

LAND AT STANBURY HOUSE, SPENCERS WOOD

LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL APPRAISAL

APPENDIX 9

EXTRACTS OF THE WOKINGHAM BOROUGH LANDSCAPE

CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

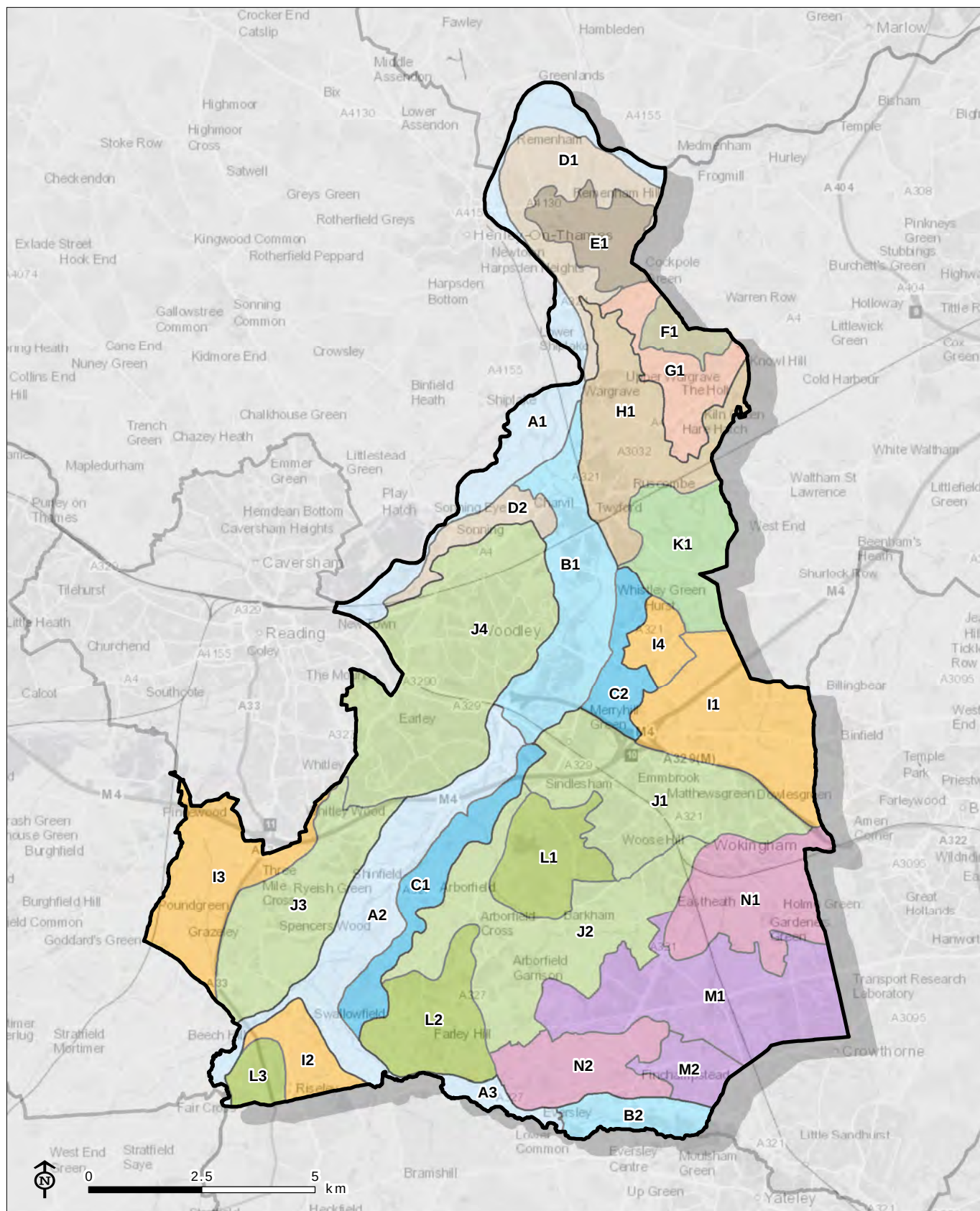
for
Cooper Estates Strategic Land Limited.

