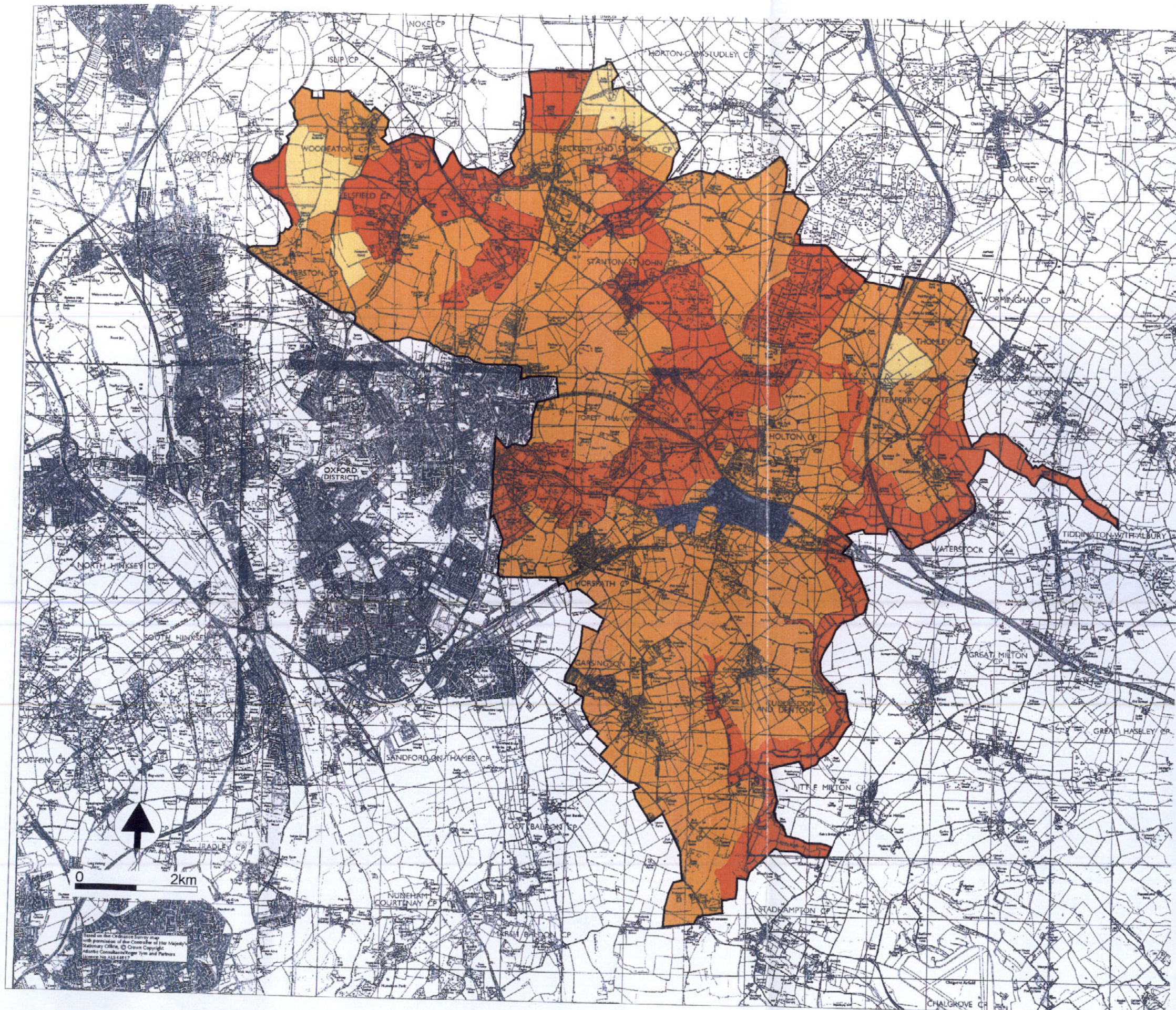




Landscape Types Figure 8.1



# 1 OXFORD HEIGHTS



**KEY:**

- Conserve
- Repair
- Restore



**Table 1.1: Oxford Heights - Landscape and settlement character**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ♦ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Flat, semi-enclosed farmland	Parkland and estate farmland	Open farmed hills and valleys	Semi-enclosed hills and valleys	Wooded hills and valleys
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>								
Scale	large		●			●	●	●
	medium	●		●	●			●
	small							
Diversity	complex				●			●
	moderate	●		●			●	
	simple		●			●		
Structure	strong	●		●	●			●
	medium	♦		♦			●	
	weak		●			●		
Enclosure	open		●			●		
	semi-enclosed	●		●			●	
	enclosed/intimate				●			●
Boundaries	straight	●	●	●		●	●	●
	sinuous				●	●	●	●
	stone walls	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	hedges	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	hedgerow trees	●		●	●		●	●
	estate boundaries				●			
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>								
Location	hilltop					●	●	●
	ridgetop					●	●	●
	hillside				●	●	●	●
	valley side	●	●	●				
	valley floor			♦				
Size	individual dwellings	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	hamlets					●	●	●
	small village					●	●	●
	large village						●	
	town							
Pattern	dispersed	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	concentrated							
Form	nucleated					●	●	●
	linear						●	
Materials	stone	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	brick	♦	♦	♦		♦	♦	♦
	flint							
	cob							
	timber frame							
	tiles	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	thatch	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	slate	♦	♦	♦	♦	♦	♦	♦

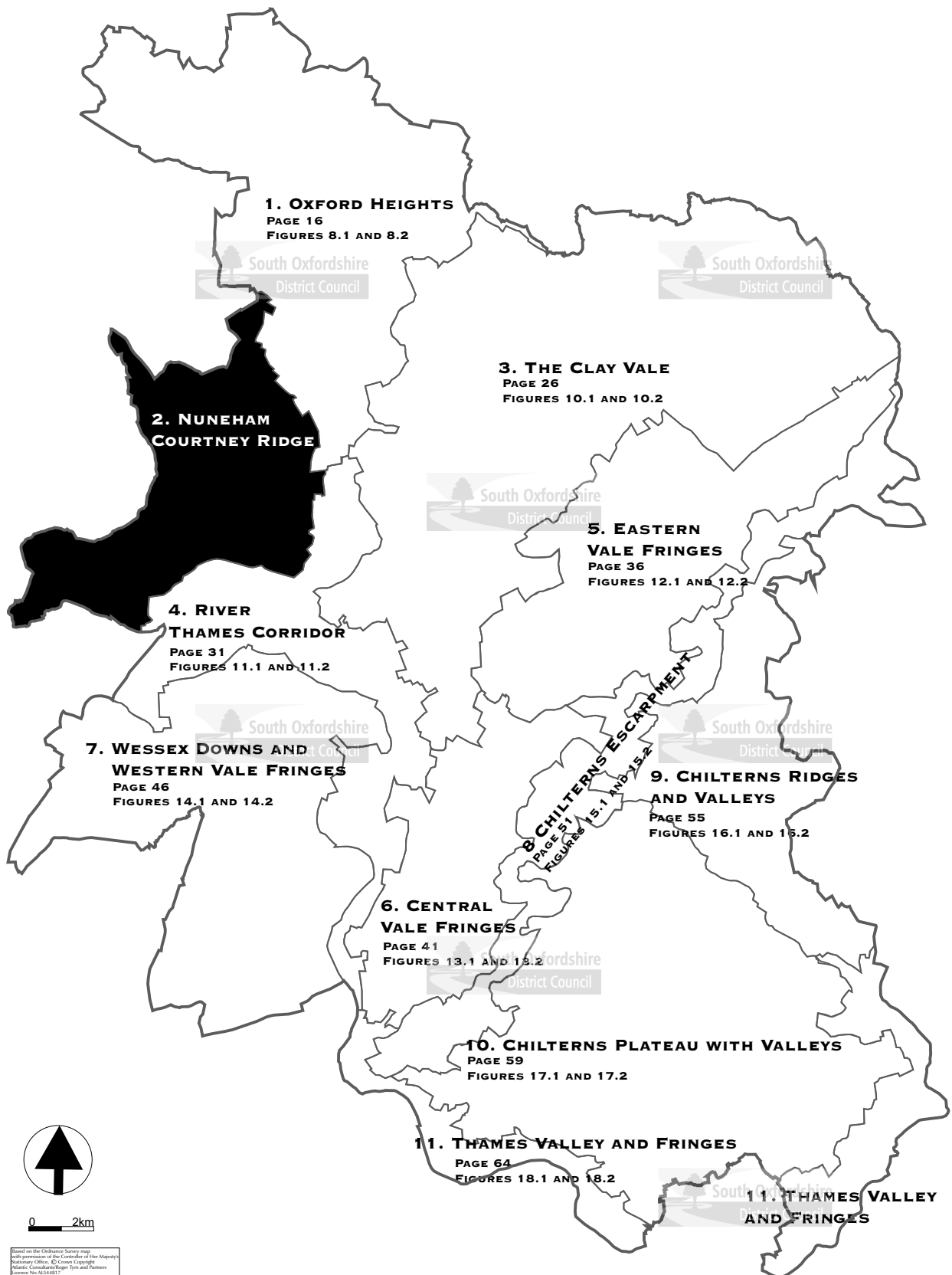
**Table 1.2: Oxford Heights - Landscape quality and sensitivity**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Flat, semi-enclosed farmland	Parkland and estate farmland	Open farmed hills and valleys	Semi-enclosed hills and valleys	Wooded hills and valleys
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY								
Scenic quality	high	●			●			●
	medium		●	●		●	●	
	low							
Sense of place	strong	●			●			●
	medium			●			●	
	weak		●			●		
Intrusive influences	uncommon	●			●			●
	occasional		●	●		●		
	frequent						●	
Other heritage values (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon		●			●		
	occasional	●		●			●	
	frequent				●			●
Visual sensitivity	high		●			●		
	medium	●		●			●	
	low				●			●
Sensitivity to change	high	●			●			
	moderate		●	●		●	●	●
	low							
Management strategy	conserve	●			●			●
	repair			●		●	●	
	restore		●					
	reconstruct							



## CHARACTER AREA 2: NUNEHAM COURTNEY RIDGE



## Landform and landcover

The character area occupies the southerly part of a belt of low limestone hills that surround Oxford and divide the low-lying clay vales which lie to the north and south. Here, the underlying Corallian limestone is capped by Kimmeridge Clay, Portland Beds and Lower Greensand which form a rolling plateau of lower elevation than the northern Oxford Heights but which still appears as a prominent spur of higher land above the River Thames which bounds it to the west and south.

The landform is particularly pronounced on its western side where it drops steeply towards the Thames, creating a dramatic river bluff with impressive views over the river towards Abingdon. Further north and to the south and east, the landform grades more gently into the low-lying floodplains of the Rivers Thames, Thame and Baldon Brook.

The landscape of the area was transformed in the eighteenth century by the creation of Nuneham Courtney park, designed by 'Capability' Brown for Lord Harcourt. The legacy of this picturesque landscape is still evident in the extensive woodlands and formal parkland which dominate the central part of the plateau. Elsewhere, the free-draining sandy soils of the Lower Greensand are mostly under arable crops while permanent pasture is more common on the heavy clay soils of the floodplains.

## Settlement and buildings

Settlements in this area have varied origins. For example, the Saxon settlement of Nuneham Courtney was originally located on high ground overlooking the Thames but it was subsequently demolished and rebuilt as a model estate village in its present location in the mid-eighteenth century, its original site being used for Lord Harcourt's 'villa with a view'[5]. Other Saxon settlements, such as Culham and Clifton Hampden, developed just above the Thames floodplain where they took advantage of the higher ground and proximity to well-watered river meadows.

Toot Baldon also originated as an old English settlement, perched on the outer edge of a hill where the greensand gives way to the clays below. However, medieval expansion of settlements and colonisation of nearby marshland created a larger estate with a shared field system, which included the associated settlement of Marsh Baldon and two other Baldons, Little Baldon and Baldon St Lawrence, of which only the isolated church of the latter survives [6].

The villages typically developed around a central green, of which Marsh Baldon has one of the finest surviving examples. In contrast to the predominance of stone buildings in the Northern Oxford Heights, Marsh Baldon also demonstrates the lack of uniformity in building styles and materials within this area. Clustered around the green there is 'a colourful medley of houses in coursed rubble, brick or timber framing, with roofs of thatch or tiles' [5].

The area has historically been bisected by major routes, including the Roman Road which linked Dorchester with Alchester (near Bicester) and the eighteenth century London to Oxford turnpike road, now the A4130. Another main road connects the important Thames crossings at Abingdon and Clifton Hampden but most other roads connecting the villages retain a minor, rural character.

## NUNEHAM COURTNEY RIDGE



1 Air photograph centred on the 'parkland and estate landscape' of Nuneham Park

2 Well-managed hedgerows with mature trees along the boundary between Nuneham Park and the 'semi-enclosed farmed hills and valleys' landscape.



3 Cottages surrounding the large village green at Marsh Baldon.



## Landscape and visual character

Landscape character in the Nuneham Courtney Ridge is dominated by the extensively wooded parkland and estate landscapes of Nuneham Courtney, which occupy the core of the area. However, landform is also a unifying element, with the distinctive rolling plateau rising prominently above the surrounding river valleys.

The main variations in landscape character (see Figure 9.1) have been identified as:

- the low-lying **floodplain** landscapes of the River Thames and Baldon Brook;
- distinctive **parkland and estate** landscapes at Nuneham Courtney;
- the **institutional** complex of The Culham Laboratory;
- and the distinctive rolling **hills and valleys** which typify the rest of the area.

### *Floodplain landscapes*

To the south and east of the area, the hills give way to the broad lowland plain of the Thames valley floor (Character Area 4). However, to the west, the hills form a dramatic setting for the narrow valley of the River Thames near Abingdon, with its distinctive ribbon of fringing riverside meadows. To the north-east, the area also includes the strip of low-lying floodplain associated with the Baldon Brook which separates this area from the hills to the north. Within these broad areas, differences in land use and enclosure create distinctive variations in landscape character.

#### *Flat floodplain pasture*

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying riverside meadows alongside the River Thames, typically dominated by permanent pasture with a distinctively 'wet', riparian character;
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches ;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside;
- intimate and pastoral character;
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the valley may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas;

- comparative inaccessibility creates a tranquil, remote character with only localised intrusion close to main urban areas of Abingdon and Oxford.

#### *Flat, open farmland*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively flat, low-lying farmland (below 65 metres AOD) occupying former marshland alongside the Baldon Brook on land less prone to flooding and more easily drained and cultivated;
- large-scale rectilinear field pattern with distinctive network of drainage ditches;
- weak landscape structure with few trees, low or gappy hedges, open ditches and fences;
- comparative inaccessibility creates a rural and remote character;
- open, denuded landscape results in high intervisibility.

### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

These landscapes comprise the formal C18 designed parkland and associated estate landscape of Nuneham Courtney and a smaller-scale area with parkland characteristics associated with Culham House.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, clumps and blocks of woodland, exotic tree species, formal structures and boundary features;
- associated 'estate' landscape extending into a few areas beyond listed parkland and characterised by large blocks of woodland, open grassland and mature trees;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover, low intervisibility but with some visually prominent hilltop and valleyside locations.

### *Mid-vale ridge landscapes*

The majority of this area is characterised by a comparatively homogenous landscape of farmed hills and valleys. Variations in character occur mostly as a result of differences in the degree of

enclosure and the landscape structure afforded by woodlands, hedges and trees.

#### *Open farmed hills and valleys*

Key characteristics:

- rolling plateau landform;
- large-scale farmland, mostly in arable cultivation;
- large fields, with rectilinear field boundaries, typical of parliamentary enclosures;
- weak structure of tightly clipped or gappy hedgerows, with few hedgerow trees;
- open, denuded and exposed character, with prominent skylines and hillsides and high intervisibility;
- distinctive elevated and expansive character on ridges and higher ground, with dominant sky and long views;
- predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads, overhead power lines and built development.

#### *Semi-enclosed farmed hills and valleys*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with a stronger structure of hedgerows and trees which provide clearer definition of field pattern;
- occurs mostly in association with settlements (eg. Marsh Baldon), where a smaller-scale field pattern and the hedgerow structure remain more intact;
- predominantly intensive arable land use but some pockets of permanent pasture occur, particularly around settlements and on steeper hillsides;
- predominantly rural character;
- landform and landscape structure create enclosure and reduce intervisibility.

#### *Wooded hills and valleys*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with a particularly strong structure of hedgerows, trees and woodlands at the western end of the greensand plateau and steep escarpments of the River Thames;
- strong relief, mixed land use and blocks of woodland create an attractively diverse landscape;
- intervisibility reduced by landform and landscape structure to create a more enclosed and intimate landscape, but long

views possible from hillsides and higher ground across Thames valley;

- predominantly rural character with few detracting influences.

#### *Institutions*

Culham Laboratories is located within this area and comprises a complex of institutional buildings within landscaped grounds.

Key characteristics:

- landscaped setting with mature trees and semblance of parkland character but lacking its formal features;
- dispersed complex of buildings, signs and land uses have an urbanising influence on rural context of site.

## **Landscape management issues**

Overall, the Nuneham Courtney Ridge has an attractive, rural and generally unspoilt character but with some localised variations in quality and condition.

In particular, there are areas of landscape which have retained a strong structure of woods, hedgerows and trees, have a particularly rich, diverse and well-managed character and are of high scenic quality. They principally comprise the historic parkland and wooded landscape associated with Nuneham Park, the very attractive wooded hills and escarpment at the western end of the plateau above the Thames and parts of the River Thames floodplain itself. Management to **conserve** and enhance these assets is the most appropriate strategy in these areas (see Figure 9.2).

Most of the remaining farmed landscape of the Nuneham Courtney Ridge, while still rural and attractive, is showing some signs of decline in condition and quality. Principally this is the result of a general weakening of landscape structure through intensive arable farming, in places creating a particularly open and denuded character. This exacerbates the intrusion of built development (eg. at Berinsfield and the edge of Oxford) and the network of overhead power lines which cut across the open farmland to the north

of the area. Other typical land management issues include the impact of 'horsiculture' and somewhat 'scruffy' or intrusive land uses on the fringes of villages. In these areas, it would be desirable to **repair** or **restore** a stronger structure of field boundaries, trees and woodlands (typical of the mid-vale ridge landscapes), and to reduce the adverse impact of certain land uses.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- encourage the maintenance and restoration of historic parkland landscapes and features at Nuneham Park and Culham;
- manage existing hilltop and valley-side woods to the north of Culham to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- encourage further woodland, hedge and tree planting on farmland to reinforce the distinctive patchwork of open fields, woods and strong hedgerows of the farmed hills and valleys landscape;
- maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river valleys;
- encourage better maintenance of field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside.

## Planning and development issues

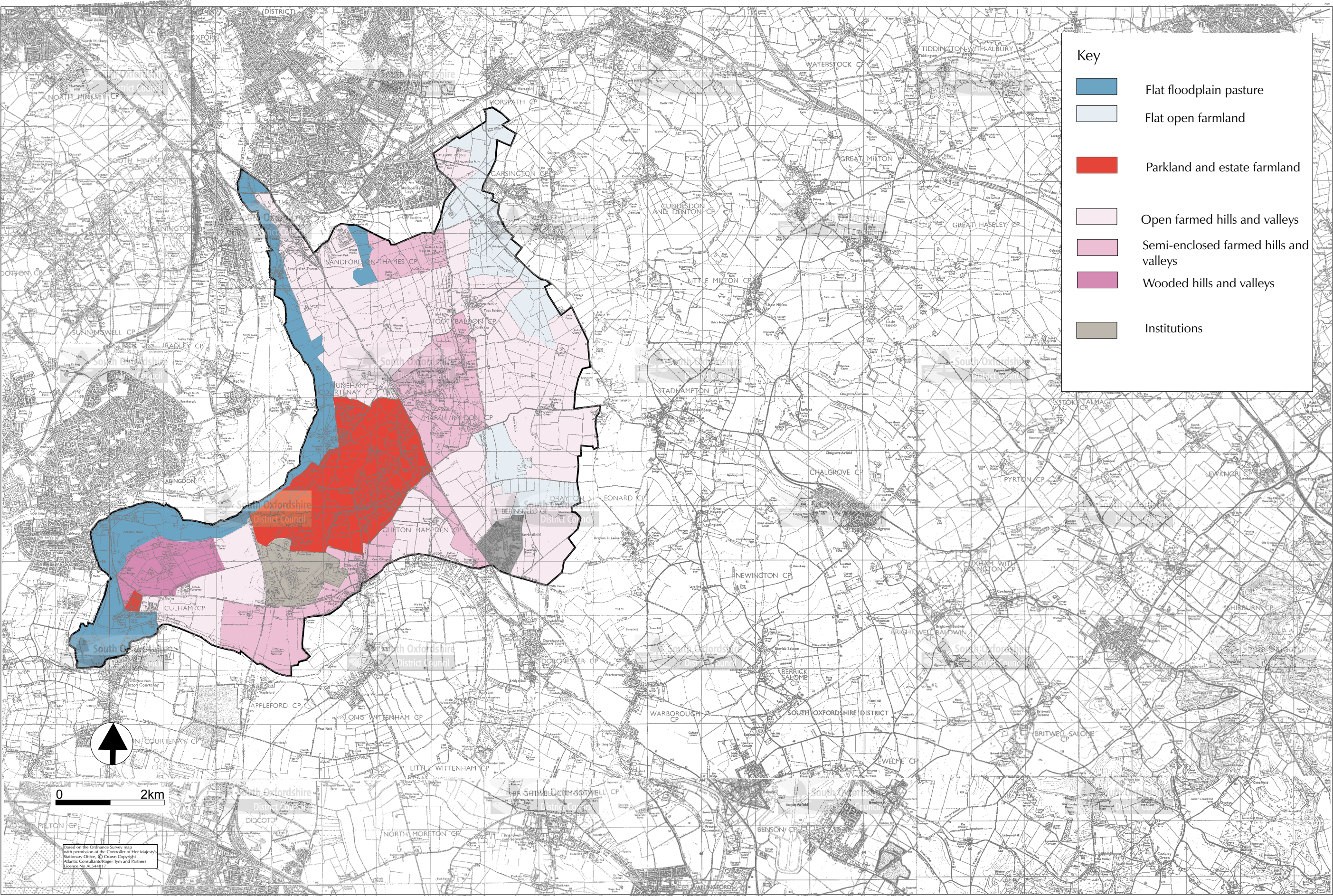
Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within this essentially rural and unspoilt landscape. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-scale development will depend upon:

- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

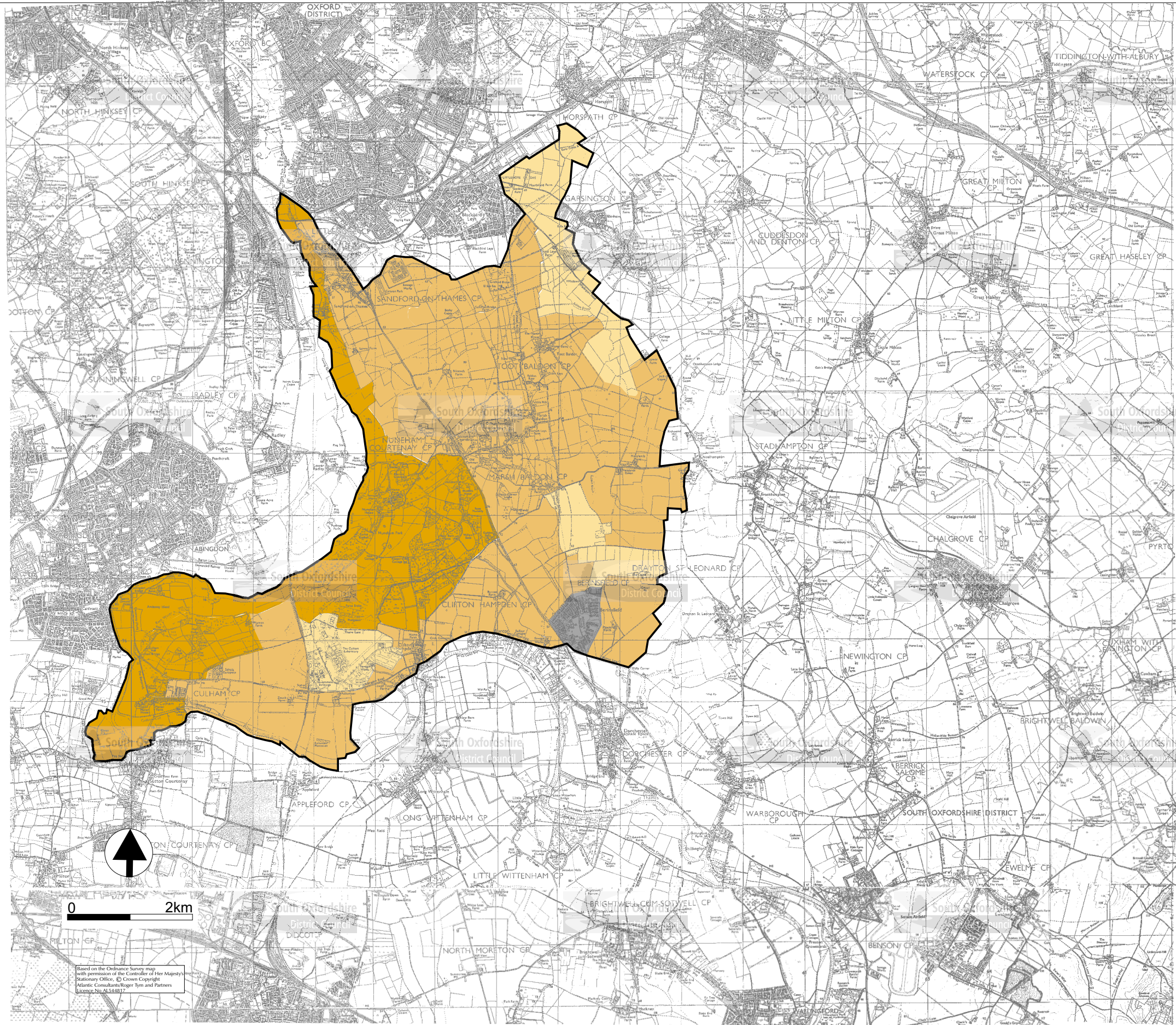
Tables 2.1 and 2.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Nuneham Courtney Ridge, as explained on page 6. However, some general conclusions are that:

- the parkland/estate landscapes and the remote, low-lying floodplain landscapes are particularly vulnerable to change and are likely to be unsuited to new built development;
- open landscapes, hill-tops and hill-sides are visually exposed and unsuitable for prominent development unless closely integrated with existing built form or well-integrated within new landscape frameworks;
- landscapes with strong landform and a mature structure of woods and hedgerows are less visually exposed and may be more able to absorb change but they are generally of higher landscape quality and therefore sensitive to development;
- landscapes on the fringes of settlements are particularly vulnerable to change and special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent the coalescence of settlements.









