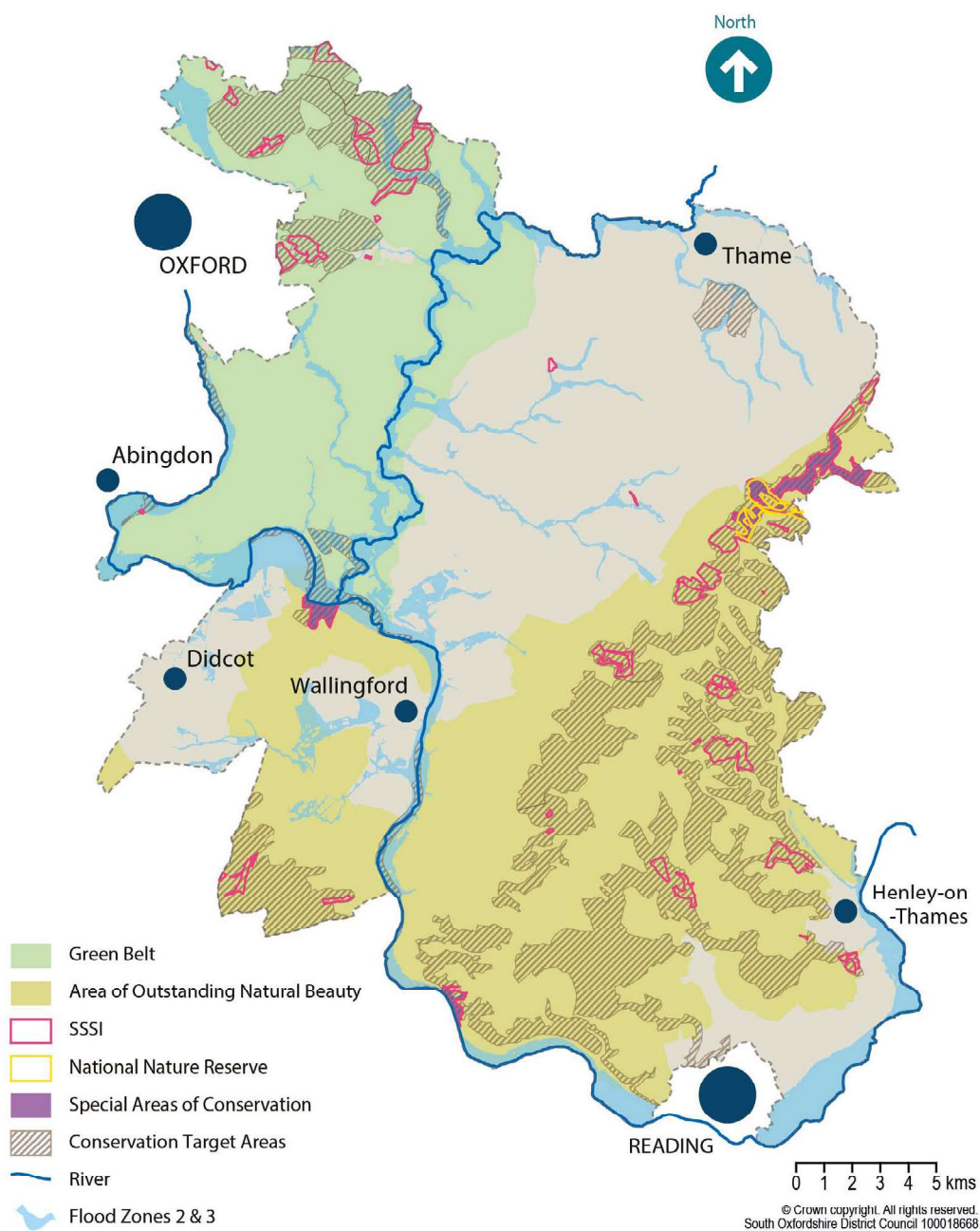


7 NATURAL AND HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

- 7.1 South Oxfordshire has a beautiful natural and built environment, which makes the district an attractive place to live and work. This environment also attracts visitors who contribute to the local economy.
- 7.2 The landscape of the district includes rolling downland, wooded hills, ancient woodlands, historic parkland, low-lying farmland, riverside meadows and strategic environmental assets including the North Wessex Downs and the Chilterns AONB, the Green Belt and the River Thames and its tributaries. We encourage effective management of the AONB and the Green Belt.
- 7.3 The whole district is rich in biodiversity, including international, national and locally protected sites and habitats and forms a part of a wider ecological network across the County. Maintaining sustainable agricultural land and practices is important in preserving the district's rural character and landscape.
- 7.4 The valley and tributaries of the River Thames are highly attractive features of the landscape and its special visual and environmental qualities are for the most part unspoilt. The Thames Valley is noted for its peace, tranquillity, biodiversity and cultural heritage, which is essential to preserve. The long-distance Thames Path and the river itself provide a focus for recreation and leisure activities.
- 7.5 We will seek to ensure that the planning and design of development not only protects water supply and quality, but also protects and, where appropriate restores, natural river form and function, whilst maximising resistance and resilience to flood risk.
- 7.6 The district has a rich cultural history that has provided South Oxfordshire with over 3,500 listed buildings, 52 Scheduled Monuments, 13 Registered Parks and Gardens, a Registered Battlefield, and 72 Conservation Areas. Sadly in 2020 there are 14 sites on the Heritage at Risk Register. Parts of the district's natural environment and many historic assets are of national significance. These heritage assets³¹ help establish the distinctive character of South Oxfordshire. We seek to ensure the conservation, enhancement, enjoyment and understanding of all our heritage assets as they make a positive contribution to sustainable communities, including their economic vitality.

