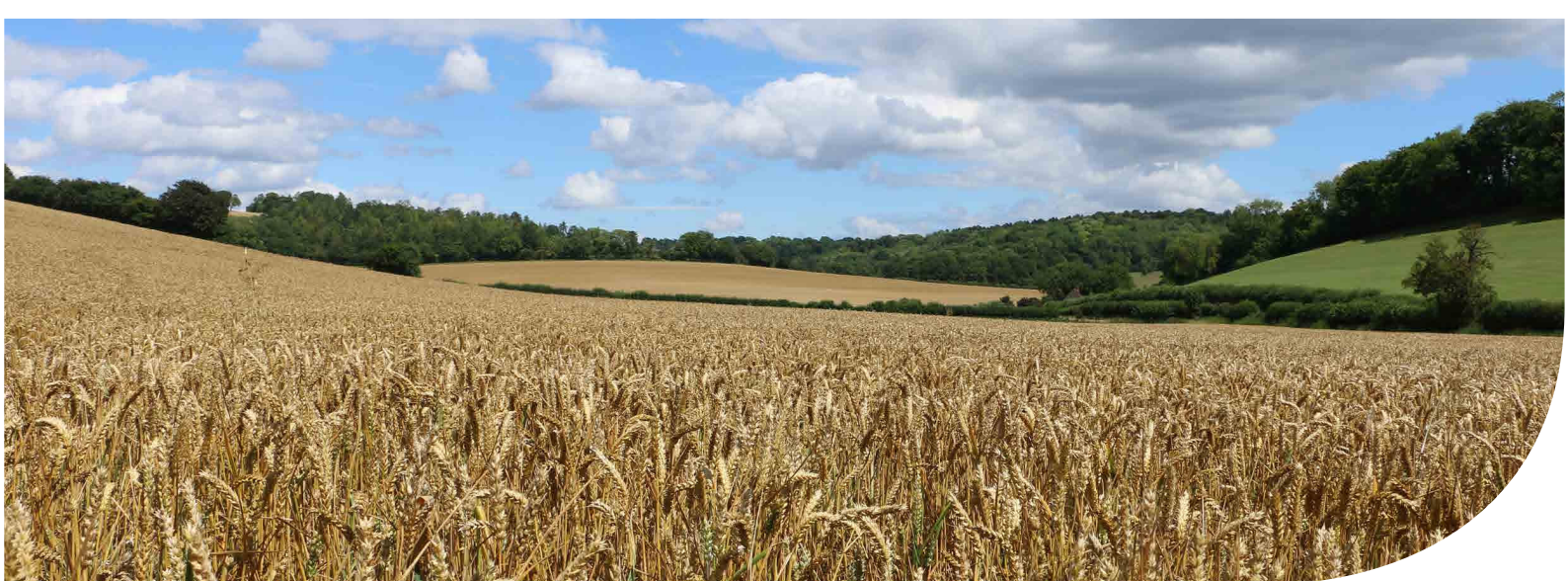


Landscape Character Assessment for the Local Plan 2033

South Oxfordshire District Council

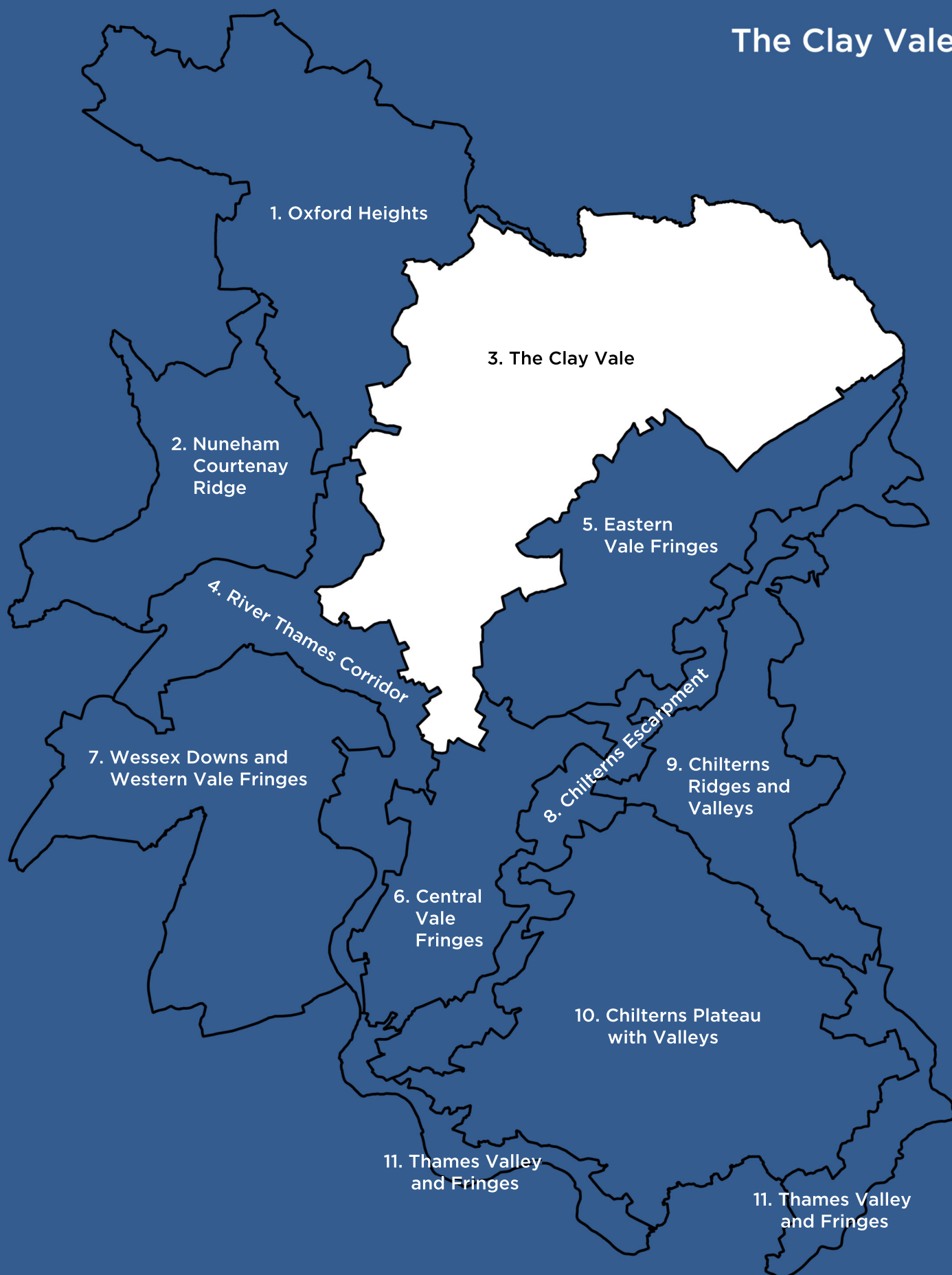
November 2017

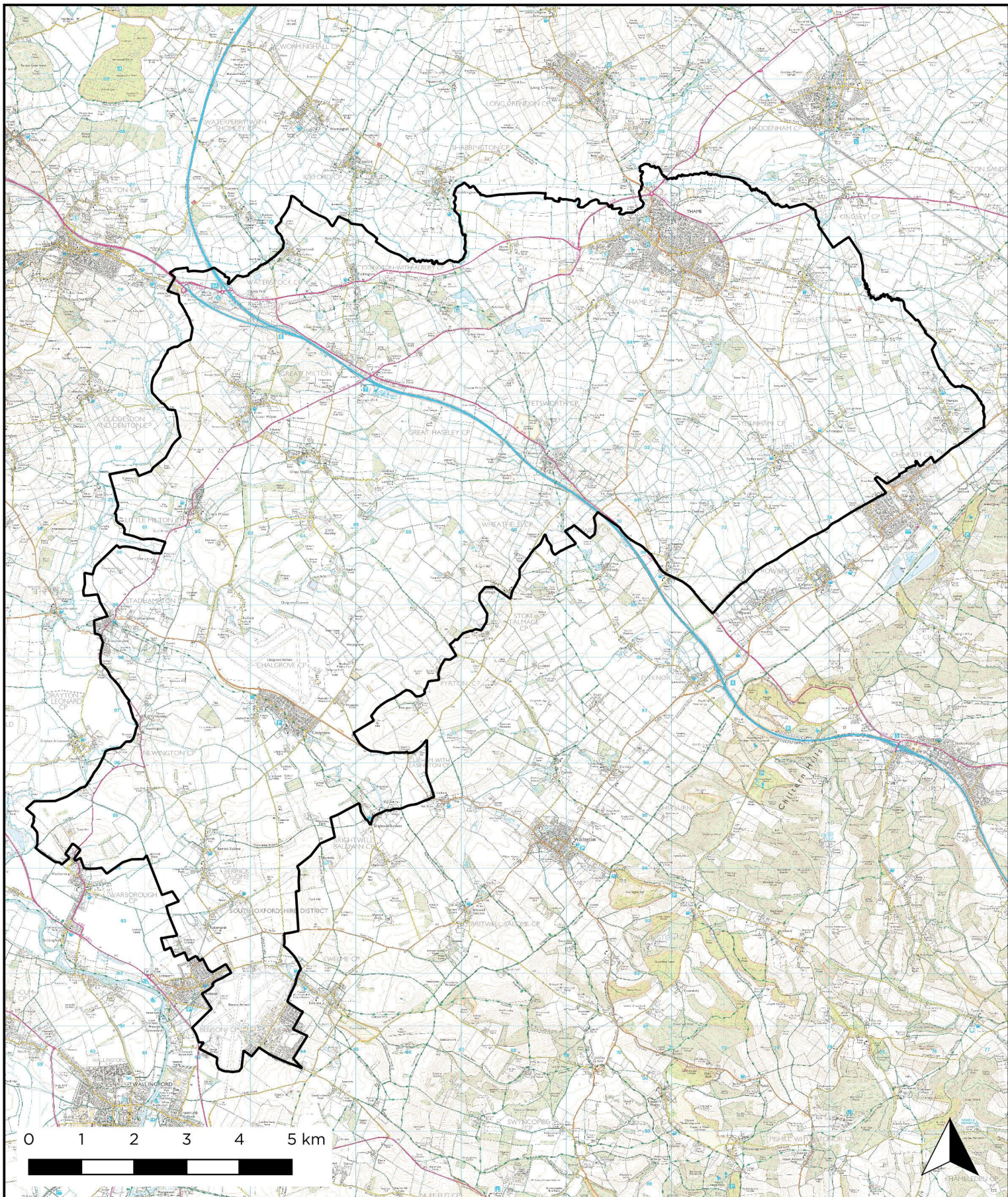


LEPUS CONSULTING
LANDSCAPE, ECOLOGY, PLANNING & URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

Landscape Character Area 3

The Clay Vale





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Ordnance Survey 100018668 South Oxfordshire District Council

Legend

 3. The Clay Vale

Landscape Character Area 3

South Oxfordshire Landscape
Character Assessment

1:95,000 scale

31.07.17





Pasture to the east of Sydenham



Arable land to the north of Postcombe



Grassland and thatched roofs at Little Haseley



Arable land to the north of Great Haseley



Pasture to the north of Great Haseley



Arable land to the west of Little Haseley



Pasture and cattle to the north of Berrick Prior



Arable land to the north east of Roke

8 The Clay Vale (LCA 3)

8.1 Summary

- 8.1.1 *The Clay Vale* embraces the low-lying, gentle landscape which overlies the Gault Clay across the centre of the South Oxfordshire district.

8.2 Location and boundaries

- 8.2.1 *The Clay Vale* occupies a lowland agricultural landscape stretching from the town of Benson to the south west to the town of Thame in the north east.
- 8.2.2 *The Clay Vale* is defined by the district boundary to the north and north east of the area. *The Clay Vale* borders *Oxford Heights* (1) and *River Thames Corridor* (4) to the west, *Central Vale Fringes* (6) to the south and *Eastern Vale Fringes* (5) to the east.
- 8.2.3 *The Clay Vale* is comprised mostly of NCA 108 Upper Thames Clay Vales and a small area of NCA 110 Chilterns in the far south.