**KEY:**

	Conserve
	Repair
	Restore



**Table 2.1: Nuneham Courtney Ridge - Landscape and settlement character**

**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Parkland and estate farmland	Open farmed hills and valleys	Semi-enclosed hills and valleys	Wooded hills and valleys	Institutions
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>								
<b>Scale</b>	large		●		●	●	●	
	medium	●		●			●	●
	small							
<b>Diversity</b>	complex			●			●	
	moderate	●				●		●
	simple		●		●			
<b>Structure</b>	strong	●		●			●	
	medium	◆				●		●
	weak		●		●			
<b>Enclosure</b>	open		●		●			
	semi-enclosed	●				●		
	enclosed/intimate			●			●	●
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight	●	●		●	●	●	
	sinuous			●	●	●	●	●
	stone walls	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	hedges	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	hedgerow trees	●		●		●	●	●
	estate boundaries			●				●
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>								
<b>Location</b>	hilltop				●	●	●	●
	ridgetop				●	●	●	
	hillside			●	●	●	●	
	valley side	●	●					
	valley floor							
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	hamlets				●	●	●	
	small village				●	●	●	
	large village					●		
	town							
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	concentrated							
<b>Form</b>	nucleated				●	●	●	
	linear					●		
<b>Materials</b>	stone	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	brick	◆	◆		◆	◆	◆	●
	flint							
	cob							
	timber frame							
	tiles	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	thatch	●	●	●	●	●	●	
	slate	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆

**Table 2.2: Nuneham Courtney Ridge - Landscape quality and sensitivity**

**Key**

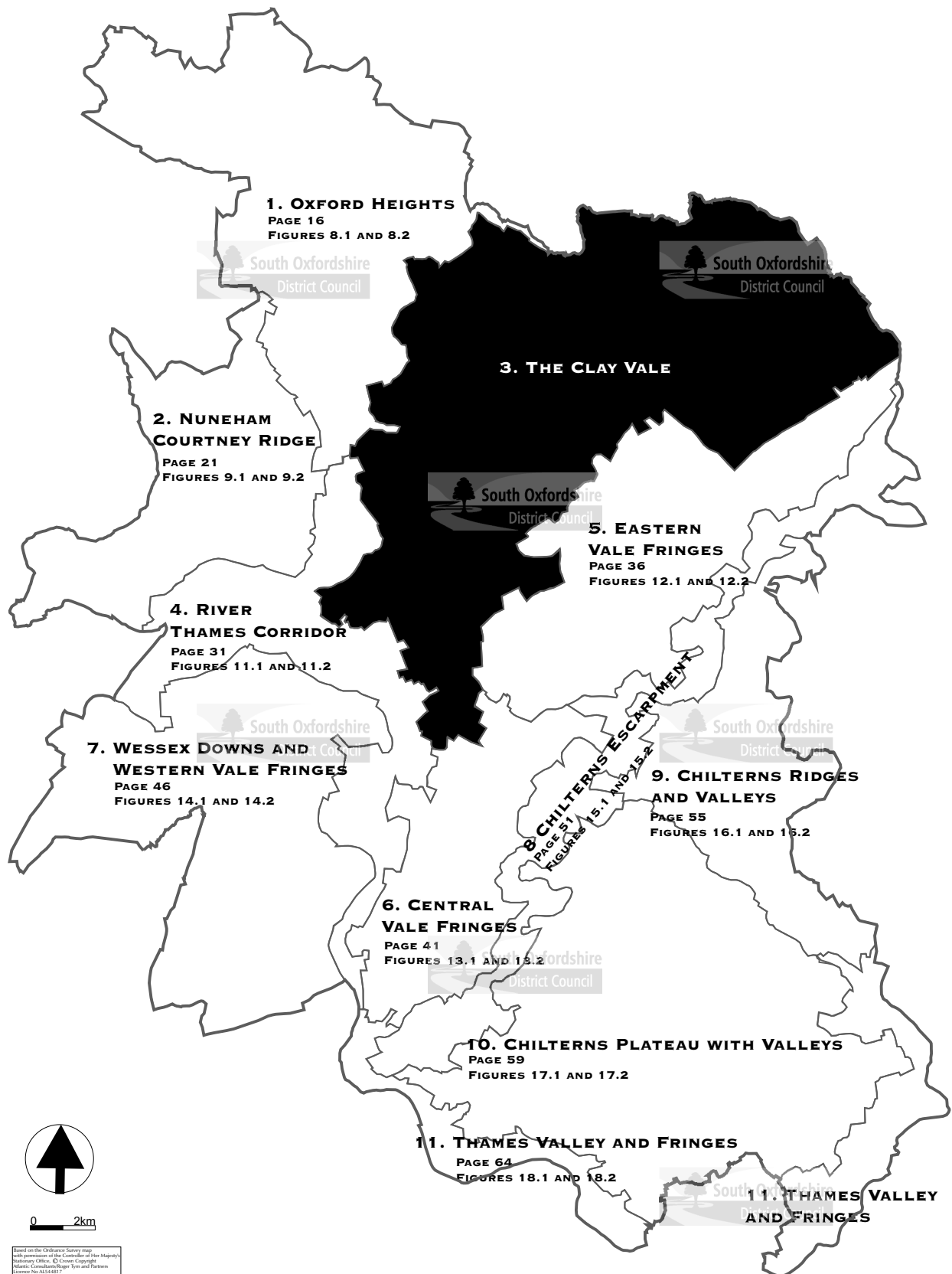
- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Parkland and estate farmland	Open farmed hills and valleys	Semi-enclosed hills and valleys	Wooded hills and valleys	Institutions
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY								
<b>Scenic quality</b>	high	●		●			●	
	medium		●		●	●		
	low							●
<b>Sense of place</b>	strong	●		●			●	
	medium					●		
	weak		●		●			●
<b>Intrusive influences</b>	uncommon	●		●			●	
	occasional		●		●			●
	frequent					●		
<b>Other heritage values</b> (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon		●		●			●
	occasional	●				●		
	frequent			●			●	
<b>Visual sensitivity</b>	high		●		●			
	medium	●				●		●
	low			●			●	
<b>Sensitivity to change</b>	high	●		●				
	moderate		●		●	●	●	
	low							●
<b>Management strategy</b>	conserve	●		●			●	
	repair	◆			●	●		
	restore		●					●
	reconstruct							

Notes on landscape quality and sensitivity:

- 1 Quality of floodplain pasture influenced by proximity to new development on edge of Oxford and sewage works

# CHARACTER AREA 3: THE CLAY VALE



## Landform and landcover

This character area embraces the lowland agricultural landscape of the central clay vale, which lies between the hills of the Mid-vale Ridge and the chalk of the Chiltern Hills, and stretches from Thame in the north-east to Benson in the south-west. This broad valley forms the transition between the Vale of White Horse to the west and the Vale of Aylesbury to the east.

The underlying geology is dominated by heavy blue grey Gault Clay, which was laid down during a marine incursion in the Lower Cretaceous period. This gives rise to the low ground, subdued topography and heavy soils which are typical of the gently rolling vale landscape.

At its western end, the vale grades gently into the flat alluvial floodplain of the River Thames. However, along its northern edge, the vale becomes more strongly undulating, partly as a result of more mixed geology around Great Milton and towards the upper Thame valley, where the Gault Clay gives way to exposures of Lower Greensand, Portland Beds and Kimmeridge Clay. Here, in places, there is a distinct sense of elevation although most of the area lies well below 100 metres AOD.

The vale supports mainly arable farming with some tracts of pasture, particularly in the lowest areas along various watercourses where drainage is impeded. Farming practice is particularly intensive on the better-drained soils of the Lower Greensand and Portland Beds, such as around Great Milton, where field enlargement and hedgerow removal have created a very open landscape probably similar to the bare open vistas of the ancient common fields.

## Settlement and buildings

Settlement pattern within the vale is strongly influenced by physical factors. The heavy clay soils and a risk of flooding have traditionally discouraged settlement on areas underlain by the Gault Clay and there are still quite large areas of the vale which are sparsely settled (eg. to the north-east of Chalgrove).

However, the area does contain the town of Thame and a number of smaller villages which tend to be associated with the sandstones and mudstones of the Portland Beds, Upper Greensand and Kimmeridge Clays. For example, Thame is built on a sandstone island which emerges from the surrounding clay and is almost entirely encircled by the River Thame and its tributaries (the town takes its name from the river, which means 'dark waters'). Other examples of this link with geology are the villages of Great Milton and Great Haseley which sit on the rolling plateau formed by exposures of the Portland Beds and Lower Greensand.

Thame was one of the primary Saxon settlements but was deliberately enlarged in the twelfth century by the Bishop of Lincoln and still retains the characteristics of a classic linear medieval new town [6]. This and several other settlements retain a substantial number of old buildings of historical importance and contain designated Conservation Areas. Because of the lack of building stone, most of the older houses are timber framed with thatched roofs and there are occasional examples of walling in cob, a mixture of mud and straw. Brick was also widely used from an early date and appears as 'nogging' for timber framed houses, in alternating bands of brick and flint in some eighteenth century cottages and in a characteristic pattern of mellow red and grey brickwork [6].

# THE CLAY VALE



1 Air photograph showing the flat open landscapes around Chalgrove airfield in the centre of the clay vale.



2 Undulating wooded vale around Tiddington.

3 The denuded arable landscape of the 'undulating open vale' near Little Milton.



## Landscape and visual character

Although this is a large character area, its landscape character is remarkably unvarying. It is dominated by gently rolling or undulating landform upon which lies a typical pattern of medium to large-scale fields bounded by regular hedgerows, typical of the planned agricultural landscape of the parliamentary enclosures. The main differences lie in the degree of 'intactness' of the hedgerow structure and the degree of openness or enclosure in the landscape, although there are minor variations in land use which have localised effects on landscape character (see Figure 10.1).

The main distinctions that have been drawn are between:

- the different sub-types of the typical **undulating vale** landscapes which dominate the area;
- the flat, low-lying **floodplain** landscapes of a number of minor river valleys;
- areas of **parkland** landscape at Thame Park and a number of smaller parks throughout the Vale;
- an area of **amenity** landscape in the form of a golf course to the west of Thame;
- two distinctive, flat **airfield** sites, at Chalgrove and Benson.

### *Clay vale landscapes*

These are the characteristic farmed landscapes of the clay vale, characterised by gently rolling or undulating landform and a regular pattern of fields bounded by hedgerows. The main variations are between the very open, denuded large-scale arable landscapes with a weak hedgerow structure (eg. along the centre of the vale) and areas with stronger structure of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and woodland, and a more mixed pattern of land use (eg. around Tiddington).

#### *Undulating open vale*

Key characteristics:

- low-lying, undulating or gently rolling landform;
- large-scale farmland, mostly under intensive arable cultivation;

- typically large fields, with rectilinear pattern of field boundaries;
- weak structure of tightly clipped or gappy hedgerows, with few hedgerow trees;
- open, denuded and exposed character, with high intervisibility;
- distinctive elevated and expansive character on higher ground, with dominant sky and long views;
- predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads (including M40/A40), overhead power lines and built development.

#### *Undulating, semi-enclosed vale*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with a stronger structure of hedgerows and trees which provide clearer definition of field pattern;
- predominantly intensive arable land use but some pockets of permanent pasture occur, particularly around settlements and in the more strongly undulating areas;
- predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads (including M40/A40), overhead power lines and built development;
- moderate intervisibility.

#### *Undulating wooded vale*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with significant woodland blocks which create a stronger sense of enclosure and visual containment;
- low intervisibility.

### *Floodplain landscapes*

These landscapes occur as localised variations in character along the shallow valleys and floodplains of the minor watercourses that drain the vale and separate areas of raised ground. These landscapes predominantly comprise thin strips of floodplain pasture (eg. along Haseley Brook) but also include some areas which have been drained and cultivated and are now under arable farmland (eg. the flat, low-lying farmland next to Chalgrove airfield).

#### *Flat, open farmland*

Key characteristics:



- distinctively flat farmland with a low-lying character;
- rectilinear field pattern with distinctive network of drainage ditches;
- weak landscape structure with few trees, low or gappy hedges, open ditches and fences;
- predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion from built development near Chalgrove;
- open, denuded landscape with high intervisibility.

#### *Flat semi-enclosed farmland*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with stronger landscape structure and a semi-enclosed character (eg. along Cuttle Brook near Thame Park);
- rural and semi-enclosed character;
- moderate to low intervisibility.

#### *Flat floodplain pasture*

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying farmland, typically dominated by permanent pasture with a distinctively 'wet', riparian character;
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches ;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside;
- small-scale landscapes with intimate, pastoral and tranquil character;
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the river corridor may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas.

#### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

The area contains the listed parkland landscape of Thame Park and a number of smaller parks at Rycote, Ascott, and Brightwell Park.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, clumps and blocks of woodland;
- rural, unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.

#### *Amenity landscape*

This type is represented by two recent golf course developments - at the Oxfordshire Golf Course to the west of Thame and at Lower Farm, Waterstock.

Key characteristics:

- incongruous, artificial landform at the Oxfordshire Golf Course, out of context with surrounding gently undulating landform;
- typical golf course landscapes of greens, fairways and roughs, with associated features such as lakes and bunkers and buildings;
- intensively managed and sub-urban character;
- moderate intervisibility.

#### *Airfields*

Two large airfields are located within the area, at Chalgrove and Benson, taking advantage of low-lying, flat land.

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying land;
- large expanse of open ground with very little vegetation to interrupt views and an open, exposed character;
- typical features of high security fences, large-scale sheds or other buildings which are out of character with their rural setting;
- high intervisibility.

## **Landscape management issues**

The landscape of the Clay Vale comprises attractive undulating countryside with a rural and predominantly unspoilt character but with some local variations in quality and condition.

Areas of particularly high scenic quality, which retain a strong character and landscape structure, comprise the formal parklands, parts of the pastoral floodplain landscape of the River Thame and its tributaries, the area of strongly undulating wooded landscape around Tiddington and the semi-enclosed farmland around Brightwell Baldwin. Management to **conserve** and enhance these landscapes is the most appropriate strategy in these areas (see Figure 10.2).

Across much of the remaining area, intensive farming practice is responsible for varying degrees of decline in landscape condition and quality. Where field pattern, hedgerow structure and landscape character are still basically intact (eg. in the areas south of Thame, to the north and south of Stadhampton and to the south of Chalgrove) **repair** of a slightly weakened structure is the most appropriate strategy. However, there are quite extensive areas of farmland in the vale where landscape structure has been substantially weakened (eg. to the west and east of Thame, around Great Milton and to the south of the M40 and to the north-east of the airfields of Chalgrove and Benson). In these areas, more significant intervention is required to **restore** landscape structure and character.

Finally, the airfields themselves, the newly created golf courses and the dominant road network at the junction of the M40 and A418 east of Wheatley, are examples of land uses which have disrupted the natural pattern and character of the rural landscape. Here, intervention which would help to **reconstruct** a more sympathetic character and to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding landscape would be desirable.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river corridors;
- strengthen the typical pattern of field boundaries, with strong hedgerows and frequent hedgerow trees enclosing medium to large-scale fields;
- maintain and, where appropriate, restore parkland landscapes and features at Thame Park, Rycote, Ascott, and Brightwell Park;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas, airfields and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside;
- manage golf courses to provide better integration with character of surrounding countryside and to enhance landscape and wildlife value, eg. through low-intensity management of roughs, introduction of wildflowers into grasslands and planting of

native trees and shrubs on land between fairways and around periphery of sites.

## Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas and along the river corridors. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-scale development will depend upon:

- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

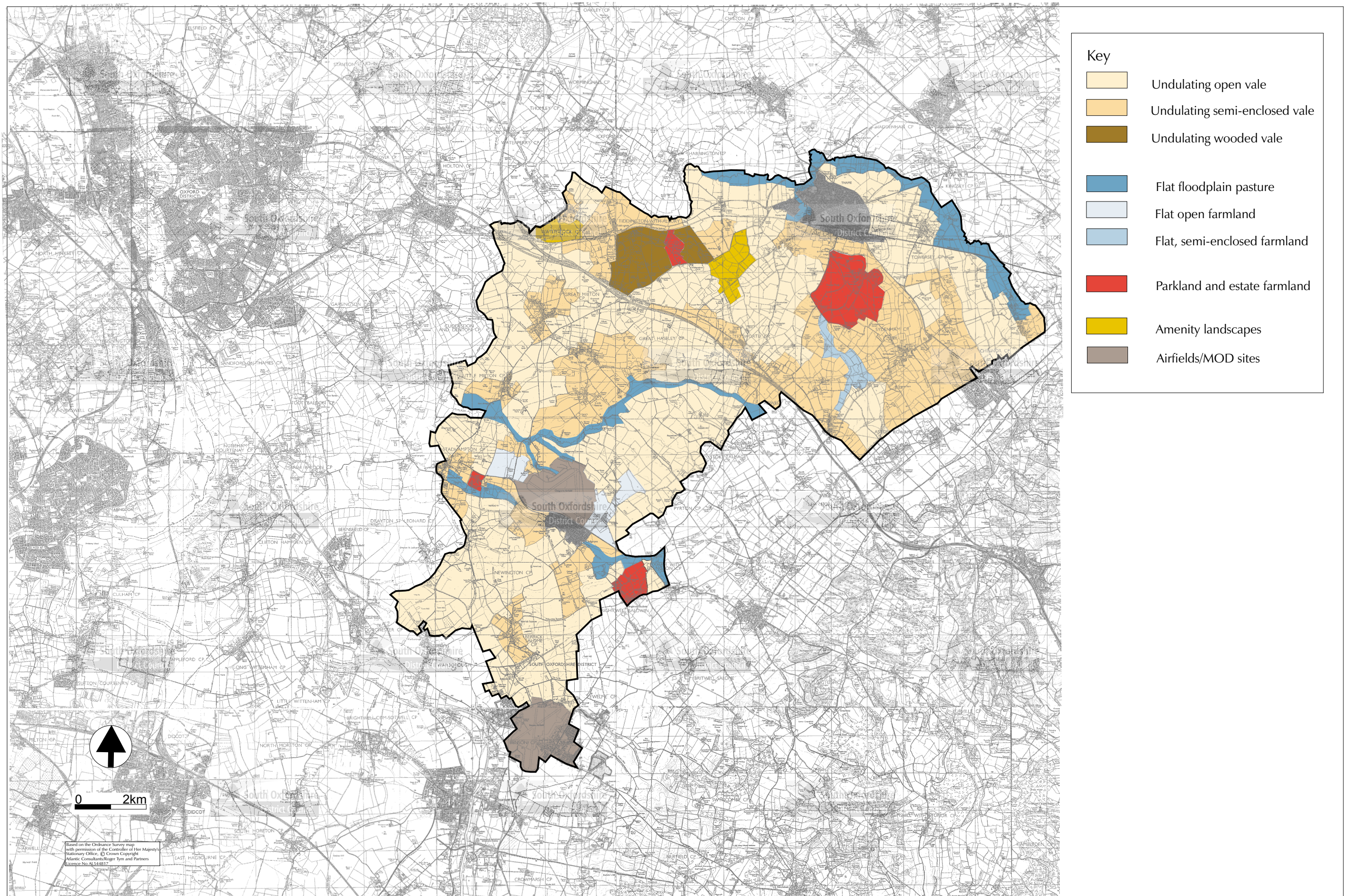
Tables 3.1 and 3.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the River Thames Corridor, as explained on page 6.

Some specific conclusions are that:

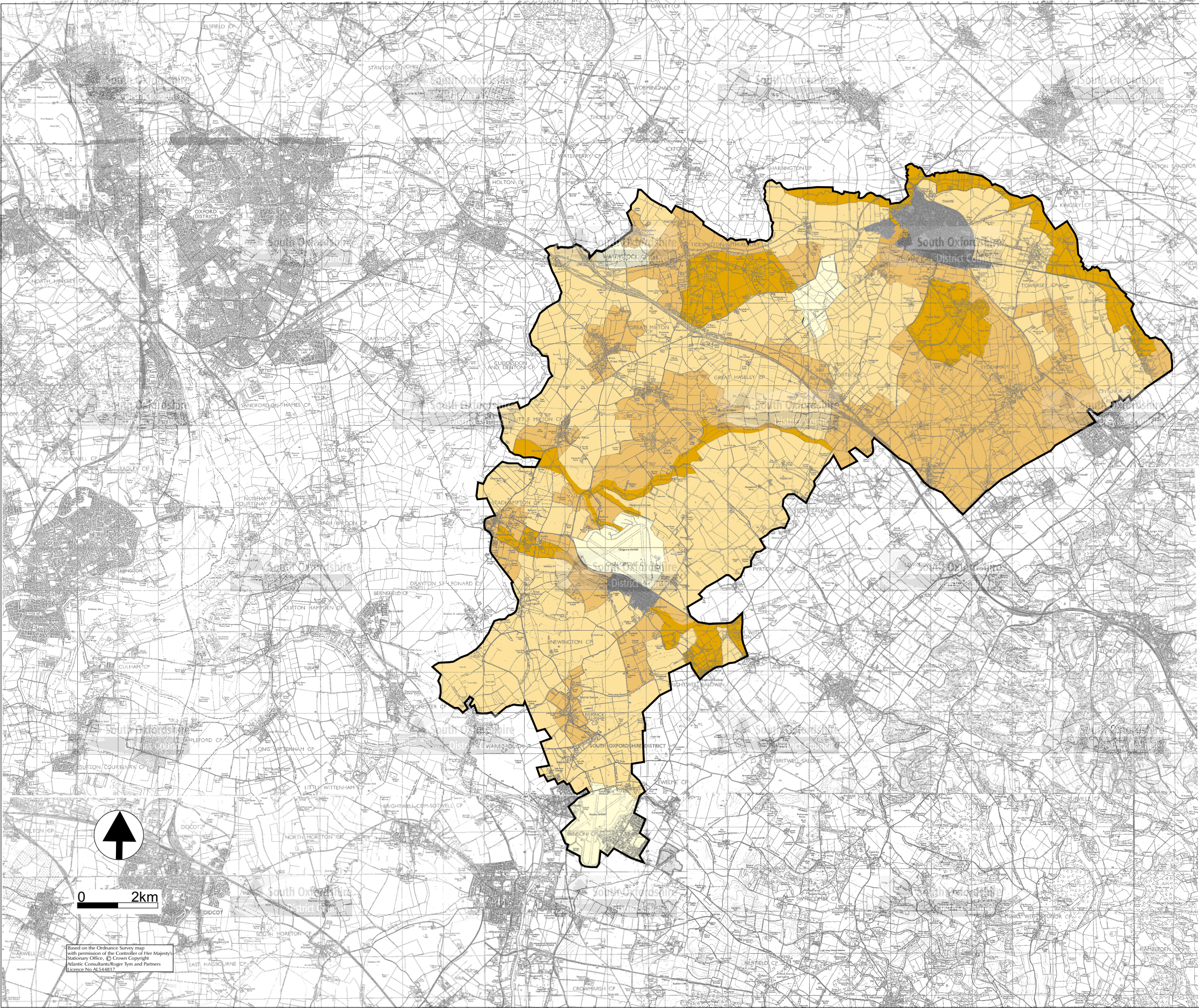
- the unspoilt floodplain pastures, wetlands and parkland/estate landscapes are vulnerable to change and least able to accommodate built development;
- areas of open landscape on elevated ground and on the floor of the vale (including airfield sites) are visually exposed and new development would be highly prominent unless closely associated with existing built form or well-integrated within new landscape frameworks;
- development within the motorway corridor would intrude upon the predominantly rural and sparsely settled character of the adjacent landscape;
- landscapes on the fringes of settlements are particularly vulnerable to change and special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent the coalescence of built development;
- the ribbon of floodplain which separates the eastern and western built areas of Thame should be maintained as an important green corridor.



### 3 THE CLAY VALE







**KEY:**

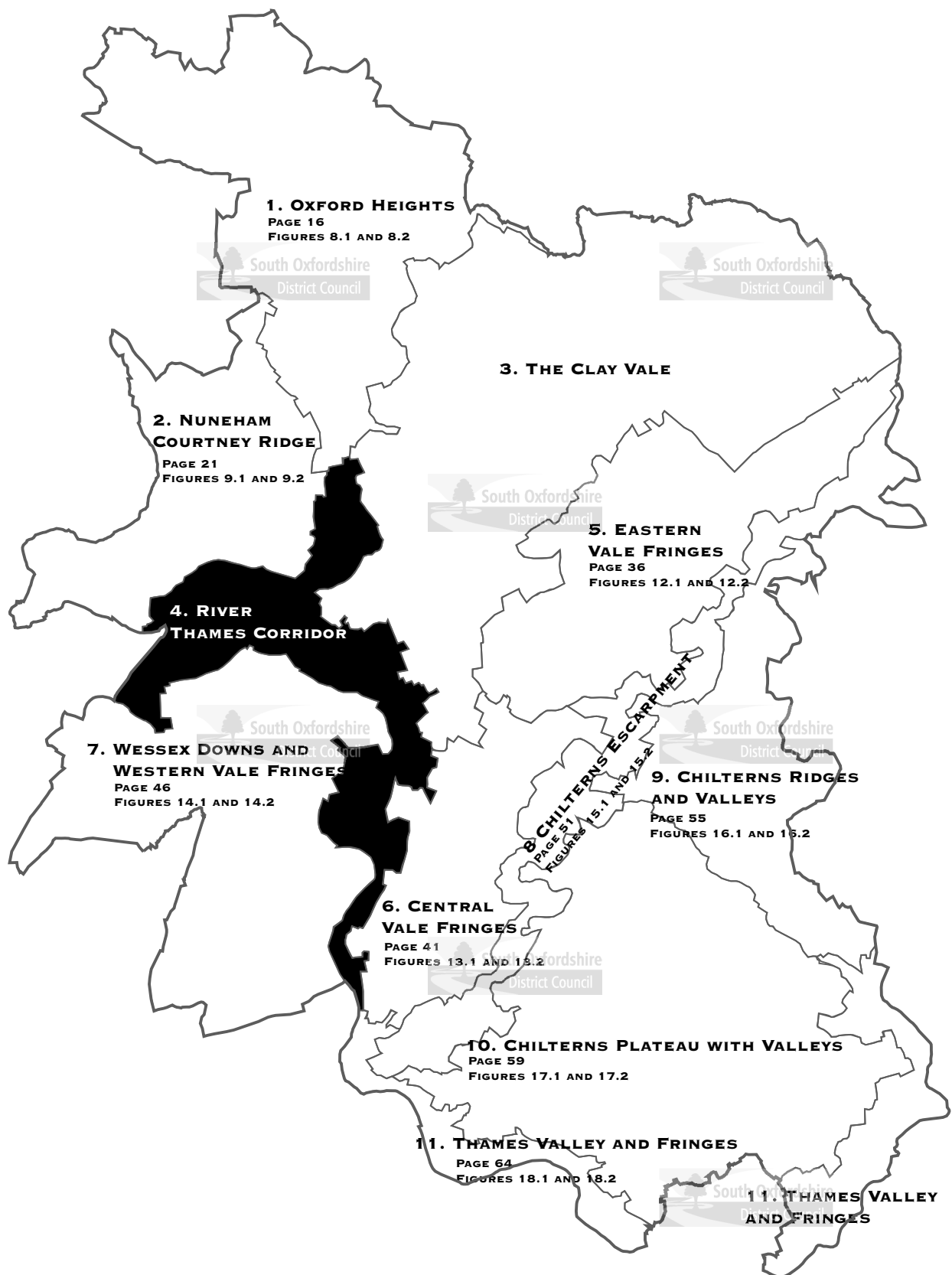
	Conserve
	Repair
	Restore
	Reconstruct







# CHARACTER AREA 4: RIVER THAMES CORRIDOR



## Landform and landcover

This character area embraces the flat, low-lying floodplain of the River Thames between Long Wittenham and Goring and includes the lower reaches of its main tributary, the River Thame.

The land lies almost entirely below 60m AOD and is exceptionally flat, with little perceptible variation in relief. The floodplain is confined to a comparatively narrow strip where it is bounded by the harder rocks of the lower and upper greensand and chalk but widens considerably around the confluence of the Thames and Thame within the softer Gault Clay of the central vale. The transition between the floodplain and surrounding landscape is comparatively subtle, with no obvious valley form, but the boundaries of the character area do follow a perceptible break in slope between the very flat floodplain floor and rising ground beyond.

The underlying solid geology is dominated by Gault Clay but this is masked by extensive quaternary deposits. A thin strip of alluvium follows the immediate river corridors, giving rise to heavy soils with naturally impeded drainage. These areas are still liable to flooding (as designated within the Local Plan) and are predominantly under permanent pasture.

Beyond this, the floodplain is dominated by extensive spreads of river terrace gravels which are better drained and support lighter more easily worked soils. Much of this has been extensively drained and is now under intensive arable cultivation.

