

Part 2:

The Landscape Character of Wokingham Borough



Landscape Character Classification

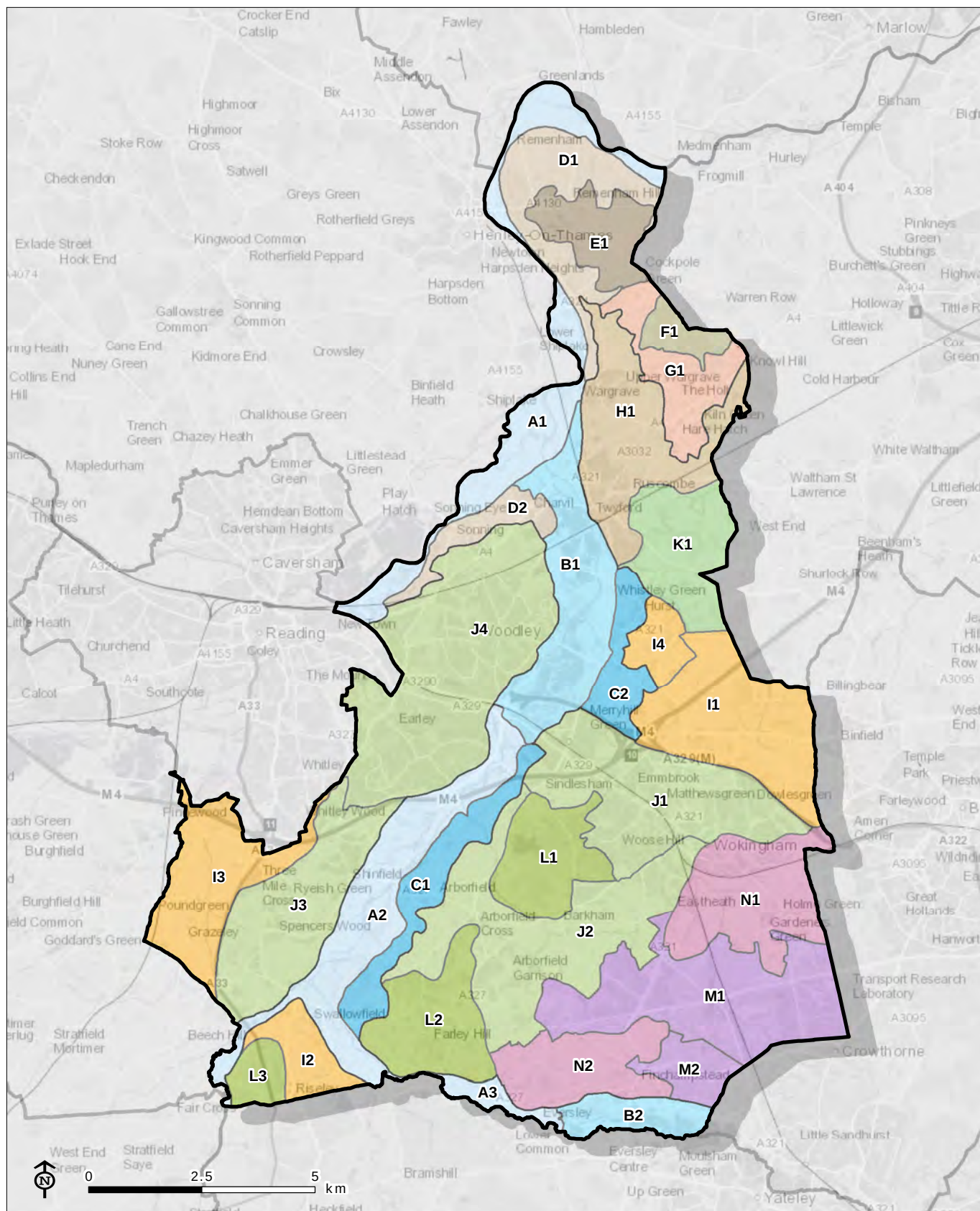
Landscape Types and Character Areas

- 4.1 The updated landscape classification identifies 14 landscape character types each representing a distinct identity and reflecting the range of contrasting landscapes across the borough. These are illustrated in Figure 4.1 below.
- 4.2 The changes in character types represent the gradual change across the borough. The transition between types, both within the borough and across administrative boundaries, is gradual and therefore boundaries are transitional rather than hard lines of change.
- 4.3 Wooded and farmed chalk landscapes associated with the Chilterns AONB, which rise up from the Thames Basin, define the north of the borough (LCTs D: Wooded Chalk Slopes, LCT G: Chalk Slopes and LCT F: Chalk Knolls and the flatter but elevated landscape of LCT E: Chalk Plateau).
- 4.4 Lowland landscapes associated with the wider Thames Valley dominate the centre of the borough, with larger scale arable farmland underlain by chalk (LCT H: Arable Chalk Lowland) or clay (LCT I: Clay Lowland and LCT K: Sand and Clay Lowland). More marginal farmed landscapes (LCT J: Settled and Farmed Clay) particularly along the M4/A329 (M) corridor and adjacent to the urban areas extending from Reading and Wokingham itself are found in this central belt.
- 4.5 Hydrological features dominate these lowlands and the borough is crossed by three river valleys (LCT A: River Valleys) some which have experienced extensive mineral workings creating a landscape of large lakes and ecologically important wetlands (LCT B: River Valley with Open Water) and their associated river terrace landscapes (LCT C: River Terrace).
- 4.6 To the south of the borough, the landscape is smaller scale and predominantly pastoral (LCT N: Pastoral Sandy Lowland) where it is underlain by sandy acidic soils with more undulating heaths and woodlands to the south east (LCT L: Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills and LCT M: Forested and Settled Sands).
- 4.7 Landscape types share broadly similar patterns of geology, topography, vegetation and human influences in each area in which they occur. Although not identical they share a common pattern of elements e.g. River Valley LCT.
- 4.8 Each landscape type is divided into a number of geographically specific landscape character areas (LCAs). These share generic characteristics with other areas of the same type but have their own particular identity or 'sense of place', e.g. Loddon River Valley LCA. The revised classification identifies 28 separate landscape character areas. Some of these cover relatively small areas along the borough boundary which extend into neighbouring authorities. These are illustrated in Figure 4.2.
- 4.9 It is important to note that the boundary between one character area and the next is transitional and there is rarely a clear cut change. The precision of boundaries drawn around landscape character areas and types varies with the scale and level of detail of the assessment. This assessment has been mapped at a scale of 1:25,000 which means that it is suitable for use at this scale. The scale of this classification will need to be taken into account whenever the assessment is used, to ensure that the level of detail is compatible with the intended application.

Table 4.1: Landscape Character Types and Areas in Wokingham

Ref	Type	Area
A	River Valley	Thames River Valley (A1)
		Loddon River Valley (A2)
		Blackwater River Valley (A3)
B	River Valley with Open Water	Loddon River Valley with Open Water (B1)
		Blackwater River Valley with Open Water (B2)
C	River Terrace	Arborfield River Terrace (C1)
		Hurst River Terrace (C2)
D	Wooded Chalk Slopes	Remenham Wooded Chalk Slopes (D1)
		Sonning Wooded Chalk Slopes (D2)
E	Arable Chalk Plateau	Remenham Arable Chalk Plateau (E1)
F	Wooded Chalk Knolls	Bowsey Hill Wooded Chalk Knolls (F1)
G	Farmed Chalk Slopes	Hare Hatch Farmed Chalk Slopes (G1)
H	Arable Chalk Lowlands	Wargrave-Twyford Arable Chalk Lowlands (H1)
I	Farmed Clay Lowland	Ashridge Farmed Clay Lowland (I1)
		Riseley Farmed Clay Lowland (I2)

J	Settled and Farmed Clay	Grazeley Farmed Clay Lowland (I3)
		Wokingham-Winnersh Settled and Farmed Clay (J1)
		Arborfield and Barkham Settled and Farmed Clay (J2)
K	Farmed Sand and Clay Lowland	Spencers Wood Settled and Farmed Clay (J3)
		Woodley-Earley Settled and Farmed Clay (J4)
		Stanlake Farmed Sand and Clay Lowland (K1)
L	Sand and Gravel Hills	Bearwood Sand and Gravel Hills (L1)
		Farley Hill Sand and Gravel Hills (L2)
M	Forested and Settled Sands	Stanford End Sand and Gravel Hills (L3)
		Finchampstead Forested and Settled Sands (M1)
		Finchampstead Ridges Forested and Settled Sands (M2)
N	Pastoral Sandy Lowland	Holme Green Pastoral Sandy Lowland (N1)
		Finchampstead Pastoral Sandy Lowland (N2)



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

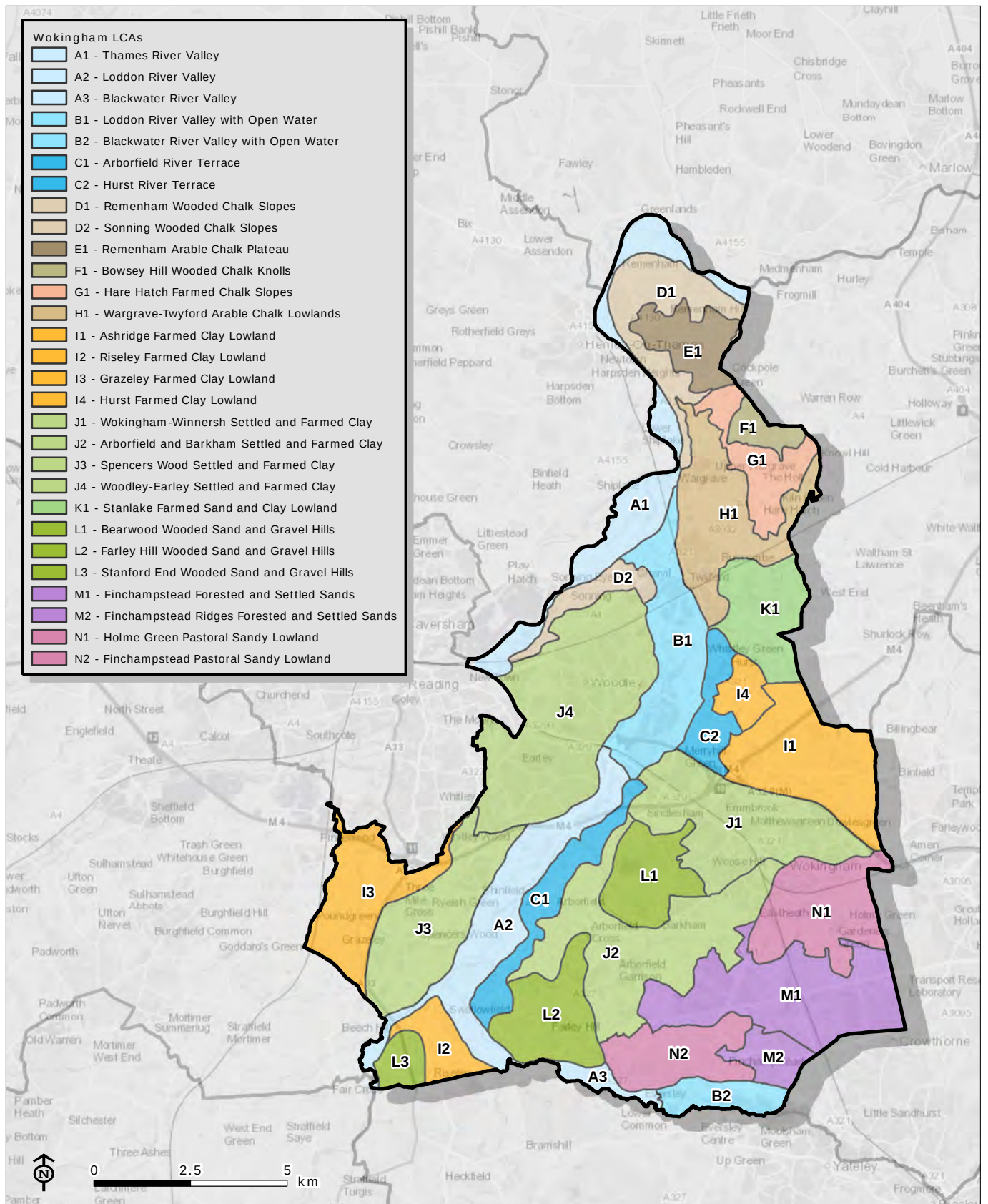
Source: LUC, Campaign to Protect Rural England