8.3 Key characteristics

- The landscape ranges between c. 50m AOD and c. 110m AOD.
- The River Thame is located adjacent to the northern and western character area boundary.
- The area is crossed by a network of small watercourses.
- Ancient woodland exists in small areas.
- The land use is predominantly agricultural, comprising mostly of arable land.
- Arable field margins are widespread in the area.
- The Clay Vale contains Spartum Fen SSSI designated for its calcareous fen and carr vegetation, open water habitats and damp, oak woodland.
- Busy transport corridors cross through this area including the M40 motorway, the A40, A329 and A418 roads.
- Long distance views to the Chilterns AONB in the east.
- Aeroplanes are a common feature in the skies above the area.
- Villages in the area are typically nucleated.

Geology and landform

- 8.3.1 The underlying geology is dominated by heavy blue grey Gault Clay, deposited during a marine incursion in the Lower Cretaceous period. This gives rise to the low ground, subdued topography and heavy soils which are typical of the gently rolling vale landscape.
- 8.3.2 At its western end, the vale grades gently into the flat alluvial floodplain of the River Thames. Along its northern edge, the vale becomes more strongly undulating, partly as a result of more mixed geology around Great Milton and towards the upper Thame valley, where the Gault Clay gives way to exposures of Lower Greensand, Portland Beds and Kimmeridge Clay.
- 8.3.3 The topography of *The Clay Vale* ranges between c. 50m AOD and c. 110m AOD. The lowest areas of land are located around the River Thame. The highest area of land in *The Clay Vale* is located adjacent to Mill Lane (B4009) at Chinnor (116m AOD). Other notable high points include land to the south of Henton (112m AOD), and land adjacent to the M40 motorway to the north west of Postcombe (112m AOD).

Hydrology

- 8.3.4 The River Thame meets the border of *The Clay Vale* to the north of the town of Thame (which is also the South Oxfordshire district boundary). The river then follows the boundary line west and then south, meandering in and out of *The Clay Vale*.
- 8.3.5 *The Clay Vale* is intercepted by a network of smaller watercourses, these include Cuttle Brook and Haseley Brook.
- 8.3.6 *The Clay Vale* contains areas of Flood Zone 2 and 3, associated with the River Thame and smaller watercourses.

8.4 Natural factors

Biodiversity/flora and fauna

- 8.4.1 Priority habitats are widespread in this area, including semi-improved grassland, coastal and floodplain grazing marsh, wood-pasture and parkland, deciduous woodland, traditional orchards.
- 8.4.2 *The Clay Vale* contains two local nature reserves, Cuttle Brook (located within the town of Thame) and part of Ewelme Watercress Beds (located in the village of Ewelme).
- 8.4.3 The Clay Vale contains one SSSI, Spartum Fen (located to the east of the village of Great Haseley), to the south of Abingdon-on-Thames. Spartum Fen is designated as a SSSI for its calcareous fen and carr vegetation, open water habitats and damp, oak woodland⁴³.
- 8.4.4 Small blocks of woodland are scattered across the landscape. Ancient Woodland exists in small areas including deciduous and coniferous woodland at Fernhill Wood, to the south east of the village of Tiddington⁴⁴.

8.5 Cultural and social factors

Land use (and management)

- 8.5.1 The vale supports mainly arable farming with some tracts of pasture, particularly in the lowest areas along various watercourses where drainage is impeded. Farming practice is particularly intensive on the better-drained soils of the Lower Greensand and Portland Beds, such as around Great Milton, where field enlargement and hedgerow removal have created a very open landscape probably similar to the bare open vistas of the ancient common fields.
- 8.5.2 Arable field margins are widespread across the area.
- 8.5.3 Species-rich hedgerows are distributed throughout parts of this character area. Priority should be given to safeguarding, maintaining and expanding this resource.

⁴³

<https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/SiteDetail.aspx?SiteCode=S1002764&SiteName=Spartum&countyCode=&responsiblePerson=>

⁴⁴ Natural England (2017) MAGIC. Accessed on 07/09/17. Available at:
<http://magic.defra.gov.uk/MagicMap.aspx>

- 8.5.4 Two registered parks and gardens are located within *The Clay Vale*; Thame Park (Grade II*); and Ascott Park (Grade II).

Public rights of way

- 8.5.5 Oxfordshire Way and Thame Valley Walk cross through this area.