## Settlement and buildings

The Thames-side terrace gravels have been a favoured area for settlement from prehistoric times. Neolithic settlers at Dorchester and other downstream gravel sites along the Thames took advantage of the lighter, more workable soils, an accessible water supply and slight elevation above the most flood-prone areas. This pattern of settlement persisted and was extended through the Roman and Saxon periods, with Dorchester providing a particularly notable persistence of settlement and overlap of cultures. Apart from the physical advantages of these locations, this continuity of settlement was also due to the strategic importance of the River Thames as a territorial boundary and for defence, transport and trade.

The string of Thames-side settlements from Dorchester to Goring include the smaller settlements of Shillingford, Warborough, Benson, Preston Crowmarsh, Crowmarsh Gifford, North and South Stoke and Moulsoford. They also include the town of Wallingford which originated by an important ford over the Thames [6]. This strategic position made it a meeting point of ancient routes and contributed to its importance as a town.

Many of these settlements retain a substantial number of old buildings of historical importance and contain designated Conservation Areas. Because of the lack of building stone, most of the older houses here are timber framed with thatched roofs and there are occasional examples of walling in cob, a mixture of mud and straw. Brick was also widely used from an early date and appears as 'nogging' for timber framed houses, in alternating bands of brick and flint in some eighteenth century cottages and in a characteristic pattern of mellow red and grey brickwork (eg. in Dorchester) [9].



## RIVER THAMES CORRIDOR



1 Air photograph showing the River Thames corridor at Burcot.



2 Flat open farmland within the River Thames corridor near Shillingford.



3 Typical brick and thatch cottages in the Thames-side village of Clifton Hampden.

## Landscape and visual character

Landscape character in this area has a strong degree of coherence, with the River Thames providing a strong unifying influence. There are consequently few variations in landscape character (see Figure 11.1).

The main distinctions that have been drawn are between:

- the different sub-types of the flat, low-lying **floodplain** landscapes which dominate the area;
- small areas of **parkland** landscape to the north of Wallingford and at Mongewell;
- an area of **amenity** landscape in the form of a golf course to the south of Mongewell park.

### *Floodplain landscapes*

Floodplain pasture is characteristic of the immediate corridor of the Rivers Thames and Thame, on the heavy alluvial soils more prone to flooding. Elsewhere, the areas underlain by terrace gravels have been extensively drained and are now under intensive arable cultivation, typically with a weak landscape structure and very open character. Areas of floodplain wetland, created as a result of extensive gravel workings around Dorchester, are particularly distinctive features of this character area.

#### *Flat, open farmland*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively flat, low-lying farmland (below 50 metres AOD);
- large-scale rectilinear field pattern with distinctive network of drainage ditches;
- weak landscape structure with few trees, low or gappy hedges, open ditches and fences;
- comparative inaccessibility creates a rural and remote character;
- open, denuded landscape results in high intervisibility.

#### *Flat semi-enclosed farmland*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with stronger landscape structure and a semi-enclosed character around Burcot and to the north of Wittenham Clumps;

- predominantly rural character but with some intrusion of built form around Burcot;
- semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

#### *Flat floodplain pasture*

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying farmland, typically dominated by permanent pasture with a distinctively 'wet', riparian character;
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches ;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside;
- intimate, pastoral and tranquil character with some 'arcadian' qualities along the Thames close to settlements and riverside parklands (eg. Mongewell);
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the river corridor may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas;
- important areas of riverside greenspace within or adjoining the main settlements and urban areas (eg. the riverside at Wallingford).

#### *Floodplain wetland*

Key characteristics:

- complex of freshwater lagoons formed from flooded gravel pits;
- margins colonised by native plants and animal species to create a semi-natural, riparian character with developing wildlife value;
- predominantly tranquil, rural character but with some localised intrusion from main roads around Dorchester;
- semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

The area contains two main areas with a distinctive parkland character, associated with Wallingford Castle and Mongewell Park.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, clumps and blocks of woodland;
- unspoilt character;

- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover, low intervisibility.

### ***Amenity landscape***

Key characteristics:

- typical golf course landscape of greens, fairways and roughs, with associated buildings and features;
- intensively managed and sub-urban character;
- moderate intervisibility.

## **Landscape management issues**

Overall, this area retains a predominantly rural character with some particularly unspoilt and attractive areas of landscape which have retained a strong structure of hedgerows and trees, have a particularly rich, diverse and well-managed character and are of high scenic quality. These mainly comprise the pastoral floodplain pasture landscapes and the small areas of remnant parkland immediately next to the Thames. Management to **conserve** and enhance these characteristics and qualities is the most appropriate strategy in these landscapes (see Figure 11.2).

Much of the remaining area comprises a rural farmed landscape which is showing some signs of decline in condition and quality. Principally this is the result of a general weakening of landscape structure through intensive arable farming, creating an open and denuded character which exacerbates the intrusion of built development and roads (eg. to the south of Wallingford). Action to **repair** or **restore** former landscape diversity and structure would be desirable within these areas.

Other typical land management issues include the impact of 'horsiculture' and somewhat 'scruffy' or intrusive land uses on the fringes of settlements, and the gradual sub-urbanisation of the river corridor landscape through development along the riverside.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river corridors;
- encourage planting and pollarding of willows along ditches and watercourses and less intensive management of ditch systems to promote semi-natural aquatic and riparian vegetation;
- minimise disturbance to wildlife caused by recreational use of former gravel pits near Dorchester and encourage management of aquatic and riparian vegetation to maximise wildlife value;
- encourage better maintenance of field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- encourage the maintenance and restoration of parkland landscapes and features at Wallingford Castle and Mongewell Park;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside and river corridor landscape.

## **Planning and development issues**

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas and along the river corridors. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-scale development will depend upon:

- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

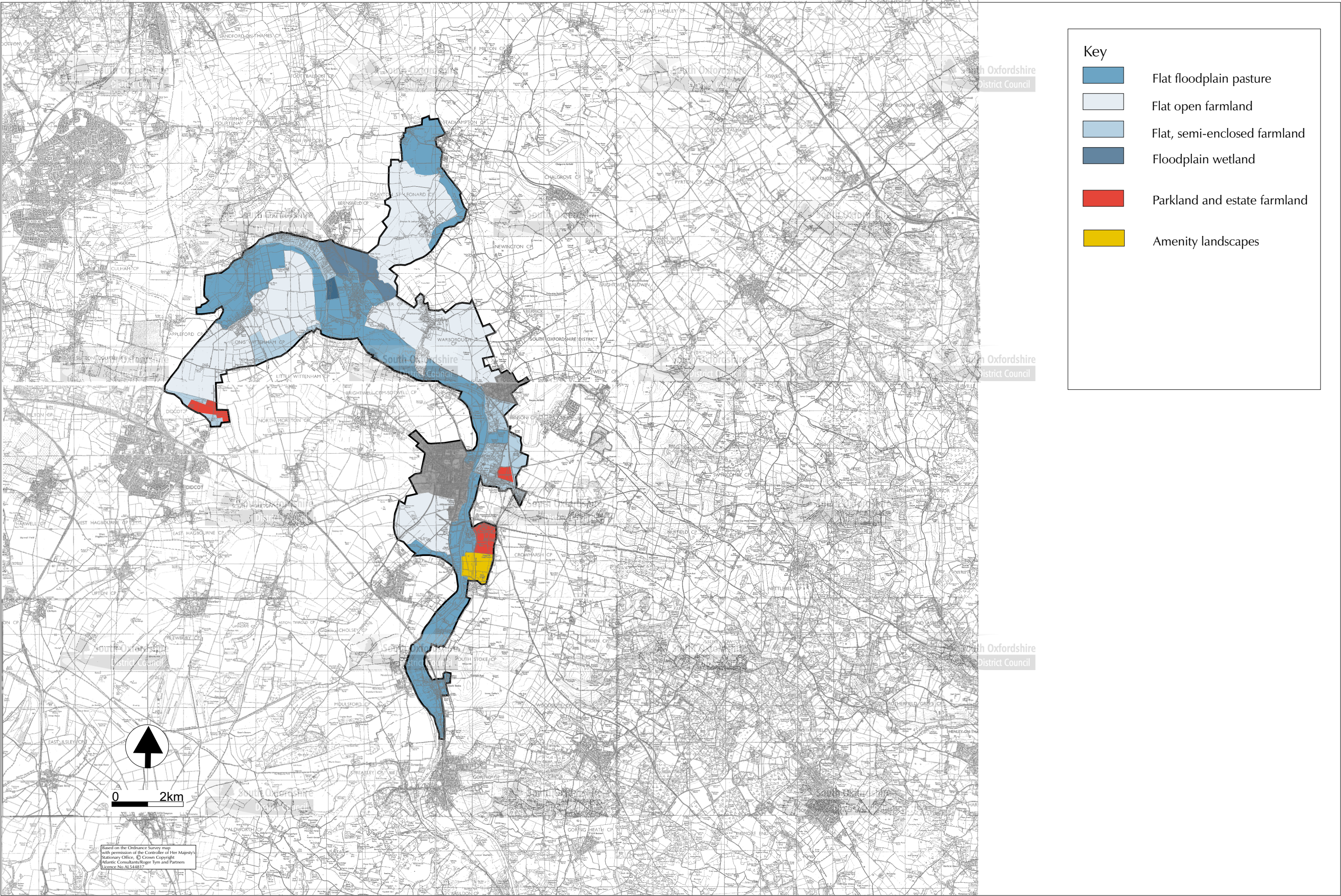
Tables 4.1 and 4.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the River Thames Corridor, as explained on page 6.

Some specific conclusions are that:

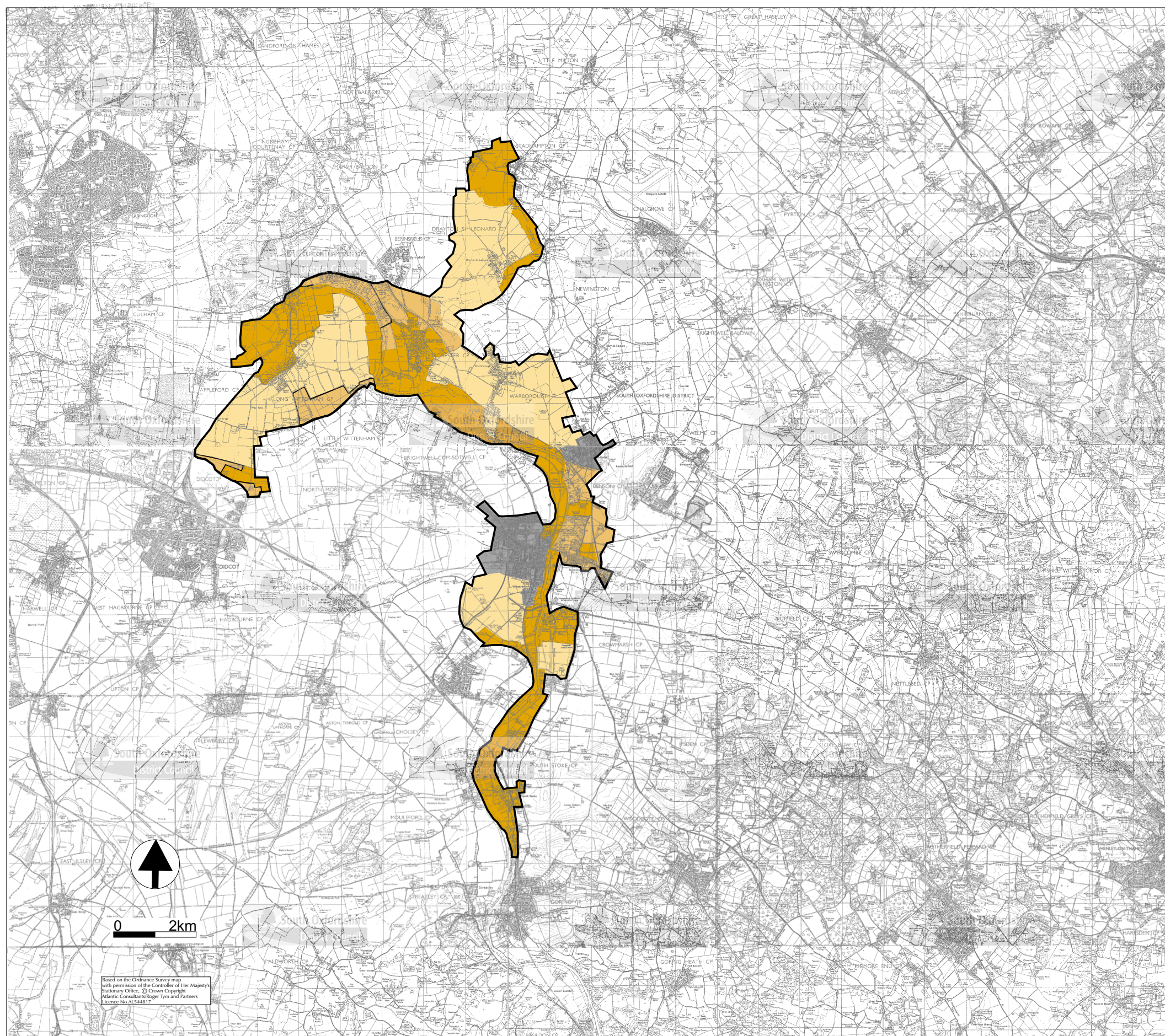
- development would generally be inappropriate within the unspoilt floodplain pastures, wetlands and parkland/estate landscapes;

- development within visually exposed landscapes such as the open flat farmland of the floodplain, will be highly prominent unless closely associated with existing built form or well-integrated within new landscape frameworks;
- further recreational development associated with the former gravel pits is generally incompatible with nature conservation interests and therefore undesirable;
- landscapes on the fringes of settlements are particularly vulnerable to change and special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent the coalescence of settlements.









KEY:

- Conserve
- Repair
- Restore

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**Table 4.1: River Thames Corridor - Landscape and settlement character**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Flat, semi-enclosed farmland	Floodplain wetland	Parkland and estate farmland	Amenity landscape
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>							
<b>Scale</b>	large		●				
	medium	●		●	●	●	●
	small						
<b>Diversity</b>	complex				●	●	●
	moderate	●		●			
	simple		●				
<b>Structure</b>	strong	●		●	●	●	
	medium	◆		◆	◆		●
	weak		●				
<b>Enclosure</b>	open		●				
	semi-enclosed	●		●			●
	enclosed/intimate				●	●	
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight	●	●	●			●
	sinuous				●	●	●
	stone walls						
	hedges	●	●	●		●	●
	hedgerow trees	●		●	●	●	●
	estate boundaries					●	
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>							
<b>Location</b>	hilltop						
	ridgetop						
	hillside						
	valley side						
	valley/vale floor	●	●	●		●	
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings	●	●	●		●	
	hamlets						
	small village	●		●			
	large village	●					
	town		●				
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed						
	concentrated	●	●	●			
<b>Form</b>	nucleated						
	linear	●	●	●			
<b>Materials</b>	stone						
	brick	●	●	●			
	flint	●	●	●			
	cob	◆	◆	◆			
	timber frame	●	●	●			
	tiles	●	●	●			
	thatch	◆	◆	◆			
	slate	◆	◆	◆			

**Table 4.2: River Thames Corridor - Landscape quality and sensitivity**

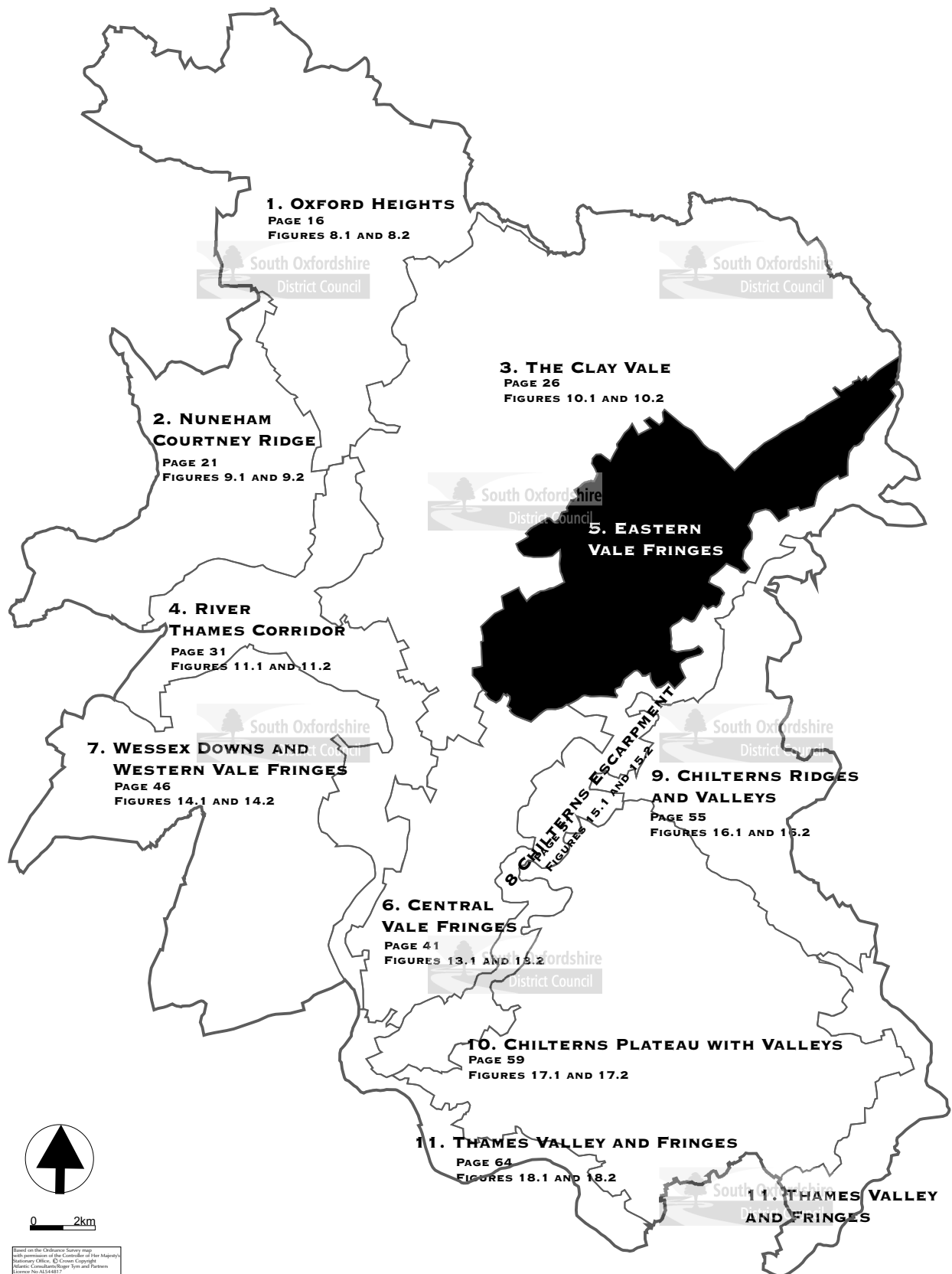
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Flat, semi-enclosed farmland	Floodplain wetland	Parkland and estate farmland	Amenity landscape
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY							
<b>Scenic quality</b>	high	●				●	
	medium		●	●	●		●
	low				◆		
<b>Sense of place</b>	strong	●			●	●	
	medium			●			●
	weak		●				
<b>Intrusive influences</b>	uncommon	●				●	
	occasional		●	●	●		●
	frequent						
<b>Other heritage values</b> (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon		●		●	●	●
	occasional	●		●			
	frequent						
<b>Visual sensitivity</b>	high		●				
	medium	●		●	●	●	●
	low						
<b>Sensitivity to change</b>	high	●				●	
	moderate		●	●	●		●
	low						
<b>Management strategy</b>	conserve	●				●	
	repair			●	●		
	restore		●				●
	reconstruct						



# CHARACTER AREA 5: EASTERN VALE FRINGES



## Landform and landcover

This character area forms the eastern section of a distinctive belt of low, rounded hills, approximately 3 to 4 kms wide, which follow the base of the towering Chiltern escarpment and form a transitional zone between the chalk uplands and the low-lying clay vale.

This 'shelf' of higher ground is formed by an outcrop of Middle and Lower Chalk, with a small area of malmstone (Upper Greensand), which fringes the Gault Clay of the vale. These permeable, calcareous rocks produce the smoothly rolling landform and light, loamy soils that are characteristic of chalk areas and which contrast with the low-lying, subtle relief and heavy soils of the clay vale.

The productive and easily worked sandy brown earth soils have been cultivated over a very long period and are now predominantly under intensive arable land use, with large-scale fields bounded by straight hedgerows typical of the later enclosures. Linear belts, clumps and blocks of woodland are quite frequent features, providing some structure and enclosure in the landscape.

## Settlement and buildings

This belt of landscape has provided a favoured area for settlement since prehistoric times. The Icknield Way, a prehistoric thoroughfare, followed the outcrop of dry, permeable rocks between the wet land of the vale and the steep Chilterns escarpment, and the numerous pure springs that emerge along the scarp foot have attracted a long string of villages from Chinnor to Ewelme [6].

Many of the existing settlements were established by Saxon times (eg. Pyrton, Watlington and Lewknor) and the basic pattern of settlement has changed very little since then. The Saxon period also accounts for some other patterning in the landscape, with the boundaries of 'strip parishes' (long, linear land holdings which run up into the Chiltern Hills) following the line of early routeways. The whole countryside below the Chilterns is patterned by the intersection of transverse and parallel routes, visible in the existing lattice work of footpaths and bridleways [5].

Many villages were originally nucleated in form, with buildings typically clustered around a church and central open space but during the last two centuries many villages have developed a more linear form (eg. in Pyrton where the encroachment of the manor and park deflected other buildings along an ancient highway). Some former villages were deserted in medieval times, such as Clare where a single farm now occupies the site of 37 former households [5].

Many of the area's settlements have an attractive core of historic buildings. Earlier buildings were timber-framed with wattle and daub infill, replaced later by brick nogging. Brick and flint are widespread with some examples of the local soft 'clunch' or chalk stone used in association with brick dressings. Roofs are typically red tiles with occasional thatch.



## THE EASTERN VALE FRINGES



1 Air photograph showing the landscape of the Eastern Vale Fringe around Shirburn.

2 Typically smooth, rounded profile of the rolling downs landscape near Lewknor.



## Landscape and visual character

Landscape character within this area is fairly consistent, with coherence and unity provided by the underlying chalk or greensand geology which produces the characteristic smooth, rolling landform and grey, flinty soils. Typically this rural landscape is dominated by large, rectangular fields, mostly under arable cultivation, with a good structure of hedgerows and linear tree belts, particularly towards the east. The character of the area is also influenced by the impressive backdrop of the Chiltern escarpment which enhances the quality and sense of enclosure of the landscapes at its foot.

The main variations in landscape character (see Figure 12.1) are between:

- the smoothly rounded **downs and vale fringe** landscapes of the chalk and malmstone hills;
- areas of **parkland and estate farmland** landscape;
- one small area of **floodplain pasture** along one of the minor river valleys which encroach into the area;
- and a couple of areas undergoing **mineral** extraction or **landfill** operations.

### *Downs and vale fringe landscapes*

These are the predominant landscape types within the area, forming a consistently rolling agricultural landscape of smooth, rounded landform and gentle valleys. The structure of hedgerows, trees and woodland belts, and the degree of visual enclosure, are the main factors which distinguish one area from another. These differences are closely related to the nature and intensity of farming practice, with more enclosed landscapes to the east and more denuded, open landscapes further to the west.

#### *Open rolling downs*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk or greensand hills;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation with weak or absent hedgerow structure and large-scale field pattern;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;

- denuded and somewhat bleak and sterile character, with few features of landscape or wildlife value;
- rural character with few detracting influences but large-scale farm buildings tend to be particularly prominent in this very open landscape;
- open landscape results in high intervisibility and extensive views.

#### *Semi-enclosed rolling downs*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk or greensand hills;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation but some areas of permanent pasture or grassland;
- large-scale field pattern contained within a comparatively intact structure of hedges, with hedgerow trees and frequent linear belts or stands of planted woodland;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- rural character with few detracting influences, although main roads create some localised intrusion;
- semi-enclosed landscape with moderate intervisibility.

### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

The main area of parkland and estate farmland is concentrated around Shirburn Castle and Pyrton Manor but there are a number of other smaller examples, around Aston Rowant, Kingston Blount, Britwell Salome House and near Adwell.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, or 'estate' landscapes dominated by woodland blocks and clumps of trees;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.



### ***Floodplain landscapes***

A small area of floodplain pasture is associated with a minor streamcourse north of Lewknor.

#### *Flat floodplain pasture*

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying farmland, typically dominated by permanent pasture with a distinctively 'wet', riparian character;
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches ;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside;
- intimate and pastoral character;
- generally low intervisibility.

### ***Mineral and landfill sites***

Two such sites were recorded during the survey, the main one being the chalk quarry at Chinnor with a small landfill operation in a former quarry near Upperton.

Key characteristics:

- disturbed ground under active quarrying or landfilling;
- removal of characteristic vegetation and land uses and introduction of machinery, structures etc that are incongruous within local landscape;
- typically 'scruffy' character to site and surrounding area, often evidenced by litter, dust, poor fencing etc.

## **Landscape management issues**

The few areas of parkland stand out within this area as being of particularly high landscape quality, where a strategy of **conservation** is most applicable (see Figure 12.2). However, the eastern end of this area also has a typically attractive, rural and generally unspoilt character which is strongly influenced by its rolling character, reasonably intact landscape structure and the dramatic and attractive backdrop of the Chilterns escarpment. These landscapes require only modest levels of intervention to **repair** areas which have been weakened by intensive farming or the impact of roads.

To the west of Watlington, however, the impact of modern farming practice has been more intense and the landscape has a particularly denuded and sterile character. Action to **restore** its former diversity and structure would be desirable, taking the historic pattern of large-scale enclosures as a guide to an appropriate density of field boundaries. Quarries and landfill sites are examples of land uses which have disrupted the natural pattern and character of the rural landscape. Here, intervention to **reconstruct** a more sympathetic character and to mitigate adverse landscape impacts would be desirable.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- retain important open views from the chalk and greensand hills but encourage some replacement of hedgerows and woodland planting within the 'open rolling downs' landscapes (to restore the former pattern of large-scale enclosures);
- protect any remnant areas of chalk grassland and convert arable land to permanent pasture where possible;
- maintain existing field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- maintain and restore typical landscape features of existing parklands at Shirburn Castle and Pyrton Manor and other smaller parks within the area;
- mitigate the impacts of quarrying and landfill operations (including urbanising road treatments) and restore to a rural character in keeping with the surrounding landscape;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside.

## Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas. The ability of the landscape to accommodate smaller-scale development will depend upon:

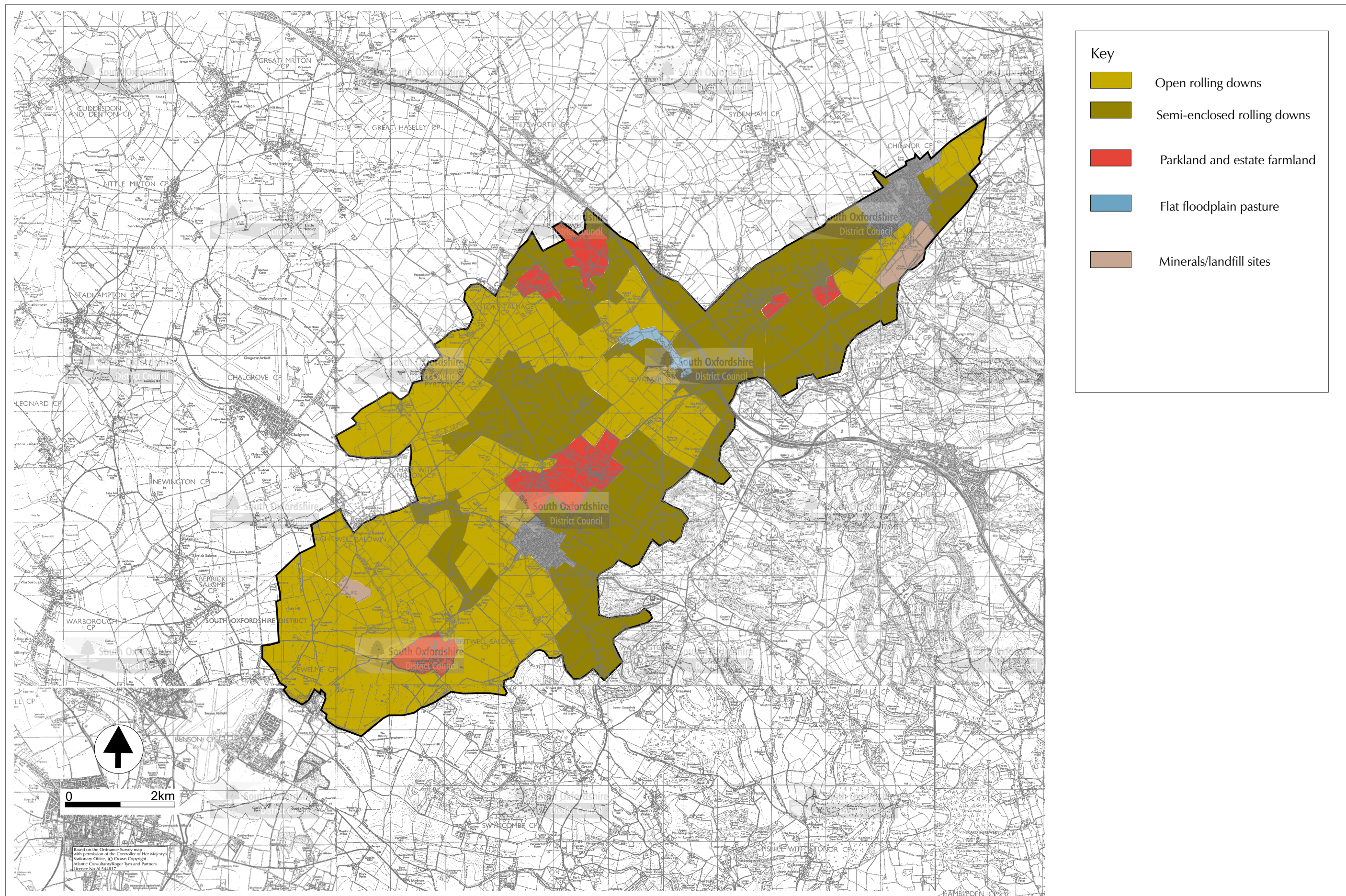
- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Eastern Vale Fringes, as explained on page 6.

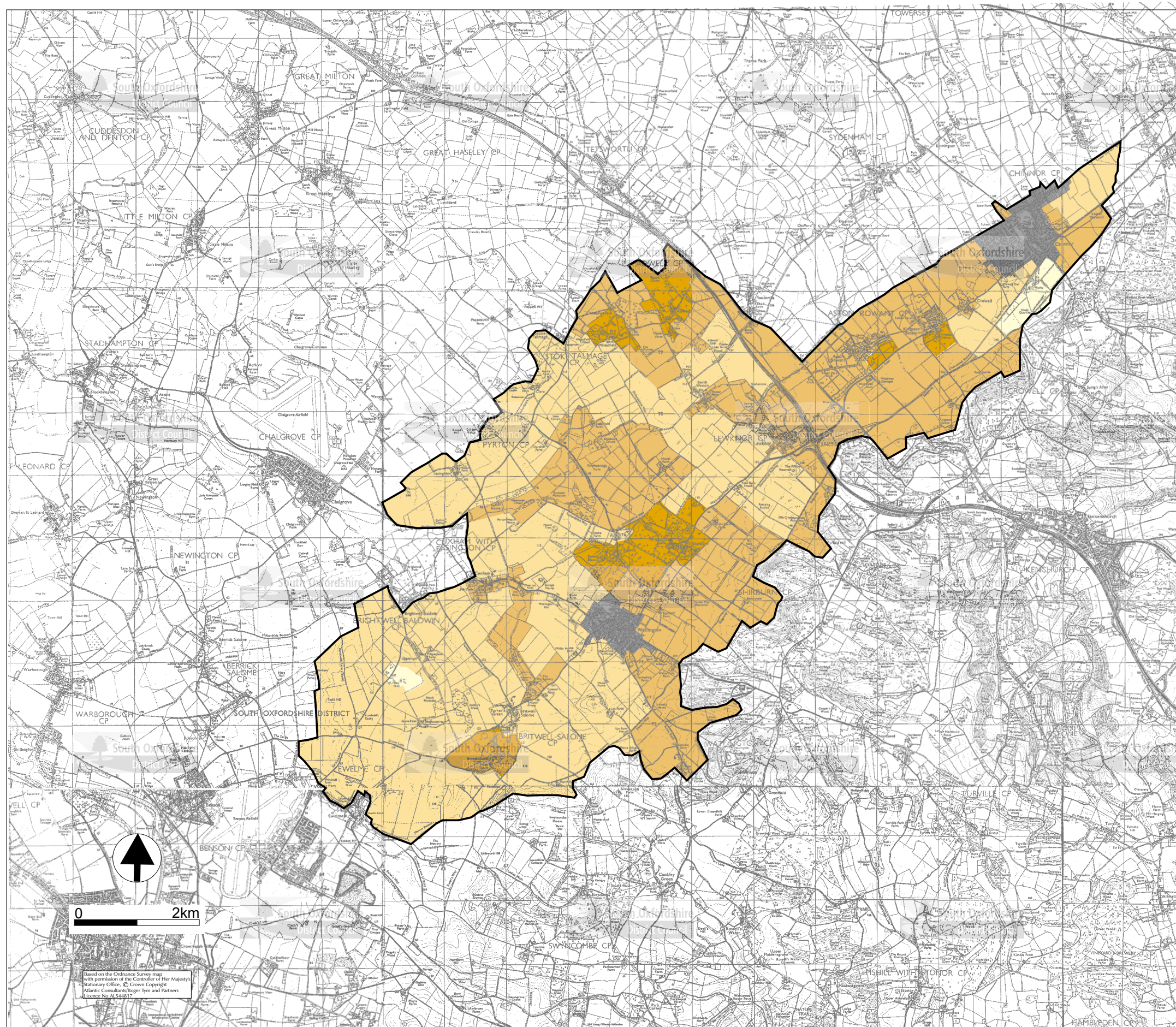
Some specific conclusions are that:

- the high quality parkland landscapes within this area are particularly sensitive to change and least able to accommodate new development;
- the semi-enclosed rolling downs landscapes benefit from a more intact landscape structure and the strong backdrop of the Chilterns escarpment, but their scenic quality (part AONB) and visual prominence makes them sensitive to development;
- development within the open arable downs landscapes will be highly prominent unless closely associated with existing built form;
- landscapes with strong landform and a mature structure of woods and hedgerows are less visually exposed and may be more able to absorb change but they are generally of higher landscape quality and therefore sensitive to development;
- special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to settlements to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent ribbon development and the coalescence of settlements.









- KEY:**
- Conserve
  - Repair
  - Restore
  - Reconstruct



**Table 5.1: Eastern Vale Fringes - Landscape and settlement character**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Parkland and estate farmland	Open rolling downs	Semi-enclosed rolling downs	Minerals and landfill sites
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>						
<b>Scale</b>	large			●	●	
	medium	●	●			●
	small					
<b>Diversity</b>	complex		●			●
	moderate	●			●	
	simple			●		
<b>Structure</b>	strong	●	●			
	medium	◆			●	●
	weak			●		
<b>Enclosure</b>	open			●		
	semi-enclosed	●			●	●
	enclosed/intimate		●			
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight	●		●	●	●
	sinuous		●	●	●	●
	stone walls					
	hedges	●	●	●	●	●
	hedgerow trees	●	●		●	
	estate boundaries		●			
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>						
<b>Location</b>	hilltop		●	●	●	
	ridgetop					
	hillside		●	●	●	
	valley side					
	valley floor	●				
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings	●	●	●	●	
	hamlets		●	●	●	
	small village			●	●	
	large village			●	●	
	town					
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed	●	●	●	●	
	concentrated					
<b>Form</b>	nucleated	●	●	●	●	
	linear		◆	◆		
<b>Materials</b>	stone ('clunch' - chalk stone)	◆	◆	◆	◆	
	brick	●	●	●	●	
	flint	●	●	●	●	
	cob					
	timber frame	◆	◆	◆	◆	
	tiles	●	●	●	●	
	thatch	◆	◆	◆	◆	
	slate	◆	◆	◆	◆	

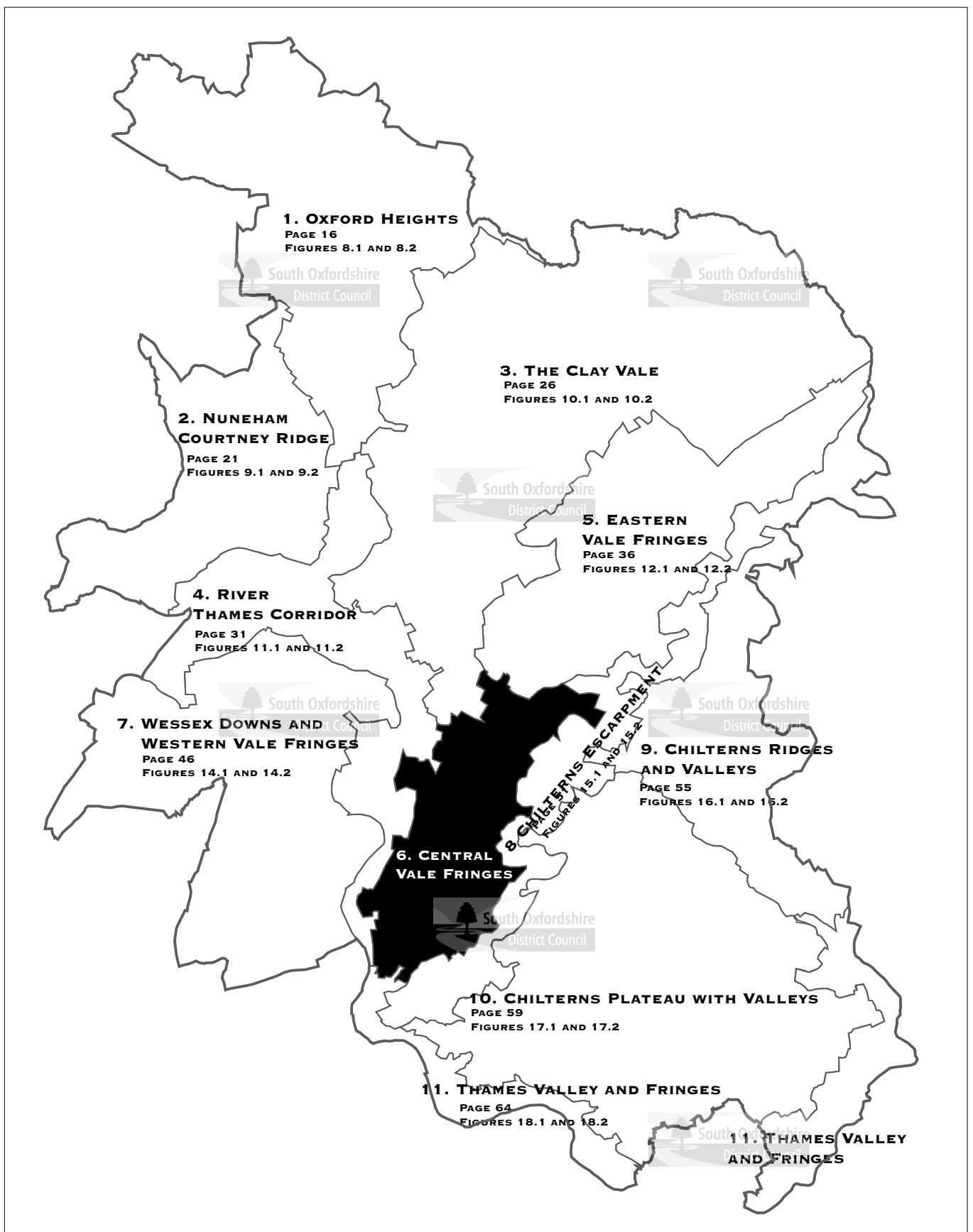
**Table 5.2: Eastern Vale Fringes - Landscape quality and sensitivity**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Parkland and estate farmland	Open rolling downs	Semi-enclosed rolling downs	Minerals and landfill sites
<b>LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY</b>						
<b>Scenic quality</b>	high	●	●			
	medium			●	●	
	low					●
<b>Sense of place</b>	strong	●	●			
	medium				●	
	weak			●		●
<b>Intrusive influences</b>	uncommon	●	●			
	occasional				●	
	frequent			●		●
<b>Other heritage values</b> (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon	●				●
	occasional			●	●	
	frequent		●			
<b>Visual sensitivity</b>	high			●		
	medium	●			●	●
	low		●			
<b>Sensitivity to change</b>	high	●	●			
	moderate			●	●	
	low					●
<b>Management strategy</b>	conserve		●			
	repair	●			●	
	restore			●		
	reconstruct					●



## CHARACTER AREA 6: CENTRAL VALE FRINGES



## Landform and landcover

This character area forms the western section of a distinctive belt of low, rounded hills, approximately 3 to 4 kms wide, which follow the base of the Chiltern escarpment and form a transitional zone between the chalk uplands and the low-lying clay vale and River Thames floodplain.

This 'shelf' of higher ground is formed by an outcrop of Middle and Lower Chalk which fringes the Gault Clay of the vale. These permeable, calcareous rocks produce the smoothly rolling landform and light, loamy soils that are characteristic of chalk areas and which contrast with the low-lying, subtle relief and heavy soils of the clay vale. The productive and easily worked sandy brown earth soils have been cultivated over a very long period and are now predominantly under intensive arable land use. Woodland and tree cover is generally quite sparse due to hedgerow removal, particularly towards the south of this area where intensive agriculture has created a particularly exposed and expansive, open landscape - the so-called 'Ipsden Prairies'. This landscape is likely to be similar to the earlier, bare open vistas of the ancient common fields which would have dominated this area.

Quite extensive parts of the chalk are overlain by Coombe deposits which contain gravels and flints, the latter conspicuous in the soils and traditionally used as a local building material. These deposits have been worked for crushed flint gravel and hoggins, for example in the area to the east of Benson.

## Settlement and buildings

As described under Character Area 5, this belt of higher ground has provided a favoured area for settlement since prehistoric times. The Icknield Way, a prehistoric thoroughfare, followed the outcrop of dry, permeable rocks between the wet land of the vale and the steep Chilterns escarpment and became a focus for early settlement and forest clearance.

This part of the chalk belt is, however, more sparsely settled than the Eastern Vale Fringes. It is characterised by a dispersed pattern of farmsteads with a few small nucleated villages, such as Ipsden, Turners Court and Hailey, and straggling rows of houses along some of the many rural roads which criss-cross this area. The southernmost part of the area is particularly empty of settlements, while there is a focus of larger settlements just outside this area within the River Thames corridor (eg. Crowmarsh Gifford, North Stoke and South Stoke).

Earlier buildings within the area were timber-framed with wattle and daub infill, replaced later by brick nogging. Brick and flint are widespread with some examples of the local soft 'clunch' or chalk stone used in association with brick dressings. Roofs are typically red tiles with occasional thatch [9].



## THE CENTRAL VALE FRINGES



1 Air photograph showing the large-scale, intensively farmed landscape of the Central Vale Fringe around Wicks Hill.



2 The denuded arable landscape of the 'Ipsden Prairie'.



3 The picturesque village of Ewelme which straddles a shallow, sheep-grazed valley.

## Landscape and visual character

Like the eastern vale fringes, the landscape within this area has a fairly consistent character, with coherence and unity provided by the underlying chalk or greensand geology which produces the characteristic smooth, rolling landform and grey, flinty soils. However, the character of this area is dominated by the somewhat bleak chalk landscapes around Ipsden, which have historically been quite open but have been further denuded by intensive arable farming (see Figure 13.1).

The main variations in landscape character are between:

- the smoothly rounded **downs and vale fringe** landscapes of the chalk hills;
- an area of **parkland and estate farmland** landscape;
- and a couple of **landfill** sites within former quarries.

### *Downs and vale fringe landscapes*

These are the predominant landscape types within the area, forming a consistently rolling agricultural landscape of smooth, rounded landform and gentle valleys. The structure of hedgerows, trees and woodland belts, and the degree of visual enclosure, are the main factors which distinguish one area from another. These differences are closely related to the nature and intensity of farming practice.

#### *Open rolling downs*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk hills;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation with weak or absent hedgerow structure and large-scale field pattern;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- denuded and somewhat bleak and sterile character, with few features of landscape or wildlife value;
- rural character with few detracting influences but large-scale farm buildings tend to be particularly prominent in this very open landscape;
- open landscape results in high intervisibility and extensive views.

#### *Semi-enclosed rolling downs*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk hills;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation but some areas of permanent pasture or grassland;
- large-scale field pattern contained within a comparatively intact structure of hedges, with hedgerow trees and some linear belts or stands of planted woodland;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- rural character with few detracting influences, although main roads create some localised intrusion;
- semi-enclosed landscape with moderate intervisibility.

### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

A small area of parkland and estate farmland was noted on the fringes of Crowmarsh Gifford.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, or 'estate' landscapes dominated by woodland blocks and clumps of trees;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.

### *Mineral and landfill sites*

Two landfill sites were recorded during the survey, the main one being the recently restored site south of Ewelme with another smaller site a short distance to the south.

Key characteristics:

- un-natural landform and uncharacteristic vegetation cover, giving impression of disturbed ground;
- introduction of incongruous styles of fencing and highway treatments which lend an urban character to the landscape.



## Landscape management issues

Apart from the area of parkland at Crowmarsh Gifford, there are no other landscapes within the **conserve** category within this area (see Figure 13.2). However, the smooth, rolling contours of the lower chalk hills which dominate the area are scenically attractive and have a strong rural character and sense of place. Where the structure of hedgerows and woodlands is more intact, (eg. towards the foot of the wooded Chiltern scarp and south of Ewelme), the landscape is of higher quality and requires only modest intervention to **repair** areas weakened by intensive farming practice.

Across the remaining area, however, the impact of modern farming practice has been more intense and, in some areas, has resulted in the complete removal of hedgerows and trees creating an exceptionally denuded and sterile landscape. Action to **restore** some of its former structure would be desirable, taking the historic pattern of large-scale enclosures as a guide to an appropriate density of field boundaries. Quarries and landfill sites are examples of land uses which have disrupted the natural pattern and character of the rural landscape. Here, intervention to **reconstruct** a more sympathetic character and to mitigate adverse landscape impacts would be desirable.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- retain a generally open character and important views from the chalk hills but encourage some replacement of hedgerows and woodland planting within the 'open rolling downs' landscapes (to restore the former pattern of large-scale enclosures);
- protect any remnant areas of chalk grassland and convert arable land to permanent pasture where possible;
- maintain existing field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- maintain and restore typical landscape features of existing parkland at Crowmarsh Gifford;
- mitigate the impacts of quarrying and landfill operations (including urbanising road

treatments) and restore to a rural character in keeping with the surrounding landscape;

- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside.

## Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas. The ability of the landscape to accommodate smaller-scale development will depend upon:

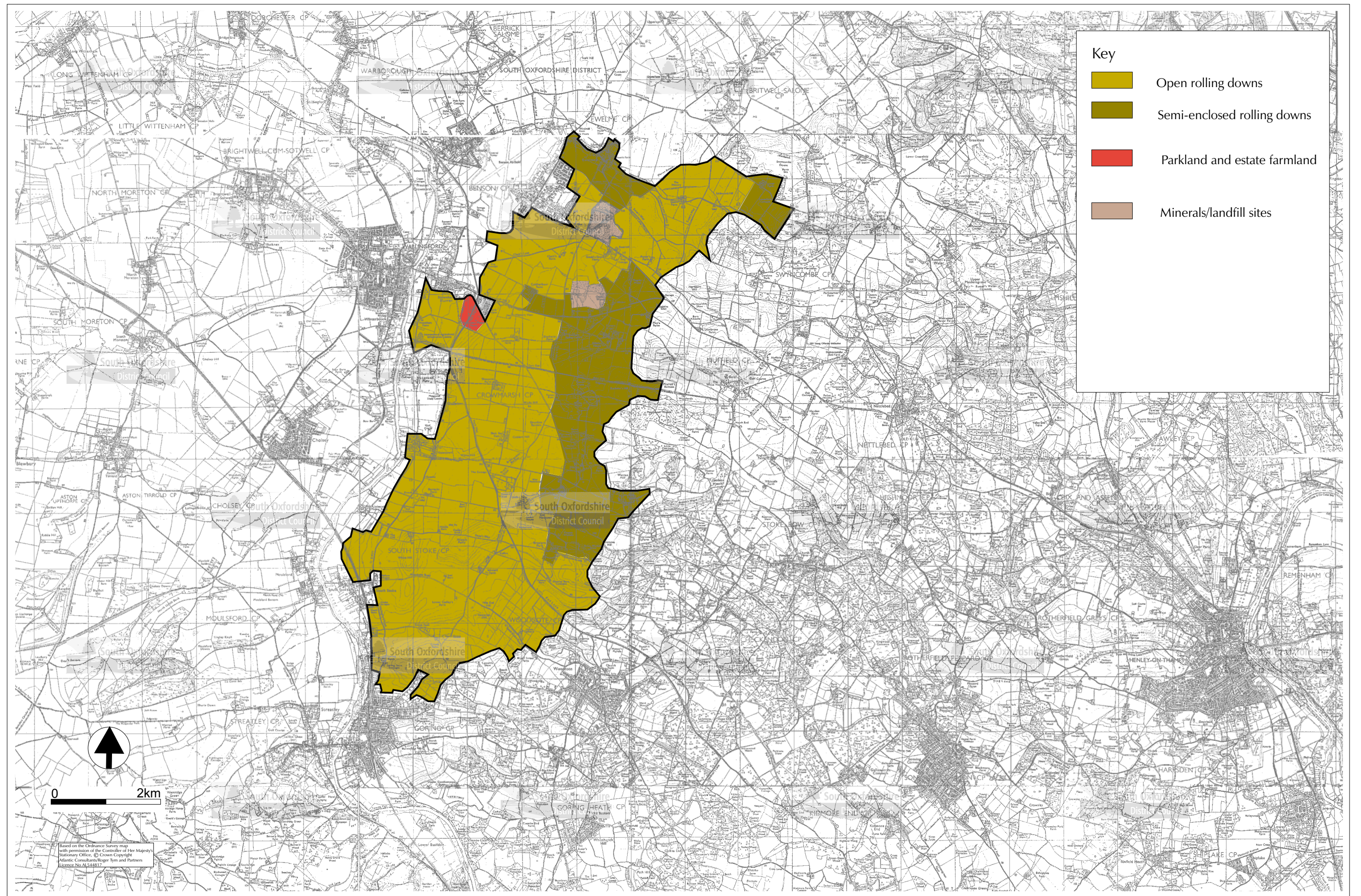
- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

Tables 6.1 and 6.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Central Vale Fringes, as explained on page 6.

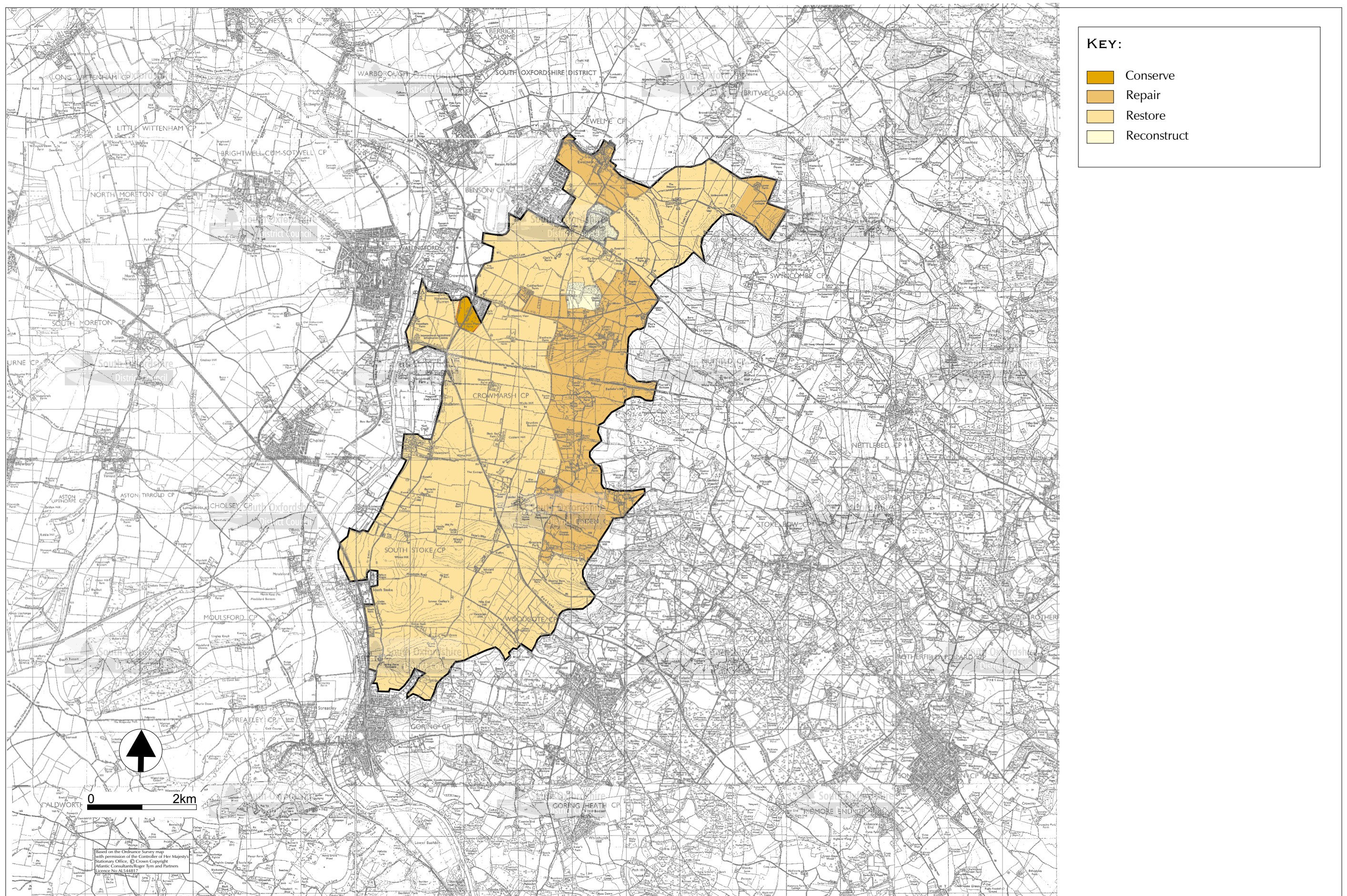
Some general conclusions are that:

- the high quality parkland landscape within this area is particularly sensitive to change and least able to accommodate new development;
- the semi-enclosed rolling downs landscapes benefit from a more intact landscape structure and the strong backdrop of the Chilterns escarpment, but their scenic quality (part AONB) and visual prominence makes them sensitive to development;
- development within the open arable downs landscapes will be highly prominent unless closely associated with existing built form;
- in general, landscapes with stronger landform and a mature structure of woods and hedgerows may be more able to absorb small-scale development, as long as it is in character with the locality, carefully sited and well-integrated;
- special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to settlements to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside.