- 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

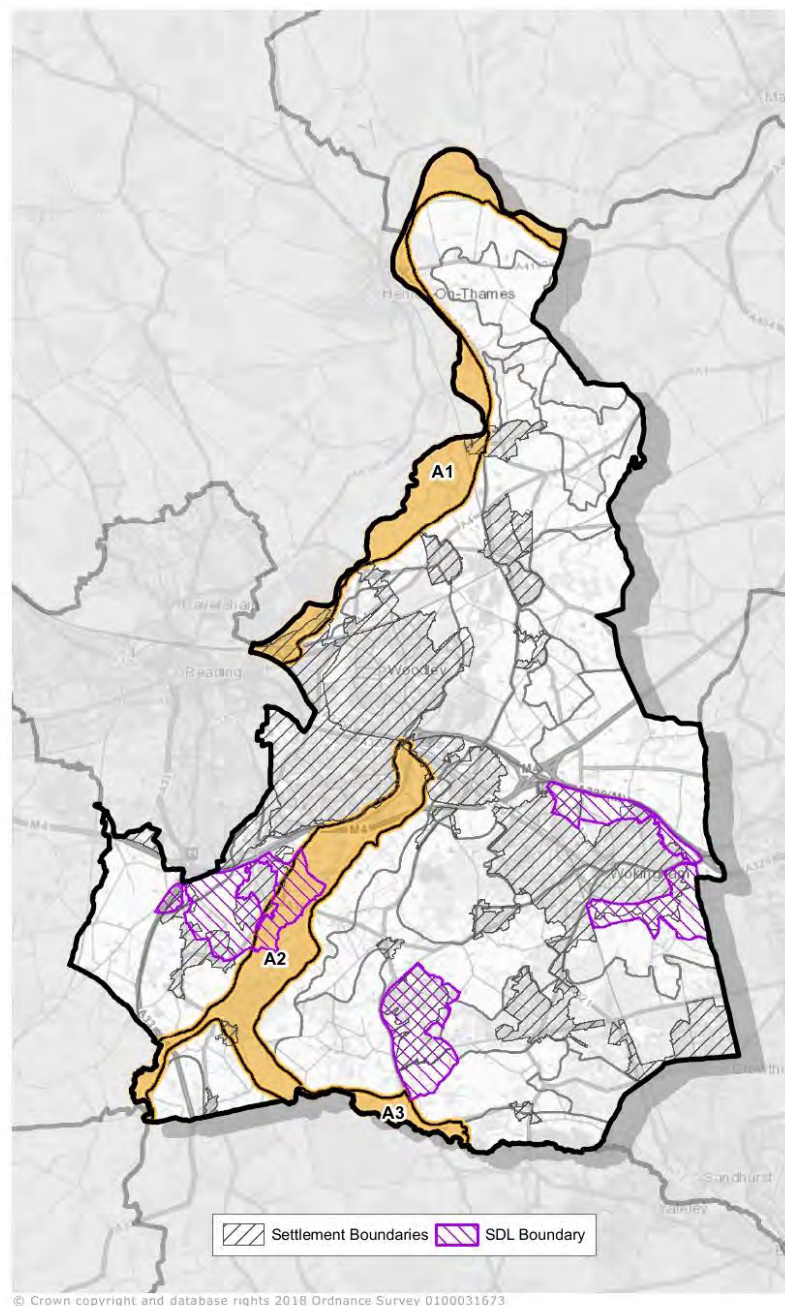
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Source: LUC, Campaign to Protect Rural England

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Map Scale @ A4: 1:140,000

A: River Valley



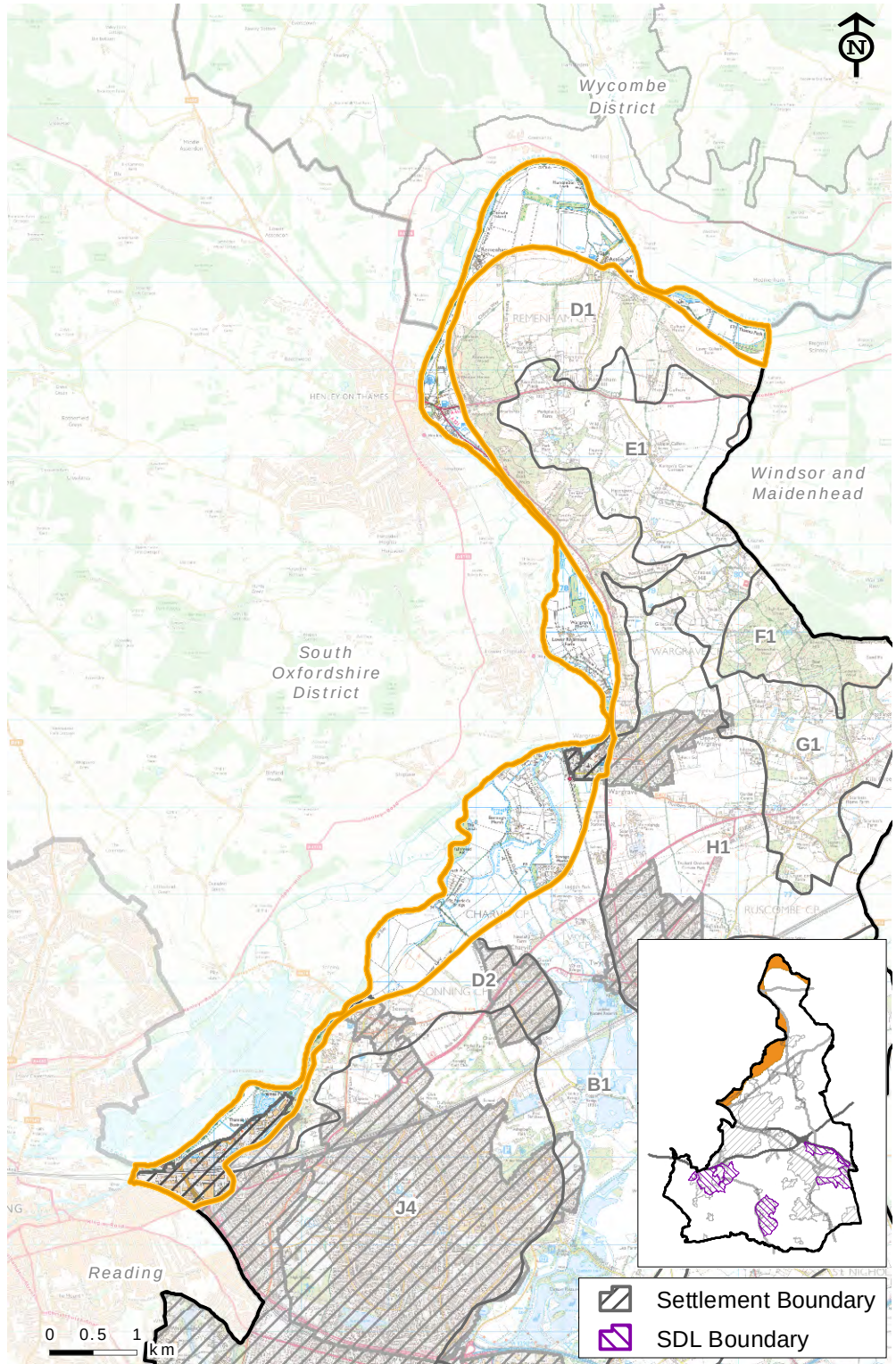
Description

The LCT is distinguished by a flat lowland alluvial or river terrace floodplain, which supports a mixture of arable and pastoral farmland and important wetland habitats. A partially wooded context creates a semi-enclosed landscape, which is sparsely settled and popular for recreation.

Landscape Character Areas

The River Valley LCT is subdivided into three Landscape Character Areas:

- A1: Thames River Valley
- A2: Loddon River Valley
- A3: Blackwater River Valley



SUMMARY

A flat alluvial floodplain dominated by a sinuous sweep of the River Thames and partly enclosed by steep chalk slopes. The area is characterised by large open arable fields, pasture, and areas of wetland and bankside woodland alongside the Thames and its tributaries. Small riverside settlements are clustered on the periphery, some of which have expanded away from the floodplain including Wargrave and Sonning. This is a popular recreational area, with the Thames navigation and the Thames Path national trail. There are views of and links to the Chilterns AONB.

The northern and western boundaries of this area are defined by the borough boundary, although the character area extends into the adjoining districts (South Oxfordshire and Wycombe). The southern boundary is limited by the edge of Reading. The eastern boundary is defined largely by the limit of the floodplain, and the break in chalk slopes to D1: Remenham Wooded Chalk Slopes and D2: Sonning Wooded Chalk Slopes. This boundary is less distinct where the Thames and Loddon floodplains meet near Twyford and Charvil, at the boundary with B1: Loddon River Valley with Open Water.



Key Characteristics

- Dominated by the River Thames, the north of this area is defined by a pronounced sweeping meander, becoming braided and branching further south around Charvil and Wargrave with faster flowing streams and interconnected drainage channels.
- A flat floodplain landscape ranging from 30 to 40m AOD, dramatically accentuated and semi-enclosed by the steep, intermittently open and wooded, chalk landscapes of the Chilterns and those within Wokingham borough. The floodplain becomes wider and more expansive in the south where the River Loddon joins the Thames to the west of Wargrave.
- Defined geologically by a broad alluvial corridor with pockets of River Terrace. The well-drained and fertile soils support a mosaic of arable and pastoral land uses including wet meadows in flood-prone areas close to the river.
- Large open geometric fields used for pasture close to the riverbank and increasingly for arable. The fields are often undivided or divided by drainage channels or post and wire fences. Between Wargrave and Charvil there are horticultural polytunnels.
- Wetland character with fragments of semi-natural habitats (which support rare and important species such as Loddon Lily), including BAP priority habitat floodplain grazing marsh, lowland fen, and wet woodland as well as waterside features such as pollarded willows. Many of these habitats are recognised as LWS and the area is largely included in the Chilterns Escarpment and Loddon Valley Gravel Pits BOA.
- Influenced by adjoining formal parkland landscapes associated with large manor houses located on the adjoining chalk slopes of Remenham, Sonning and the Chilterns. Temple Island with its elegant romantic folly by James Wyatt is a particular landmark on this stretch of the Thames.
- Small nucleated and linear settlements clustered along the floodplain edge including hamlets, for example Aston and Remenham; and larger towns and villages, such as Wargrave and Sonning, which have expanded into adjoining character areas.
- Distinctive vernacular character typified by the use of warm red brick and flint particularly used in the floodplain villages including Remenham, and the conservation areas of Sonning, Wargrave and Henley Bridge.
- Popular recreational setting for rowing, canoeing and pleasure boating. Fishing, walking and cycling, along the banks with long-distance walking and running along the Thames Path National Trail. Supporting facilities include boatyards, boatsheds and towpaths. Other infrastructure such as locks and weirs are essential for the practical management of the river and its water levels and also enhance the setting for recreation.
- Views of the landscape along the Thames and to the hills of the adjoining Chilterns AONB. In some places views are focused along the river channel and framed by bankside vegetation, predominantly willow, particularly in the south. Around Wargrave Marsh the views become very open as the floodplain widens.
- Peaceful, picturesque and largely rural landscape with dark night skies, qualities that have inspired literary and artistic interest including Jerome K. Jerome in his famous 'Three Men in a Boat'.

Natural Landscape

- A1.1 The character of the area is dominated by the presence of the River Thames, a large and mature river. The River Thames has large pronounced meanders, of which this character area is one. The Thames is braided and branching in parts, notably north of Charvil, where St Patrick's Stream diverts and rejoins; and north of Wargrave where the Henerton Backwater forms part of the navigation. Along the main channel there are a number of small islands, eyots or aits.
- A1.2 The landscape surrounding the Thames is essentially a flat floodplain, which in places shelves gently down to the river. The flatness and openness of this landscape contrasted dramatically with some of the most elevated and steepest land in the area, particularly in the north of the borough where the floodplain abuts the precipitously rising Remenham Wooded Chalk Slopes on the right bank and the strongly rolling hills of the Chilterns on the left. Where the River Loddon joins the River Thames, west of Wargrave, the floodplain opens up and is wide and expansive.
- A1.3 The floodplain landscape is defined geologically by a wide alluvial corridor, which, in some areas, is abutted by pockets and bands of Shepperton Gravels and Kempton Park Gravels. These conditions give rise to the Argillic Brown earth soils of the Thames series which vary from heavy loam soils over chalk to flint loam soils over gravel and lime-rich clayey floodplain soils which are influenced by the underlying chalk. Although the soils are generally well-drained and fertile, they are subject to high groundwater and periodic flooding.
- A1.4 The soils and periodic flooding have created an area that is a mosaic of arable and pastoral land uses with arable farmland wherever conditions allow, and areas of pasture and wet meadow in the most flood-prone areas. The farmland in this area is large scale and comprises vast arable fields, often cereals, divided by post and wire fences and medium-sized horse pastures bounded by fences and drainage ditches. There is no real network of hedgerows in this character area and the few surviving hedgerows are fragmented low flailed hawthorn monocultures. Consequently the floodplain has an open feel. The exception to this is the large 'island' of land between the Thames and the Henerton Backwater around Wargrave Marsh, which has a smaller field system and more intimate quality, and contains more pasture. The allotments, near Henley, also create a more intricate pattern on the floodplain.
- A1.5 The area is partially wooded. The woodland is concentrated in linear belts following the watercourses or belts of trees marking property boundaries, often BAP priority habitat deciduous woodland with some conifers. The smaller drainage channels set within the pastures are sporadically punctuated with pollarded willows. Large species deciduous trees growing beside the river, add to the wooded character of the area.
- A1.6 The valley is characterised by seasonally wet alluvial soils, which support a range of wetland and woodland vegetation types, as well as open water, designated as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS). These contain BAP priority habitats wet woodland, wet grassland, sedge, marsh and lowland fen. The woodland sites are typically composed of alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and willow carr (*Salix* spp.) and support a range of wet woodland species including marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*), meadow sweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) and occasionally the rare and nationally important Loddon lily (*Leucojum aestivum*).
- A1.7 Gravel extraction in the south of the area began in the 20th century, to exploit the Kempton Park Gravels for the construction industry. These gravel pits have been restored as a number of small water bodies and now contains wet woodland and lowland fen has been designated as Thames Valley Park East LWS.
- A1.8 Wargrave Marsh represents the largest remaining area of semi-natural wet grassland and fen in this character area, and is an important site for breeding birds. This site once carried SSSI designation but its nature conservation value declined due to changes in agricultural management in the 1980s.
- A1.9 The Thames channel itself is managed for both boat traffic and flood defence purposes and maintains ecological interest, including occasional records of the important Loddon pondweed (*Potamogeton nodosus*). The water retains a high quality diverse and comparatively productive fishery of which the Temple to Marlow reach is the highlight with excellent rheophilic (flowing water) and limnophilic (still water) populations. A section of the River Loddon lies to the south of the area, west of Wargrave, and is also designated as Loddon River LWS.