March 2025

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Wokingham Borough boundary

Wokingham LCTs and LCAs 2019

- A - River Valley
- B - River Valley with Open Water
- C - River Terrace
- D - Wooded Chalk Slopes
- E - Arable Chalk Plateau
- F - Chalk Knolls
- G - Farmed Chalk Slopes

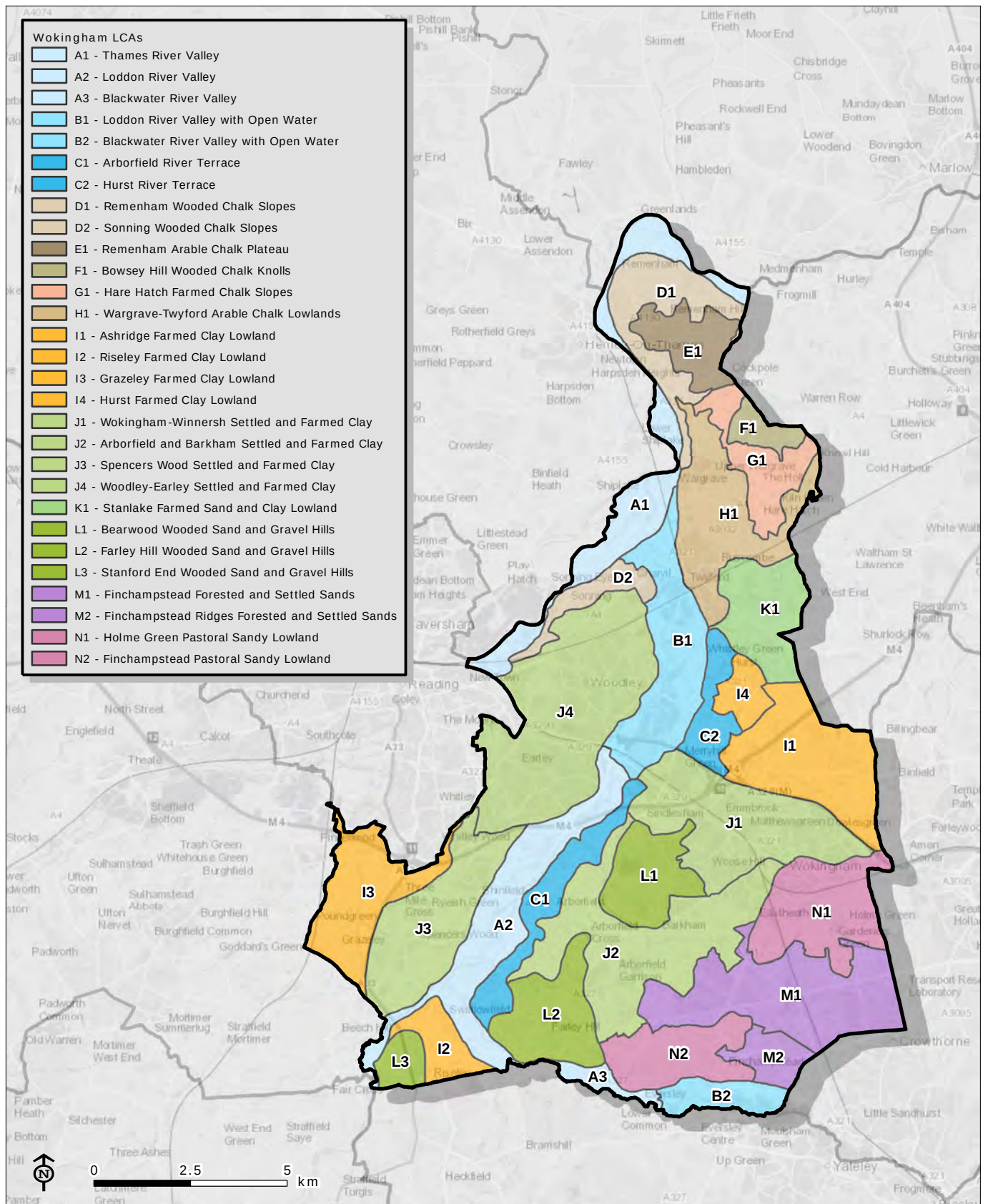
Source: LUC, Campaign to Protect Rural England

- H - Arable Chalk Lowlands
- I - Farmed Clay Lowland
- J - Settled and Farmed Clay
- K - Farmed Sand and Clay Lowland
- L - Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills
- M - Forested and Settled Sands
- N - Pastoral Sandy Lowland