³¹ Further information on nationally protected historic buildings is available on the Historic England website (www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/). Further information on Heritage at Risk is also available (www.historicengland.org.uk/advice/heritage-at-risk/search-register/) The lists are updated periodically.



Landscape and Countryside

Policy ENV1: Landscape and Countryside

1. The highest level of protection will be given to the landscape and scenic beauty of the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs):
 - Development in an AONB or affecting the setting of an AONB will only be permitted where it conserves, and where possible, enhances the character and natural beauty of the AONB;
 - Development in an AONB will only be permitted where it is appropriate to the economic and environmental wellbeing of the area or promotes understanding or enjoyment of the AONB;
 - Major development in an AONB will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated to be in the public interest; and
 - Development proposals that could affect the special qualities of an AONB (including the setting of an AONB) either individually or in combination with other developments, should be accompanied by a proportionate Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.

AONB Management Plans will be a material consideration in decision making.
2. South Oxfordshire's landscape, countryside and rural areas will be protected against harmful development. Development will only be permitted where it protects and, where possible enhances, features that contribute to the nature and quality of South Oxfordshire's landscapes, in particular:
 - i) trees (including individual trees, groups of trees and woodlands), hedgerows and field boundaries;
 - ii) irreplaceable habitats such as ancient woodland and aged or veteran trees found outside ancient woodland;
 - iii) the landscapes, waterscapes, cultural heritage and user enjoyment of the River Thames, its tributaries and flood plains;
 - iv) other watercourse and water bodies;
 - v) the landscape setting of settlements or the special character and landscape setting of Oxford;
 - vi) topographical features;
 - vii) areas or features of cultural and historic value;
 - viii) important views and visually sensitive skylines; and

ix) aesthetic and perceptual factors such as tranquility, wildness, intactness, rarity and enclosure.

3. Development which supports economic growth in rural areas will be supported provided it conserves and enhances the landscape, countryside and rural areas.

4. The Council will seek the retention of important hedgerows. Where retention is not possible and a proposal seeks the removal of a hedgerow, the Council will require compensatory planting with a mixture of native hedgerow species.

This policy contributes towards achieving objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8.

7.7 South Oxfordshire is a mainly rural district. Mid-year population estimates for 2014 from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) rank the district as 249th out of 326 districts in terms of population density, with an average of 202 people per square kilometre (the national average for England is 417 people per square kilometre).

7.8 The countryside and its relationship with our settlements contributes significantly to the district's character and is highly valued. Development should conserve and where possible, enhance the landscape setting of settlements. The Council will use its evidence base on the district's landscape which currently includes the Landscape Character Assessment, Landscape Capacity Assessments and the Oxfordshire Historic Landscape Characterisation Project, to assess and determine development proposals.

Significant weight is also given to protecting non-designated landscapes, the countryside and Green Infrastructure assets from harm

7.9 Whilst supporting suitably located and designed development necessary to facilitate the economic and social well-being of local communities, great weight is given to conserving and enhancing the intrinsic character and beauty of our Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection. Significant weight is also given to protecting non-designated landscapes, the countryside and Green Infrastructure assets from harm.

Trees and Hedgerows in the Landscape

7.10 Trees and hedgerows, individually and collectively, can make an important contribution to biodiversity and the landscape. They also absorb atmospheric pollution and have a beneficial influence on the climate. Development proposals should provide a net increase in tree canopy cover where this is

possible, having regard to other considerations including site size, heritage protection, landscape character, habitat protection, residential amenity, and the need to make the best use of land.

- 7.11 The Council will protect trees of significant amenity value which are worthy of retention and considered to be at risk, through Tree Preservation Orders, Conservation Areas and planning conditions as appropriate, except in woodland subject to a Forestry Commission management agreement. When considering applications to carry out work to trees protected by an Order or Conservation Area, the Council will take account of good arboricultural practice, the effect of the trees on nearby properties, and the contribution they make to the visual quality of the area.

Biodiversity

Policy ENV2: Biodiversity - Designated Sites, Priority Habitats and Species

1. **The highest level of protection will be given to sites of international nature conservation importance (Special Areas of Conservation). Development that is likely to result in a significant effect, either alone or in combination, on such sites will need to satisfy the requirements of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended).**
2. **Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) are of national importance. Development that is likely to have an adverse effect on a SSSI (either on its own or in combination with other developments) will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances, where it can be demonstrated that the benefits of the development in the location proposed clearly outweigh any harm to the special interest features and the SSSI's contribution to the local ecological network. In such circumstances, measures should be provided (and secured through planning conditions or legal agreements) that would mitigate or, as a last resort, compensate for the adverse effects resulting from development.**
3. **Development likely to result, either directly or indirectly to the loss, deterioration or harm to:**
 - **Local Wildlife Sites**
 - **Local Nature Reserves**
 - **Priority Habitats and Species**