Cultural Landscape

- A1.10 Clearance of woodland from the valley floor, in order to cultivate the fertile river gravels, may have started as early as the Neolithic and was largely complete by the Late Bronze Age. There is little visible evidence of this landscape although cropmarks reveal evidence of prehistoric/Romano-British settlement and farming. Cultivation on the valley sides would have led to accelerated deposition of alluvium on the floodplain.
- A1.11 The bridging place at Sonning may date to Roman times. Sonning was an important ecclesiastical centre from the late Saxon period. The present brick bridge, with eleven arches spanning the three river channels was built in 1790 replacing an earlier medieval bridge. A bridge was built at Henley in the 12th century linking the main route to the capital from central Oxfordshire and the Midlands. The River Thames was an important transportation route and this is reflected in the extent of Anglo-Saxon riverside settlement recorded in the Domesday Book (1086) with villages at Remenham, Sonning, and Henley. However, most late medieval settlement is located at the edges of the valley and there are few farms on the valley floor – a pattern which has largely survived to the present day.
- A1.12 In the medieval period there were open fields along the river terraces and common meadows on the floodplain, although drainage works may have allowed occasional mixed farming on the floodplain. Domesday records numerous mills associated with settlements along the Thames, and some of the surviving post-medieval mills are likely to be at the same locations.
- A1.13 The straight-sided rectangular fields that dominate the modern valley floor landscape indicate Parliamentary enclosure probably from the early 19th century. However, in places, such as around Remenham and between Sonning and Wargrave, 20th century boundary removal has created extensive prairie-style fields losing much of the original character of the landscape.
- A1.14 The main roads are determined largely by the course of the river, and its crossing points at Sonning and Henley. The embankment at the base of White Hill on the post road from Maidenhead to Henley was part of a major regrading following the 1718 Turnpike Act, allowing coaches to ascend the hill rather than go the long route via Remenham. The valley is skirted in the south by the Great Western Main Line Railway and crossed by the Twyford to Henley branch line at Wargrave.
- A1.15 This character area is an important focus of settlement, with villages spaced at regular intervals on both sides of the river valley. There are four Conservation Areas, at Sonning, Wargrave, Remenham Henley Bridge and Remenham Church. The settlements are located at the edge of the floodplain along the periphery of the character area boundary. However, the most important settlements have expanded away from the floodplain and into the adjoining character areas. The principal settlements following this pattern within Wokingham Borough are Wargrave (discussed further in H1: Wargrave-Twyford Arable Chalk Lowlands) and Sonning (D2: Sonning Wooded Chalk Slopes), although Henley-on-Thames and Lower Shiplake across the valley in Oxfordshire follow a similar pattern.
- A1.16 The hamlets of Aston, Remenham and the nuclei of Wargrave and Sonning villages are typical of the floodplain edge settlements with a small-scale vernacular character. These settlements are particularly noted for their combination of local building materials including flint, warm traditional red brick and tile, with dark weatherboarding. Brick banding and timber-framing with pitched and half-hipped roofs are also features. Some of these settlements include focal edge-of-floodplain flint churches with square towers and attractive churchyards.
- A1.17 In the south of the area the floodplain was exploited for river gravels. Since restoration, the area has been used for commercial properties, at the Suttons Business Park and the Thames Valley Business Park. The floodplain leading to the urban edge in this location is in use as amenity grassland, with associated benches and litter bins.
- A1.18 In addition to edge-of-Thames settlements there are linear settlements on the valley floor. These include Loddon Drive, located along the stretch of the River Loddon before it meets with the River Thames, and Willow Lane along the Hennerton Backwater at Wargrave Marsh. These tend to be more modern executive style houses, some of which have the appearance of weekend retreats or holiday homes. They are fairly well integrated into the landscape within a wooded framework.

- A1.19 Buildings visible from but not actually within the Thames Valley also have an important influence on the character of this area. Most notable in this respect are the manor houses and parkland located along the chalk slopes of Remenham, Sonning and the Chilterns, including the large detached red brick and pantile buildings of Matson House, Fawley Court, Bear Place, Shiplake House, and Wargrave Manor. These country houses surrounded by landscaped grounds were built or remodelled as the Bath and Swindon Roads extended from London in the 18th century. The parkland character of the landscape is particularly marked in the vicinity of the picturesque Fishing Temple, a small white-painted Georgian building, romantically located on Temple Island. The Island, forms part of the Grade II* Registered Park and Garden of Fawley Court in Wycombe District while the Temple building is Grade II listed. The Registered Park and Garden with fine views of the temple is currently on the Heritage at Risk register.
- A1.20 The Thames is an important feature of the Thames valley, particularly for the opportunities it offers for recreation. A number of small informal car parks have been established over time to support these uses. The banks of the Thames are a very popular destination for rambling and cycling. This is facilitated by the presence of numerous footpaths and towpaths following the river, including The Thames Path. This long distance national trail runs on alternate banks along the length of the river, and south of Sonning and north of Wargrave it falls within Wokingham borough. The river itself is used for angling, canoeing and boating. The pleasure craft ferrying tourists down the Thames, colourful barges and associated boathouses are a feature of the landscape introducing activity and noise into the peaceful setting. This reach of the Thames is also, famously, the venue of the Henley Regatta, held on this stretch of the Thames since 1839 and a highlight of the British establishment's social calendar.

Perceptual Landscape

- A1.21 There are good views along the Thames river corridor, up to the hills of the Chilterns AONB and into the remnant parkland at Park Place and Temple Combe. As the floodplain widens south of Wargrave, these views become more expansive. South of Sonning views are once again channelled along the river corridor, and maturing willow vegetation largely hides the business parks from view. There are views into the urban edge of Reading including views of the Brunel railway bridge crossing at Kennet Mouth and across Kings Meadow to the county town.
- A1.22 This stretch of the Thames has been a popular source of inspiration, and artists have been drawn by the scenic river landscape, adorned by stretches of pasture, architectural grandeur, vernacular buildings and the special character of rural river-side villages and hamlets. Despite its popularity, this stretch of the riverside remains peaceful, picturesque and largely rural. The status of the Thames as a nationally-important river and its connotations and connection with the development of major English cities including Oxford and London adds to its important perceptual qualities.
- A1.23 Numerous painters and artists worked and resided around Wargrave, including F. Walker, B.W. Leader, H.S. Marks, E. Duncan and S.P. Jackson. William Gosling (1824-1883) painted 'Near Wargrave-on-Thames' depicting a number of villages, working and boating on the Thames and 'Henley from the Gate Hill', an image of peasants harvesting with Henley in the distance. Alfred Augustus Glendening (1840-1910) also painted the river landscape including the painting 'Gathering Rushes on the Thames near Wargrave'. Henley was also a source of inspiration for the French artist, James Tissot who painted 'Henley Regatta (1877) and 'Return from Henley' (1874) and for William Christian Symons who painted 'A Regatta at Henley' (1909).
- A1.24 In J.E. Vincent's 'The Story of the Thames' (1909) he details the journey taken from Shiplake Lock to Wargrave which he describes as:
- "...a short half-mile of the Thames, reinforced by the Loddon, flowing almost due east, and here the stream is turned northward into low ground, calculated to encourage wide curves of course and many islets by the commanding ridge of chalk..."*
- A1.25 Vincent refers to Wargrave as *"an exquisite village, boasting an ivy-grown church and...an inn-sign, that of the George and the Dragon"*.
- A1.26 George Dunlop Leslie RA and J.E. Hodgson repainted the sign to the George and Dragon, at a time when both were unable to paint the landscape due to excessive flooding. The Book of Wargrave – 'History and Reminiscences by the People of Wargrave' (1986) tells how Gertrude

Jekyll "is recorded as having painted several inn signs in the area; alas we have no record of their names". In his book 'Our River' George Dunlop Leslie RA records Wargrave as:

"a sweet quiet little village, and the houses with their lawns on the river bank, all add to the charm of the spot, the elm-trees in Mr. F. Maitland's garden being, with those about the church, quite a feature of the bend of the river".

- A1.27 In his famous 'Three Men in a Boat' (first published 1889), Jerome K. Jerome wrote of the journey to Wargrave along the Hennerton Backwater:

"We went up the backwater to Wargrave. It is a short cut, leading out of the right-hand bank about half a mile above Marsh Lock, and is well worth taking, being a pretty, shady little piece of stream, besides having nearly half a mile of distance".

- A1.28 Sonning has also been the subject of many artistic and literary references. In J.E. Vincent's 'The Story of the Thames' (1909) he describes the journey from the wooded hills of Holme Park to Sonning. On passing through Sonning Lock he states that:

"There is a strong disposition to disobey the self-denying ordinance against comparisons and to pronounce that here, assuredly, is the prettiest spot on the Thames. Here, so far as the delight of the eye goes, we have nearly everything that can be desired – much branching of the river, many eyots, rising ground and variety of contour on the Berkshire side, gay gardens and lawns of hotels modernised but some with taste...."

- A1.29 Paintings of Sonning include 'Sonning Church and Bridge' by Samuel Ireland (1791) and 'September Sunshine' by J. Ayton Symington (1911) both depicting scenes of a riverside village idyll. Jerome K. Jerome wrote of Sonning:

"...the most fairy-like little nook on the whole river. It is more like a stage village than one built of bricks and mortar. Every house is smothered in roses, and now, in early June, they were bursting forth in clouds of dainty splendour".

- A1.30 Of the river he wrote:

"The river up to Sonning winds in and out through many islands and is very placid, hushed and lonely. Few folk, except, at twilight, a pair or two of rustic lovers, walk along its banks...It is a part of the river in which to dream of bygone days, and vanished forms and faces, and things that might have been, but are not, confound them."

Valuable Landscape Attributes

- Distinctive river channel landscape which sweeps through the surrounding landscape and provides a natural feature as well as a recreational resource.
- The open mosaic of arable land, pasture and wet meadow provide scenic qualities and visual diversity.
- Diverse wetland and waterside habitats including BAP priority habitats wet woodland, reedbed, lowland fen and grazing marsh provide scenic quality as well as important ecological habitats.
- Picturesque and historic settlements on the floodplain edge provide a cultural record of the past and contribute to scenic quality
- Recreational value with presence of waterside towpaths including the Thames Path National Trail, and the Thames providing a venue for the active and passive activities as well as events such as the Henley Regatta.
- Views of the river and its setting; views tunnelled along the river channel contrast with wider views to the slopes of the Chilterns AONB and to adjoining parkland including designed views such as that of Temple Island from nearby Fawley Court. The scenic quality of the landscape provides local distinctiveness and gives this area a very strong sense of place.

- Peaceful character of the undeveloped floodplain, with naturalistic qualities and experience of dark skies when removed from the roads and visual influence of settlement, which provides an accessible but unspoilt rural retreat in close proximity to urban areas.
- Strong literary and artistic associations which provide a cultural record of the past, and a continuing source of inspiration.

Landscape Condition

The distinctive river landscape is in good condition with its associated waterside habitats and the presence of picturesque and traditional settlements on the floodplain edge.

There are opportunities for improvement, for example enhancements to the interconnectivity of wetland and waterside habitats and the restoration of hedgerows.

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 and greater flooding which may impact riverside vegetation.
- 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.
- Agricultural works to drain land and amalgamate fields still further.
- Hedgerow loss associated with past expansion of fields and intensification of agriculture.
- Incremental loss of species rich grassland (including grazing marsh) due to increasingly intensive grassland management or conversion to arable land.
- Drainage operations associated with development and agriculture affecting wetland habitats.
- High demands for recreation, including watersports, leading to erosion of wildlife habitats, landscape features and impact on tranquillity. Erosion of rights of way, special archaeological, ecological and other landscape features is a continuing concern in this popular area.
- Fawley Court and Temple Island Registered Park and Garden is on the Heritage at Risk register.
- Demand for residential and commercial development, is continuing to push linear development on the floodplain, with consequent implications for flooding.
- Pressure for new renewable energy units e.g. solar panels, industrial developments, sewage treatment works and commercial premises, including a new Park and Ride facility and proposed Mass Rapid Transport link road in the south of the area between the Thames and the Great Western Main Line Railway, leading to physical and visual intrusion of these elements in the open countryside and a negative impact on tranquillity.
- Potential for a third Thames crossing in this area, safeguarded in the Local Plan, which would be visually intrusive and would erode the rural character of the area.
- Past extraction of gravels and sands from sites along the Thames has resulted in changes in landscape character. The pressure for gravel extraction is likely to continue, with a need to ensure appropriate restoration to help reinstate landscape character.
- Increasing demand for communication masts, pylons and poles leading to visual intrusion of these elements in the open landscape. This is likely to particularly affect views from this character area to the adjoining Chiltern Hills.

