

SUMMARY

A section of the Blackwater River Valley which has been exploited for gravel extraction and is being restored as the Moor Green Lake Nature Reserve. Scattered and small scale settlement is located at the edge of Finchampstead and north of Lower Sandhurst Road.

The boundaries of this area are largely determined by the borough boundaries with Hart and Bracknell Forest Districts. The restored gravel workings and therefore character area continue into Bracknell Forest and Hart. The western boundary to A3: Blackwater River Valley is the limit of recent gravel extraction. The northern boundary within Wokingham borough marks the transition from the floodplain to the upland landscapes of M2: Finchampstead Ridges Forested and Settled Sands and the more undulating landscape of N2: Finchampstead Pastoral Sandy Lowland.



Key Characteristics

- **Flat alluvial floodplain** at 55m AOD with gently sloping valley sides, loosely enclosed to the north east by the wooded ridges of Finchampstead (M2). The extensive surface geology of alluvium and river terrace deposits has resulted in extensive gravel extraction across the river valley, changing its original character.
- **Riverine landscape dominated by the River Blackwater**, a small river with a gently winding course enclosed by riverbank vegetation.
- **A series of large open water bodies created from flooded gravel pits in varying stages of restoration** which extend across the valley floor and connect to the larger restored gravel pits at Trilakes Country Park in the adjacent districts of Bracknell Forest and Hart.
- **Ecologically important wetland habitats have developed around the restored gravel pits**, including BAP priority habitat floodplain grazing marsh, wet woodland and grassland and create an appearance of natural landscape. Moor Green is well established as a Nature Reserve and LWS, Longwater Lane Meadow LWS is designated for its wet grassland. The floodplain is covered by the Blackwater Valley BOA. The open water of the restored gravel pits is an important habitat for birds.
- **Wooded and enclosed** character, created by woodland planting fringing the restored gravel pits, thick overgrown hedgerows with numerous mature hedgerow trees, and Fleet Copse LWS designated for a large BAP priority habitat lowland mixed deciduous woodland of ancient origin.
- **Irregular fields used for small-scale agriculture including horse grazing and paddocks**, south of Lower Sandhurst Road and south of Fleet Hill.
- **A rural linear settlement pattern along leafy lanes on the edge of the floodplain**, except for post-war development on the settlement edge of Finchampstead, where buildings tend to be set back, with long drives, and are therefore not very visible.
- **Informal recreational landscape** with trails and footpath connections to Trilakes Country Park, including the promoted Blackwater Valley Path.
- **Wooded backdrop to views** from Fleet Copse and extensive woodland on Finchampstead Ridges.
- **Attractive naturalistic landscape** with a backwater character created by the presence of open water surrounded by wetland vegetation.
- **Strong sense of tranquility and dark night skies** although disturbed locally by the busy B3016 and on-going restoration of the former gravel pits.

Natural Landscape

- B2.1 The main physical influence on this landscape is the presence of the River Blackwater. The valley has a gently sloping, and in some areas almost flat landform which contrasts with the steeper slopes of the Forested and Settled Sands leading up to Finchampstead Ridges to the north. The floodplain is comprised of alluvial and Second River Terrace deposits fringed by the sandy soils of the Bagshot Beds. This has resulted in the presence of Argillic Gley soils on the floodplain and

Gley-Podsols on the more elevated sandy soils. Both of these soil types are affected by high groundwater levels and are of marginal agricultural value.