Wokingham - Landscape Character Assessment

Figure 4.1: Landscape character types and areas

LUC



 Wokingham Borough boundary

Wokingham Landscape
Character Assessment

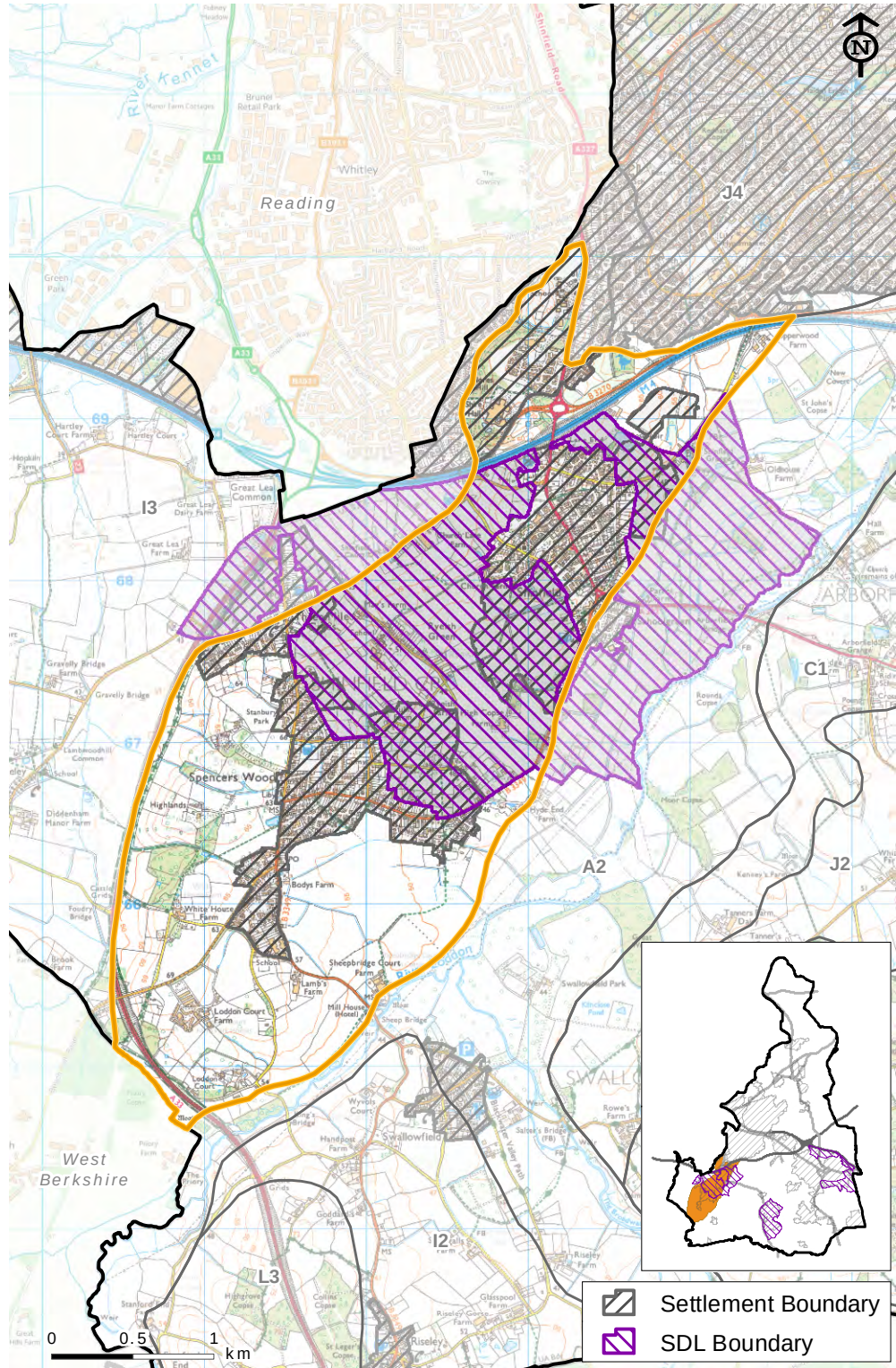
Figure 4.2: Landscape
Character Areas

LUC

Source: LUC, Campaign to Protect Rural England

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Map Scale @ A4: 1:140,000



SUMMARY

An undulating landscape of large arable fields with some pasture. Ongoing development in the north of the area, part of the South of the M4 SDL, is increasing the settled character of the area adding to the urbanising influence of its proximity to Reading. The south remains rural with a number of woodlands remnant parklands and open pasture.