- Although light pollution is a key issue affecting the night landscape, especially in the south near Reading, this character area contains a reservoir of 'dark skies'.

Landscape Strategy

To maintain the landscape character of the *Thames River Valley* the following strategy is required: to conserve and enhance the peaceful, natural character of the meandering river channel, network of streams and channels, belts of bankside woodland and distinctive willow pollards and other trees and picturesque floodplain edge settlements.

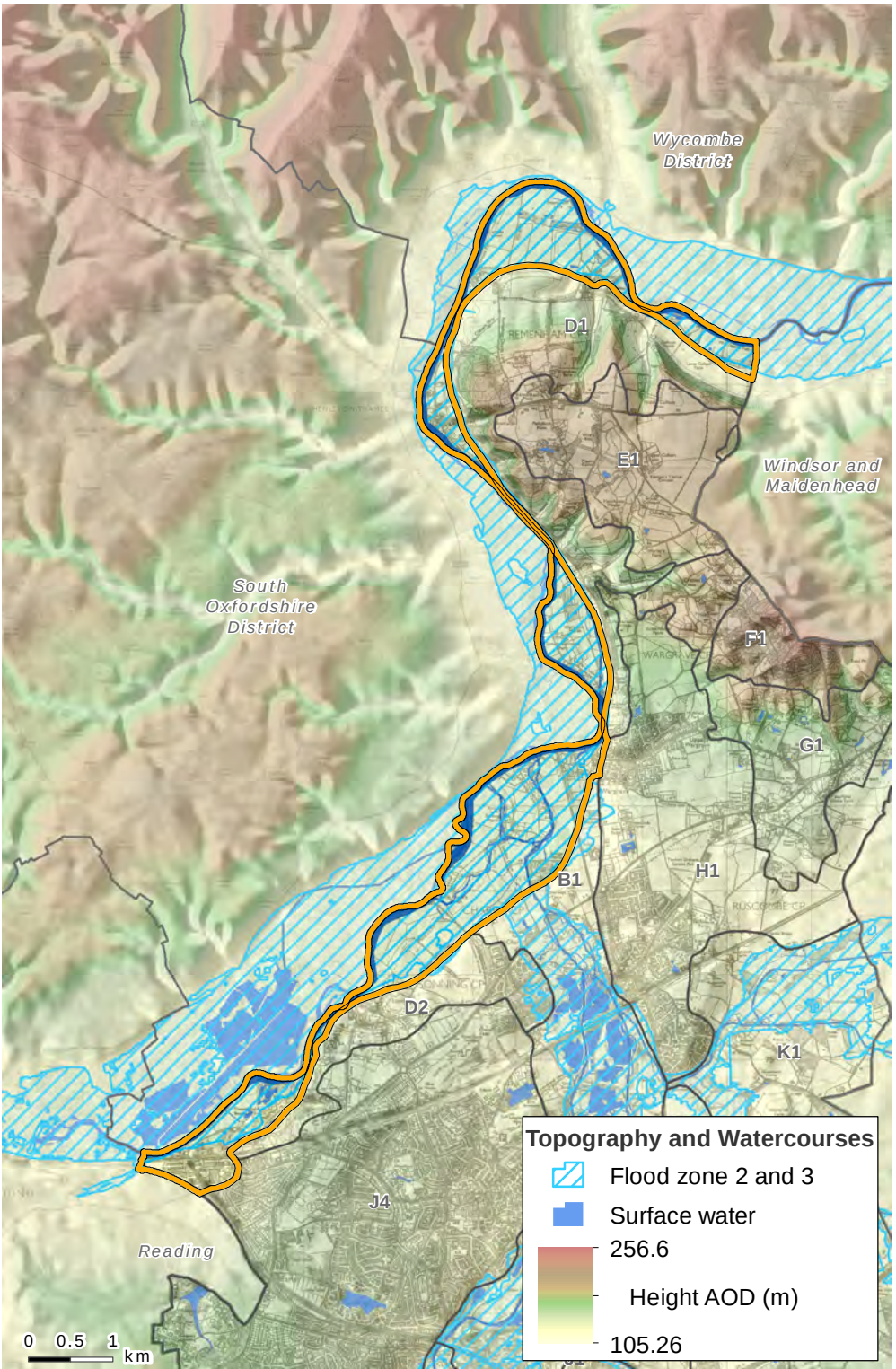
The key aspects to be conserved and actively managed are the river itself, and the adjacent open rural landscape and its features including: large country houses and their associated parklands and pleasure grounds which are important to local landscape character, woodland and wetland habitats, and traditional rural features including pollarded willows. In particular there is an opportunity to consider restoration of the hedgerow framework, and restoration of pasturage along the floodplain, in areas where arable land uses now dominate.

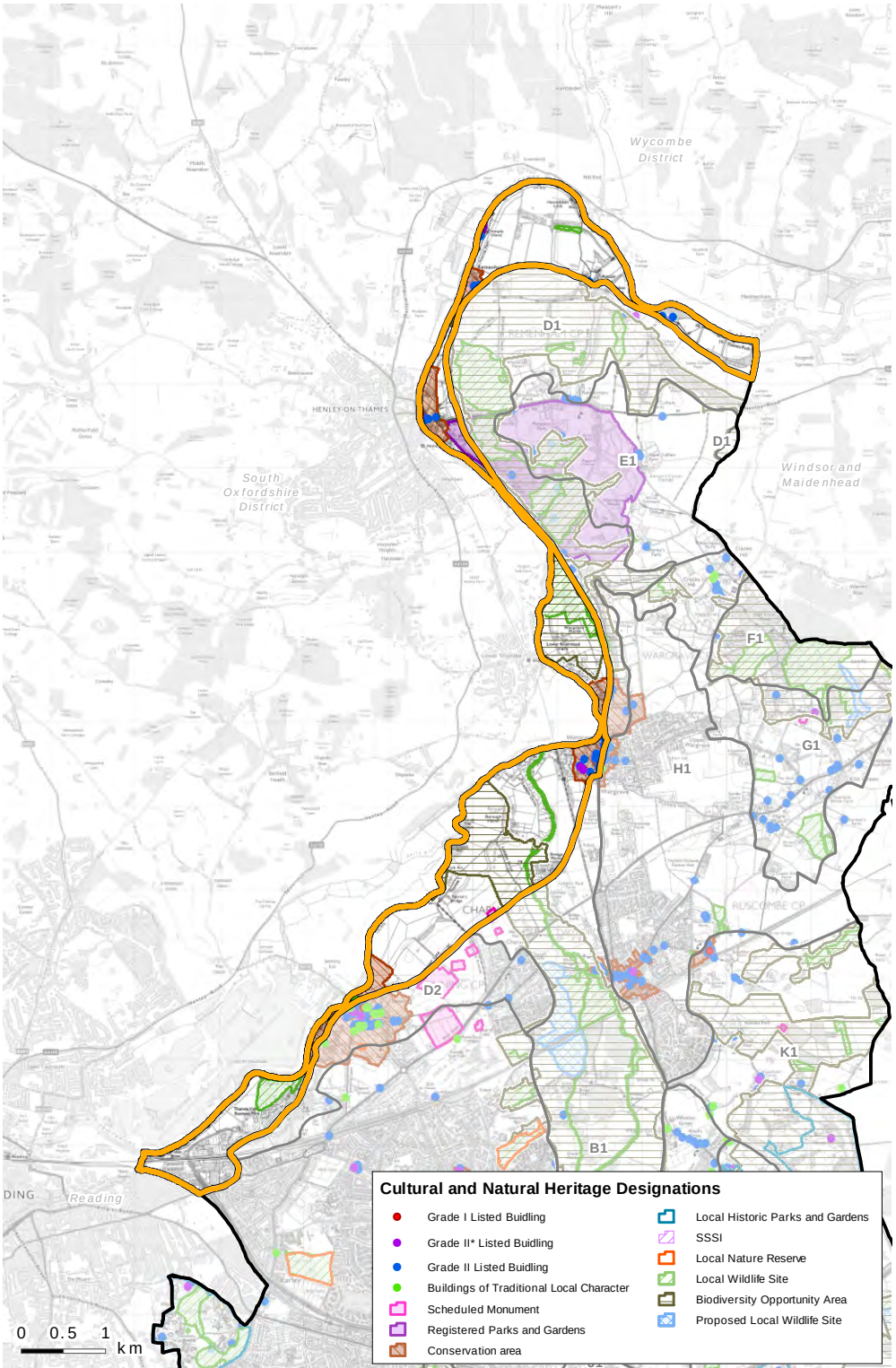
In terms of development, the aim is to conserve the sparse settlement pattern and maintain the low density domestic character.