**Table 6.1: Central Vale Fringes - Landscape and settlement character**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Parkland and estate farmland	Open rolling downs	Semi-enclosed rolling downs	Minerals and landfill sites
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>					
<b>Scale</b>	large		●	●	
	medium	●			●
	small				
<b>Diversity</b>	complex	●			
	moderate			●	
	simple		●		●
<b>Structure</b>	strong	●			
	medium			●	
	weak		●		●
<b>Enclosure</b>	open		●		
	semi-enclosed			●	●
	enclosed/intimate	●			
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight	●	●	●	●
	sinuous	●			
	stone walls				
	hedges	●	●	●	●
	hedgerow trees	●		●	
	estate boundaries	●			
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>					
<b>Location</b>	hilltop		●	●	
	ridgetop				
	hillside		●	●	
	valley side				
	valley floor	●			
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings	●	●	●	
	hamlets		●	●	
	small village		●	●	
	large village				
	town				
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed	●	●	●	
	concentrated				
<b>Form</b>	nucleated	●	●	●	
	linear				
<b>Materials</b>	stone ('clunch' - chalk stone)	◆	◆	◆	
	brick	●	●	●	
	flint	●	●	●	
	cob				
	timber frame	◆	◆	◆	
	tiles	●	●	●	
	thatch	◆	◆	◆	
	slate	◆	◆	◆	



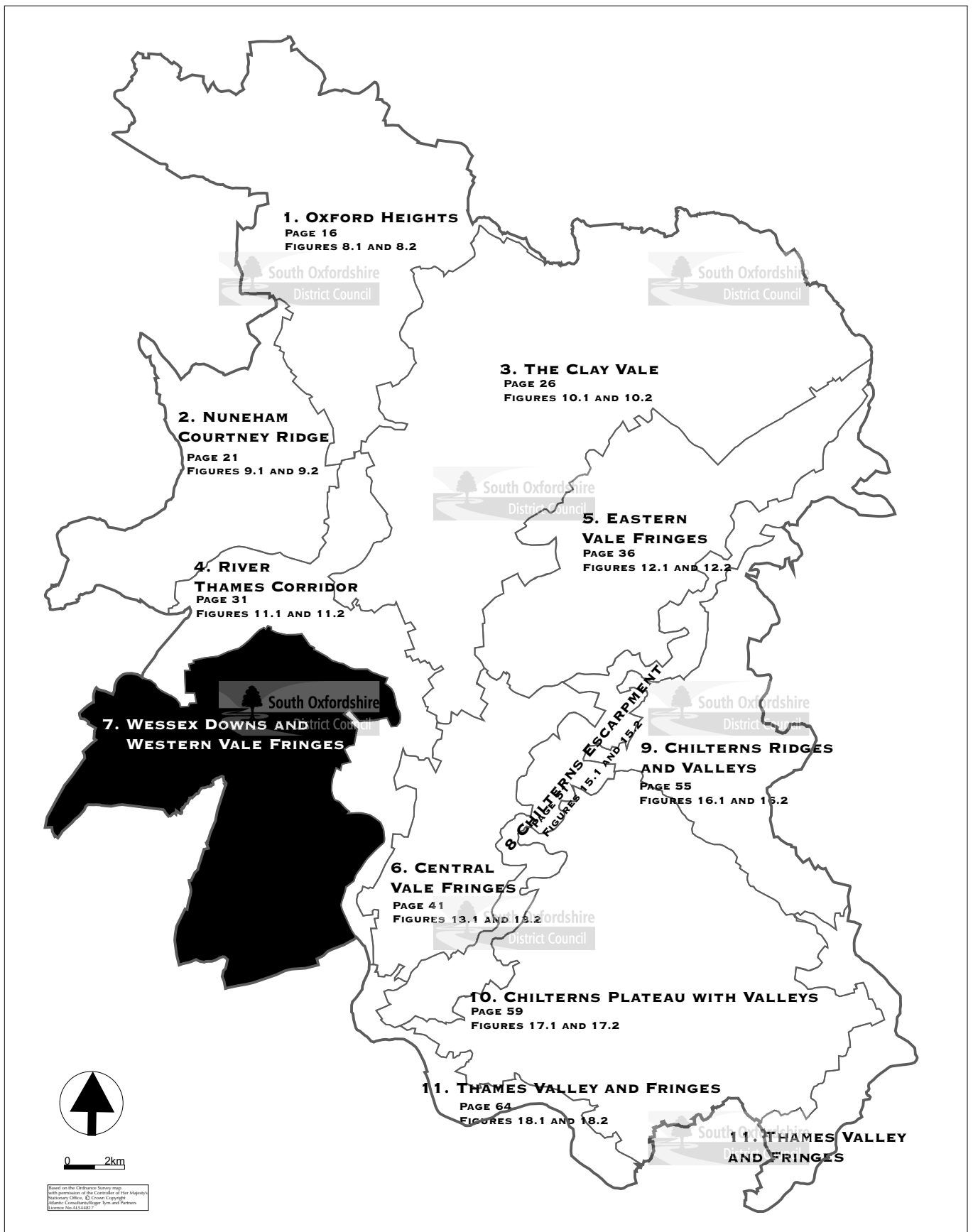
**Table 6.2: Central Vale Fringes - Landscape quality and sensitivity**

**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Parkland and estate farmland	Open rolling downs	Semi-enclosed rolling downs	Minerals and landfill sites
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY					
Scenic quality	high	●		●	
	medium		●		
	low				●
Sense of place	strong				●
	medium		●	●	
	weak	●			
Intrusive influences	uncommon	●			
	occasional			●	●
	frequent		●		
Other heritage values (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon	●	●	●	●
	occasional				
	frequent				
Visual sensitivity	high		●		
	medium			●	●
	low	●			
Sensitivity to change	high	●			
	moderate		●	●	
	low				●
Management strategy	conserve	●			
	repair			●	
	restore		●		
	reconstruct				●

# CHARACTER AREA 7: WESSEX DOWNS AND WESTERN VALE FRINGES





## Landform and landcover

Like the Eastern and Central Vale Fringes, this character area forms a transitional area between the chalk uplands to the south and the clay vale to the north. The southernmost part of the area occupies part of the north-facing escarpment of the North Wessex (or Berkshire) Downs, part of the extensive cretaceous chalk belt of southern England. The area is characterised by typical chalk scenery of smoothly rounded open hills dissected by dry, and sometimes wooded, valleys and coombes. Parts of the area are overlain by clay with flints, the latter conspicuous in the soils and buildings of the area.

Around Didcot, a band of calcareous siltstones and sandy limestones of the Upper Greensand (or 'malmstone') forms the transition between the higher land of the downs and the lower-lying vale. These areas share characteristics of the chalk downland, with smoothly rounded landform and well-drained, 'chalky' and sometimes 'flinty' soils. Isolated outcrops of greensand and chalk form prominent rounded hills at Wittenham Clumps and Cholsey Hill, distinctive features within the flat vale landscape. Intensive arable farming is the predominant land use, with a sparse covering of trees and woodland, except on the steeper valley and hill-sides of the downs and at Wittenham.

Below the chalk and malmstone hills, the remaining area is underlain by alluvium, forming typically flat, low-lying and 'wet' landscapes. Much of this has been extensively drained and is now also under intensive arable farming, with permanent pasture concentrated mainly within areas prone to flooding next to the River Thames (see Character Area 4).

## Settlement and buildings

Didcot is the largest settlement within the area, its growth from a small village being originally due to its location on the strategic rail network. With the arrival of the Great Western Railway in 1840 it expanded significantly and has continued to grow throughout this century [5]. The industrial estate and power station now link Didcot to Milton and the massive cooling towers are a distinctive and highly visible landmark across large parts of the flat clay vale and from the hills beyond.

Evidence of a long history of settlement is provided by various prehistoric earthworks and hillforts (eg. at Aston Upthorpe) which are scattered along the edge of the downs. Many of the surviving settlements have Saxon origins and are typically clustered along the foot of the downs, taking advantage of the water supply arising from springs at the junction of the chalk and clay (eg. the Astons and Cholsey). Others are located on isolated pockets of higher ground within the vale, such as Mackney, North and South Moreton and Brightwell-cum-Sotwell.

Many of the villages in the area have a typically nucleated form, with many attractive historic buildings. Thatch, red brick and weatherboard are characteristic of the older buildings, sometimes with knapped flint and weathered chalk in their walls. Traditional barns have a similar character. Some of these are associated with large horse-racing establishments which, along with the gallops, are distinctive features of the downs landscape.

## WESSEX DOWNS AND WESTERN VALE FRINGES



1 Air photograph showing the rolling chalk landscape of the Wessex Downs with wooded valley sides and open arable downs.

2 Typically grey, flinty soils and smooth landform of the open, rolling downs above the vale near Didcot.





## Landscape and visual character

Landscape character in this area is varied because of its mixed geology and relief, although some coherence and unity is provided by the containment of the lower-lying areas by smoothly rounded hills (see Figure 14.1).

The main variations in landscape character have been identified as:

- the smoothly rounded **downs and vale fringe** landscapes of the chalk and malmstone hills;
- the flat, low-lying **floodplain** landscapes to the west of Wallingford;
- small areas of **parkland and estate** landscape between Brightwell-cum-Sotwell and the Thames;
- a small pocket of **amenity** landscape associated with the golf course to the east of Didcot.

### *Downs and vale fringe landscapes*

These landscapes include the smooth north-facing flanks of the North Wessex Downs, which are heavily dissected by valleys, and a series of outlying rounded hills of chalk or Upper Greensand which fringe the downs to the west and east of Didcot and stand out as isolated landform features within the low-lying vale at Cholsey and Sinodun Hills (Wittenham Clumps).

#### *Open rolling downs*

Key characteristics:

- smoothly rounded hills and downland flanks;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation with weak or absent hedgerow structure and large-scale field pattern;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- large-scale, open and denuded landscape;
- rural character with few detracting influences;
- open landscape results in high intervisibility and extensive views.

#### *Semi-enclosed rolling downs*

Key characteristics:

- smoothly rounded hills and downland flanks;
- intimate dry valleys which dissect the chalk downs, typically with mixed woodland clothing the steep valley sides;
- dominance of arable cultivation but with a comparatively strong landscape structure of

hedges, trees and woods, providing visual enclosure and diversity;

- distinctive clumps of woodland on prominent hilltops, such as Wittenham Clumps;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- rural character with few detracting influences;
- extensive views from hilltops and downs across the vale to the north but intervisibility restricted by woods and hedgerows.

### *Floodplain landscapes*

These form areas of low-lying landscape following the main streamcourses which flow off the downs into the vale and River Thames. These very flat floodplain areas are interrupted by the isolated chalk and greensand hills which stand out prominently within the landscape. Most floodplain areas have been drained and cultivated, with only small areas of typical floodplain pasture landscape noted along parts of the Mill Brook near East Hagbourne and Wallingford.

#### *Flat floodplain pasture*

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying farmland, typically dominated by permanent pasture with a distinctively 'wet', riparian character;
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside;
- intimate and pastoral character;
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the valley may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas;
- comparative inaccessibility creates a tranquil, remote character.

#### *Flat, open farmland*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively flat, low-lying farmland (below 50 metres AOD);
- large-scale rectilinear field pattern with distinctive network of drainage ditches;
- weak landscape structure with few trees, low or gappy hedges, open ditches and fences;
- comparative inaccessibility creates a rural and remote character;
- open, denuded landscape results in high intervisibility;

- overhead power lines intrude in the very open landscape to the west of Cholsey.

#### *Flat semi-enclosed farmland*

Key characteristics:

- as above but with stronger landscape structure and a semi-enclosed character;
- scattered blocks of woodland between Didcot and South Moreton create some enclosure and diversity;
- smaller-scale, irregular field pattern near Brightwell-cum-Sotwell create a more enclosed, intimate character;
- predominantly rural, tranquil, remote or intimate character;
- regular pattern of ditches and rural roads;
- semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

#### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

Two areas of parkland and estate farmland are located on the eastern flanks of the isolated ridge of chalk at the Sinodun Hills, associated with the houses of Rush Court and the Sinodun Hills themselves.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, clumps and blocks of woodland;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.

#### *Amenity landscape*

Key characteristics:

- rolling landform characteristic of the chalk and upper greensand geology;
- typical golf course landscape of greens, fairways and roughs, with associated buildings and features;
- generally weak landscape structure with immature tree planting, creating an open, exposed character;
- intensively managed and sub-urban character;

- lack of mature tree cover results in high intervisibility.

## Landscape management issues

Overall, the character area retains a predominantly rural character with some particularly unspoilt and attractive areas of landscape which have retained a strong structure of woods, hedgerows and trees, have a particularly rich, diverse and well-managed character and are of high scenic quality. These are mainly associated with the more heavily dissected, wooded and enclosed parts of the North Wessex Downs but they also include the distinctive chalk ridge of the Sinodun Hills which supports the well-preserved hillfort, the prominent trees of 'Wittenham Clumps' and extensive woodland at Little Wittenham Wood and Long Wittenham Wood. Together, they form a distinctive and prominent landscape feature which is visible as a landmark over a wide area. Management to **conserve** and enhance these assets is the most appropriate strategy in these areas (see Figure 14.2).

Most of the remaining farmed landscape of the character area, while still rural and attractive, is showing some signs of decline in condition and quality. Principally this is the result of a general weakening of landscape structure through intensive arable farming, creating an open and denuded character. This exacerbates the intrusion of built development and roads (eg. around Didcot), and the network of overhead power lines which cut across the open farmland within the central part of the area. Other typical land management issues include intrusive land uses on the fringes of the main settlements, some of which is the result of 'hope value' arising from perceived future development potential of land on the urban fringes. Intervention to **repair** or, more typically, to **restore** diversity to the landscape and to reintroduce a stronger pattern and structure of field boundaries, belts of trees and blocks of woodland, would be appropriate across these areas.



Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- manage existing hilltop and valley-side woods on the Wessex Downs and Sinodun Hills to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- retain important open views from the chalk downland and greensand hills but encourage some replacement of hedgerows and woodland planting within the 'open rolling downs' landscapes (to replicate the semi-wooded patchwork character of other downland areas);
- protect any remnant areas of chalk grassland and encourage conversion of arable land to permanent pasture where possible;
- manage gallops to favour chalk grassland species;
- maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river floodplains;
- encourage planting and pollarding of willows along ditches and watercourses and less intensive management of ditch systems to promote semi-natural aquatic and riparian vegetation;
- encourage better maintenance of field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- encourage the maintenance and restoration of parkland landscapes and features at Rush Court and Sinodun Hill;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside.

## Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas. Any development associated with future expansion of the main urban centres of Didcot and Wallingford would require careful integration to minimise its impact on surrounding areas.

The ability of the landscape to accommodate development will depend upon:

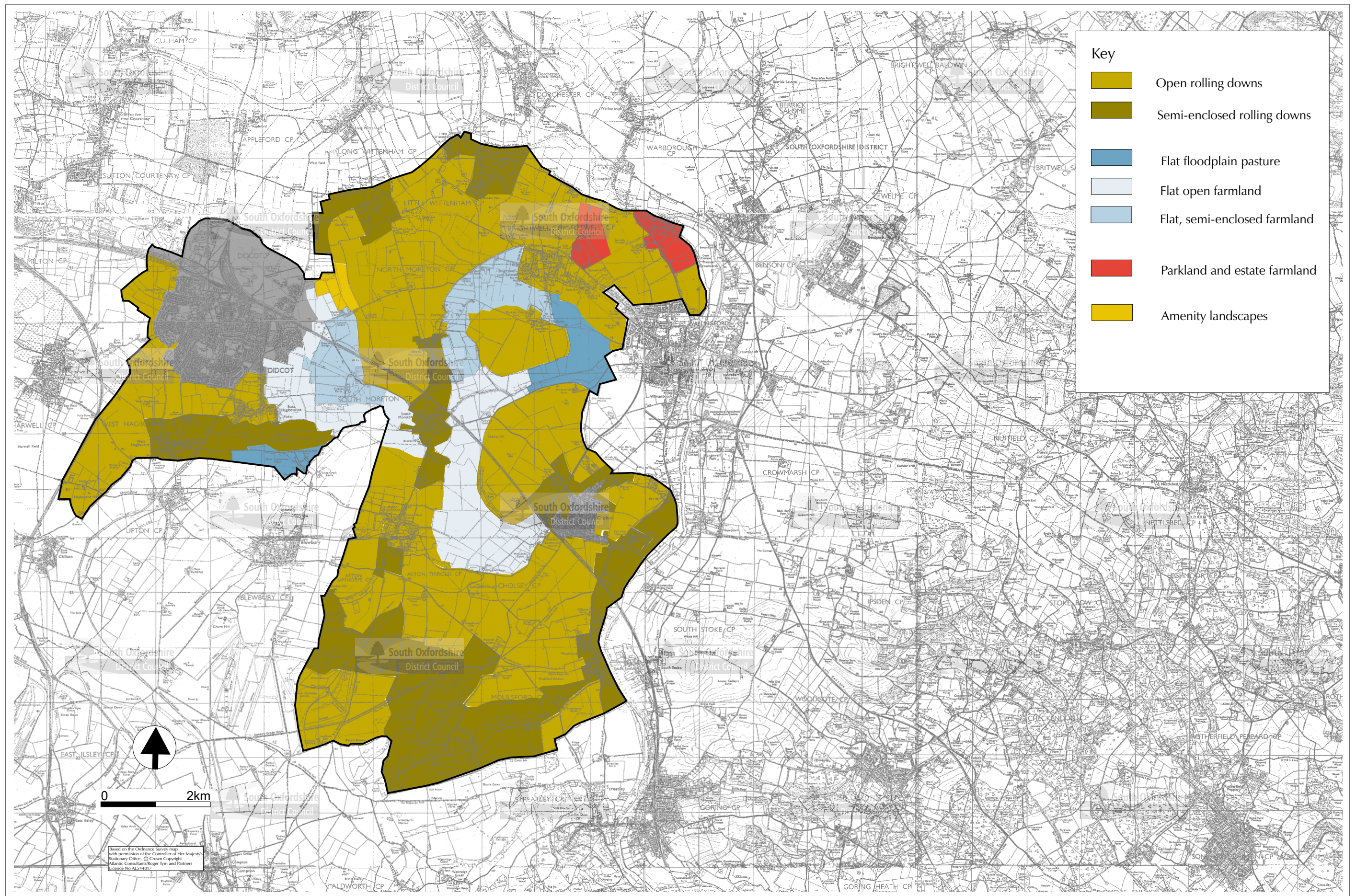
- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

Tables 7.1 and 7.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Wessex Downs and Western Vale Fringes.

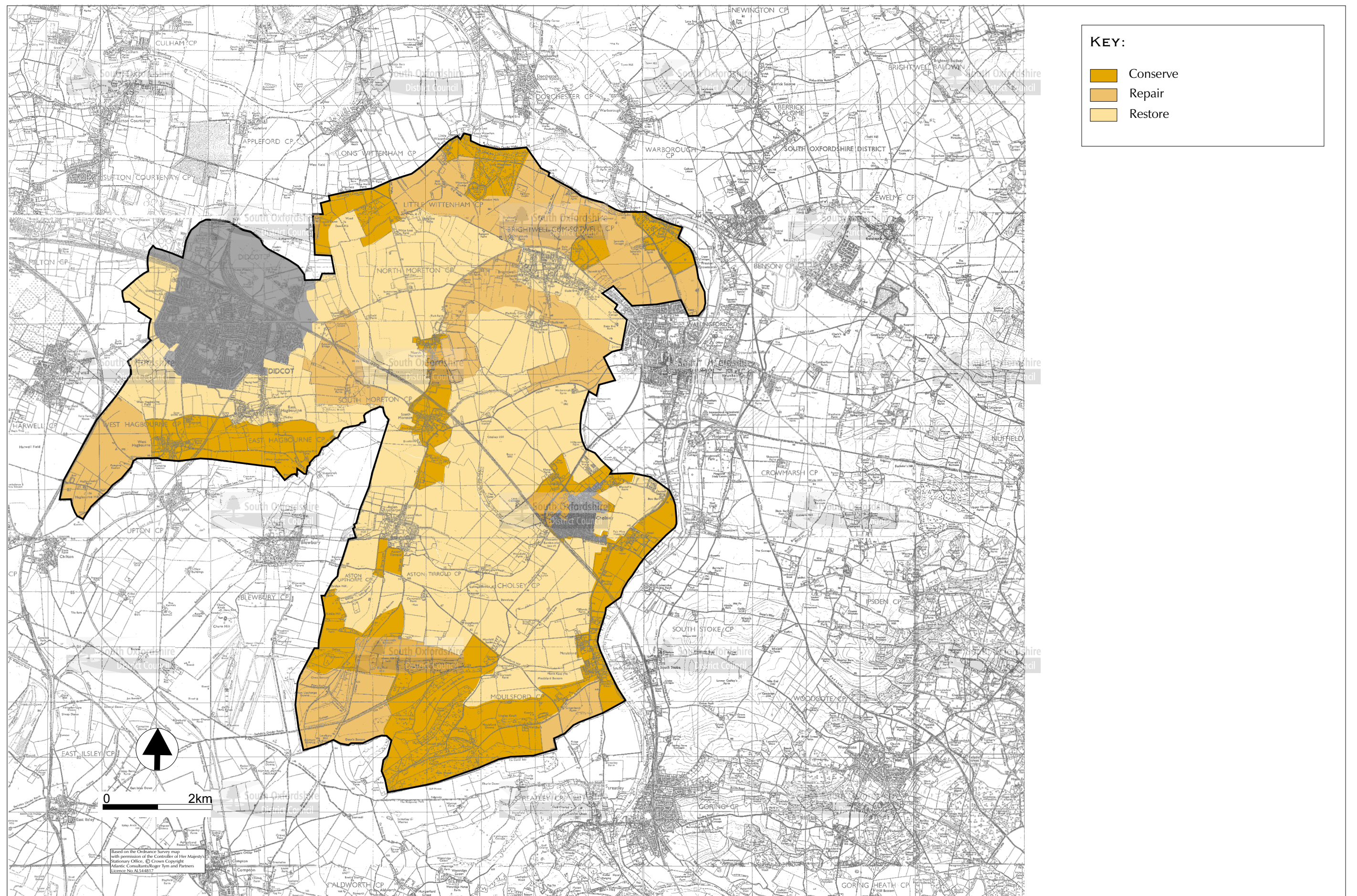
Some general conclusions are that:

- the unspoilt, rural landscapes of the Wessex Downs, Sinodun Hills, floodplain pastures and parkland/estate landscapes are particularly sensitive to change and therefore less able to accommodate new development;
- development within visually exposed landscapes such as the denuded arable downs and the open flat farmland of the floodplain, will be highly prominent;
- landscapes with strong landform and a mature structure of woods and hedgerows may be more able to absorb small-scale development, as long as it is in character with the locality, carefully sited and well-integrated;
- landscapes on the fringes of settlements are particularly vulnerable to change and special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent the coalescence of settlements;
- any new development on the fringes of Didcot and Wallingford should avoid visually exposed areas and prominent skylines, and be well-integrated within new landscape frameworks, which provide a strong edge to the built area, to minimise its wider impact on the landscape.











**Table 7.1: Wessex Downs and Western Vale Fringes -  
Landscape and settlement character**

**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Flat, semi-enclosed farmland	Parkland and estate farmland	Open rolling downs	Semi-enclosed rolling downs	Amenity landscape
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>								
<b>Scale</b>	large		●	●		●	●	
	medium	●			●			●
	small							
<b>Diversity</b>	complex				●			
	moderate	●		●			●	●
	simple		●			●		
<b>Structure</b>	strong	●		◆	●			
	medium	◆		●			●	●
	weak		●			●		
<b>Enclosure</b>	open		●			●		
	semi-enclosed	●		●			●	●
	enclosed/intimate				●			
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight	●	●	●		●	●	●
	sinuous				●			
	stone walls							
	hedges	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	hedgerow trees	●		●	●		●	●
	estate boundaries				●			
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>								
<b>Location</b>	hilltop							●
	ridgetop							
	hillside				●	●	●	
	valley side							
	valley floor		●	●				
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings		●	●	●	●	●	●
	hamlets					●	●	
	small village			●				
	large village					●		
	town					●		
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed			●		●	●	
	concentrated							
<b>Form</b>	nucleated					●	●	
	linear			●		◆		
<b>Materials</b>	stone (chalk)			◆	◆	◆	◆	
	brick			●	●	●	●	
	flint			●	●	●	●	
	cob							
	timber frame/weatherboard			●	●	●	●	
	tiles			●	●	●	●	
	thatch			●	●	●	●	
	slate			◆	◆	◆	◆	



**Table 7.2: Wessex Downs and Western Vale Fringes -  
Landscape quality and sensitivity**

**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

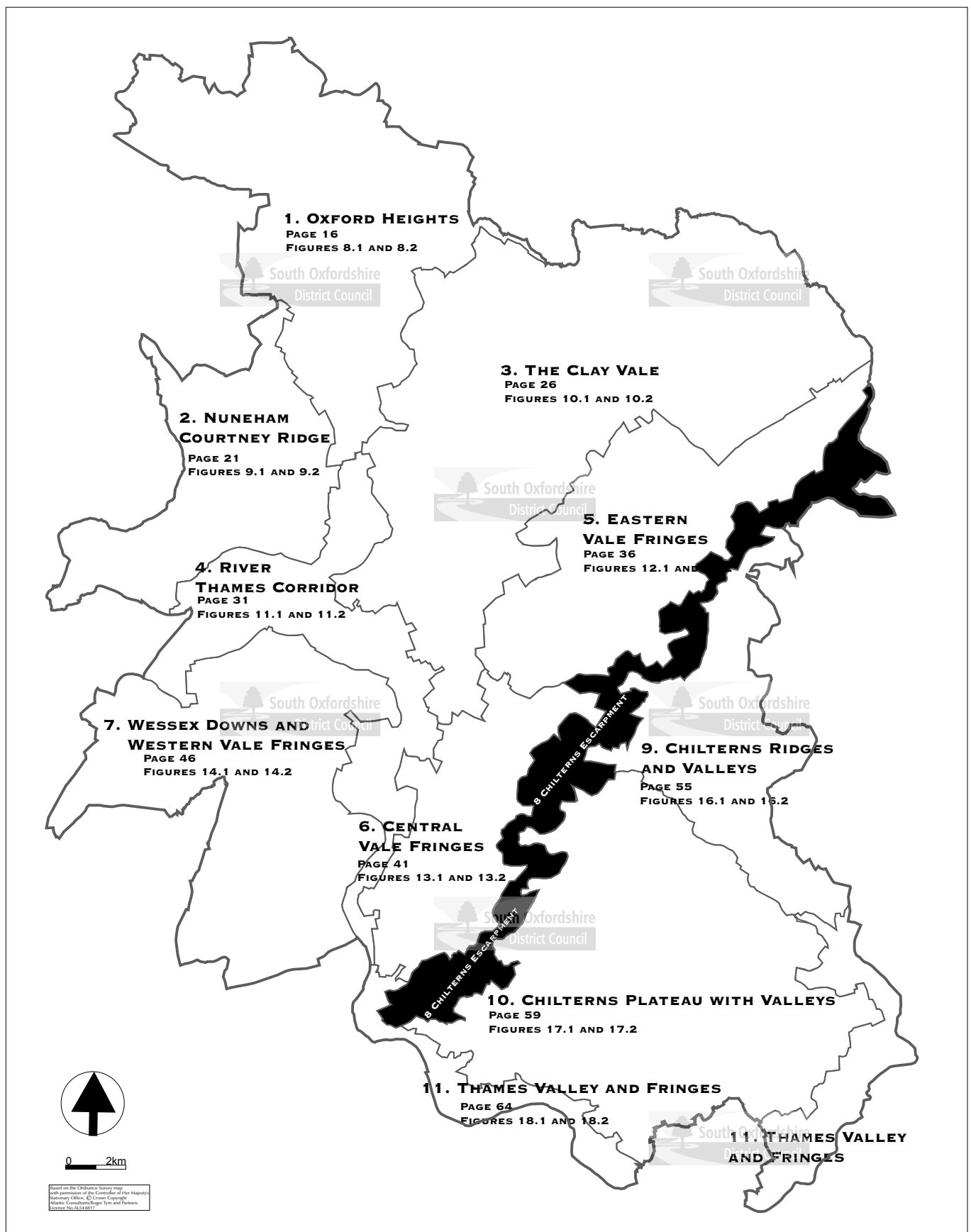
		Flat floodplain pasture	Flat, open farmland	Flat, semi-enclosed farmland	Parkland and estate farmland	Open rolling downs	Semi-enclosed rolling downs	Amenity landscape
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY								
<b>Scenic quality</b>	high	◆			●	◆	●	
	medium	●	●	●		●		
	low							●
<b>Sense of place</b>	strong	●			●		●	
	medium			●				
	weak		●			●		●
<b>Intrusive influences</b>	uncommon	●			●		●	
	occasional		●	●		●		●
	frequent							
<b>Other heritage values</b> (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon	●	●		●			●
	occasional			●		●	●	
	frequent							
<b>Visual sensitivity</b>	high		●			●		●
	medium	●		●			●	
	low				●			
<b>Sensitivity to change</b>	high	●			●		●	
	moderate		●	●		●		
	low							●
<b>Management strategy</b>	conserve	◆			●		●	
	repair	●		●		●		
	restore		●			●		●
	reconstruct							

Notes on landscape quality and sensitivity:

1 Scenic quality of floodplain pasture to south of Didcot enhanced by proximity to Wessex Downs.

2 Scenic quality of open rolling downs to south of Didcot and at Wittenham Clumps influenced by strong landform and adjacent landscapes

# CHARACTER AREA 8: CHILTERNES ESCARPMENT





## Landform and landcover

This character area forms the most visually significant and distinctive landform unit within the whole District. It comprises the steep face and top of the Chilterns escarpment, which forms a dramatic backdrop to the low-lying landscape of the vale to the north-west.