- B2.2 The presence of sub-alluvial First and Second River Terrace Gravel led to exploitation by the aggregates industry. The area around Moor Green Farm has been restored as large lakes, part of a series which continues beyond the borough boundary to form the Yately Lakes, the foci of the Trilakes Country Park. The former Manor Farm and Fleethill Farm extraction sites are currently being restored.
- B2.3 Three Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) are located in the area, and house BAP priority habitat woodland and grassland. The largest of these is Fleet Copse, a significant block of ancient woodland dominated by oak (*Quercus robur*), ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and hazel (*Corylus avellana*) together with a rich assemblage of higher plant species. It has been managed as coppice with standards and has retained its original woodland banks. Longwater Lane Meadow contains meadow and an area of wet rushy grassland. Moor Green Lakes LWS supports a varied range of aquatic flora and trees, including the nationally scarce pillwort (*Pilularia globulifera*). The site is also important for waterfowl.
- B2.4 A few agricultural fields remain, south of Lower Sandhurst Road. These are irregular in shape and used predominately for small-scale arable land and horse grazing and paddocks. A soft fruit farm with associated polytunnels is located north of Sandhurst Road at Manor Farm.

Cultural Landscape

- B2.5 There is little evidence of prehistoric or Romano-British clearance along the Blackwater valley. The Blackwater formed part of the southern boundary of the Saxon shire, part of the kingdom of Wessex, but the valley appears not to have been a major focus for Saxon settlement.
- B2.6 Medieval and post-medieval settlement in this area was limited to farmsteads distributed along the lane running along the valley edge. During the medieval period the valley floor is likely to have comprised open fields and common grazing. Traces of the pattern of narrow sinuous fields running across the valley floor southeast of Finchampstead, shown on the first edition OS map, are still visible despite the gravel extraction and restoration, and indicate early enclosure of the open fields.
- B2.7 Finchampstead village which is mainly situated in character area N2: Finchampstead Pastoral Sandy Lowland expanded from its historic core with newer estate development spreading into the river valley, dating from the post-war era. These developments include estates with mock-vernacular character. There is a linear settlement located along Lower Sandhurst Road at the eastern edge of the character area located on the Bagshot Beds. This settlement includes a number of detached houses set within large grounds, some of which are visible from the Moor Green Lakes. Farm buildings are present at Hall Farm and Moor Green Farm, where horse paddocks are also present.
- B2.8 Roads are limited in this area to the B3016 crossing over the Blackwater River from Hart District, and Lower Sandhurst Road on the edge of the floodplain. The B0316 is a straight road from Finchampstead to Eversley Cross. It crosses the river at Finchampstead Bridge and replaced the earlier Longwater Lane ford crossing.
- B2.9 The character area has considerable informal recreational value. A small car park with an information board is located off Lower Sandhurst Road, and leads to a footpath and the Three Castles Path bordering the area of open water at Moor Green Lakes. This path connects to the Blackwater Valley Path and to the Trilakes Country Park in Bracknell Forest District. The Moor Green Lakes Group and Blackwater Valley Conservation Partnership have built a hide by the lake to encourage bird watching. Public access west of the B3016 is currently restricted, but will be restored once the gravel restoration has been completed.

Perceptual Landscape

- B2.10 The area exhibits a new 'natural' landscape of open water created by mineral extraction, and has a quiet backwater character. Within the Moor Green Lakes there is a remote and even secluded character, and the area feels far from residential development. The area is a resource of tranquillity and dark skies, particularly along the River Blackwater.
- B2.11 Fleet Copse and the woodland in M2: Finchampstead Ridges Forested and Settled Sands provide a wooded backdrop to much of the area, particularly above the Moor Green Lakes.

Valuable Landscape Attributes

- **Rural riverine character of the Blackwater River and restored floodplain** provide a sense of space.
- **Ecologically valuable wetland habitats** including BAP priority habitat eutrophic standing waters, lowland mixed deciduous woodland and floodplain grazing marsh, as well as remnant wet meadow and ancient woodland e.g. at Longwater Lane Meadow and Fleet Copse not affected by mineral extraction, which provide an important environment for flora and fauna.
- **Restored gravel pit lakes** which provide important ecological habitats and support a diverse range of birds, as well as opportunities for recreation.
- **Undeveloped character of the valley**, particularly in the floodplain, which provides a sense of naturalness and remoteness.
- **Quiet rural lanes bordered by hedgerows** which provide access to the area and enjoyment of the countryside.
- **Recreational value of the Moor Green Lake Nature Reserve** and the public rights of way including the promoted Blackwater Valley and Three Castles Paths which give access to the area and enjoyment of the river valley.
- **Localised areas of tranquillity and peacefulness, with an experience of dark skies**, particularly around the restored lakes, and away from the B0136.
- **Views to the wooded backdrop** of Fleet Copse and Finchampstead Ridges create an enclosed and secluded character, particularly around the Moor Green Lakes.