The Spencers Wood Settled and Farmed Clay is a locally prominent clay ridge that separates A2: Loddon River Valley on its eastern edge from I3: Grazeley Farmed Clay Lowland on its western boundary. Both boundaries are defined by topography, where the clay ridge ends. The northern boundary extends into the urban edge of Woodley-Earley, and the southern boundary by the borough boundary, although the landscape character extends into West Berkshire.



Key Characteristics

- Rolling clay ridge above the Loddon Valley to the east and the lowlands to the west, rising to a flat sandy plateau at 66m AOD.
- Small scattered mixed deciduous woodland blocks and copses including some of ancient origin, many designated as LWS, most located on the steep west and south facing slopes of the ridge.
- Fragmented unimproved meadow habitats, with BAP priority habitat lowland meadow, are found on lower slopes, for example Clare's Green Road LWS.
- Large arable fields with some pasture, with an intact hedgerow network and hedgerow oaks. Horse paddocks feature on the edge of settlements or around large farmsteads e.g. Sheepridge Court and Loddon Court Farms. Smaller and irregular field boundaries around Three Mile Cross and Spencers Wood are still evident, indicating early enclosure.
- Remnant parkland at Shinfield Grange, Loddon Court, Shinfield Lodge, Stanbury Park and Highlands. A number of these are clustered along the top of the ridge overlooking the clay lowlands of Grazeley to the west. These parklands contain BAP priority habitat lowland wood pasture and parkland and ancient woodland. Visually prominent parkland veteran trees include many Wellingtonias, there is a prominent avenue of these trees along the drive to Wellington Court, originally the Stanbury Park estate.
- The GHQ Stop Line and associated Second World War features built during the summer of 1940 to contain the threatened German invasion.
- Densely settled landscape, with new large-scale residential estate development around the substantially 20th century settlements of Shinfield, Spencers Wood and Three Mile Cross, as part of South of the M4 SDL.
- To the south of the area, settlement is more scattered with traditional farmsteads many with a strong vernacular of polychromatic Reading brick and weatherboarding. A number of farmhouses are listed including Grade II* Sheepridge Court. There is a permanent mobile home site at Loddon Court Farm and some agricultural buildings have been converted to other uses e.g. Lambs Farm Business Park.
- Network of rural lanes bordered by water-filled ditches connect the original settlement pattern. Some B roads have urbanised features including kerbs and pavements. The A33 form the western border and is very busy, while the M4 crosses the area north of Shinfield, and introduces noise and movement.
- Sense of elevation from the ridgeline and good views over surrounding lowlands including to the Loddon valley and over West Berkshire.

Natural Landscape

- J3.1 The Spencers Wood Settled and Farmed Clay is characterised by a prominent, undulating clay ridge between two lowland areas of A2: Loddon River Valley to the east and I3: Grazeley Farmed Clay Lowland to the west. The landscape rises to a flat, sandy plateau of 66m AOD at Stanbury Park, deposited as a fifth level terrace of a proto-Thames. The sandy soils of the plateau are acidic and give rise to distinctive vegetation and historic land use of common land around Spencers Wood. There are a number of River Terrace Gravel deposits throughout the area.