Settlement

- 8.5.6 Settlement pattern within the vale is strongly influenced by physical factors. The heavy clay soils and a risk of flooding have traditionally discouraged settlement on areas underlain by the Gault Clay and there are still quite large areas of the vale which are sparsely settled (e.g. to the north-east of Chalgrove).
- 8.5.7 The area contains the town of Thame (the largest settlement within this character area) and a number of smaller villages which tend to be associated with the sandstones and mudstones of the Portland Beds, Upper Greensand and Kimmeridge Clays. For example, Thame is built on a sandstone island which emerges from the surrounding clay and is almost entirely encircled by the River Thame and its tributaries (the town takes its name from the river, which means 'dark waters'). Other examples of this link with geology are the villages of Great Milton and Great Haseley which sit on the rolling plateau formed by exposures of the Portland Beds and Lower Greensand.
- 8.5.8 Thame was one of the primary Saxon settlements but was deliberately enlarged in the twelfth century by the Bishop of Lincoln and still retains the characteristics of a classic linear medieval new town⁴⁵. This and several other settlements retain a substantial number of old buildings of historical importance and contain designated Conservation Areas. Because of the lack of building stone, most of the older houses are timber framed with thatched roofs and there are occasional examples of walling in cob, a mixture of mud and straw. Brick was also widely used from an early date and appears as 'nogging' for timber framed houses, in alternating bands of brick and flint in some eighteenth century cottages and in a characteristic pattern of mellow red and grey brickwork⁴⁶.
- 8.5.9 Busy transport corridors cross through the area including the M40 motorway, the A40, A329 and A418 roads.

⁴⁵ Bond, J and Over, L (1988) Oxfordshire and Berkshire. Ordnance Survey Historical Guides. George Philip & Son. London.

⁴⁶ Bond, J and Over, L (1988) Oxfordshire and Berkshire. Ordnance Survey Historical Guides. George Philip & Son. London.

8.6 Perceptual and aesthetic factors

- 8.6.1 The landscape is of a strong, agricultural nature, particularly comprising of arable land. Field sizes are vast in some areas. The M40 motorway, the A40, A329 and A418 roads are aural and visual detractors in the landscape. The cooling towers and chimney at Didcot Power Station are visible to the south west from areas of higher ground. Thatched roofs are a feature including in the villages of Great Haseley and Little Haseley. Red kites are often seen in the skies above the area. Aeroplanes associated with RAF Benson and Chalgrove Airfield are a common feature in the skies. Sparsely settled villages, stone walls and churches with corallian limestone characterise built form across much of the landscape. Willow trees are a regular feature.

8.7 Landscape Types

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

- 8.7.2 *The Clay Vale* is comprised of the following landscape types:

Undulating open vale

Key characteristics:

- Low-lying, undulating or gently rolling landform.
- Large-scale farmland, mostly under intensive arable cultivation.
- Typically large fields, with rectilinear pattern of field boundaries.
- Weak structure of tightly clipped or gappy hedgerows, with few hedgerow trees.
- Open, denuded and exposed character, with high intervisibility.
- Distinctive elevated and expansive character on higher ground, with dominant sky and long views.
- Predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads (including M40/A40), overhead power lines and built development.

Undulating, semi-enclosed vale

Key characteristics:

- Similar to *undulating open vale* landscape type but with a stronger structure of hedgerows and trees which provide clearer definition of field pattern.
- Predominantly intensive arable land use but some pockets of permanent pasture occur, particularly around settlements and in the more strongly undulating areas.
- Predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads (including M40/A40), overhead power lines and built development.
- Moderate intervisibility.

Undulating wooded vale

Key characteristics:

- Similar to *undulating, semi-enclosed vale* landscape type but with significant woodland blocks which create a stronger sense of enclosure and visual containment.
- Low intervisibility.

Flat, open farmland

Key characteristics:

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

Flat semi-enclosed farmland

Key characteristics:

- Similar to *flat, open farmland* landscape type but with stronger

landscape structure and a semi-enclosed character (e.g. along Cuttle Brook near Thame Park).

- Rural and semi-enclosed character.
- Moderate to low intervisibility.