Landscape Condition

The perceptual characteristics of a calm, quiet character and new 'natural' landscape of open water created by mineral extraction are valued, and it is now in **good condition**. Restoration works of former gravel extraction sites at Manor Farm and Fleethill Farm are due to be completed by December 2018, which will improve provide opportunities to improve the condition of this area.

Key Issues

- Effects on tree health or species composition of woodland and wet woodland as a consequence of pathogens and climate change. Climate change is also likely to result in increased seasonal variation in river flows with, at times, greater flooding and at other times drought which is likely to impact riverside vegetation habitats and recreational enjoyment thereof.
- Past use of fertilisers and pesticides resulting in polluted run-off affecting water quality and biodiversity, although in recent years there has been improvement in water quality.

- Influence of woodland fell cycles on wider landscape character, in particular affecting wooded ridgelines of adjacent character areas (e.g. M2: Finchampstead Ridges Forested and Settled Sands).
- Loss of landscape features such as hedgerows, hedgerow standard trees, and pollarded willows on waterside pasture.
- Changes in water levels and associated habitats due to drainage schemes.
- Changes in management that could result in loss of fragmentation of wetland habitats as a result of scrub encroachment.
- Changes in agricultural practice, with the expansion of agricultural polytunnels for soft fruit growing. This is leading to visual intrusion of these elements and the loss of traditional pastoral land uses.
- Pressure for built development in adjacent areas, particularly on the skyline leading to loss of wooded ridges, characteristic of the Wokingham landscape.
- Demands for upgrading the winding network of rural lanes with new signage, line painting and widening threatens the intimate rural character of the lanes.

Landscape Strategy

To maintain the landscape character of the *Blackwater River Valley with Open Water* the following strategy is required: to conserve and enhance wetland and woodland habitats.

The key aspects to be conserved, enhanced and actively managed are the River Blackwater corridor, the wetland habitats associated with the river and former gravel works, the woodland (particularly the ancient woodland) and the perceptual characteristics including the peaceful setting and dark skies.

In terms of development, the aim is to conserve the sparse settlement pattern and retain the views to the wooded backdrop provided by Fleet Copse and M2: Finchampstead Ridges Forested and Settled Sands.