- J3.2 The flat plateau area was formerly Spencerswood Common but all common land has now been enclosed. The former common is now a network of fields, woodland and parkland and is characterised by acid-loving species such as Scots pine, birch, holly and rhododendron.
- J3.3 Elsewhere, the rolling agricultural landscape is characterised by a variety of field sizes divided by largely intact hedgerows and mature hedgerow oaks. Arable fields are most prominent, although there is pasture and horse grazing, particularly on the edge of settlements. Temporary planning permission was granted for a solar farm at Sheepridge Court.
- J3.4 There are a number of woodlands, mixed woodland belts and tree clumps associated with designed landscapes or remnant deciduous copses. Much of the woodland, including areas to the north of the M4, contain BAP priority habitat lowland mixed deciduous woodland and are designated as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). There are areas of ancient woodland, with a history of coppice with standard management. Often this traditional management has ceased, but at Pearman's Copse LWS and LNR this management system has been reintroduced. Old ash stools with field maple (*Acer campestre*) and hazel (*Corylus avellana*) dominate Pearman's Copse, and it supports a rich woodland flora with around 27 ancient woodland indicator species and a good range of woodland invertebrates.
- J3.5 There are small fragmented areas of unimproved neutral grassland, some recorded as BAP priority habitat lowland meadows. Clare's Green Road Grassland LWS is designated for its botanical interest.
- J3.6 The presence of parkland is a feature of the landscape, with remnant parklands around Loddon Court, Highlands and Shinfield Park at Nores Hill, some of which is BAP priority habitat lowland wood pasture and parkland. Parkland trees stand out as features against the skyline including individual Wellingtonias and especially the avenue of *Wellingtonias* along the drive to Wellington Court, previously the Stanbury Park estate. The Highlands site is visually open and is a defining feature on the edge of Spencers Wood.
- J3.7 A small area between Loddon Court and Sheepbridge Court Farm is part of the Loddon Valley South BOA. This is mainly concentrated along the course of the River Loddon and Broadwater in A2: Loddon River Valley however the farmland bordering the Loddon is potentially important for farmland birds.
- J3.8 Residential development is a significant land use. Boundaries include rows of conifers and suburban fences that have eroded the rural character of the ridge in places and contrast with the native hedgerows and hedgerow trees of the surrounding farmland. Other features that have an urbanising influence on the landscape are street lighting, white lines and road signs, kerbs and pavements, lay-bys and municipal street furniture along with disturbance generated by road users.
- J3.9 The public open space and SANGS created as part of the South of the M4 SDL between the settlements of Shinfield, Spencers Wood and Three Mile Cross is important in maintaining the separation and landscape setting of the three settlements. The southern settlement edge of Spencers Wood is defined by roadside and hedgerow trees.

Cultural Landscape

- J3.10 In common with clay soils found elsewhere in the borough there is little evidence for extensive prehistoric or Romano-British settlement of this area at the edge of the Loddon river valley. By Saxon times it appears likely that settlement and agriculture expanded onto previously marginal areas - the "-feld" element in the name of Shinfield, a Domesday settlement, suggesting a largely open and cultivated landscape in the Saxon period.
- J3.11 In the medieval period in this area, forest law protected the Crown's hunting, timber and other rights over both private and common land in the face of pressure from assart incursions into the woodland for cultivation and pasture. The piecemeal clearance of woodland to form cultivable land by assarting, and later by agreement, continued until the 18th century.
- J3.12 The first edition OS map shows the area to contain numerous small irregular fields with wavy boundaries, indicative of early enclosure of former open fields, as well as of heath and common as

at Spencers Common. Some of the common still existed at the time the map was drawn. With adjoining landscapes of the Loddon (A2, C1) and Farley Hill (L2) these form the largest area of early enclosure landscape in the borough. Some fields around Three Mile Cross and Spencers Wood still show this early enclosure pattern, although much of this has been lost through expanding development or amalgamation of fields.

- J3.13 Spencers Wood takes its name from the Despencer family who owned Beaumys Castle (located on the River Loddon) an important medieval family. Beaumys was later held by Nicholas de la Beche (Seneschal of Gascony and Governor of Edward III's heir the Black Prince) after whom Beech Hill is named.
- J3.14 There was a loose network of winding country lanes, but few major roads until the 18th century. The road between Reading and Basingstoke (now the A33), was established in 1718 and was one of the earliest turnpike roads in Berkshire.
- J3.15 The traditional settlement pattern was of small agricultural settlements at Shinfield and Three Mile Cross, surrounded by quite closely spaced medieval/post medieval farmhouses. The rural farmsteads are often timber framed infilled with soft polychromatic Reading brick with half-hipped clay tiled roofs and brick walls as boundary features. A number of these farmhouses are now listed buildings including the Grade II* Sheepridge Court. Weatherboarding is a distinctive feature. Some of these traditional agricultural buildings are now encapsulated within more recent suburban development where they form landmark buildings. Traces of areas of landscaped parkland associated with country houses are still evident to varying degrees around Shinfield Park (The Grove), Stanbury Park, Highlands and Loddon Court.
- J3.16 The area saw rapid expansion during the Victorian and post-Victorian periods resulting in developments of Victorian semi-detached properties at Spencers Wood, Three Mile Cross and Shinfield.
- J3.17 These settlements are now expanding, as part of the South of the M4 SDL, with estate-type developments with public open space and SANGS between the settlements. The modern built development shows a large range of different house styles and use of materials, with little consistent character of form, although brick is the most common material. The Thames Valley Science Park, in the north of the area between the M4 and Cutbush Lane East, is under development. This includes the Gateway building, which is clad in corten steel giving it a distinctive red appearance and making it highly visible across the landscape. The new Shinfield Relief Road was opened in 2017, connecting the Blackboy Roundabout north of the M4 with the A327 (in A2). This provides access to the Thames Valley Science Park and new development as part of the South of the M4 SDL.
- J3.18 Other significant 20th century additions are the Second World War pillboxes and buried tank ditch located on the southern end of the clay ridge and form part of the defensive GHQ Stop Line, built in 1940 and which extends east along the River Loddon and northwards along the Foudry Brook.
- J3.19 A network of footpaths and narrow tracks provide opportunities for informal recreation, and give the area beyond the settlement a rural character.