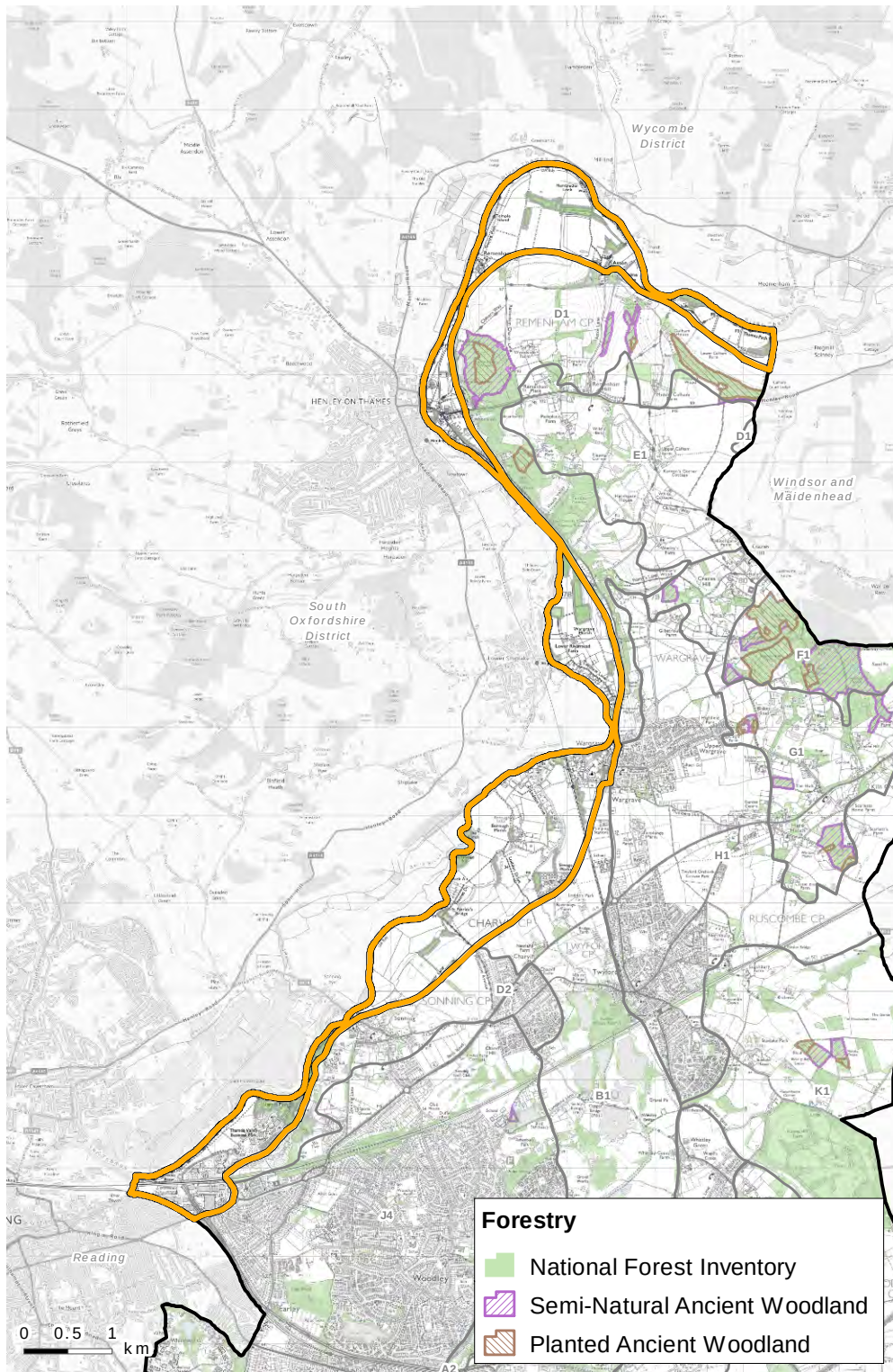
Landscape Guidelines

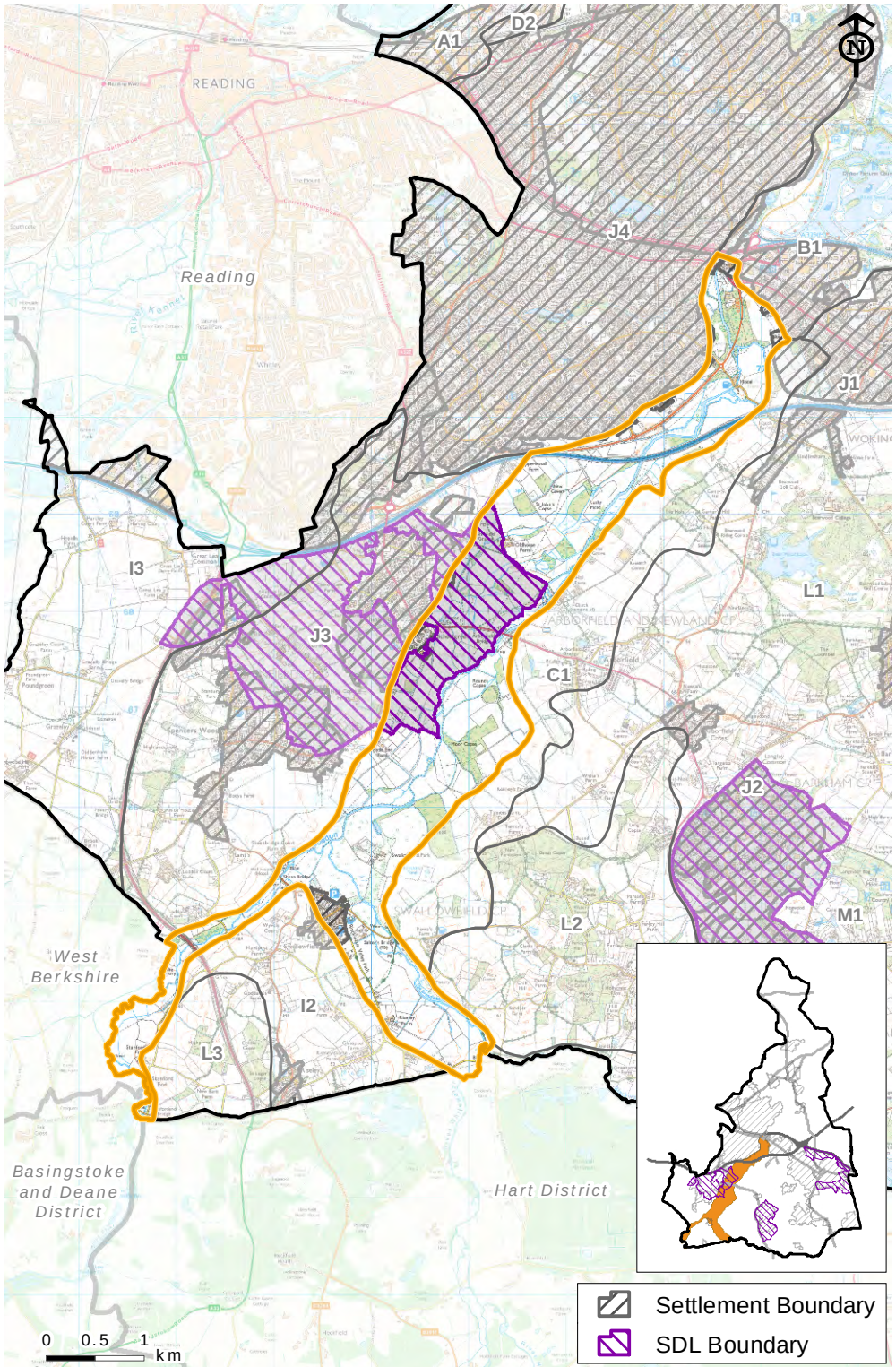
- Conserve the scenic quality and natural character of the river corridor and tributary streams particularly from development, intensification of land use and encroachment by scrub and secondary woodland.
- Conserve and protect the landscape pattern of mixed pasture and arable fields encourage appropriate management of grassland by grazing, particularly immediately by the river corridor. Consider re-creation of lost grassland habitats.
- 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.
- Reinstate or repair hedgerows with native species where there are opportunities to do so, particularly from highly visible locations e.g. along roadsides.
- Conserve, enhance and manage wetland and waterside habitats, including BAP priority habitats, from changes in land use including to arable farming. An area of land centred around Wargrave Marsh is part of the Chilterns Escarpment BOA. This network of natural habitats, which extends across the borough and into Windsor and Maidenhead, has been identified as a target for habitat creation and restoration and positive management of fen and wet grassland. The Loddon and Borough Marshes are part of the Loddon Valley Gravel Pits BOA. The area requires positive management and recreation of fen and grassland habitats. An appropriate wetland management regime is critical.
- Conserve the scenic value of the riverside villages and gardens, including the four Conservation Areas and the listed buildings, including Temple Island and its surrounding Registered Park and Garden.
- Maintain the prevailing hydrology and water tables to enable anaerobic conditions to preserve archaeological sites in low lying wetland areas, particularly along river corridors.
- Maintain the rural character of settlements through control of new development, avoiding linear spread of development and amalgamation between Henley, Wargrave, Charvil and Sonning.

- Enhance informal recreational enjoyment of the landscape while managing recreational pressure on the river and its banks. Consider zoning of activities to ensure ecologically valuable landscapes are protected from damaging activities and ensure appropriate management of informal recreation, particularly in relation to the Rights of Way network. Seek sympathetic integration of new recreational facilities and associated car parks into the landscape.
- Take care in the siting of vertical elements e.g. communication masts or other structures in this open landscape.
- Conserve the rural character of the open floodplain landscape between adjacent settlements, to protect the individual identity of settlements, and retain their sense of physical and visual separation. In particular protect the sensitive areas of open land at Wargrave Marsh, and Borough Marsh which provide a positive interface between the settled areas and river corridor. These areas are also important for flood protection and management.
- Conserve and enhance the integration of urban edges on the edge of the floodplain through hedges, wooded boundaries, occasional scrub planting, and large-species trees to provide visual screening.
- Conserve designed landscapes and their associated architectural heritage including the great houses, their monuments and follies and arboricultural and landscape heritage.
- Enhance sense of place through careful design (including siting, massing, scale, materials and landscape – as well as sensitive lighting to retain dark skies at night) to minimise the impacts of any potential new development on valuable attributes.
- Resist proposals that introduce extensive or obtrusive elements e.g. pylons on the visually sensitive landscape.
- Protect the views along and across the river channel; into and out of the Chilterns AONB; and the wider visual setting of the river including parklands and mansions at Park Place and Temple Combe.
- Protect the strong perceptions of tranquillity in the landscape, including the experience of dark skies, through the management of development.









SUMMARY

This area occupies the flat alluvial floodplain of the River Loddon and its tributaries the Broadwater and the Blackwater. An agricultural landscape of irregular fields, with large scale arable fields on better drained areas and small scale wet meadows on frequently flooded land adjacent to the river. A largely peaceful area, disturbance comes from major roads which cross the floodplain including the M4, and adjacent developments in Earley, Winnersh, the expanding settlement of Shinfield and new Science and Innovation Park.

The southern boundaries of this area are defined by the borough boundary, although the character area extends into the adjoining districts (West Berkshire and Hart). The northern boundary is confined by the industrial edge of Winnersh and the Loddon Bridge, where industry and infrastructure mark the end of the tranquil rural landscape of the Loddon Valley. The eastern and western boundaries are defined by the geological extent of the river alluvium and river terrace deposits which occupy the valley floor and marked changes in topography on the valley sides of the adjacent character areas.



Key Characteristics

- A broad, flat alluvial floodplain around 40-45m AOD underlain by riverine alluvium and river terrace deposits. The alluvial soils are affected by high groundwater levels, while the loamy soils on the low ridges of the river terrace gravels are better drained and in use as arable fields.
- The River Loddon follows a meandering course within braided channels. There are a system of sluices and weirs along the course of the river, at Arborfield, Sheep Bridge and Stanford End. Streams and tributary rivers join the Loddon including the rivers Broadwater and Blackwater in the southeast of the area. There are ponds, oxbow lakes and pools of standing water on the valley floor.
- A wooded backdrop is provided by scattered blocks of deciduous woodland and copses, interlinked woodland belts and scattered mature trees and scrub. The semi-natural woodlands include frequent areas of Ancient Woodland, all of which are designated as LWSs.
- Pasture and arable farmland in medium and large irregular geometric fields, divided by post and wire fencing, post and rail fencing, gappy hedgerows and drainage ditches. The areas closest to the river are affected by flooding and are characterised by pasture and wet meadow.
- Wetland character, including BAP priority habitats of floodplain grazing marsh, wet woodland, lowland fen and lowland meadows which contain characteristic features such as willow pollards. Six areas with wetland character are designated as LWS. South of Sheepbridge an area of waterlogged hay meadow is designated as the Stanford End Mill and River Loddon SSSI, which supports nationally important populations of fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) and the Loddon pondweed (*Potamogeton nodosus*), while the full length of river north of Sheepbridge is an LWS.
- Important historic riverside features include traditional brick humpback bridges and water mills e.g. Sindlesham Mill and Sindlesham Bridge and the Mill at Swallowfield (all Grade II listed). Moated sites are present at Beaumy's Castle and Sheepbridge Court and designated as Scheduled Monuments.
- Extensive designed parkland landscape at Swallowfield Park (designated as a Registered Park and Garden) which leads down to the River Loddon with grassland and mature oaks and specimen trees including cedars of Lebanon, and a Grade II listed 18th century bridge.
- The GHQ Stop Line (General Headquarters Line), a defensive zone built during the summer of 1940 to contain the threatened German invasion ran east from Bristol to the Thames Estuary and included a section along the Foudry Brook, the Loddon, the Broadwater and the Blackwater.
- Low-density scattered settlement pattern of villages and farmsteads characterised by traditional warm red brick and timber framed vernacular evident in cluster of listed buildings in Swallowfield village Conservation Area.
- Tranquil and rural character away from river crossings and visual influence of large scale settlement in adjacent areas. The south of the area is also a resource of 'dark skies'.
- Little public access to the floodplain except for the Blackwater Valley Path which runs south and east of Swallowfield. Busy roads cross the flood plain, including the A33, M4 and Winnersh and Shinfield Eastern Relief Roads, and create physical and visual severance along the floodplain.
- Pylons, residential and commercial development are distinctive visual features in this open and flat landscape, with development very visible along the edges of this character area. The new landmark Science and Innovation Park building at Shinfield is a notable feature in the

landscape.

Natural Landscape

- A2.1 The character of the Loddon River Valley is influenced by the River Loddon, a tributary of the Thames. The river occupies only a small part of the floodplain and its presence is only revealed close to its banks or in the tranquil water meadows that lie alongside the river. The river is branched and braided, for example north of Arborfield Bridge where a system of sluices and weirs mark the site of the old Arborfield Mill, now a water pumping station. The river also branches significantly at Salter's Bridge, Swallowfield and at Sindlesham Mill, north of the M4. There are also numerous ponds, oxbow lakes and pools of standing water on the valley floor.
- A2.2 The landform comprises a flat floodplain that lies between 40 and 45m AOD. It is underlain by riverine alluvium and younger River Terrace deposits of the Loddon and Brickearth. These give rise to Pelo-Alluvial Argillic Gley soils that are affected by high groundwater levels. The loamy soils that overlie the younger river terrace gravels are better drained and are in use as arable fields. The areas closer to the river are affected by short term flooding and are characterised by pasture and wet meadow. The wet meadows are an important resource and wet woodland provides a sense of enclosure and hidden character that contrasts with the open floodplain beyond. The presence of pollarded willow is characteristic of the river corridor.
- A2.3 The landscape is dominated by mixed agriculture of irregular fields, with large-scale arable fields occupying better drained areas and small scale wet meadows occurring on frequently flooded land adjacent to the river. The fields are divided by drainage ditches and post and wire fencing. Where hedgerows occur they are low flailed, species poor and discontinuous, forming the remnants of a former network.
- A2.4 BAP priority habitat lowland mixed deciduous woodland and coniferous copses and coverts form isolated geometric blocks within the wider mixed farmland. These woodlands provide shelter for wildlife as well as a green backdrop to views across the floodplain. The historic parkland of Swallowfield Park, imparked by Edward III and a royal residence until the Tudor era, has a localised influence on the character of the floodplain with scattered parkland trees (mature oaks) and woodland belts forming features within the open floodplain.
- A2.5 The Loddon River Valley character area has retained significant biological interest and is characterised by scattered BAP priority habitats including wet woodlands and grasslands, which are now mostly restricted to the banks of the river channel. The valley is particularly notable for the nationally important Stanford End Mill and River Loddon SSSI, which comprises a 4km stretch of the River Loddon together with a series of traditionally managed, seasonally waterlogged hay meadows. This site supports rich plant communities and is of special interest for its thriving populations of two rare plants, the fritillary (*Fritillaria meleagris*) which is now mainly confined to scattered localities in southern Britain, and a national stronghold of Loddon pondweed (*Potamogeton nodosus*). The site is also associated with a number of notable aquatic and wetland mollusc species, including two rare pea mussels (*Pisidium moitessierianum* and *P. tenuilineatum*), and two rare snails *Vertigo antivertigo* and *V. moulinsiana*.
- A2.6 The valley also supports twelve areas designated as Local Wildlife Sites (LWS), for their woodland, wet woodland and fen habitats. These include four Ancient Woodlands. The wet woodlands are dominated by alder (*Alnus glutinosa*) and crack willow (*Salix fragilis*) and are particularly notable for supporting important populations of Loddon lily (*Leucojum aestivum*).