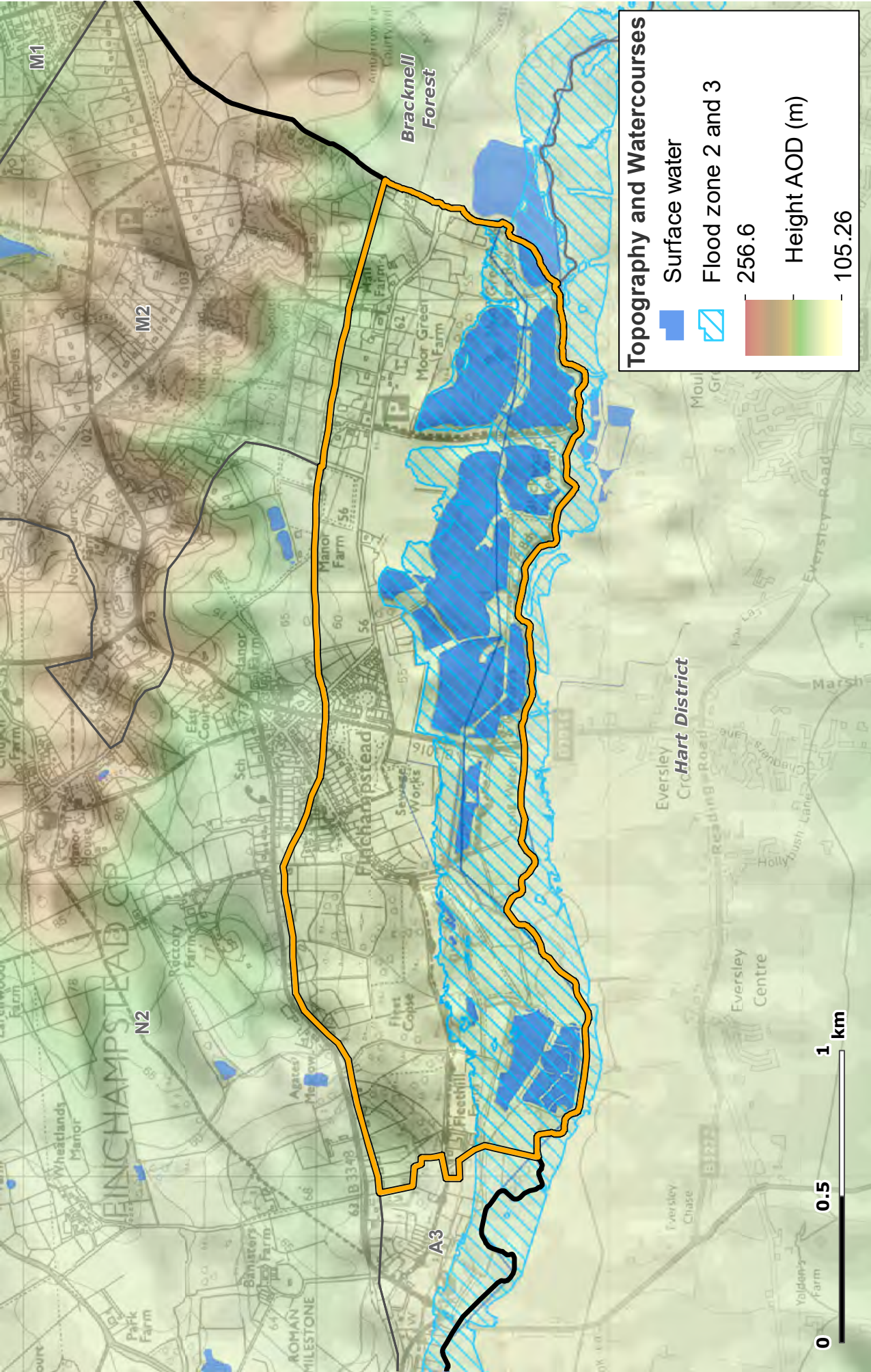
Landscape Guidelines

- **Conserve, protect and enhance the scenic quality and naturalistic character of the river corridor and restored gravel pits**, restoring former gravel extraction sites to maximise biodiversity and scenic qualities.
- **Manage and enhance the wildlife interest of agricultural fields** by encouraging the creation of uncultivated field margins and other wildlife-friendly farming methods around intensively farmed fields.
- **Minimise the expansion and visual impact of agricultural polytunnels** through careful siting and design.
- **Reinstate or repair hedgerows with native species of hedgerow trees and shrubs to create a connected landscape pattern** where there are opportunities to do so.
- **Conserve, enhance and manage wetland habitats, particularly in newly restored areas of former gravel pits**, and BAP priority habitats, particularly from development, changes in land use and encroachment by secondary woodland and scrub. The area is part of the Blackwater Valley BOA. This network of re-created natural habitats, which extend into Bracknell Forest and Hart districts, has been identified as a target for habitat re-creation and restoration and positive