Flat floodplain pasture

Key characteristics:

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

Parkland and estate farmland

Key characteristics:

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

- Well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, clumps and blocks of woodland.
- Rural, unspoilt character.
- Generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover.
- Low intervisibility.

Amenity landscape

Key characteristics:

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

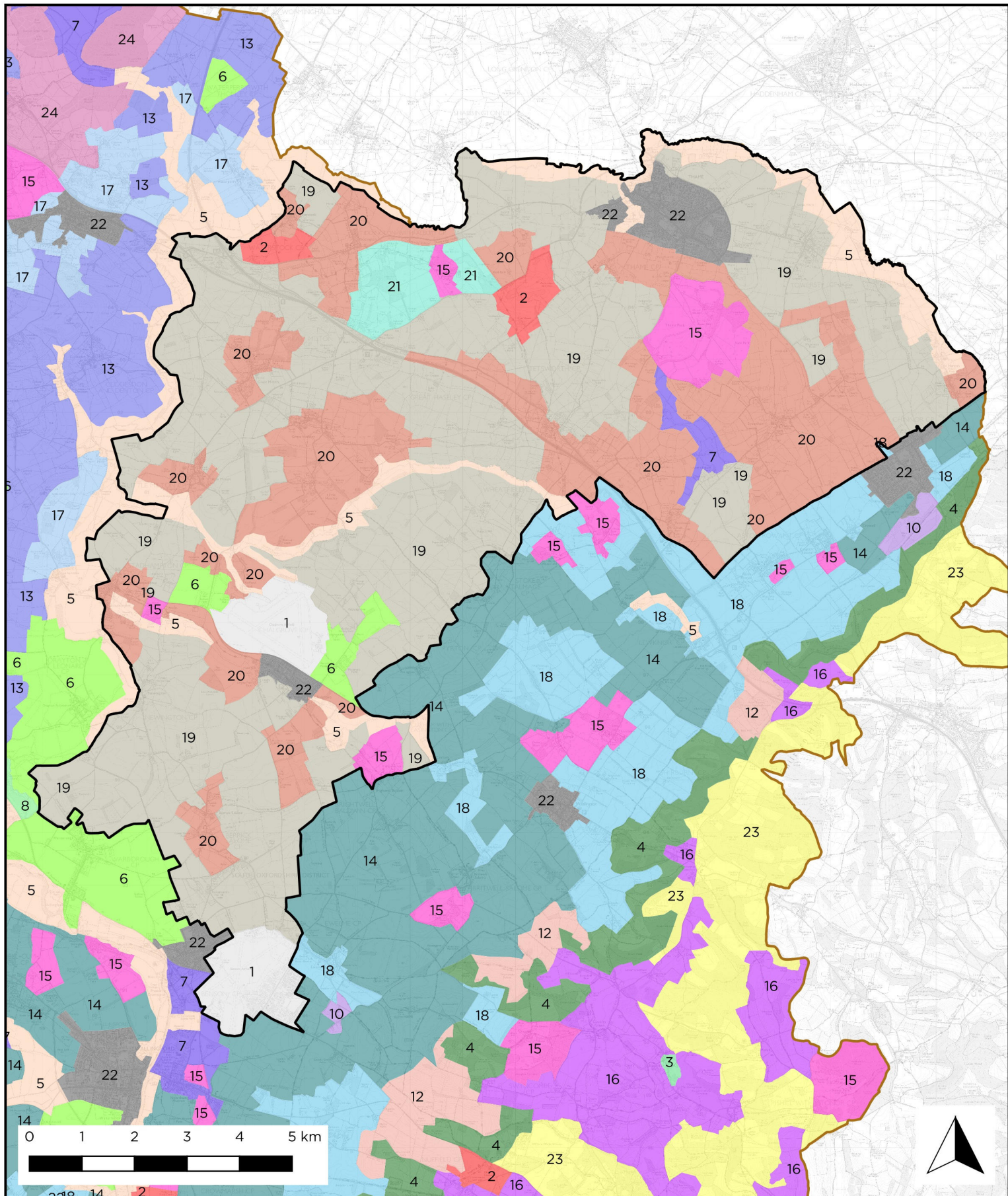
- Incongruous, artificial landform at the Oxfordshire Golf Course, out of context with surrounding gently undulating landform.
- Typical golf course landscapes of greens, fairways and roughs, with associated features such as lakes and bunkers and buildings.
- Intensively managed and suburban character.
- Moderate intervisibility.