Perceptual Landscape

- J3.20 The M4 in the north of the area and the A33 dual carriageway along the western boundary introduce noise and movement into the area although the A33 corridor is well-treed and in a cutting adjacent to the southern end of the clay ridge reducing impacts. Views to Reading and the built up areas north of the M4 introduce an urbanising element.
- J3.21 Away from these transport corridors and settlements, particularly south of Spencers Wood, the area retains a rural character, with views over the surrounding lowland landscapes of the Loddon valley and the arable fields around Grazeley. From the south of the area there are views across West Berkshire towards Stratfield Mortimer and other nearby villages. There are areas along the southern boundary of the area with high levels of tranquillity and dark night skies.
- J3.22 The slopes of the clay ridgeline provide physical and visual separation between the settlements of Spencers Wood and Three Mile Cross.

J3.23 Mary Russell Mitford, author of 'Our Village' often walked along Woodcock Lane (a footpath now running along the A33 Swallowfield bypass) of which she wrote:

"In that very lane am I writing on this sultry June day, luxuriating in the shade, the verdure, the fragrance of hayfield and beanfield, and the absence of any noise except the song of birds and the whir of a thousand forms of insect life so often heard among the general hush of a summer noon".

Valuable Landscape Attributes

- Remnant historic parklands and visually prominent parkland trees, including many Wellingtonias, especially the avenue of this species which provide time-depth, visual diversity and a sense of orientation to the landscape.
- Pattern of arable and pastoral fields, which provide a rural character away from the urban areas and provide an important separation between settlements.
- Small-scale woodlands provide visual diversity in the landscape, as well as ecologically important habitats.
- Strong hedgerow network with standard oaks provides a wooded character and visual interest within the rural landscape.
- Network of rural lanes bordered by water-filled ditches provide evidence of the original settlement pattern.
- Views to the surrounding lowlands provide a sense of place and of orientation.
- Undeveloped slopes of the clay ridgeline which is visually prominent and provides separation between settlements.
- The GHQ Stop Line and associated Second World War features which follows the course of the Foudry Brook crossing the southern end of the clay ridge and along the River Loddon.
- Open area of former common land to the west of Basingstoke Road at 'Highlands'.
- Beaumys Castle, a rare example of a defensive moated site in medieval times and on the front line of the GHQ defence in the Second World War.
- Isolated traditional farmsteads and their associated buildings, particularly in the south of the LCA.

Landscape Condition

The survival of former field patterns, the remnants of historic parklands, woodland blocks and the hedgerow network are in good condition. The new South of the M4 SDL and other development, and urban edge of Reading fragment the rural character of the northern part of the area, while the major transport corridors introduce noise and movement, except where well screened by ground modelling or trees.

Key Issues

- Loss of deciduous woodland or changes in woodland structure due to loss of species diversity of the traditionally coppiced woodlands have occurred in the past through cessation of coppice management, leading to a change in character. However, there are positive signs that woodlands are being brought back into management.
- Effects on tree heath or species composition of woodland as a consequence of pathogens and

climate change.