The scarp is formed from Upper Chalk, the youngest of the several layers of chalk laid down in the Cretaceous period which were subsequently tilted downwards towards the south-east leaving an abrupt north-west face. The escarpment rises in places to over 250 metres AOD and looms some 50 metres above the fringing shelf of the Middle and Lower Chalk.

Although it has the typically smooth and well-defined profile of chalk landform, the escarpment is heavily incised with spurs and valleys, especially towards its western end, which give it a more complex form and character. The steepness of the scarp also varies, with quite gentle slopes towards the western end (in places it hardly reads as an escarpment at all) and becoming increasingly and more dramatic moving eastwards.

The chalk geology is exposed along the steep scarp face giving rise to thin, calcareous soils on steep slopes which are unsuited to cultivation. Much of this part of the Chilterns escarpment is blanketed in broad-leaved semi-natural woodland which has developed in the absence of grazing management. However, this typically forms a distinctive mosaic of dense shady woodland interspersed, especially on the steeper slopes, with small pockets or larger stretches of open chalk grassland, often liberally dotted with scrub.

## Settlement and buildings

While settlements are frequent along the band of Middle and Lower Chalk which runs along the scarp foot (see Areas 5 and 6), the steep scarp face itself is virtually devoid of buildings with only a few isolated farms nestling in hollows along the lower slopes and within the coombes and minor valleys. The main settlement is at Woodcote, where a sizeable village has developed on the much shallower and more gentle gradients of the southern scarp. Other settlement within the character area is located on the level ground at the top of the scarp. This largely comprises individual scattered farms but also some small settlements with a loose linear form, such as Chinnor Hill, Crowell Hill and Christmas Common, and the country mansions of Watlington Park and Swyncombe House, sited on or above the scarp.

Traditional building materials are typical of the Chilterns as a whole, with a predominance of red and silver-grey brick and flint. Around Woodcote, brick may account for three quarters of the pre-Victorian buildings and appears in all those built after 1850 [5]. Older houses were timber-framed in oak. Plain tiles were the rule on the larger roofs, with thatch on cottages with some slate introduced in Victorian times. Farmsteads are often characterised by large timber framed barns, typically clad with black, horizontal weather boarding with gable walls constructed out of brick and flint.

The scarp has a distinctive pattern of roads, with distinctive 'sunken lanes' climbing the scarp face or minor valleys from the vale and other minor roads linking the scattered farmsteads along the plateau top. The M40 motorway is a prominent feature where it carves a route through the chalk scarp near Lewknor.

# CHILTERNS ESCARPMENT



1 Air photograph showing the sinuous form of the chalk scarp at Beacon Hill, Bald Hill and Shirburn Hill.



## Landscape and visual character

The physical form of the scarp face and the 'semi-natural' unspoilt qualities of its vegetation cover provide both unity and coherence to the character of the landscape. However, some localised variations are created by differences in slope, vegetation cover and the degree of enclosure (see Figure 15.1).

The main variations in landscape character have been identified as:

- the distinctive face of the **escarpment** itself, varying from open areas of grassland and areas enclosed by dense woodland cover;
- small areas of **dipslope** landscape adjacent to the scarp top, either semi-enclosed or well-wooded;
- and areas of distinctive **parkland and estate** landscape at Watlington Park and Swyncombe House.

### *Chiltern landscapes*

#### *Open escarpment*

Key characteristics:

- well-defined, smooth profile with the main scarp face folded into a series of spurs and valleys ;
- lack of trees creates a 'bald', open character;
- areas of unimproved chalk grassland of high nature conservation value at Bald Hill, Beacon Hill and Swyncombe Downs, with soft, muted colours;
- dominance of arable cultivation at Harcourt Hill where gradients are less steep, with stronger, more intense colours;
- elevated, expansive and invigorating character, with dramatic and extensive views across the vale below;
- predominantly rural character but with some significant intrusion from M40 motorway;
- scarp face itself is prominent in views from surrounding area and the lack of vegetation creates high intervisibility along the scarp face.

#### *Enclosed escarpment*

Key characteristics:

- scarp face dominated by dense woodland cover or a mosaic of open grassland, scrub and woodland;

- predominantly semi-natural character with a series of broad-leaved woodlands of significant nature conservation value (many designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest);
- smooth scarp profile masked by roughly-textured vegetation, with sombre, muted colours;
- enclosed, intimate character within densely wooded areas;
- semi-enclosed character and some views out across the vale from the scarp within areas with a mosaic of open grassland, scrub and woodland;
- escarpment prominent in views but woodland cover helps to absorb prominent features and results in low intervisibility.

### *Dipslope landscapes*

#### *Semi-enclosed dipslope*

Three small areas of semi-enclosed dipslope landscape lie adjacent to the scarp top at Christmas Common and either side of the M40 at Bald Hill/Beacon Hill.

Key characteristics:

- level or gently sloping ground immediately adjacent to the scarp top;
- generally open character but surrounded by a strong structure of woods, hedgerows or trees;
- some views possible over the scarp edge at Bald Hill but otherwise views restricted by vegetation to create moderate to low intervisibility;
- generally rural character but some intrusion from M40 motorway.

#### *Wooded dipslope*

Two main areas of wooded dipslope landscape lie close to the scarp top within the character area, around Crowell Hill to the north and Woodcote to the south.

Key characteristics:

- flat or gently sloping landform dissected by valleys, particularly in the northern section around Crowell Hill;
- strong structure of woodland and valley landform creates an attractive, intimate and enclosed character;

- dominance of semi-natural broad-leaved woodland of high nature conservation value;
- generally rural character but with some intrusion of built development around Woodcote;
- low intervisibility.

### ***Parkland and Estate Farmland***

Two areas of wooded parkland and estate landscape occur at Swyncombe House and Watlington Park.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, blocks of mature woodland and estate walls;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.

## **Landscape management issues**

The chalk escarpment has a particularly strong and unspoilt character and is of high scenic quality, forming an impressive backdrop to views from the vale and a prominent 'natural' landscape feature. It also supports important remnants of chalk grassland and woodland habitats of high nature conservation value. The overwhelming priority within this character area is, therefore, to **conserve** and manage these resources in order to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value (see Figure 15.2). Some further remediation of the permanent scar left by the M40 motorway cutting is the main area for **repair** within this landscape.

Key enhancement priorities should be to:

- manage existing woodlands along the escarpment to ensure their long-term survival and to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- conserve and manage areas of chalk grassland to prevent scrub encroachment and to maintain species diversity;

- where possible, re-create chalk grassland habitats on areas converted to arable or improved grassland along the face or top of the escarpment;
- manage and promote the further development of vegetation along the M40 motorway cutting to provide effective impact mitigation in the longer term;
- maintain and restore typical landscape features of existing parkland along the scarp face and top.

## **Planning and development issues**

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas in general but particularly within the Chilterns AONB. The ability of the landscape to accommodate smaller-scale development will depend upon:

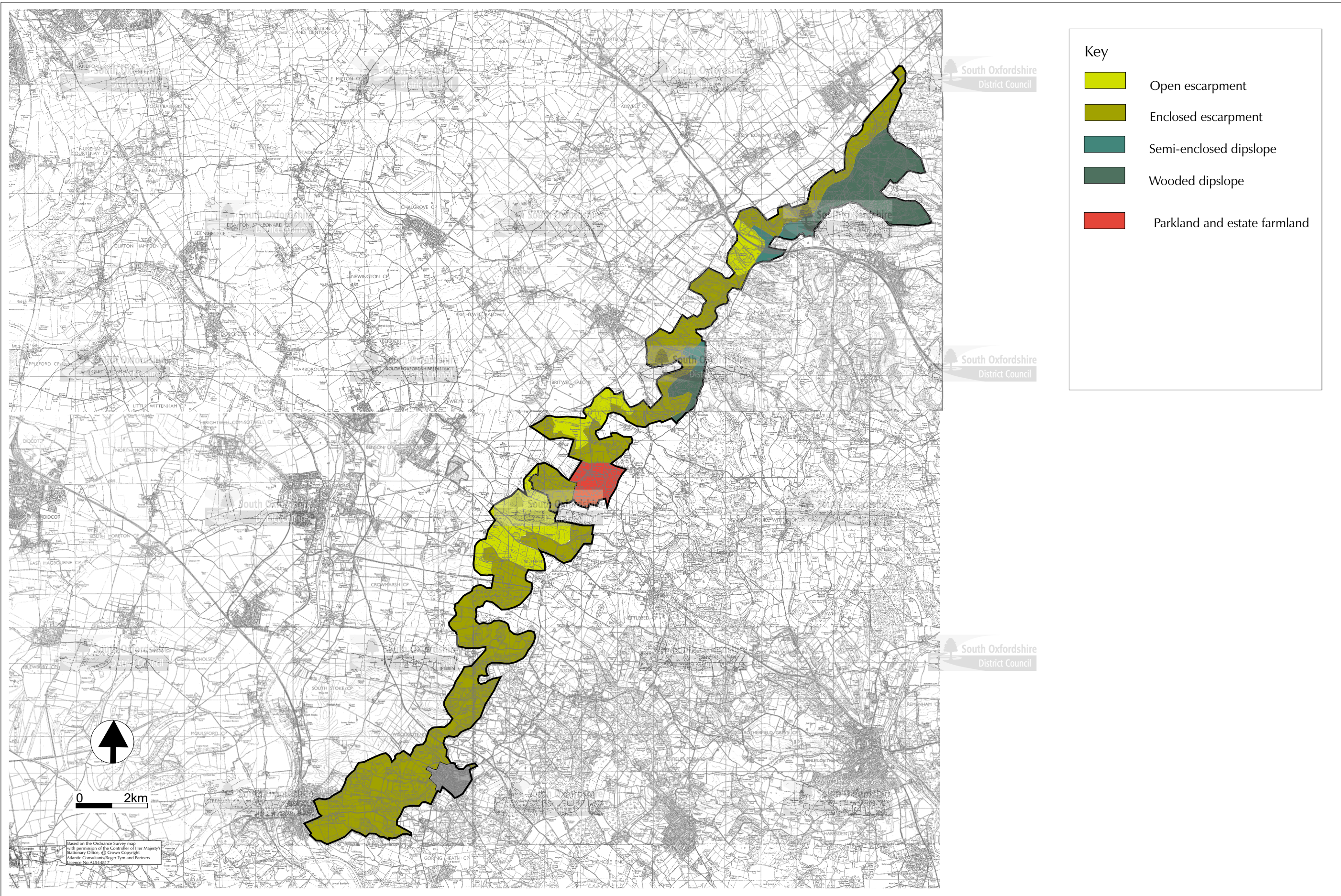
- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

Tables 8.1 and 8.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Chilterns Escarpment, as explained on page 6.

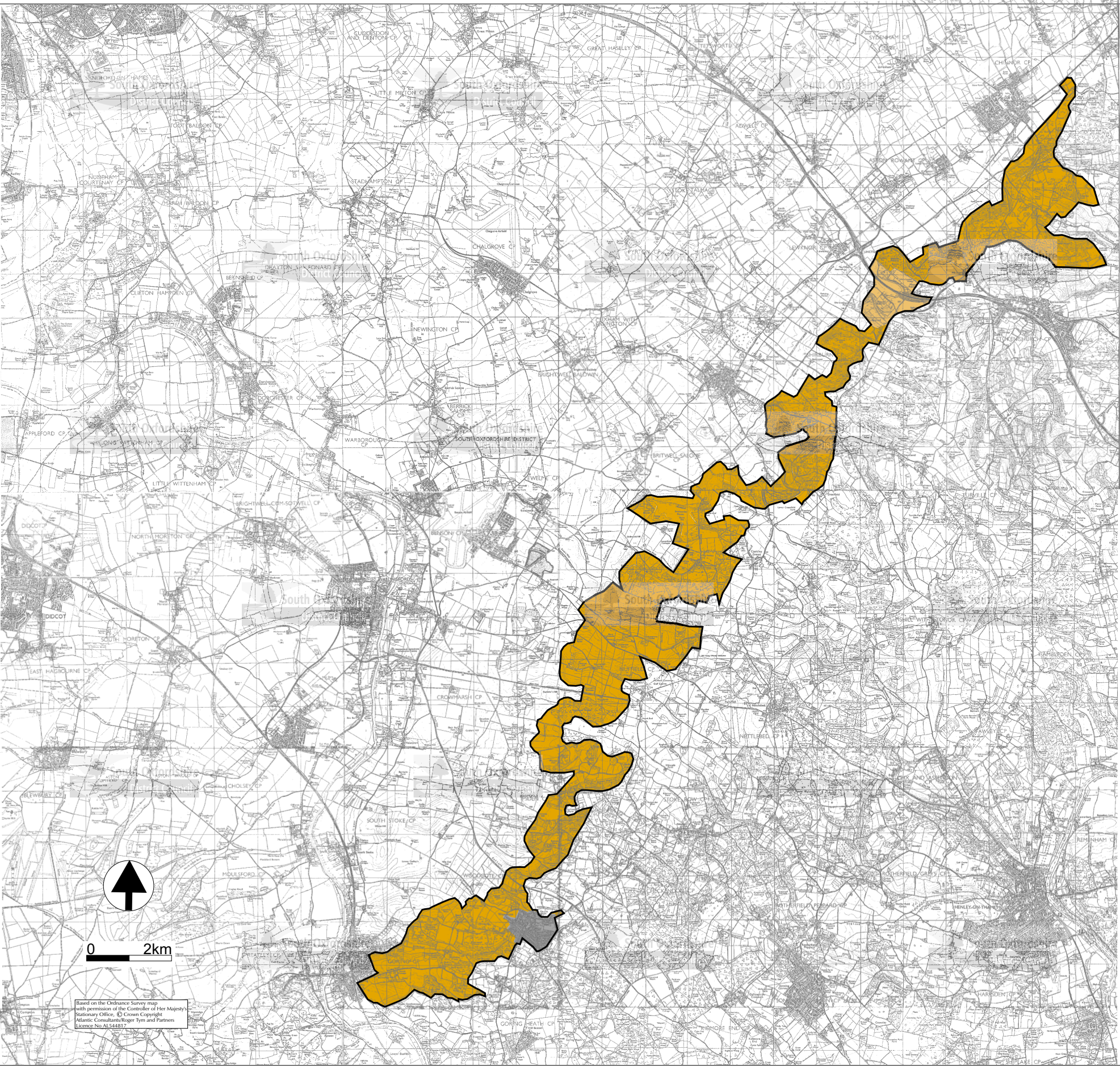
Some general conclusions are that:

- the unspoilt character and ecological sensitivity of the escarpment face makes it particularly unsuitable for development;
- although less visually sensitive, the high quality of the dip slope and parkland landscapes means that most forms of new development will potentially have an adverse impact on the AONB;
- particular attention should be given to preventing the suburbanisation of the landscape through inappropriate highway improvements, lighting, signage, telecommunication masts etc.









**KEY:**

- Conserve
- Repair



**Table 8.1: Chilterns Escarpment - Landscape and settlement character**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Open escarpment	Enclosed escarpment	Semi-enclosed dipslope	Wooded dipslope	Parkland and estate farmland
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>						
<b>Scale</b>	large					
	medium	●	●	●	●	●
	small		◆	◆	◆	
<b>Diversity</b>	complex			●		●
	moderate	●			●	
	simple		●			
<b>Structure</b>	strong		●	●	●	●
	medium	●				
	weak					
<b>Enclosure</b>	open	●				
	semi-enclosed			●		
	enclosed/intimate		●		●	●
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight					
	sinuous			●	●	●
	stone walls					●
	hedges			●	●	●
	hedgerow trees			●	●	●
	estate boundaries					●
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>						
<b>Location</b>	hilltop/plateau			◆	●	◆
	ridgetop					
	hillside	●	●	●		●
	valley side					
	valley floor					
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings	●	●	●	●	●
	hamlets			●	●	
	small village					
	large village				●	
	town					
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed	●	●	●	●	●
	concentrated					
<b>Form</b>	nucleated			◆	◆	
	linear			●	●	
<b>Materials</b>	stone					
	brick	●	●	●	●	●
	flint	●	●	●	●	●
	cob					
	timber frame/weatherboarding	●	●	●	●	●
	tiles	●	●	●	●	●
	thatch	●	●	●	●	●
	slate	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆

**Table 8.2: Chilterns Escarpment - Landscape quality and sensitivity**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

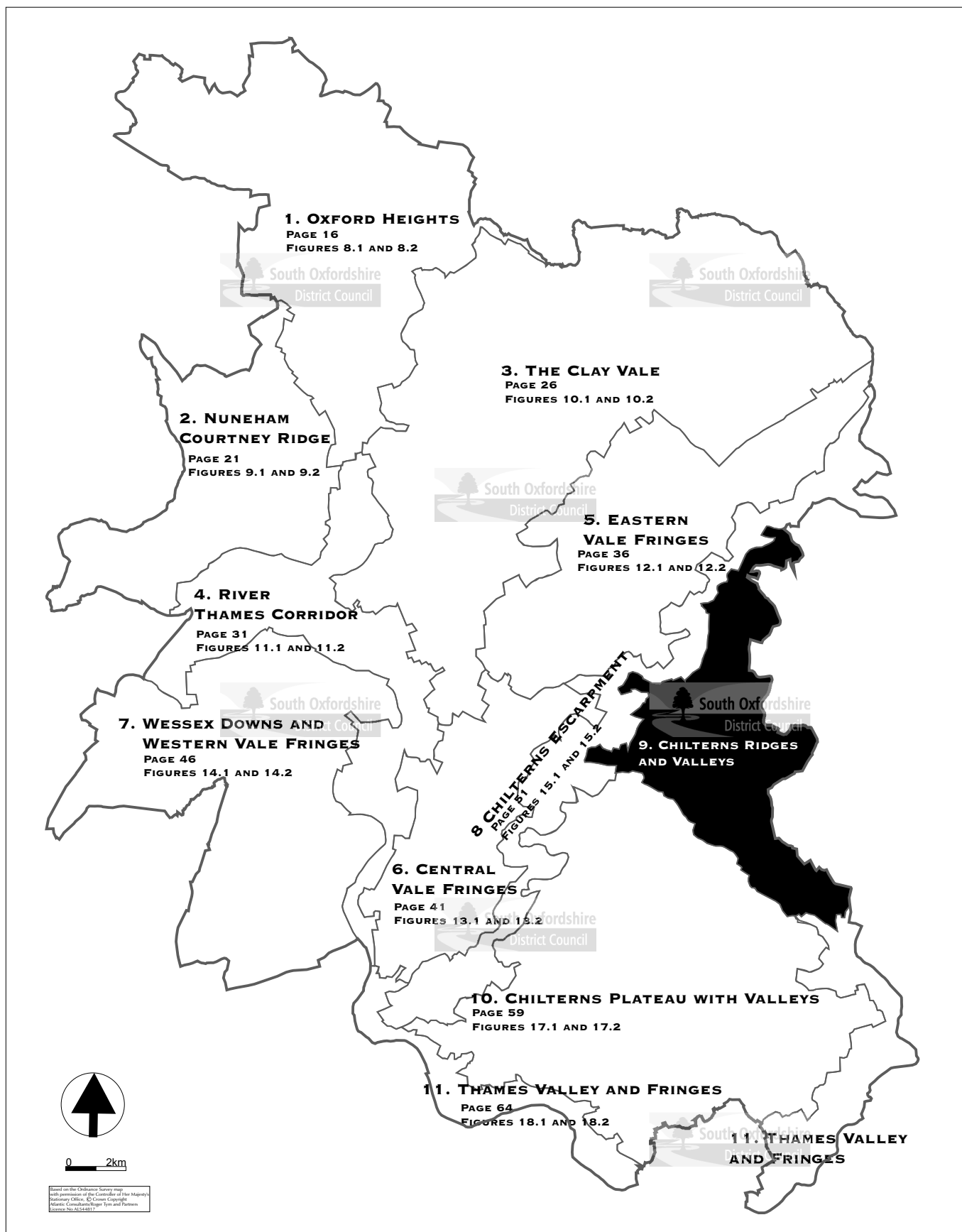
		Open escarpment	Enclosed escarpment	Semi-enclosed dipslope	Wooded dipslope	Parkland and estate farmland
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY						
<b>Scenic quality</b>	high	●	●	●	●	●
	medium			◆		
	low					
<b>Sense of place</b>	strong	●	●	●	●	●
	medium					
	weak					
<b>Intrusive influences</b>	uncommon		●		●	●
	occasional	●		●		
	frequent					
<b>Other heritage values</b> (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon					●
	occasional			●		
	frequent	●	●		●	
<b>Visual sensitivity</b>	high	●				
	medium			●		
	low		●		●	●
<b>Sensitivity to change</b>	high	●	●			●
	moderate			●	●	
	low					
<b>Management strategy</b>	conserve	●	●	●	●	●
	repair	◆		◆		
	restore					
	reconstruct					

Notes on landscape quality and sensitivity:

1 Quality of open escarpment and semi-enclosed dipslope locally affected by M40 cutting



# CHARACTER AREA 9: CHILTERN RIDGES AND VALLEYS



## Landform and landcover

This character area forms the part of the Chilterns dip slope which lies roughly to the north of Nettlebed, bounded by the top of the escarpment to the west and the District boundary to the east.

The area is underlain by Upper Chalk, the youngest of the several layers of chalk laid down in the Cretaceous period. The strata are tilted towards the south-east but the land dips away from the scarp at such a gentle angle that the fall of the ground is almost imperceptible, giving the slope the character of a plateau. In this part of the dip slope, the plateau is heavily dissected by quite steeply incised valleys, leaving only narrow ridges in between which contrasts with the more level and continuous plateau further south.

The local topography of this area is dominated by the Assendon and Stonor Valleys which merge to form the distinctive straight approach into Henley known as the 'Fair Mile'. Above this, the valleys have a strong and complex profile, with heavily folded sides and narrow meandering spines which create enclosed, intimate landscapes. The steep valley sides typically support woodland, with distinctive valley top 'beech hangers' framing the valley and emphasising its depth, and pasture or arable land on the lower valley sides and bottoms. The B480 runs along the Stonor Valley, while the Assendon Valley beyond Bix Bottom is less accessible and has a more remote character. Neither valley contains permanent streams or valley-bottom fields.

Deposits of clay-with-flints and pockets of Reading Beds mask the chalk geology on the ridges and typically support woodland and small areas of remnant heath (eg. at Russell's Water). However, some areas are more intensively farmed and, for the Chilterns, have a more open character.

## Settlement and buildings

The pattern of settlement in the Chilterns is typically one of small hamlets and farms scattered amongst extensive woods and commons. Most of the settlements are located on the ridges (eg. Middle Assendon) or within the valleys (eg. Stonor) and have a typically linear form.

Many settlements date from the early middle ages, which saw enclosure and clearance of 'wastes' and colonisation of previously unpopulated areas, during a period of relative prosperity and rapid population growth. Clusters of loosely grouped farmsteads were established on the plateau and new small fields were carved out of the extensive common woods, a process known as 'assarting' [7]. The process of enclosure through the Tudor and Jacobean period was accompanied by the development of grand mansions and manor houses, including Stonor Park which has a significant impact on local landscape character in the Stonor valley.

Traditional building materials are typical of the Chilterns as a whole. Brick-making was an early industry in the area (eg. at Nettlebed in the fifteenth century) and red brick, together with silver-grey flint, are the predominant materials [5]. Older houses were timber-framed in oak and chalk blocks have sometimes been used on Chiltern buildings. Plain tiles were the rule on the larger roofs, with thatch on cottages and with some slate introduced in Victorian times. Farmsteads are often characterised by large timber framed barns, typically clad with black, horizontal weather boarding with gable walls constructed out of brick and flint.



## CHILTERN RIDGES AND VALLEYS



1 Air photograph showing Stonor village and park and the typical wooded and semi-enclosed dipslope landscapes of the Chiltern Hills.

2 The distinctive buildings and picturesque parkland landscape of Stonor Park which nestles within a wooded Chiltern valley.



## Landscape and visual character

The complex topography and mosaic of woodland and open farmland paradoxically create both diversity and uniformity in the landscape of the Chilterns Ridges and Valleys. This very complexity is a consistent and distinctive feature of the area, and the most obvious differences in landscape character are between the very intimate, enclosed wooded landscapes and those which have a more open structure and character (see Figure 16.1).

The main variations in landscape character have, therefore, been identified as:

- the different sub-types of the typical **dipslope** landscape of ridges and valleys, with a wooded farmland mosaic of varying degrees of enclosure and small pockets of heath and common;
- areas of distinctive **parkland and estate** landscape at Stonor and on the fringes of Henley-on-Thames;
- a small area of **amenity** landscape in the form of a golf course near Henley.

### *Chiltern landscapes*

#### *Semi-enclosed dipslope*

This slightly looser mosaic of farmland and woodland is characteristic of the western end of the area, particularly on the ridges and more gentle slopes at the head of the Assendon valley and along the lower slopes of the Stonor valley.

Key characteristics:

- typically level or more gently sloping ground;
- comparatively open fields contained within a strong structure of woods, hedgerows or trees to form a loose mosaic;
- dominance of arable cultivation with pasture more typical of lower slopes or valley bottoms;
- some views off ridges into valleys but landform and strong structure of woods and hedgerows generally provides visual containment with moderate to low intervisibility;
- distinctive pattern of winding rural roads, irregular field boundaries and scattered rural settlements, typical of 'ancient countryside';
- generally rural and unspoilt character.

#### *Wooded dipslope*

This is the dominant landscape type within the area, with extensive blocks of woodland occupying the ridges and valley sides and creating a much more enclosed mosaic of wooded farmland.

Key characteristics:

- complex landform of ridges and valleys;
- heavily wooded character, including extensive stands of ancient, semi-natural broadleaved woodland, mature beechwoods and more recent plantations;
- strong structure of woodland and incised valley landform creates an intimate and enclosed character;
- distinctive pattern of valley-side woods with arable or pasture on lower slopes and in valley bottom;
- distinctive pattern of winding rural roads, irregular field boundaries and scattered rural settlements, typical of 'ancient countryside';
- generally rural and unspoilt character;
- low intervisibility.

#### *Commons and heaths*

Two small areas of open common or heath occur within the area, at Russell's Water, Maidensgrove and at Bix.