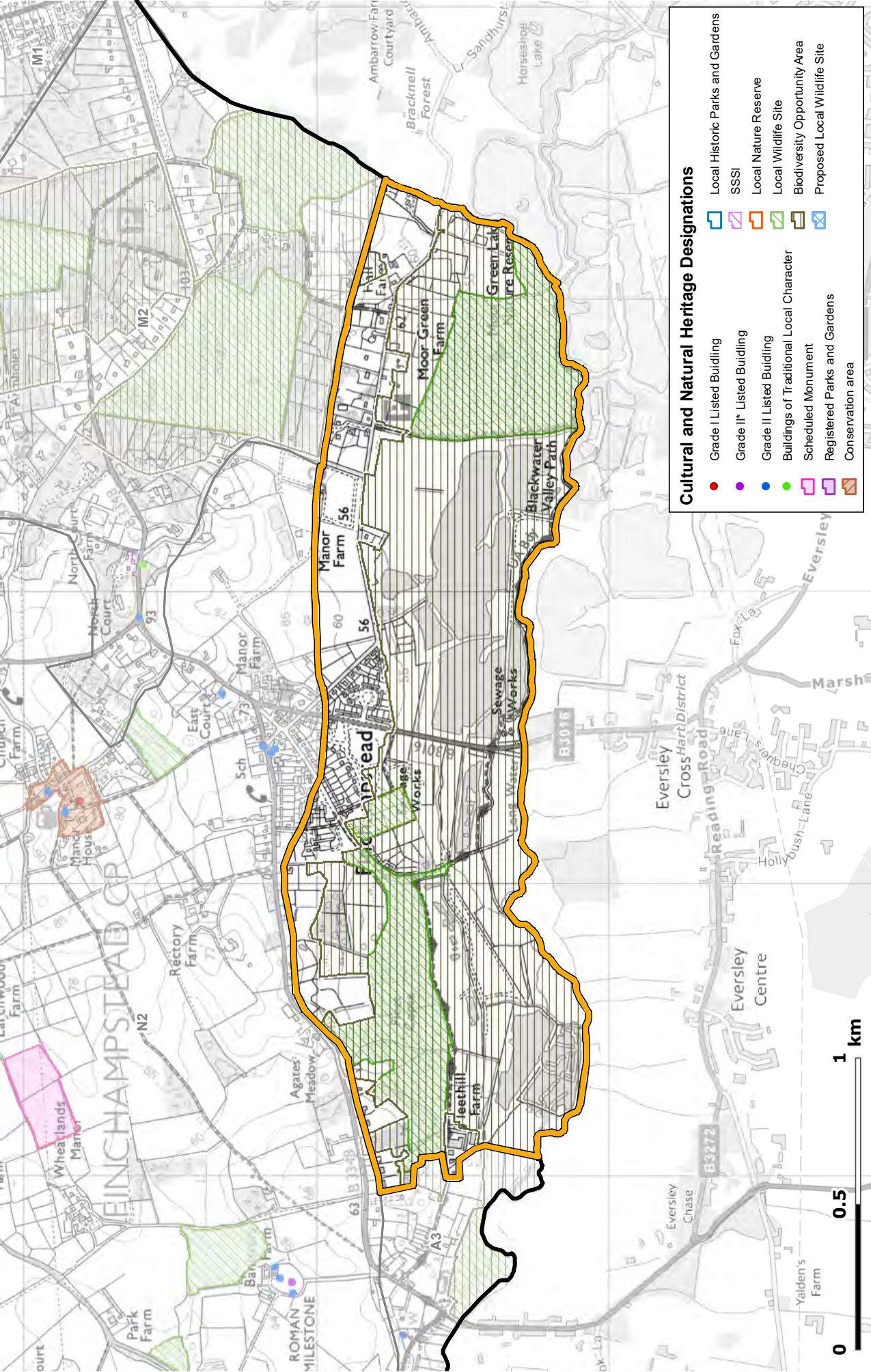
management of grassland and wetland habitats. An appropriate wetland management regime is critical.