- Hedgerow and tree loss and soil erosion associated with settlement expansion and intensification of agriculture.
- Past use of fertilisers and pesticides resulted in a polluted run-off affecting water quality and biodiversity within the water filled ditches
- Potential for agricultural land to be kept in 'hope' value, and therefore not well managed, particularly around settlement edges and on the urban fringe.
- Pressure for horse/pony paddocks, particularly at settlement edges leading to a decrease in rural intactness.
- Drainage operations have resulted in loss of wetland habitats. This threat continues as a result of drainage schemes associated with new building works and agriculture.
- Lack of the recruitment of young trees (through natural regeneration or planting) required to rebalance the age structure of parkland and hedgerow trees is an on-going threat to the character of the landscape.
- Pressure for large scale residential development and supporting infrastructure, such as the South of the M4 Strategic Development, impacting landscape character and leading to further pressure to amalgamate the separate settlements
- Pressure to develop the undulating slopes of the clay ridgeline which are visually prominent.
- Pressure for new commercial premises, including the further major expansion of the Thames Valley Science Park, over a 20 year period.
- Increased traffic on rural roads due to expanding residential development leading to further loss of tranquillity, and erosion of road version and demands for upgrading the winding network of rural lanes with new signage, line painting and widening threatening the intimate rural character of the lanes.
- There is continuing pressure for new roads or additional lanes on existing roads, associated with the South of the M4 SDL particularly in this well populated and commercially vibrant area, leading to visual intrusion of transport corridors and fragmentation of the landscape.
- Light pollution at night causing 'sky glow'.
- Increasing demand for communication masts, pylons and poles leading to visual intrusion of these elements in the open landscape.
- Decline or decay of historic features including those of the GHQ Stop Line.

Landscape Strategy

To maintain the landscape character of the *Spencers Wood Farmed and Settled Clay* the following strategy is required: to conserve and enhance the rural character of the agricultural landscape. The key aspects to be enhanced and actively managed are the pattern of hedgerows, remnant parkland, trees and avenues, views to the Loddon Valley and west Berkshire, the rural character of the lanes, and the GHQ Stop Line. There are opportunities for woodland planting to integrate the M4, busy roads and expanding urban fringes of Reading, in particular around the expanding settlements of Shinfield, Spencers Wood and Three Mile Cross as part of the South of the M4 SDL.

In terms of development, the aim is to conserve the rural character of the landscape and gaps between settlements while maintaining the integrity of settlement identity.

Landscape Guidelines

- Conserve and enhance the wooded character of the landscape. Conserve ancient woodlands and woodland copses. Continue to promote appropriate management through natural regeneration, control of non-native species and coppicing as a management tool for neglected woodland.
- 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.
- Conserve and manage hedgerows with standard oaks as important wildlife habitats and landscape features, as well as the links they provide across the landscape and between areas of woodland. Reinstate or repair hedgerows with native species where there are opportunities to do so. Plan for the next generation of hedgerow trees with a programme of tree planting.
- Conserve and protect the landscape pattern of mixed pasture and arable fields and encourage appropriate management of grassland by grazing.
- Manage the integration of equine related activities into the landscape through the maintenance of existing boundaries or restoration of hedgerows and control of associated built elements.
- Conserve and protect the parkland landscapes associated with former manor houses, particularly in areas of BAP priority habitat lowland wood pasture and parkland. Plan for the next generation of parkland and avenue trees.
- Conserve features associated with the GHQ Stop Line.
- Conserve, enhance and manage woodland and meadow habitats, particularly BAP priority habitats and LWS, from development and changes in land use. An area of land between Sheepridge Court and Loddon Court Farm is part of the Loddon Valley South BOA. The farmland bordering the Loddon is potentially important for farmland birds such as Yellowhammer. An appropriate woodland and meadow management regime is critical.
- Conserve and enhance the integration of urban edges through wooded boundaries, hedgerows and large-species trees to provide visual screening and a positive interface between the built up and rural areas.
- Conserve the open and rural character of the farmed landscape which provides a physical and visual separation or gaps between settlements. Protect the individual identity of towns and villages, and retain their sense of physical and visual separation. Resist pressure for development on the slopes or the ridgeline which provides physical and visual separation between settlements, particularly Spencers Wood and Three Mile Cross.
- Maintain and enhance the character of rural lanes resisting unsympathetic highways improvements, infrastructure and signage, particularly in the most rural areas.
- Enhance sense of place through careful design (including siting, massing, scale, materials and landscape – and sensitive lighting to retain dark skies at night) to minimise the impacts of any potential new development on valuable attributes.
- Use appropriate woodland, hedgerow and tree planting to help integrate roads into the landscape including the Shinfield Eastern Relief Road. Encourage retention of wooded edges and boundaries along roads and minimising fencing and other boundary structures.

- Take care in the siting and design of vertical elements e.g. communication masts and the siting and design of large agricultural buildings so they do not impact on the valuable characteristics of this landscape.
- Reduce and prevent further noise and light pollution through the sensitive siting of any new development, including infrastructure, and especially any proposed night-time lighting.