Key characteristics:

- unfenced character with open access;
- semi-natural vegetation dominated by acid grassland or heath, typically forming a mosaic of open areas, scrub and woodland with typical species of acid conditions (eg. birch, gorse, bracken etc.);
- typically associated with loose linear settlements, with buildings dotted around the margins of the common;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- moderate to low intervisibility.

#### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

The main area of highly distinctive parkland landscape is associated with Stonor Park, set within a valley along the eastern boundary of the area.



Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, blocks of mature woodland and estate boundaries;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.

## Landscape management issues

The landscape of this area is particularly rich in terms of its intricate mosaic of woodland and farmland and its semi-natural habitats, picturesque settlements and buildings. Across most of the area a strategy to **conserve** these important resources is the most appropriate (see Figure 16.2).

Only one area has been identified as requiring some intervention to **repair** landscape structure - in the upper Stonor valley where arable farming along the valley sides has created a particularly denuded character and weak hedgerow structure.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- manage existing woodlands to ensure their long-term survival and to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- protect any remnant areas of chalk grassland and encourage conversion of arable land to permanent pasture and chalk grassland where possible;
- protect areas of acid grassland and heath and manage to prevent encroachment of scrub and woodland;
- maintain existing field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal or woodland clearance;
- maintain and restore typical landscape features of existing parkland at Stonor.

## Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas in general but particularly within the Chilterns AONB. The ability of the landscape to accommodate smaller-scale development will depend upon:

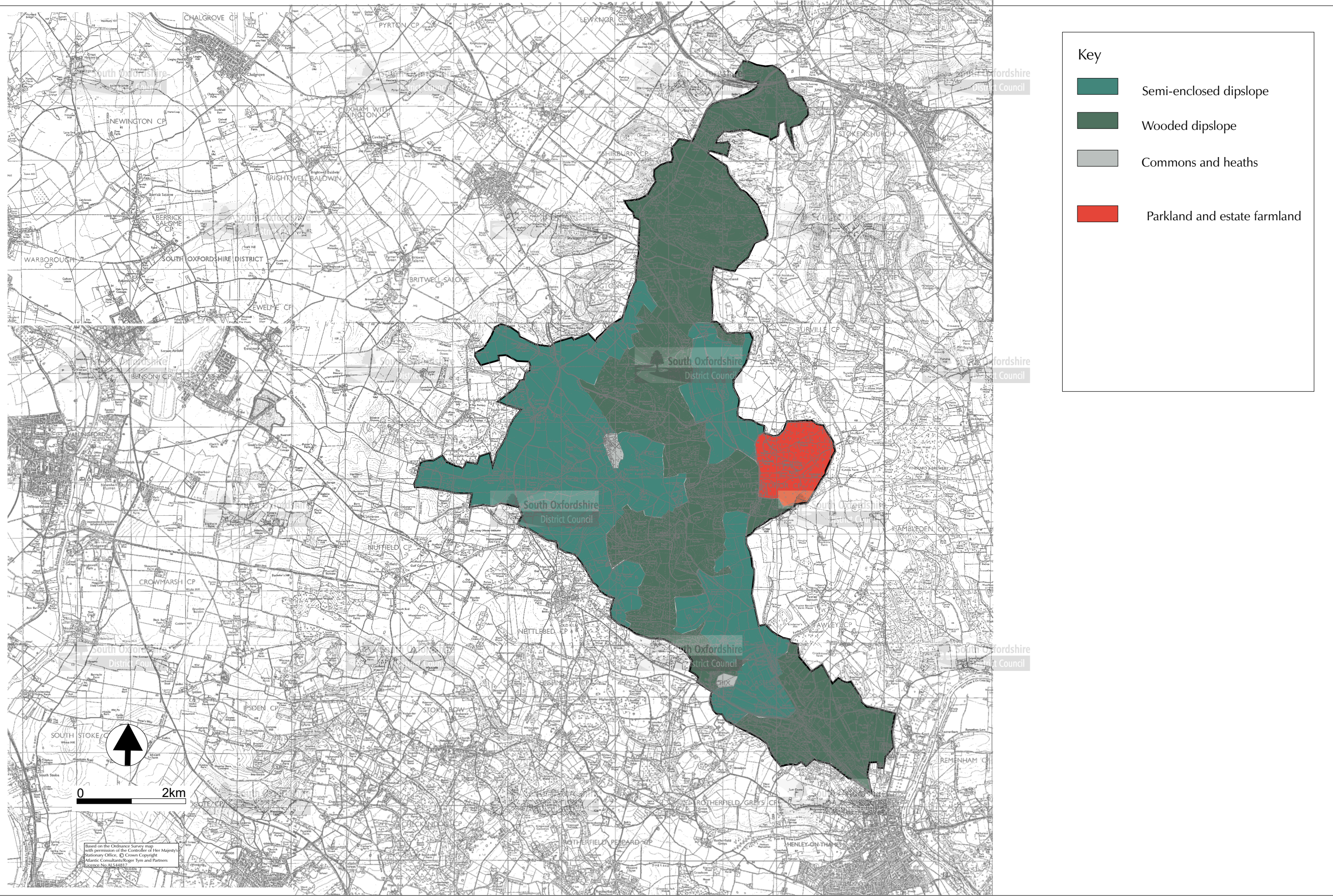
- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

Tables 9.1 and 9.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Chilterns Ridges and Valleys, as explained on page 6.

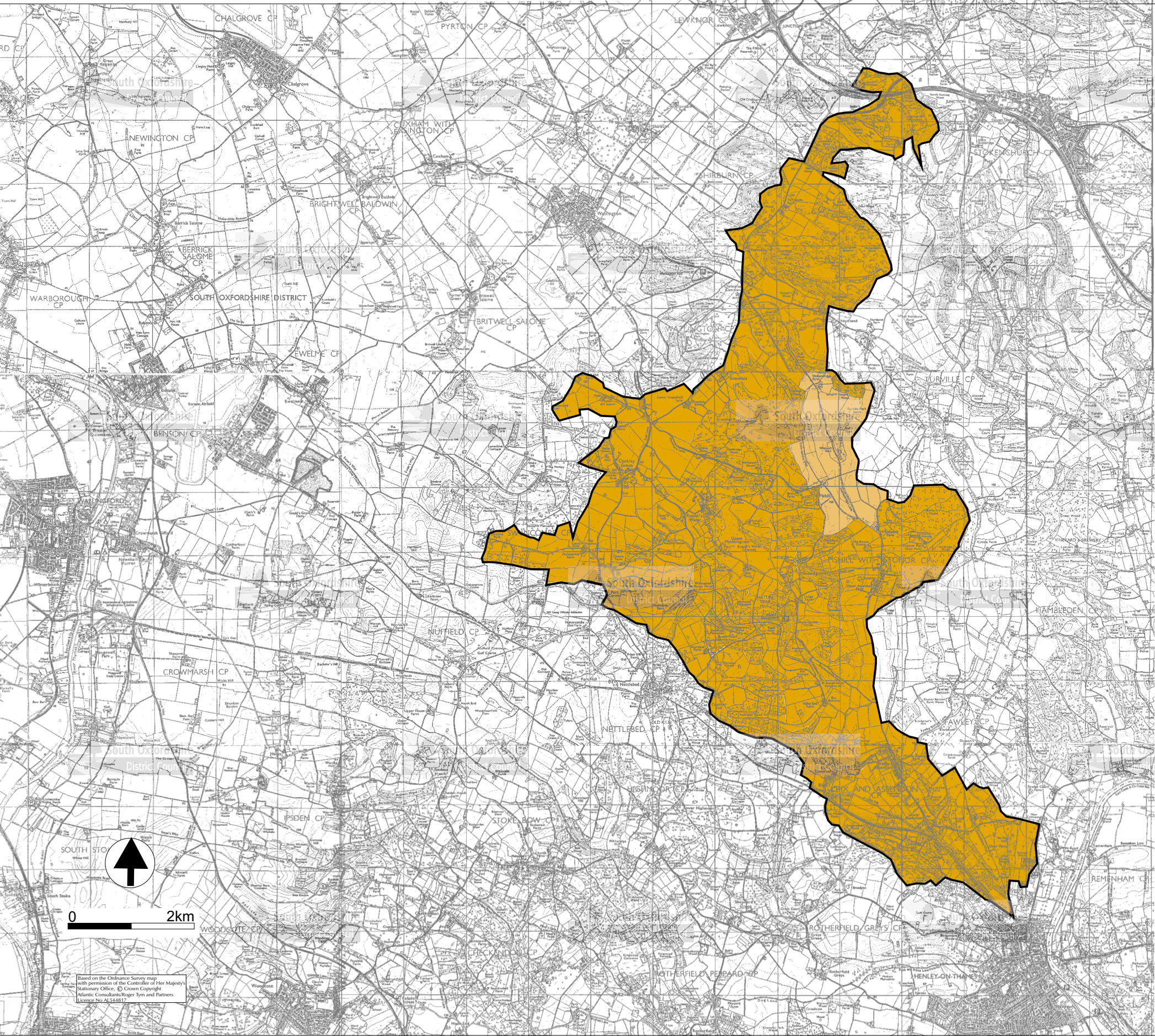
Some general conclusions are that:

- although less visually sensitive, the high quality of much of the semi-enclosed and wooded dipslope and parkland landscapes means that most forms of new development will potentially have an adverse impact on the AONB;
- particular attention should be given to preventing the suburbanisation of the landscape through inappropriate highway improvements, lighting, signage, telecommunication masts etc.;
- special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to settlements to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent ribbon development along roads and the coalescence of settlements;
- high quality parkland and semi-enclosed dipslope landscapes around the fringes of Henley limit potential opportunities for further expansion of the town.









**KEY:**

	Conserve
	Repair



**Table 9.1: Chilterns ridges and valleys - Landscape and settlement character**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Semi-enclosed dipslope	Wooded dipslope	Commons and heaths	Parkland and estate farmland
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>					
<b>Scale</b>	large				
	medium	●	●	●	●
	small				
<b>Diversity</b>	complex				●
	moderate	●	●	●	
	simple				
<b>Structure</b>	strong	●	●	●	●
	medium				
	weak				
<b>Enclosure</b>	open				
	semi-enclosed	●		●	
	enclosed/intimate		●		●
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight				
	sinuous	●	●		●
	stone walls				●
	hedges	●	●		●
	hedgerow trees	●	●		●
	estate boundaries				●
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>					
<b>Location</b>	hilltop/plateau				
	ridgetop	●	●	●	●
	hillside				
	valley side				
	valley floor	●	●		●
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings	●	●	●	●
	hamlets	●	●	●	●
	small village		●		
	large village				
	town				
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed	●	●	●	●
	concentrated				
<b>Form</b>	nucleated	◆	◆	●	
	linear	●	●		●
<b>Materials</b>	stone				
	brick	●	●	●	●
	flint	●	●	●	●
	cob				
	timber frame/weatherboarding	●	●	●	●
	tiles	●	●	●	●
	thatch	●	●	●	●
	slate	◆	◆	◆	◆



**Table 9.2: Chilterns ridges and valleys - Landscape quality and sensitivity**
**Key**

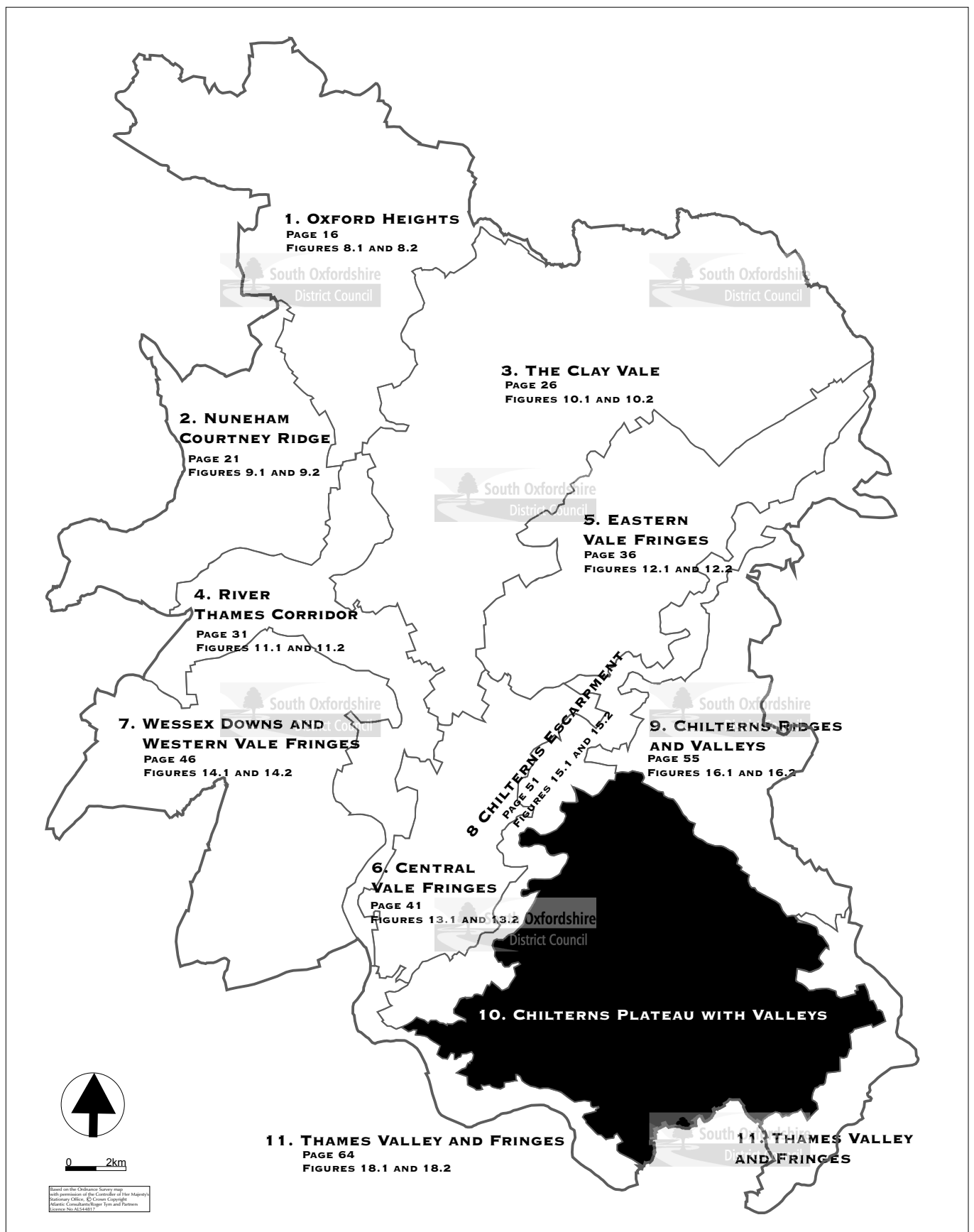
- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Semi-enclosed dipslope	Wooded dipslope	Commons and heaths	Parkland and estate farmland
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY					
<b>Scenic quality</b>	high	●	●	●	●
	medium				
	low				
<b>Sense of place</b>	strong	●	●	●	●
	medium				
	weak				
<b>Intrusive influences</b>	uncommon	●	●	●	●
	occasional				
	frequent				
<b>Other heritage values</b> (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon				
	occasional	●		●	
	frequent		●		●
<b>Visual sensitivity</b>	high				
	medium	●			
	low		●	●	●
<b>Sensitivity to change</b>	high			●	●
	moderate	●	●		
	low				
<b>Management strategy</b>	conserve	●	●	●	●
	repair	◆			
	restore				
	reconstruct				

Notes on landscape quality and sensitivity:

1 Intensive arable farming has affected quality of Stonor Valley

# CHARACTER AREA 10: CHILTERN'S PLATEAU WITH VALLEYS





## Landform and landcover

This character area forms the part of the Chilterns dip slope which lies roughly to the south of Nettlebed, bounded by the top of the escarpment to the west and the Thames Valley to the south and east.

The area is underlain by Upper Chalk, the youngest of the several layers of chalk laid down in the Cretaceous period. The strata are tilted towards the south-east but the land dips away from the scarp at such a gentle angle that the fall of the ground is almost imperceptible, giving the slope the character of a plateau. In this part of the dip slope, the plateau is comparatively level and expansive and is dissected by an irregular pattern of shallow, small-scale dry valleys which seem to appear unexpectedly in an irregular pattern across the plateau. Their enclosed, intimate and small-scale character tends to contrast with the broader plateau landscape above.

The valleys tend to be narrow without a flat floodplain and, typically, beech caps the valley sides with arable or pasture extending down to the valley bottom. Extensive deposits of clay-with-flints, with smaller pockets of Reading Beds, mask the chalk geology on the plateau and typically support extensive areas of woodland and small areas of remnant heath and grass common (eg. around Rotherfield Peppard and Nettlebed). In between, the plateau is typically occupied by arable farmland with large fields often seemingly carved out of the woodland to create a more open but well-structured landscape.

## Settlement and buildings

The pattern of settlement in the Chilterns is typically one of small hamlets and farms scattered amongst extensive woods and commons. Many of these date from the early middle ages, which saw enclosure and clearance of 'wastes' and colonisation of previously unpopulated areas, during a period of relative prosperity and rapid population growth. Clusters of loosely grouped farmsteads were established on the plateau and new small fields were carved out of the extensive common woods, a process known as 'assarting'.

This process often led to the development of a loose, linear form to medieval settlements (eg. Nettlebed) and many were also associated with a village green or with larger areas of common land (eg. Rotherfield Greys). The village of Nettlebed is one of the largest within this area and has been an important centre of the brick and tile industry since the fifteenth century and for pottery after the seventeenth century. Production ceased in 1927 [6] and only a single bottle kiln remains preserved within a modern housing estate. Furniture making was another important industry within this area, using timber from the extensive beechwoods.

Traditional building materials are typical of the Chilterns as a whole with a predominance of red brick, together with silver-grey flint. Older houses were timber-framed in oak and chalk blocks have sometimes been used on Chiltern buildings [6]. Plain tiles were the rule on the larger roofs, with thatch on cottages with some slate introduced in Victorian times. Farmsteads are often characterised by large timber framed barns, typically clad with black, horizontal weather boarding with gable walls constructed out of brick and flint [7].

## CHILTERN PLATEAU WITH VALLEYS



1 Air photograph showing the typical wooded and semi-enclosed dipslope landscapes of the Chiltern Hills near Stoke Row.



## Landscape and visual character

Like the Chilterns Ridges and Valleys (see Area 9), this part of the Chilterns dipslope has a surprisingly uniform character, despite its irregular pattern of plateaux and valleys and its mosaic of farmland and woodland. This complexity is a consistent and distinctive feature of the area, and the most obvious differences in landscape character are between the very intimate, enclosed wooded landscapes and those which have a more open structure and character (see Figure 17.1).

The main variations in landscape character have, therefore, been identified as:

- the different sub-types of the typical **dipslope** landscape of ridges and valleys, with a wooded farmland mosaic of varying degrees of enclosure and small pockets of heath and common;
- areas of distinctive **parkland and estate** landscape at Greys Court, Checkendon Court, Crowsley Park and around the fringes of Henley-on-Thames;
- areas of **amenity** landscape in the form of a golf courses near Rotherfield Peppard, Caversham and Henley.

### *Chiltern landscapes*

#### *Open dipslope*

A few isolated pockets of open farmland with a weak landscape structure occur within the Chilterns dipslope, (eg. to the north-west and north-east of Caversham, south of Nuffield and to the west of Henley), usually where more gentle gradients have encouraged intensive arable cultivation.

Key characteristics:

- gently sloping ground;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation with large-scale field pattern, weak hedgerow structure and very little woodland cover;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- predominantly rural character but with some limited intrusion from power lines (eg. on both sides of Caversham);
- large-scale, open landscape with high intervisibility in immediate area but long-

distance views contained by neighbouring woodland.

#### *Semi-enclosed dipslope*

This loose mosaic of farmland and woodland is characteristic of the more level ground of the plateau to the south of Nuffield and near Woodcote, and particularly the 'lower' dipslope to the south of Sonning Common.

Key characteristics:

- typically level or more gently sloping ground;
- comparatively open fields contained within a strong structure of woods, hedgerows or trees to form a loose mosaic;
- dominance of arable cultivation;
- strong structure of woods and hedgerows generally provides visual containment and results in moderate to low intervisibility;
- distinctive pattern of winding rural roads, irregular field boundaries and scattered rural settlements, typical of 'ancient countryside';
- generally rural and unspoilt character but with some 'suburbanising' influences within rural settlements and along main roads (eg. A4074, A4130), and localised intrusion of built development and power lines (eg. around Sonning Common and Caversham).

#### *Wooded dipslope*

This is the dominant landscape type within the area, with extensive blocks of woodland occupying much of the dipslope and creating a more enclosed mosaic of wooded farmland.

Key characteristics:

- distinctive landform of plateaux dissected by a network of shallow, dry valleys;
- heavily wooded character, including extensive stands of ancient, semi-natural broadleaved woodland, mature beechwoods and more recent plantations;
- strong structure of woodland and complex landform creates an intimate and enclosed character with a particular feeling of secrecy in some valleys;
- distinctive pattern of winding rural roads, irregular field boundaries and scattered rural settlements, typical of 'ancient countryside';
- generally rural and unspoilt character with only localised suburbanising influences within

villages, along road corridors or around the fringes of the main settlements;

- low intervisibility.

#### *Commons and heaths*

Two main areas of open common or heath occur within the area, around Nettlebed and Rotherfield Peppard.

Key characteristics:

- unfenced character with open access;
- semi-natural vegetation dominated by acid grassland or heath, typically forming a mosaic of open areas, scrub and woodland with typical species of acid conditions (eg. birch, gorse, bracken etc.);
- typically associated with loose linear settlements, with buildings dotted around the margins of the common;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- moderate to low intervisibility.

#### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

There are several areas of distinctive parkland landscape within this part of the Chilterns dip slope, including Greys Court, Checkendon Court and Crowsley Park and a number of other parks located around the fringes of Henley.

Key characteristics:

- distinctive parkland landscape with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, blocks of mature woodland and estate boundaries;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility;
- generally well-managed character but some parks showing signs of decline (eg. Crowsley Park).

#### *Amenity landscape*

This type is represented by a number of golf courses scattered within the Chiltern Hills and a sports ground near Caversham.

Key characteristics:

- typical golf course landscapes of greens, fairways, roughs and bunkers, with associated buildings and car parking;
- intensively managed and somewhat suburban character;
- use of exotic tree species out of character with locality;
- rural, often well-wooded setting with moderate to low intervisibility.

### **Landscape management issues**

The landscape of this area is particularly rich in terms of its intricate mosaic of woodland and farmland and its semi-natural habitats, picturesque settlements and buildings. Across much of the area, a strategy to **conserve** these important resources is most appropriate (see Figure 17.2).

However, some of the more open landscapes and parks are showing some signs of decline, through lack of management or intensive farming practice. These include some of the more open areas of the plateau south of Nuffield and between Sonning Common and Caversham, these latter areas also suffering from some localised intrusion of built development and power lines. These landscapes are still attractive and rural but their structure and features are in need of some **repair**. The golf courses and the remnant parkland at Crowsley Park also fall into this category.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- manage existing woodlands to ensure their long-term survival and to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value;
- protect any remnant areas of chalk grassland and encourage conversion of arable land to permanent pasture and chalk grassland where possible;



- protect areas of acid grassland and heath and manage to prevent encroachment of scrub and woodland;
  - maintain existing field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal or woodland clearance;
  - maintain and restore typical landscape features of existing parkland;
  - improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding landscape.
- prevent ribbon development along roads and the coalescence of settlements.;
  - high quality parkland and semi-enclosed dipslope landscapes around the fringes of Henley limit potential opportunities for further expansion of the town.

## Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas in general but particularly within the Chilterns AONB. The ability of the landscape to accommodate smaller-scale development will depend upon:

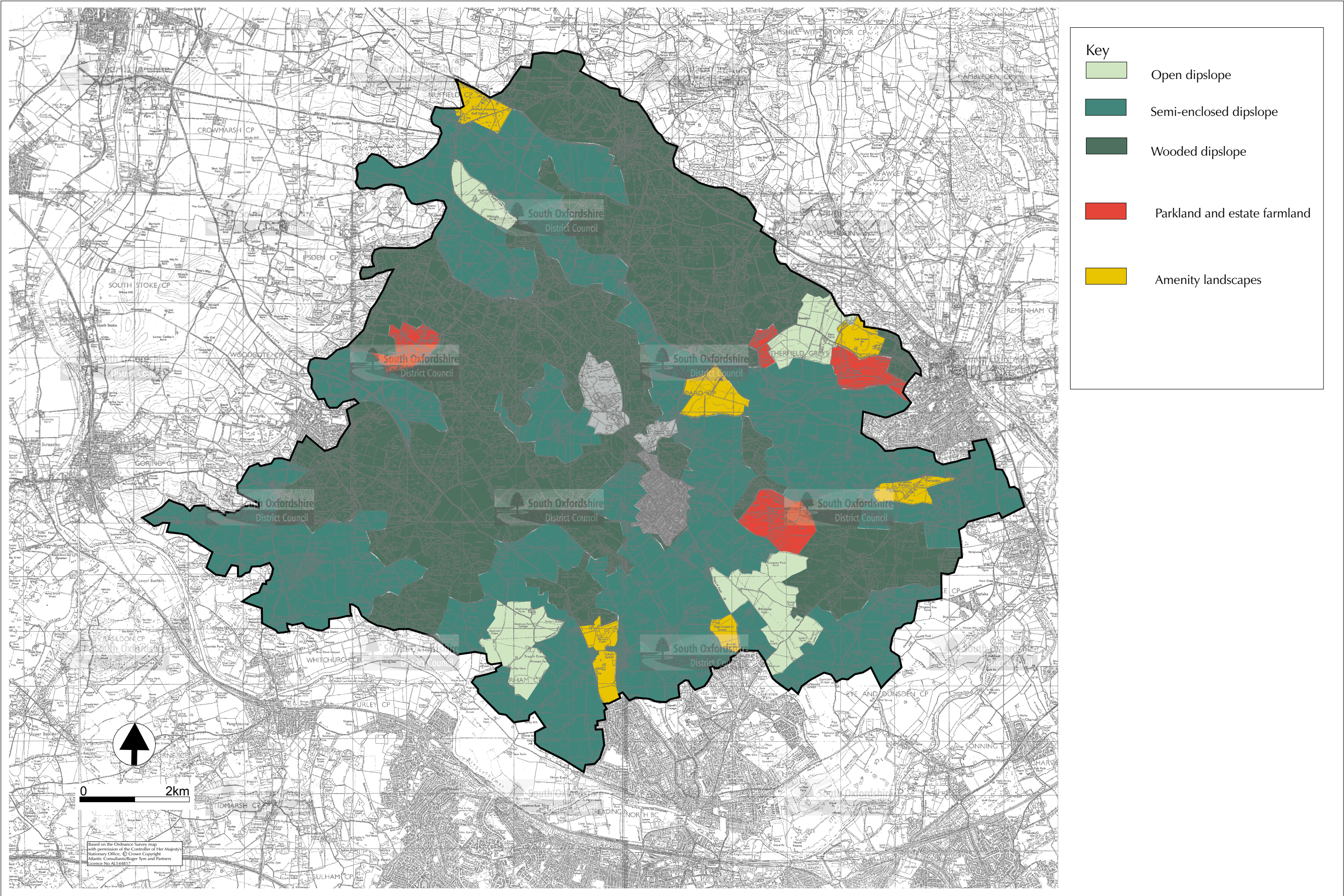
- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

Tables 10.1 and 10.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Chilterns Plateau and Valleys, as explained on page 6.