Airfields

Key characteristics:

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

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



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Legend

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| The Clay Vale (LCA 3) | 8. Floodplain wetland | 17. Semi-enclosed farmed hills and valleys |
| South Oxfordshire District Boundary | 9. Institutions | 18. Semi-enclosed rolling downs |
| 1. Airfields/MOD sites | 10. Minerals / landfill sites | 19. Undulating open vale |
| 2. Amenity landscapes | 11. Open dipslope | 20. Undulating semi-enclosed vale |
| 3. Commons and heaths | 12. Open escarpment | 21. Undulating wooded vale |
| 4. Enclosed escarpment | 13. Open farmed hills and valleys | 22. Urban areas |
| 5. Flat floodplain pasture | 14. Open rolling downs | 23. Wooded dipslope |
| 6. Flat open farmland | 15. Parkland and estate farmland | 24. Wooded hills and valleys |
| 7. Flat, semi-enclosed farmland | 16. Semi-enclosed dipslope | |

South Oxfordshire
Landscape
Character Assessment

Map: The Clay Vale
(LCA 3) LT

Scale: 1:95,000

Date: 23.08.17



8.8 Planning, managing and protecting distinctiveness

8.8.1 The following table presents recommendations to protect, conserve, enhance and restore the landscape qualities of South Oxfordshire.

| Forces for change | Guidelines/Mitigation |
|---|---|
| Agricultural intensification, diversification and farm amalgamation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the conservation of the surviving areas of permanent species-poor pasture and promote arable reversion to grassland, particularly on land adjacent to watercourses to benefit wading birds and provide distinctive extensive landscape tracts of land. Recognise that grazing sheep and cattle can make a contribution to the landscape's identity and distinctiveness. Strengthen the hedgerow network with hedgerow trees such as oak and ash. Promote environmentally-sensitive maintenance of hedgerows, including coppicing and layering when necessary, to maintain a height and width appropriate to the landscape type. Protect stone walls from deterioration. Prevent scrub encroachment in areas of species-rich grassland. Species-rich rivers and ditches should be maintained with diverse banksides and aquatic vegetation through sympathetic management and the use of agri-environment schemes. |
| Inappropriate or inconsistent management, or neglect of existing parklands. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safeguard, maintain and enhance and the characteristic landscape features of existing parklands (including Thame Park and Ascott Park) that include mature trees, avenues of trees, lakes, woods and walls. |
| Introduction of tall buildings and structures such as communication masts and electricity pylons. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimise impact by locating new communication masts on existing structures or by using existing masts. Bury cables underground and seek opportunities to bury existing overhead cables. |
| Development, expansion and infilling of settlements. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimise the visual impact of intrusive land uses at the fringes of towns, villages and farms with the judicious planting of tree and shrub species characteristic of the area. This will help to screen the development and integrate it more successfully with its surrounding countryside. Maintain the nucleated pattern of settlements, and promote the use of building materials to maintain vernacular style and a scale of development and that are appropriate to <i>the Clay Vale</i> (see also the South Oxfordshire Design Guide , November 2016). |

| | |
|--|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain local distinctiveness by controlling the quality of built development taking into account its scale, setting and use of local building materials. • Protect the sparsely settled character of the landscape and the integrity and vernacular character of the estate villages. |
| Introduction of golf courses. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage planting of biodiverse green infrastructure to surround golf courses. |
| Impact of development at RAF Benson and at Chalgrove airfield. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage planting and design of biodiverse green infrastructure at the airfields. |
| Decline in management of existing woodlands and trees | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance and strengthen the character of tree-lined watercourses by planting willows and ash and, where appropriate, pollarding willows. • Establish buffer strips/field margins to potentially benefit small mammals, invertebrates and birds adjacent to willow pollards. • Promote small-scale planting of deciduous woodland blocks using locally characteristic species such as crack willow, oak, ash and alders. • Ancient semi-natural woodlands should be managed to ensure they are in favourable condition. • Promote the sustainable management of existing woodland to safeguard its long-term survival. |