Cultural Landscape

- A2.7 As with the Thames Valley, the Loddon was an early focus of human activity and cultivation of the fertile valley floor may have commenced during the Neolithic with cultivation on the valley sides leading to alluvial deposition on the floodplain below. Cropmarks, including ring ditches, and Bronze Age finds, provide evidence of continuous prehistoric/Romano-British settlement and

farming along the Loddon. The Roman road between London and Calleva Atrebatum (Silchester), known locally as the Devil's Highway, runs for a short length across the LCA at Riseley Common.

- A2.8 The area was part of the Royal Forest of Windsor from Norman times but before that, the "-feld" element of place names such as Arborfield and Swallowfield, suggests a largely open and cultivated landscape during the Saxon period. The focus of medieval and later settlement was on the valley sides, with settlement on lower ground consisting mainly of dispersed farmsteads sited at the edges of the floodplain, probably set within open fields along the river gravels and common meadows on the floodplain.
- A2.9 The large straight-sided fields along most of the valley indicate Parliamentary enclosure of early 19th century. Small areas with less regular fields interspersed with small parcels of woodland, shown on the first edition OS map, indicate earlier assart enclosures, although few traces of these survive due to recent amalgamation of fields.
- A2.10 This area has the greatest concentration of moated sites in the borough, due to its physical, defensive, features. In the medieval period the construction of moats was a popular way of enhancing the status and appearance of a manor, or other large house, such as that at Sheepbridge Court. The moated site at Beaumy's Castle is a rare example of one which was designed for defensive purposes. A number of 17th and 18th century country houses were surrounded by areas of landscaped parkland. Traces of parkland are still visible around the site of the now demolished Arborfield Hall, and at Swallowfield Park (Grade II listed Registered Park and Garden), which incorporates the woodland and open parkland of an earlier medieval deer park. Swallowfield Park also has an old walled garden, now planted in the Arts and Crafts Style, and a woodland walk leading down to the quiet flowing River Loddon.
- A2.11 A more recent historic feature of the Loddon Valley is the GHQ Stop Line, a defensive zone built during the summer of 1940 to contain the threatened German invasion. The line ran east from Bristol to the Thames Estuary and included a section through the borough. This swathe of World War II defences consists of pillboxes (concrete defensive bunkers often hexagonal in shape) and the fortified natural defences of the rivers Loddon, Broadwater and Blackwater (including in-built chambers for demolition charges in the local bridges).
- A2.12 The Loddon River Valley has a rural, remote character with a dominant settlement pattern of very low density scattered built features, typically traditional brick and timber framed farmsteads, mills and humpbacked bridges at crossing points of the river. Often the settlements associated with water mills, for example old Arborfield village, which was moved post 1607, are located on the adjacent higher ground of the older river terraces or clay farmland and linked to the valley floor by rural tracks and lanes. The village of Swallowfield, which has a Conservation Area, is unusual in that it occupies a site on the valley floor.
- A2.13 The traditional built features within the valley are constructed from traditional warm red brick and timber framing of the 17th and 18th century, with clay tile roofs. This is seen in the scattered farmsteads, mill buildings, bridges and village of Swallowfield. Agricultural buildings often combine the use of weatherboarding with red brick and typically have half-hipped roofs. Flint is also seen in decorative use on gate posts or on churches and in all cases attention to detail is a characteristic of the built environment. There is a range of materials present where new built development has spread onto the valley floor, for example on the edge of Shinfield.
- A2.14 There is a loose network of lanes serving this primarily agricultural landscape, with a limited number of river crossing points. The presence of post-medieval mills at a number of these and other points, e.g. Sheepbridge Mill, Sindlesham Mill, Stanford End Mill, probably reflects the locations of earlier mills.
- A2.15 The floodplain is largely inaccessible by foot apart from public footpaths at the river crossings at Salter's Bridge, Arborfield/Shinfield and Loddon Bridge, and remains a remote, agricultural landscape. There is little use of the river for pleasure craft and limited opportunity for recreation including fishing.
- A2.16 Major infrastructure crosses the valley including the A33 in the south, and the M4, A327 and the new Winnersh Relief Road and Shinfield Eastern Relief Road. The B3270 is also very busy, and lit at night. The main line railway from Reading to Waterloo crosses the valley at Loddon Bridge on the northern border of the area.

Perceptual Landscape

- A2.17 The Loddon valley floor has largely retained a tranquil and remote rural character with limited development. There are, however, views to substantial areas of built development in adjacent areas, for example the residential outskirts of Reading which have a localised impact on tranquillity.
- A2.18 Pylons are detracting features of the valley floor, prominent in views across this open landscape. From the Shinfield Eastern Relief Road and the A327 commercial and residential development is evident on the edges of Shinfield and Arborfield.
- A2.19 In Swallowfield there are views to the Swallowfield Park parkland. South of Sheepbridge views are channelled along the river itself, creating a more enclosed and secluded character.
- A2.20 In his book, 'Our River' George Dunlop Leslie RA recalls collecting foliage and dried reeds at Wargrave, which he took away with him and used to create the pictures painted of the River Loddon.
- A2.21 The critic J.C. Loudon remarked of Swallowfield Park, in 1831, that *'The situation is nearly flat, with a stream passing through it. The house is a large plain building, lately put in thorough repair; and the gardens and grounds are undergoing essential ameliorations'*.
- A2.22 The village of Swallowfield has associations with Miss Mary Russell Mitford who wrote a diary published as 'Our Village' which became a contemporary classic. In 'Our Village' she asks of the *"brimming Loddon"*:
- "Is it not a beautiful river? Rising level with its banks, so clear and smooth and peaceful, giving back the verdant landscape and the clear blue sky, and bearing on its pellucid stream the snowy water-lily, the purest of flowers, like the lady in 'Comus'".*

Valuable Landscape Attributes

- The naturalness of the meandering course of the River Loddon and wide floodplain landscape which provide a strong sense of place.
- The wooded backdrop of mature broadleaved woodland copses and natural riparian corridors including ancient woodland which provides scenic quality and a sense of place, as well as framing views across, into and out of the area.
- Important wetland features / habitats including BAP priority habitats wet woodland and floodplain grazing marsh remnants designated as LWSs, and the nationally important Stanford End Mill and River Loddon SSSI that are uncommon in the borough and provide important ecological habitats.
- Historic riverside features including medieval moated sites, old brick watermills and bridges, the registered historic parkland at Swallowfield and the GHQ Stop Line and associated Second World War features which follow the course of the rivers.
- Sparse settlement pattern of farmsteads and the village of Swallowfield, characterised by a strong local vernacular which contribute to the scenic quality of the area and impart a sense of time depth.
- Remote and rural landscape in the south of the area due to the limited access to the floodplain and absence of development on the valley floor.
- Localised areas with a strong sense of tranquility particularly in the south, with naturalistic qualities and experience of dark skies away from roads and visual influence of large scale settlement in adjacent areas.

Landscape Condition

The meandering course of the river and the flat floodplain landscape is intact. For the most part this is a remote and rural landscape with characteristic riverside features and important wetland habitats which contribute to the overall perception of a landscape in moderate condition. However, views to adjacent large scale development and busy infrastructure corridors, particularly in the north of the area fragment the rural landscape. There are opportunities for improvement and particular enhancement to habitat interconnectivity.

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 and greater flooding which may impact riverside vegetation.
- Hedgerow loss associated with past expansion of fields and intensification of agriculture. The post and wire fencing present is less aesthetically pleasing than a robust hedgerow network would be.
- Incremental loss of species rich grassland due to increasingly intensive grassland management/conversion to arable land.
- Decline in demand for traditional countryside products leading to loss of rural features including pollarded willows on waterside pasture.
- An area of land south of the A327 has been identified as a potential site for extraction of 3.6 million tonnes of sand and gravel which will impact on the tranquillity and rural character of the area but may provide new recreational and biodiversity opportunities depending on the restoration design and management.
- Decline or decay of historic features including the parkland at Swallowfield Park and the GHQ Stop Line.
- Drainage operations associated with development and agriculture affecting river levels and wetland habitats. Climate change is also likely to result in increased seasonal variation in river flows.
- Pressure for new residential and commercial development and supporting infrastructure both inside and outside the area is continuing to push onto the floodplain and impacting landscape character and with potential for impacts on the rurality and tranquillity of the area. Potential development of a new settlement at Shinfield (Land south of M4 SDL) may affect the tranquillity and character of the river valley at Shinfield.
- There is continuing pressure for new industrial developments, sewage treatment works and commercial premises in the river valleys, often associated with the major transport corridors.
- Increasing use of road network, leading to continuous presence of background traffic noise from the M4 and other major roads across the floodplain including the extension of the Winnersh Relief Road, Shinfield Eastern Relief Road and upgrades to the B3270 and A327.
- Increasing demand for residential, commercial and agricultural large-scale buildings leading to visual intrusion of these elements, including development within the South of the M4 SDL and expansion of the Science and Innovation Park.
- This character area contains a reservoir of 'dark skies', particularly to the south of the area. Light pollution is a key issue affecting the night landscape.

- Increasing demand for communication masts, pylons and poles leading to visual intrusion of these elements in the open landscape.

Landscape Strategy

To maintain the landscape character of the *Loddon River Valley* the following strategy is required: to conserve and enhance the current rural character with its typical river valley components and sense of remoteness.

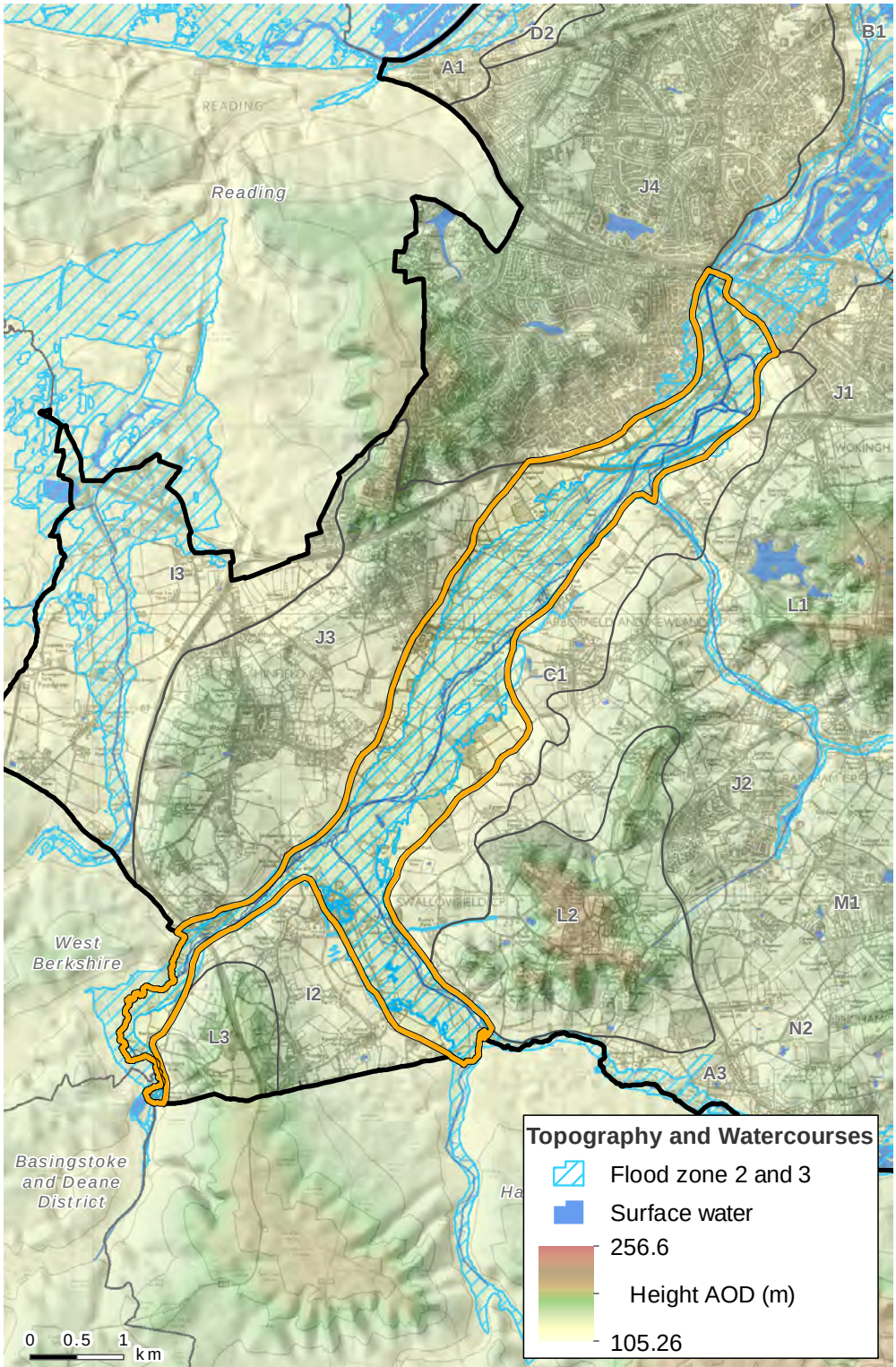
The key aspects to be conserved and actively managed are the natural habitats including areas of wet woodland and wet meadow. Restore or reinstate hedgerow boundaries with native species and the re-creation of permanent pasture alongside the river.