Some general conclusions are that:

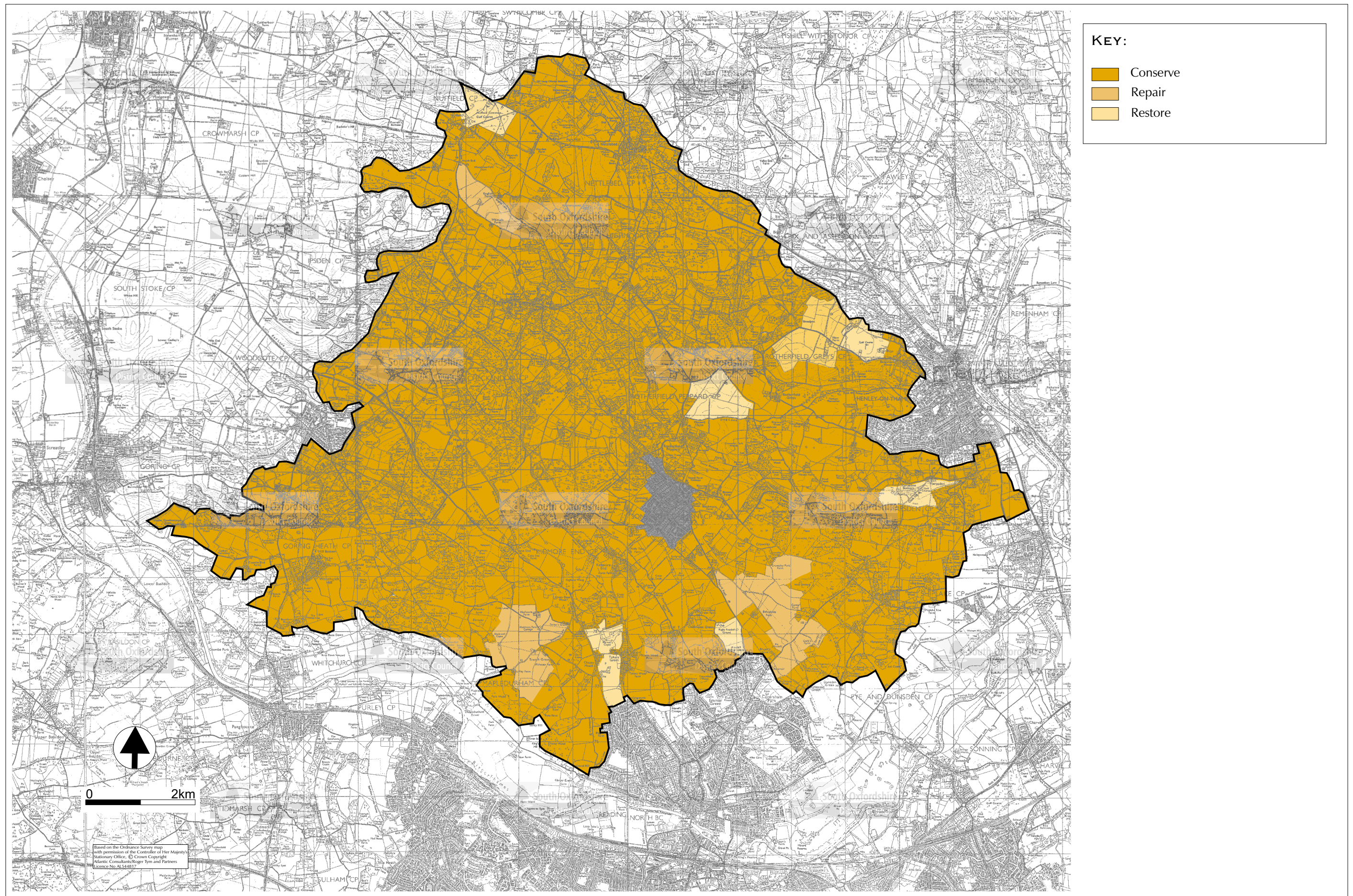
- although less visually sensitive, the high quality of much of the semi-enclosed and wooded dipslope and parkland landscapes means that most forms of new development will potentially have an adverse impact on the AONB;
- particular attention should be given to preventing the suburbanisation of the landscape through inappropriate highway improvements, lighting, signage, telecommunication masts etc.;
- special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to settlements to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to





Landscape Types Figure 17.1







**Table 10.1: Chilterns plateau with valleys - Landscape and settlement character**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Open dipslope	Semi-enclosed dipslope	Wooded dipslope	Commons and heaths	Parkland and estate farmland	Amenity landscape
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>							
<b>Scale</b>	large	●					
	medium		●	●	●	●	●
	small						
<b>Diversity</b>	complex					●	
	moderate	●	●	●	●		●
	simple						
<b>Structure</b>	strong		●	●	●	●	
	medium						●
	weak	●					
<b>Enclosure</b>	open						
	semi-enclosed		●		●		●
	enclosed/intimate	●		●		●	
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight						
	sinuous	●	●	●		●	●
	stone walls					●	
	hedges	●	●	●		●	●
	hedgerow trees	●	●	●		●	●
	estate boundaries					●	
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>							
<b>Location</b>	hilltop/plateau	●	●	●	●	●	●
	ridgetop						
	hillside						
	valley side		●	●	●	●	●
	valley floor		●	●	●		
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings	●	●	●	●	●	
	hamlets	●	●	●	●	●	
	small village		●	●	●		
	large village		●				
	town						
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed	●	●	●	●	●	
	concentrated						
<b>Form</b>	nucleated	◆	◆	◆	●	●	
	linear	●	●	●			
<b>Materials</b>	stone						
	brick	●	●	●	●	●	
	flint	●	●	●	●	●	
	cob						
	timber frame	●	●	●	●	●	
	tiles	●	●	●	●	●	
	thatch	●	●	●	●	●	
	slate	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	

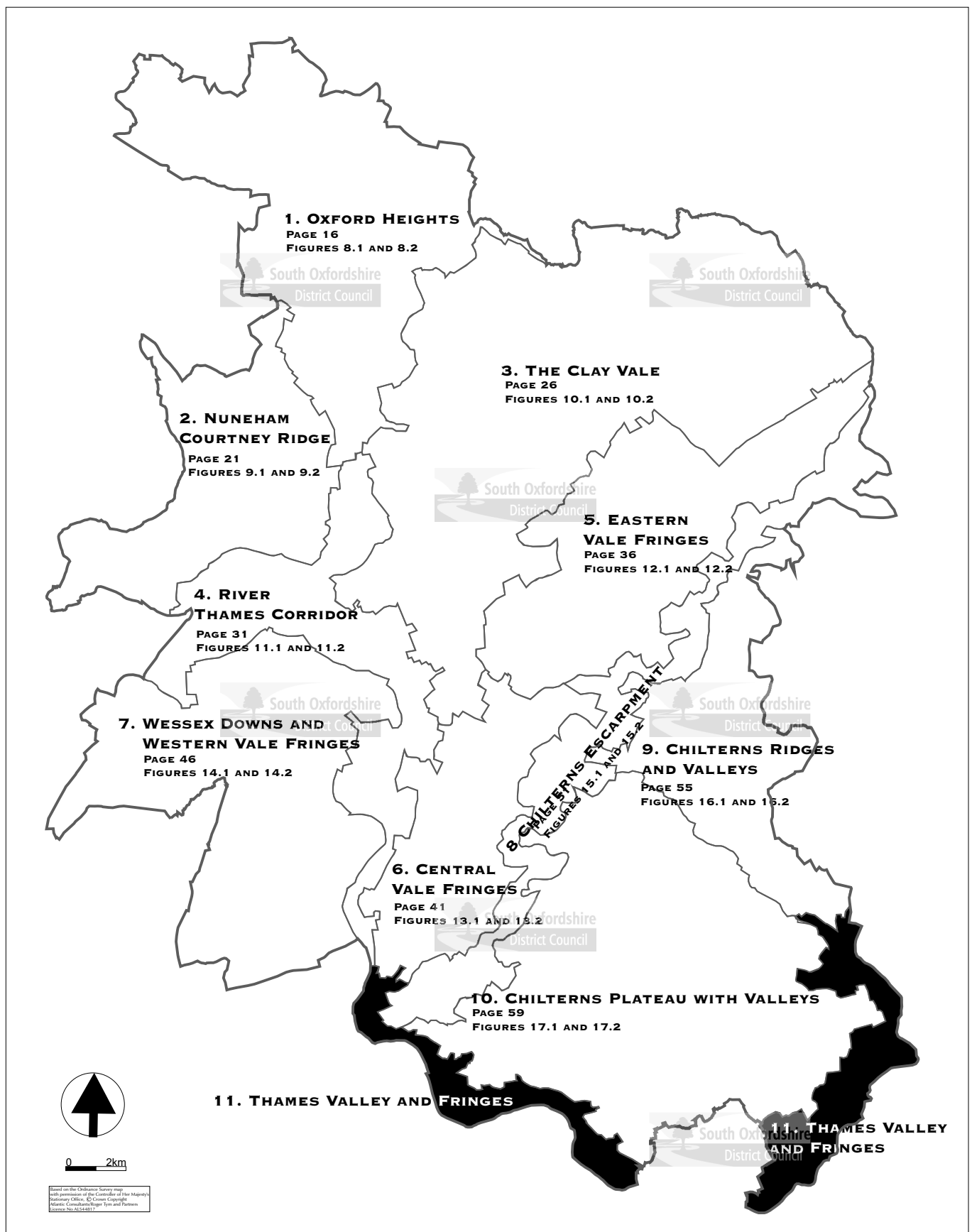


**Table 10.2: Chilterns plateau with valleys - Landscape quality and sensitivity**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Open dipslope	Semi-enclosed dipslope	Wooded dipslope	Commons and heaths	Parkland and estate farmland	Amenity landscape
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY							
<b>Scenic quality</b>	high		●	●	●	●	
	medium	●					●
	low						
<b>Sense of place</b>	strong		●	●	●	●	
	medium	●					●
	weak						
<b>Intrusive influences</b>	uncommon		●	●	●	●	
	occasional	●					●
	frequent						
<b>Other heritage values</b> (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon	●					
	occasional		●		●		●
	frequent			●		●	
<b>Visual sensitivity</b>	high	●					
	medium		●				●
	low			●	●	●	
<b>Sensitivity to change</b>	high				●	●	
	moderate	●	●	●			●
	low						
<b>Management strategy</b>	conserve		●	●	●	●	
	repair	●					
	restore						●
	reconstruct						

# CHARACTER AREA 11: THAMES VALLEY AND FRINGES





## Landform and landcover

This character area embraces the northern side of the River Thames corridor between Goring and Henley-on-Thames, divided into two sections by the built-up area of Caversham. The character area includes the flat valley floor, the steeper valley sides to the west and the more gentle hills and sloping fringes of the lower Chilterns dipslope to the east.

At the western end of the area, the River Thames has carved a distinct valley, known as the Goring Gap, through the chalk uplands, dividing the Chiltern Hills from the North Wessex Downs. This marks the transition from the more open floodplain of the River Thames Corridor (Character Area 4) and the more constricted downstream sections of the river.

The flat floodplain is underlain by alluvium but with frequent deposits of river terrace gravels. The heavier soils generally support extensive cattle grazed pastures but the gravel areas support some arable cultivation and have been quarried to the east of Caversham to create a series of flooded gravel pits.

Above the valley floor, the Chiltern Hills rise abruptly as a line of rolling hills, supporting extensive areas of woodland. The line of hills appear as an escarpment, with numerous protruding spurs and narrow valleys that cut back into the adjoining plateau landscape and create quite complex topography. In contrast, beyond Caversham the valley sides are more gentle and grade almost imperceptibly into the Chilterns dipslope. Here, the chalk is masked by coombe deposits and gravels.

## Settlement and buildings

This section of the Thames Valley includes a string of riverside towns and settlements, including Goring-on-Thames, Caversham (which now forms the northern outskirts of Reading), Whitchurch (linked to Pangbourne), Lower Shiplake and Henley-on-Thames. Many of these originated as favoured sites on the terrace gravels for prehistoric, Roman and Saxon settlement. However, their strategic position at important river crossings, and as trading or staging posts along the river and main east-west routes, was the key to their later development [5].

The special qualities of the riverside landscape, set below the wooded Chiltern Hills, were also a key factor in the development of settlements and buildings between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, drawing opulent villas to the towns and riverside and inspiring the creation of a sequence of beautiful parks along these reaches of the Thames. These include Hardwick House, Mapledurham House, Coombe Lodge, Caversham Park and Fawley Court, some of which are associated with fine Tudor brick manor houses. Later development of road and rail communications led to significant expansion of the main towns (including the overwhelming of Caversham by Reading) and the growth of commuter villages.

The principal traditional building materials within this area were timber followed by brick and tile, with Welsh slate introduced after the arrival of the railway in 1857 [6].

# THAMES VALLEY AND FRINGES



1 Air photograph showing the Thames Valley landscape around Mapledurham.



2 The River Thames waterfront at Henley.



3 Air photograph showing the effects of gravel extraction on the landscape of the Thames floodplain near Caversham.



## Landscape and visual character

Landscape character in this area has a strong degree of coherence, with the River Thames providing a strong unifying influence. There are consequently few variations in landscape character (see Figure 18.1).

The main distinctions that have been drawn are between:

- the different sub-types of the flat, low-lying floodplain landscapes which dominate the area;
- the different types of Chilterns landscapes, including both escarpment and dipslope landscapes;
- a number of examples of parkland and estate landscape located on the edge of the valley floor and around Henley.

### *Floodplain landscapes*

Floodplain pasture is the dominant landscape type within the immediate corridor of the River Thames. Flooded gravel pits form areas of floodplain wetland which are a feature of the floodplain to the east of Caversham.

#### *Flat floodplain pasture*

Key characteristics:

- flat, low-lying farmland, typically dominated by permanent pasture with a distinctively 'wet', riparian character (although some areas of arable may be interspersed within the floodplain);
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches ;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside;
- intimate, pastoral, tranquil and quite remote character with some 'arcadian' qualities along the Thames close to settlements and riverside parklands;
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the river corridor may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas.

#### *Floodplain wetland*

Key characteristics:

- complex of freshwater lagoons formed from flooded gravel pits;

- artificial form and character but colonising vegetation helps to create a more semi-natural character and developing wildlife value in some areas;
- comparatively inaccessible, remote character but active gravel workings, recreational use and proximity to roads, railways and built development intrude on rural qualities of the area;
- semi-enclosed character with moderate to low intervisibility.

### *Chiltern landscapes*

These include the chalk escarpment which forms the steep valley side to the east of Goring and is mostly wooded with only small pockets of open land, and the more gentle dipslope landscape rising up from the Thames between Caversham and Henley.

#### *Open escarpment*

Key characteristics:

- well-defined, smooth profile folded into open, rounded spurs;
- small-scale open spaces contained by a framework of woodland but with some open views out over the Thames Valley;
- arable land use typically on the upper, more gentle slopes with pasture typical of the steeper slopes and thinner soils;
- predominantly rural character;
- scarp face itself is prominent in views from surrounding area but surrounding woodland reduces intervisibility along the valley side.

#### *Enclosed escarpment*

Key characteristics:

- valley side typically clothed in a mosaic of woodland blocks, particularly on the steepest slopes, and open grassland;
- predominantly rural, and semi-natural character with broadleaved woodland of nature conservation value (eg. Hartslock Wood);
- smooth scarp profile masked by roughly-textured vegetation, with sombre, muted colours;
- intimate and enclosed character within densely wooded areas but elsewhere, the valley side has a semi-enclosed character with some long views out over the Thames valley from the more open areas;

- valley side prominent in views but woodland cover helps to absorb prominent features and reduce intervisibility.

#### *Open dipslope*

Key characteristics:

- gently sloping ground at the foot of the Chilterns dipslope next to the valley floor between Caversham and Shiplake;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation with large-scale field pattern, weak hedgerow structure and very little woodland cover;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- predominantly rural character with limited intrusion from built-up areas;
- large-scale, open landscape with views out over the Thames Valley and high intervisibility.

#### *Semi-enclosed dipslope*

Key characteristics:

- sloping ground and minor valley at foot of Chilterns dipslope next to the valley floor around Lower Shiplake and a small area to the north of Henley adjacent to the floodplain;
- mixture of medium-scale fields to west of the A4155 and smaller-scale field pattern around the settlement edges;
- strong structure of hedgerows, trees and small blocks of woodland, generally provides visual containment and results in moderate intervisibility;
- predominantly rural character, especially to the west of the A4155, but some localised influence from roads, ribbon development on minor roads and built-up areas immediately around settlement edges.

#### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

Although much of the landscape of the floodplain and valley sides has been managed as part of large estates and parks, only three areas were identified as having a specific parkland character, namely the parks associated with Hardwick House, Shiplake House and Fawley Court.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, clumps and blocks of woodland;
- unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.



## Landscape management issues

The landscape of the Thames valley and fringes is generally of high scenic quality, with its ribbon of tranquil floodplain pastures, wooded hillsides and picturesque parklands. Management to conserve and enhance these characteristics and qualities is the most appropriate strategy within this area (see Figure 18.2).

Some very localised parts of the floodplain are affected by the gradual sub-urbanisation of the river corridor landscape through built development (eg. on the fringes of Goring), where there is a need to repair the landscape setting of the river corridor, or by the effects of gravel extraction (eg. east of Caversham), where the restoration of landscape structure is already in progress.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river corridors;
- encourage planting and pollarding of willows along ditches and watercourses and less intensive management of ditch systems to promote semi-natural aquatic and riparian vegetation;
- minimise disturbance to wildlife caused by recreational use of former gravel pits near Caversham and encourage management of aquatic and riparian vegetation to maximise wildlife value;
- encourage better maintenance of field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- encourage the maintenance and restoration of parkland landscapes and features within the river corridor;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside and river corridor landscape.

## Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas and along the river corridors. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-scale development will depend upon:

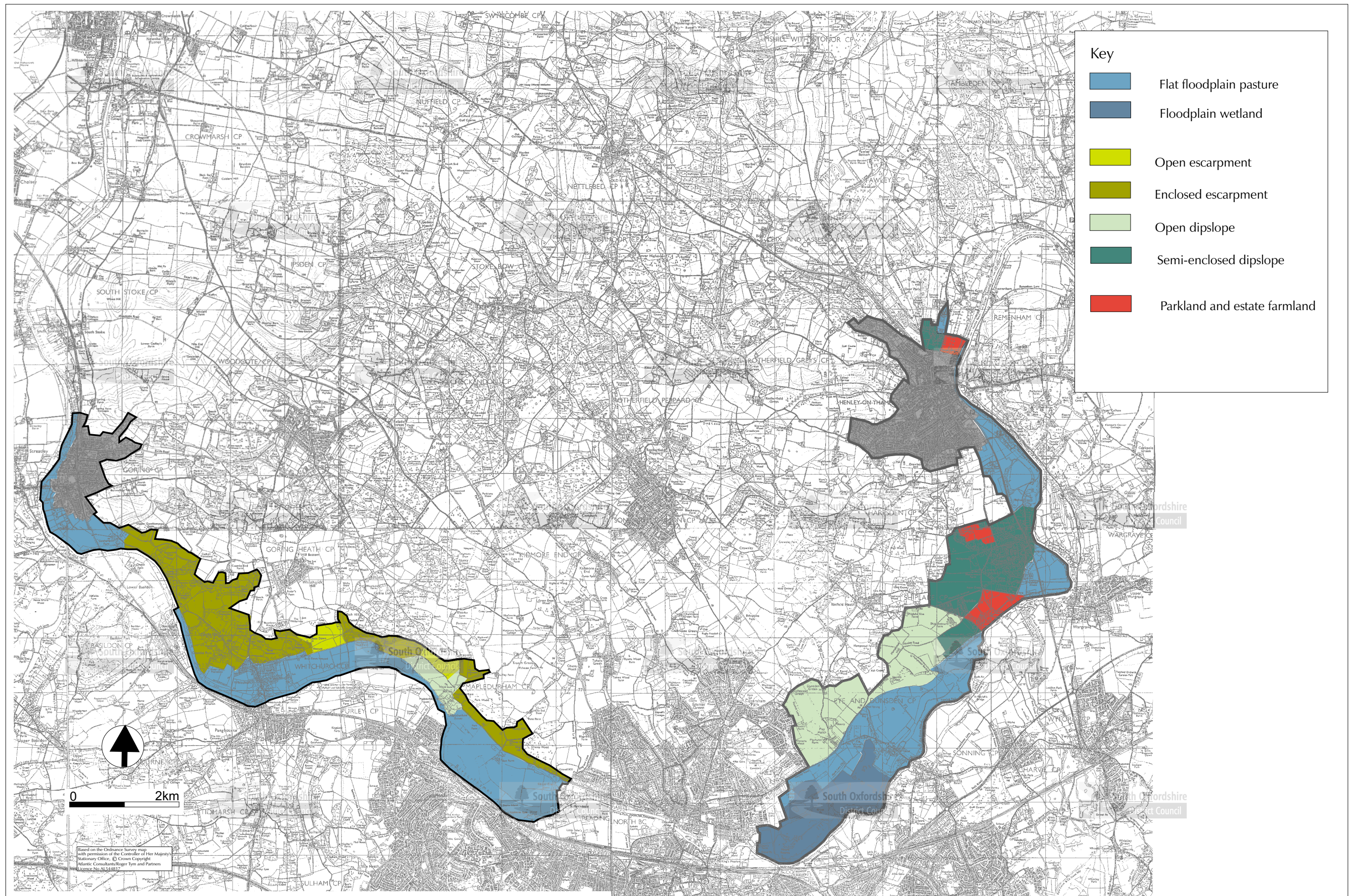
- the potential impacts on distinctive landscape and settlement character;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic landscape quality and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the visual sensitivity of the receiving landscape.

Tables 11.1 and 11.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the River Thames Corridor.

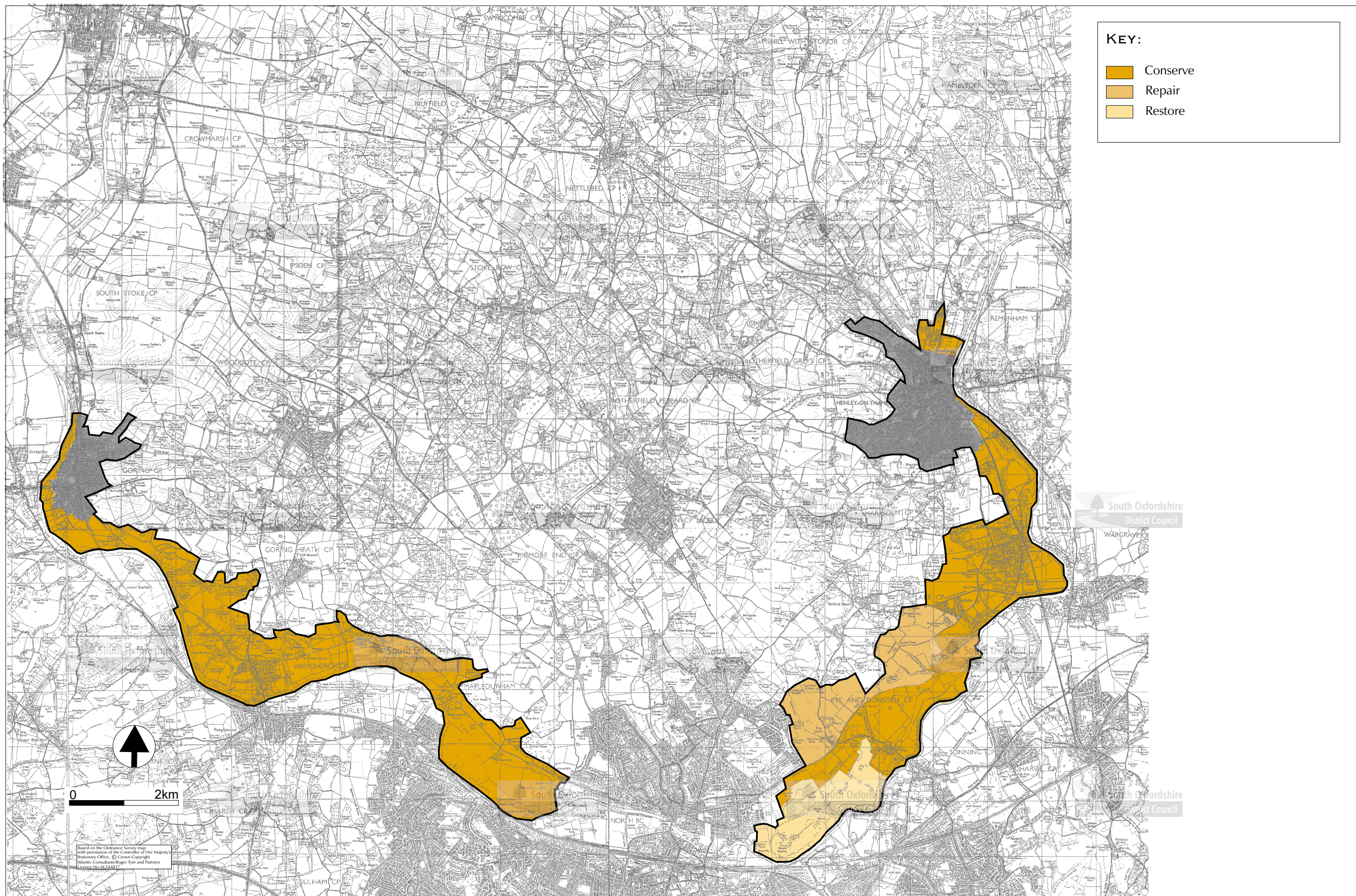
Some general conclusions are that:

- development is generally inappropriate within the unspoilt floodplain pastures, wetlands and parkland/estate landscapes;
- development within visually exposed landscapes (eg. along the valley sides) will be highly prominent and is also generally undesirable;
- landscapes on the fringes of settlements are particularly vulnerable to change and special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent the coalescence of settlements;
- high quality floodplain and parkland landscapes on the fringes of Henley limit the potential for further expansion of the town along the river corridor.











**Table 11.1: Thames valley and fringes - Landscape and settlement character**

Key

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Floodplain wetland	Open escarpment	Enclosed escarpment	Open dipslope	Semi-enclosed dipslope	Parkland and estate farmland
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>								
Scale	large		●					
	medium	●		●	●		●	●
	small					●	◆	
Diversity	complex							●
	moderate	●	●	●	●		●	
	simple					●		
Structure	strong	●			●		●	●
	medium		●	●				
	weak					●		
Enclosure	open			●		●		
	semi-enclosed	●	●				●	●
	enclosed/intimate				●			
Boundaries	straight	●	●				●	
	sinuous			●	●	●		●
	stone walls							●
	hedges	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	hedgerow trees	●	●		●		●	●
	estate boundaries							●
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>								
Location	hilltop							
	ridgetop							
	hillside							
	valley side	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	valley floor	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Size	individual dwellings	●			●	●		●
	hamlets	●				●		
	small village	●						
	large village	●					●	
	town	●					●	
Pattern	dispersed	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	concentrated							
Form	nucleated	●				●	●	
	linear							
Materials	stone							
	brick	●			●	●	●	●
	flint	●			●	●	●	●
	cob							
	timber frame	●			●	●	●	●
	tiles	●			●	●	●	●
	thatch	◆			◆	◆	◆	◆
	slate	●			●	●	●	●



**Table 11.2: Thames valley and fringes - Landscape quality and sensitivity**

Key

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Floodplain wetland	Open escarpment	Enclosed escarpment	Open dipslope	Semi-enclosed dipslope	Parkland and estate farmland
LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY								
Scenic quality	high	●		●	●		●	●
	medium		●			●	◆	
	low							
Sense of place	strong	●		●	●		●	●
	medium		●			●		
	weak							
Intrusive influences	uncommon	●		●	●			●
	occasional		●			●	●	
	frequent							
Other heritage values (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon			●		●	●	
	occasional		●		●			●
	frequent	●						
Visual sensitivity	high			●		●		
	medium	●	●		●		●	●
	low							
Sensitivity to change	high	●		●				●
	moderate		●		●	●	●	
	low							
Management strategy	conserve	●		●	●		●	●
	repair					●	◆	
	restore		●					
	reconstruct							