- **Maintain the prevailing hydrology and water tables to enable anaerobic conditions to preserve archaeological sites** in low lying wetland areas, particularly along river corridors.
- **Seek sympathetic integration of new recreational facilities** e.g. hides, footpaths, and associated car parks into the landscape.
- **Enhance informal recreational enjoyment of the landscape** and consider zoning of activities to ensure ecologically valuable are protected. Ensure appropriate management of informal recreation, particularly in relation to the Rights of Way network.
- **Maintain the sparse linear settlement pattern** of dispersed low density domestic scale small settlement set within large plots and farm buildings through control of new development, avoiding further linear spread of development. Consider opportunities to strengthen and enhance the landscape setting to existing villages through planting.
- **Maintain and enhance the character of the rural lanes**, resisting unsympathetic highways improvements, infrastructure and signage.
- **Retain and maintain views to the wooded hills.** Consider the impact of any development on the views to the wooded ridgeline. Consider the effects of change within the adjacent area on this valley landscape.
- **Conserve and enhance the perception of tranquillity and remoteness in the landscape**, including the experience of dark skies, through the management of development.

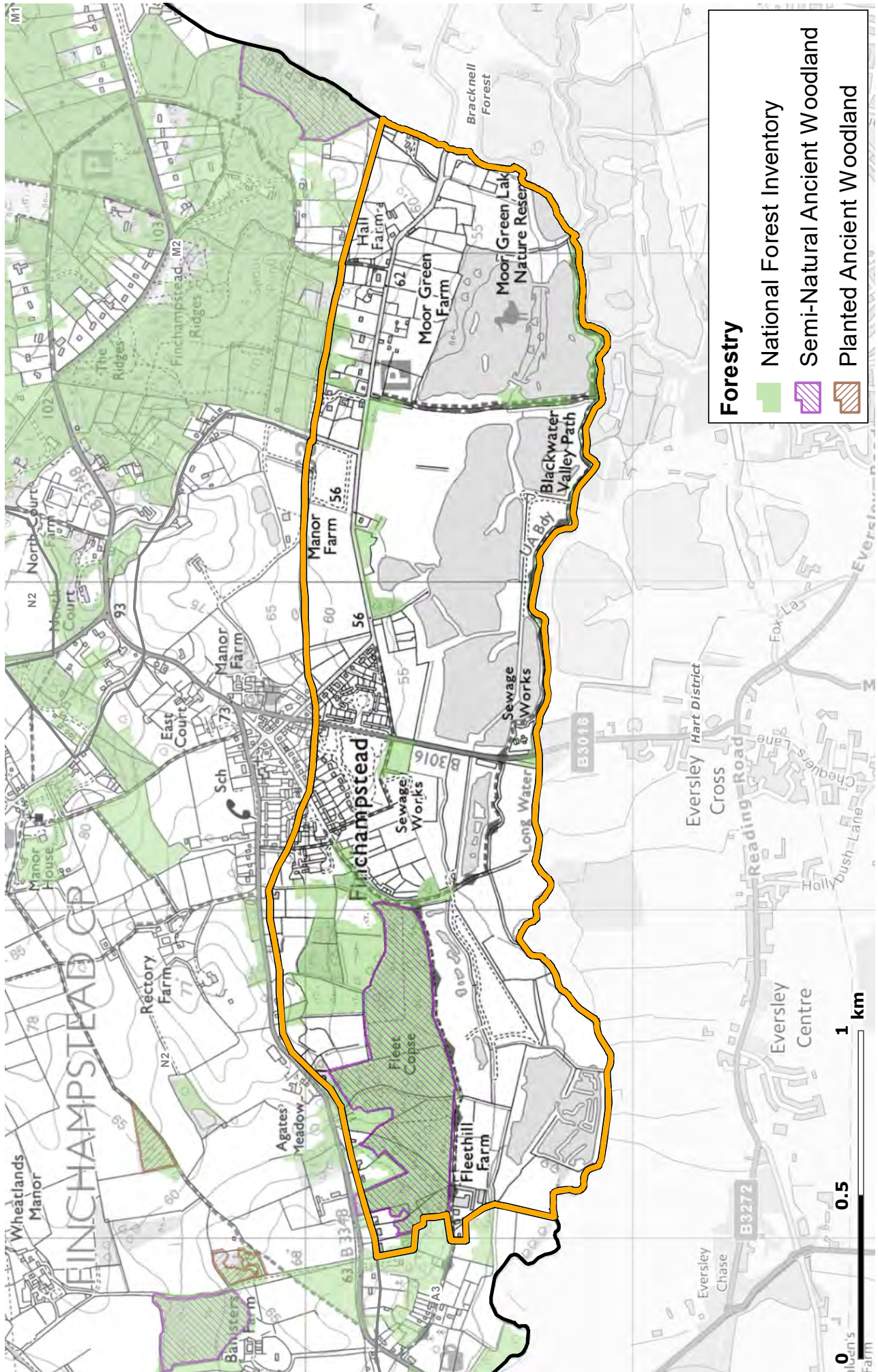
B2: Thames River Valley with Open Water



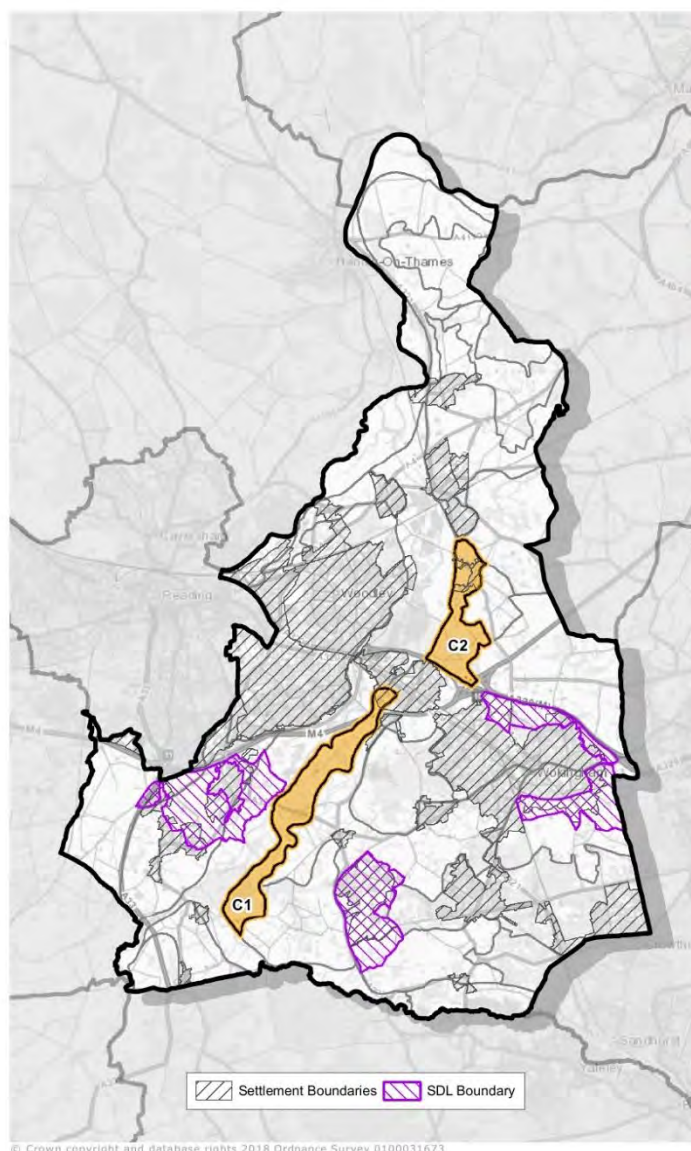
B2: Thames River Valley with Open Water



B2: Thames River Valley with Open Water



C: River Terrace



Description

The LCT is distinguished by a flat landform of younger river terraces, close to the modern rivers. A semi-enclosed landscape of large-scale agricultural fields, divided by post and wire fencing or hedgerows, with settlement connections to the adjacent river.

Landscape Character Areas

The **River Terrace** LCT is subdivided into two Landscape Character Areas:

- C1: Arborfield River Terrace
- C2: Hurst River Terrace