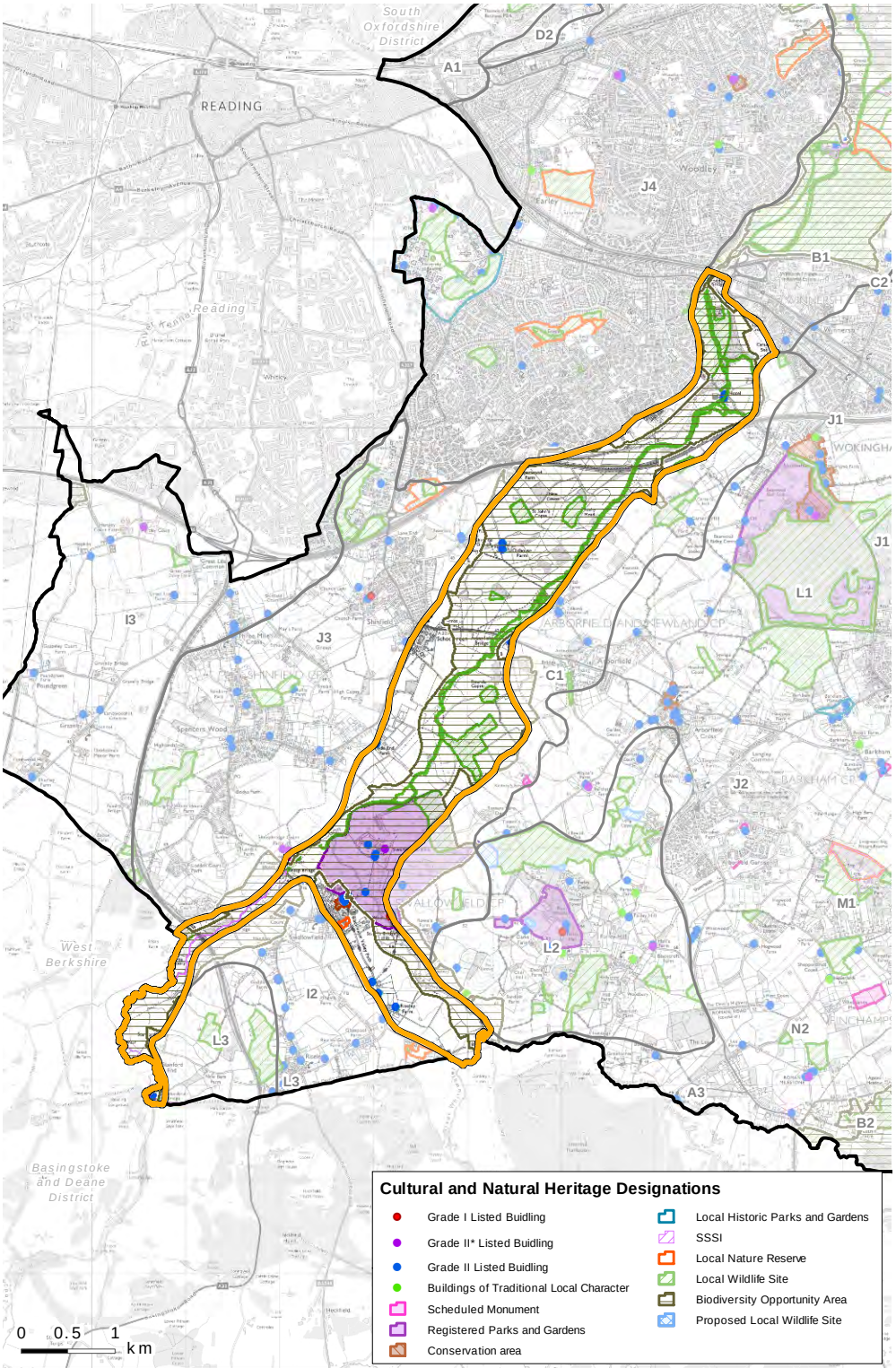
In terms of development, the aim is to conserve the sparse settlement pattern minimising influence from adjacent landscape areas.

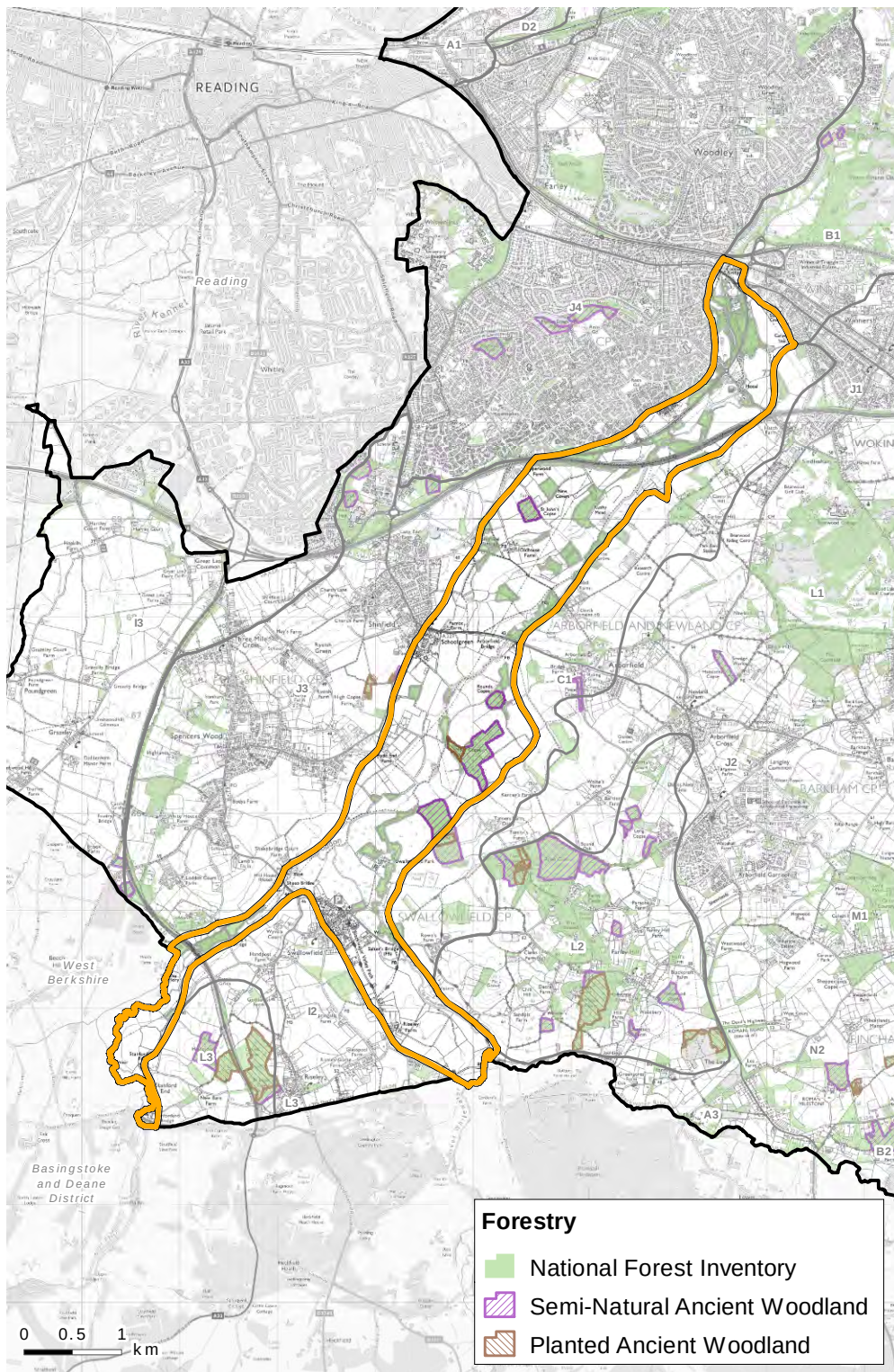
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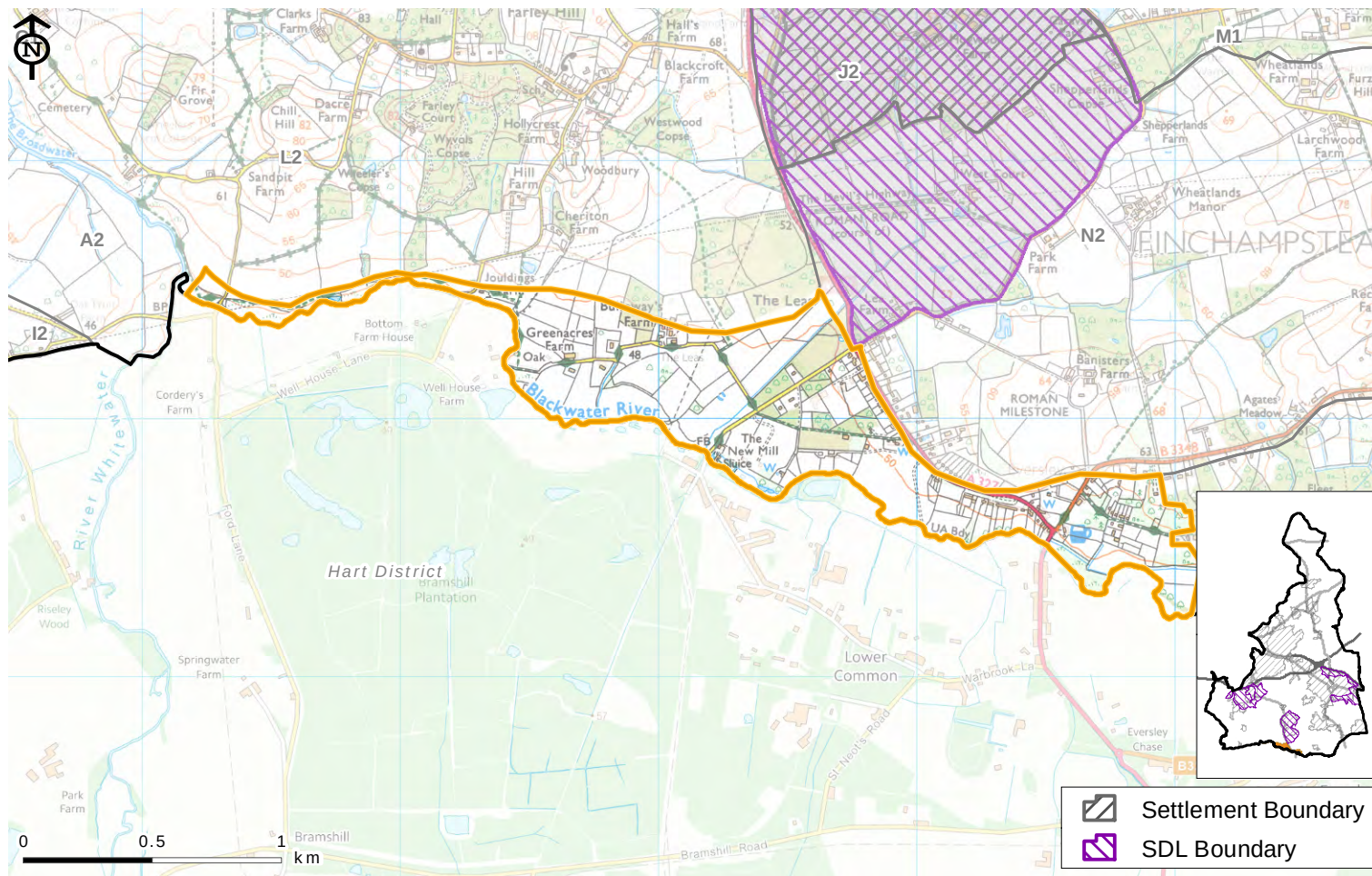
- Conserve the scenic quality and naturalistic character of the river corridor and tributary streams particularly from development, intensification of land use and encroachment by scrub and secondary woodland.
- Increase the extent of native deciduous woodland, using locally occurring native species in order to create green links to other woodland habitats and to dampen extreme river flows within river catchments. Continue to promote appropriate management through natural regeneration, control of non-native species and coppicing as a management tool for neglected woodland.
- Reinstall or repair hedgerows with native species where there are opportunities to do so. There has been recent planting of new hawthorn hedgerows, and this should be encouraged and continued but with a wider diversity of species.
- 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 protect the landscape pattern of mixed pasture and arable fields and encourage environmentally beneficial management. Encourage the appropriate management of grassland by grazing, particularly at Stamford End Meadows. Consider re-creation of lost wet meadows.
- Conserve, enhance and manage wetland habitats, including BAP priority habitats, particularly from development or changes in land use. The majority of this area is part of the Loddon Valley South BOA. This network of natural habitats has been identified as a target for habitat creation and restoration and positive management of lowland meadow, wet woodland and parkland. The 2003 Environment Agency biodiversity strategy for the Loddon catchment should be used.
- Maintain the prevailing hydrology and water tables to enable anaerobic conditions to preserve archaeological sites in low lying wetland areas, particularly along river corridors.
- Ensure restoration plans for gravel extraction sites are in keeping with character of the landscape and encourage opportunities for habitat creation. Resist proposals that would impact on the intactness or integrity of the landscape or change landscape character.
- Conserve the scenic value of Swallowfield and its Conservation Area and other listed buildings, moated sites, the Registered Park and Garden at Swallowfield and features associated with the GHQ Stop Line.

- Conserve the rural character of the river corridor, to protect the individual identity of settlements such as Swallowfield, and retain their sense of physical and visual separation. In particular protect the sensitive areas of open land between Earley and Winnersh.
- Maintain the rural character and sparse settlement pattern of dispersed farms through control of new development and avoiding the spread of development onto the floodplain, particularly in relation to the South of the M4 SDL.
- Enhance sense of place through careful design (including siting, massing, scale, materials and landscape – as well as sensitive lighting to retain dark skies at night) to minimise the impacts of any potential new development on valuable attributes.
- Resist proposals that introduce extensive or obtrusive elements e.g. pylons on the visually sensitive landscape.
- Use appropriate tree planting to help integrate roads, particularly in relation to the new Shinfield Eastern and Winnersh Relief Roads. Encourage retention of wooded edges and boundaries along roads and minimising fencing and other boundary structures.
- Protect the strong perceptions of tranquillity/remoteness in the landscape, including the experience of dark skies, through the management of development, ensuring development, including infrastructure, does not spread onto the floodplain and that technical solutions to noise and light pollution are used where possible









SUMMARY

The flat pastoral floodplain of the River Blackwater has small areas of woodland and larger arable fields and woodlands away from the river. Rural lanes cross the river by fords and link scattered farmsteads, although elsewhere there are larger engineered bridges.

The Blackwater River forms the southern boundary of Wokingham Borough, and the character area extends into Hart District. To the east the valley continues as B2: Blackwater River Valley with Open Water with the boundary defined by the extent of recent former gravel workings. The northern boundary marks the foot of the slope up to the sandy pastureland at L2: Farley Hill Wooded Sand and Gravel Hills and N2: Finchampstead Pastoral Sandy Lowland.



Key Characteristics

- Valley landscape dominated by the River Blackwater, a natural river with a gently winding course enclosed by vegetation. Small open water bodies adjoin the river, and there is a network of drainage ditches taking water from the surrounding land to the river.
- Narrow river valley enclosed by the clay slopes of Farley Hill to the west and widening to the east, where it is bounded by the gently sloping sides of the pastoral sands of Finchampstead.
- Geologically defined as flat alluvial valley floor prone to flooding, with pockets of Second River Terraces. The fertile soils of the valley floor support mixed agriculture, while the less fertile sandy soils and pockets of river gravels support woodland with settlement on higher ground.
- Wooded and enclosed character created by thick overgrown hedgerows with numerous mature hedgerow trees, often oak and blocks of mostly BAP priority habitat lowland mixed deciduous woodland and copses away from the river. Fleet Copse, partially in this area, is an ancient semi-natural woodland.
- An agricultural landscape dominated by a mix of horse paddocks and areas of small enclosed pastures concentrated along the river corridor with medium-sized geometric arable fields on the lower valley sides.
- Frequently overgrown and fragmented hedgerows, reinforced in places with post and wire fencing, define field boundaries.
- Wetland habitats including BAP priority habitat wet woodland, floodplain grazing marsh and lowland meadow. Eversley Meadow LWS contains a small area of purple moor grass and rush pasture. East of Eversley Street the area is covered by the Blackwater Valley BOA.
- Sparse settlement pattern of scattered farmsteads at the edge of the floodplain. Victorian and more modern development expands from the villages (e.g. Eversley) with stretches of ribbon development along main roads. Agricultural buildings have been converted into small business parks e.g. on New Mill Lane, although these are well-hidden from the road.
- Historic tree-lined roads, which are well used and often busy e.g. B3348. Tracks and a network of footpaths including the Blackwater Valley Path give access to the river and floodplain.
- Sense of tranquillity and even remoteness in places e.g. ford at the New Mill sluice, with 'dark skies' particularly along the Blackwater River to the west of the area. Riverbank vegetation and scrub frequently encloses the Blackwater River from view, contributing to the sense of remoteness.

Natural Landscape

- A3.1 The area is characterised by the presence of the Blackwater River, a moderate-sized river with a gently winding course. Near to and adjoining the river a network of drainage ditches takes water from the surrounding land to the river.
- A3.2 The alluvial valley floor is narrow to the west where it is closely bounded by the rising slopes of London Clay. To the east the low undulating sand of the Bagshot Formation forms the north slopes and here the valley floor is wider. Pockets of Second River Terrace at the edge of the valley floor become a more substantial element of the wider flat valley to the east. The fertile soil

of the valley floor supports a mixture of arable and pastoral use, with the land closest to the river that is subject to flooding predominantly given over to pasture. The less fertile sandy soils of the valley edge and the pockets of river gravel support wedges of woodland with settlement on the higher ground.

- A3.3 The river winds through a pastoral landscape of small fields and paddocks bounded by thick hedgerows with abundant trees and small areas of woodland. Away from the river, at the edge of the valley floor, there are larger, more open arable fields and larger blocks of BAP priority habitat lowland mixed deciduous woodland.
- A3.4 The main land uses in the Blackwater River Valley are agriculture and woodland, with residential development. Arable farming and horse paddocks predominate on the gently shelving lower valley sides in medium sized fields, geometric in shape and bounded by hedges varying in thickness, with regularly spaced large hedgerow trees making an important contribution to the wooded appearance of the landscape.
- A3.5 The valley floor contains permanent pasture and paddocks. Small geometric fields are defined by thick hedgerows with a mixture of mature and young trees. In places the hedgerows have an unkempt appearance and in others they are patchy and have been replaced by post and rail or wire fencing. Trees, including young oaks, add to the small scale, wooded feel of the valley floor. To the east where the valley widens the pastures are larger and more open, typically with parallel drainage ditches running along the boundaries down to the river.
- A3.6 The course of the Blackwater itself is marked by a narrow band of scrubby vegetation with trees often hiding the water from view. The mainly deciduous woodland is in blocks varying in size, and breaks up the landscape into intimate spaces especially to the north of The New Mill.
- A3.7 In comparison to the slightly calcareous conditions of the Thames and Loddon Valleys, there are higher proportions of sand and more acid substrates influencing the ecological character of the Blackwater Valley. The land rises up gently from the channel and the floodplain forms only a narrow band of seasonally wet ground and has resulted in fewer remaining nature conservation sites.
- A3.8 BAP priority habitat lowland meadows, purple moor grass and rush pasture and lowland mixed deciduous woodland is present in the east, designated as the Eversley Meadow Local Wildlife Site (LWS). Part of Fleet Copse is within this area; however, the LWS designation is within B2: Blackwater River Valley with open water.

Cultural Landscape

- A3.9 There is little evidence of prehistoric or Romano-British clearance along the Blackwater valley although a Roman settlement was probably associated with the crossing point of the Devil's Highway. The Blackwater formed part of the southern boundary of the Anglo-Saxon shire, part of the kingdom of Wessex, but, unlike the Thames and Loddon valleys, the Blackwater appears not to have been a major focus for Anglo-Saxon settlement. Medieval and post-medieval settlement on the valley floor was limited to the Domesday settlement at Eversley and farmsteads distributed along the valley edge. The valley floor would have comprised open fields and common grazing. There is a single mill at New Mill (Grade II listed), probably on the site of a medieval mill.
- A3.10 The first edition OS map shows a mix of irregular and straight-sided fields, interspersed with irregular areas of woodland indicating assart and later enclosure, including 19th century Parliamentary enclosure. This pattern of field enclosure is well-preserved.
- A3.11 There is a regular pattern of farmsteads along the edge of the floodplain plus old settlement at New Mill including the listed New Mill building. The buildings are timber framed or brick, some with thatched roofs. Overlaid on this older pattern is the expansion of Eversley village and ribbon development along the A327. This is Victorian and modern brick with the older buildings showing decorative chequered brick detailing. The expansion of Eversley is associated with small straight paddocks bounded by post and rail fences giving a tamed feeling to the landscape in contrast to the landscape around The New Mill.

A3.12 The valley floor was not a major communication route. A number of roads cross the valley, however the lanes along it, and crossings at fords, primarily served the farms. Rural roads run along the northern boundary of the area on the slopes of the valley side, and also cross the valley. To the west of the borough the roads typically become rural tracks bounded by thick hedges with trees and deep ditches as they near the river which they cross by fords rather than bridges. These tracks and the network of footpaths including the promoted Blackwater Valley Path, give particularly good access to the river and floodplain for leisure use.

Perceptual Landscape

A3.13 There is a strong sense of intimacy, tranquillity and remoteness, particularly close to the River Blackwater. The river itself is often hidden from view by bankside vegetation.

Valuable Landscape Attributes

- Rural riverine character of the Blackwater River and the distinctive intact floodplain.
- Pattern of pasture enclosed by hedgerows and areas of woodland provides scenic quality and visual diversity, as well as a naturalistic sense of place.
- Important wetland habitats including BAP priority habitat wet woodland and wet meadow remnants e.g. at Eversley Meadow.
- Low density settlement pattern with distinctive vernacular architecture of timber framing and red brick provides a coherent and aesthetically pleasing character.
- Historic lanes with ancient oaks and unimproved roadside verges provide ecological interest and filter views across the area.
- Recreational value of the public rights of way including the promoted Blackwater Valley Path which give access to the area. Their presence provides opportunities for the river and surrounding area to be used for leisure, especially in the east, near Fleethill Farm.
- Strong perceptual characteristics, including intimacy, tranquillity and remoteness and experience of dark skies which are rare within the borough.

Landscape Condition

The strong character and individual landscape components of the Blackwater River with its distinctive intact floodplain are generally in good condition. However, there are opportunities to restore and improve condition through the reinstatement and management of declining hedgerows and the enhancement of areas around settlement. Rural lanes have also become busier.

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 and greater flooding which may impact riverside vegetation.
- Changes in deciduous woodland structure through loss of structure and species diversity. Cessation of traditionally managed coppiced woodlands has occurred in the past. However, there are positive signs that woodlands are being brought back into management.
- Decline in demand for traditional countryside products leading to loss of rural features including

pollarded willows on waterside pasture.

- Changes in agricultural practice, with some land becoming marginal for commercial uses including conversion to horse paddocks. This is leading to loss of traditional features such as hedgerows and hedgerow trees, and of traditional pasture. There is continued pressure for pony paddocks, particularly at settlement edges, leading to a fragmentation of the rural landscape.
- Past pressures for gravel and sand extraction in the Blackwater river valley has resulted in changes in landscape character. The pressure for gravel extraction is likely to continue.
- Past use of fertilisers and pesticides resulted in a polluted run-off affecting water quality and biodiversity, although in recent years there has been an increase in the conversion to organic food production.
- Drainage operations associated with development and agriculture affecting wetland habitats.
- There is continuing pressure for expansion and infill within existing settlements and outside the area e.g. Finchampstead, Arborfield Garrison SDL, leading to loss of features such as trees, woodland and historic features. This may impact on the rural and remote character of this area.
- Demands for upgrading the winding network of rural lanes with new signage, line painting and widening threaten the intimate rural character of the lanes.
- This character area contains a reservoir of 'dark skies' particularly along the Blackwater River. Light pollution is a key issue affecting the night landscape.

Landscape Strategy

To maintain the landscape character of the *Blackwater River Valley* the following strategy is required: to conserve and enhance the tranquil rural valley character and strengthen the remaining pastoral landscape.

The key aspects to be conserved and actively managed are the declining hedgerows, wetland habitats and historic leafy lanes.

In terms of development, the aim is to enhance areas around settlement, and conserve the sparse settlement pattern.

Landscape Guidelines

- Conserve the scenic quality and natural character of the river corridor.
- Conserve and enhance the wooded character of the landscape away from the river. Conserve the BAP priority habitat deciduous woodland and ancient woodland at Fleet Copse, which provides a wooded backdrop to the river as well as wildlife interest. Encourage traditional management practices to maintain key landscape features including coppice and pollarded willows.
- Consider the use of trees and wetland habitats within river catchments to dampen extreme river flows
- Conserve and manage hedgerows, with standard oaks left to form future timber trees, 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.
- 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 landscape pattern of mixed pasture and arable fields and encourage appropriate management of grassland by grazing, particularly west of New Mill Road. Consider re-creation of lost grassland habitats.
- 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, enhance and manage wetland habitats including BAP priority habitats, particularly from changes in land use. The land east of Eversley Road is part of the Blackwater Valley BOA. This network of habitats, which extend into Bracknell Forest, has been identified as a target for habitat creation and restoration and positive management of grassland and gravel pit 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.
- Enhance informal recreational enjoyment of the landscape. Consider zoning of activities to ensure ecologically valuable landscapes are protected from damaging activities and ensure appropriate management of informal recreation, particularly in relation to the Rights of Way network.
- Maintain the sparse settlement pattern of dispersed farms through control of new development, avoiding spread of development along the floodplain.
- Maintain and enhance the character of historic and leafy lanes resisting unsympathetic highways improvements, infrastructure and signage.
- Protect the strong perceptions of tranquillity and remoteness in the landscape, including the experience of dark skies, through the management of development and that technical solutions to light pollution are used where possible.

