

# LCT 2: Wooded Chalk Escarpment

## Landscape character type summary

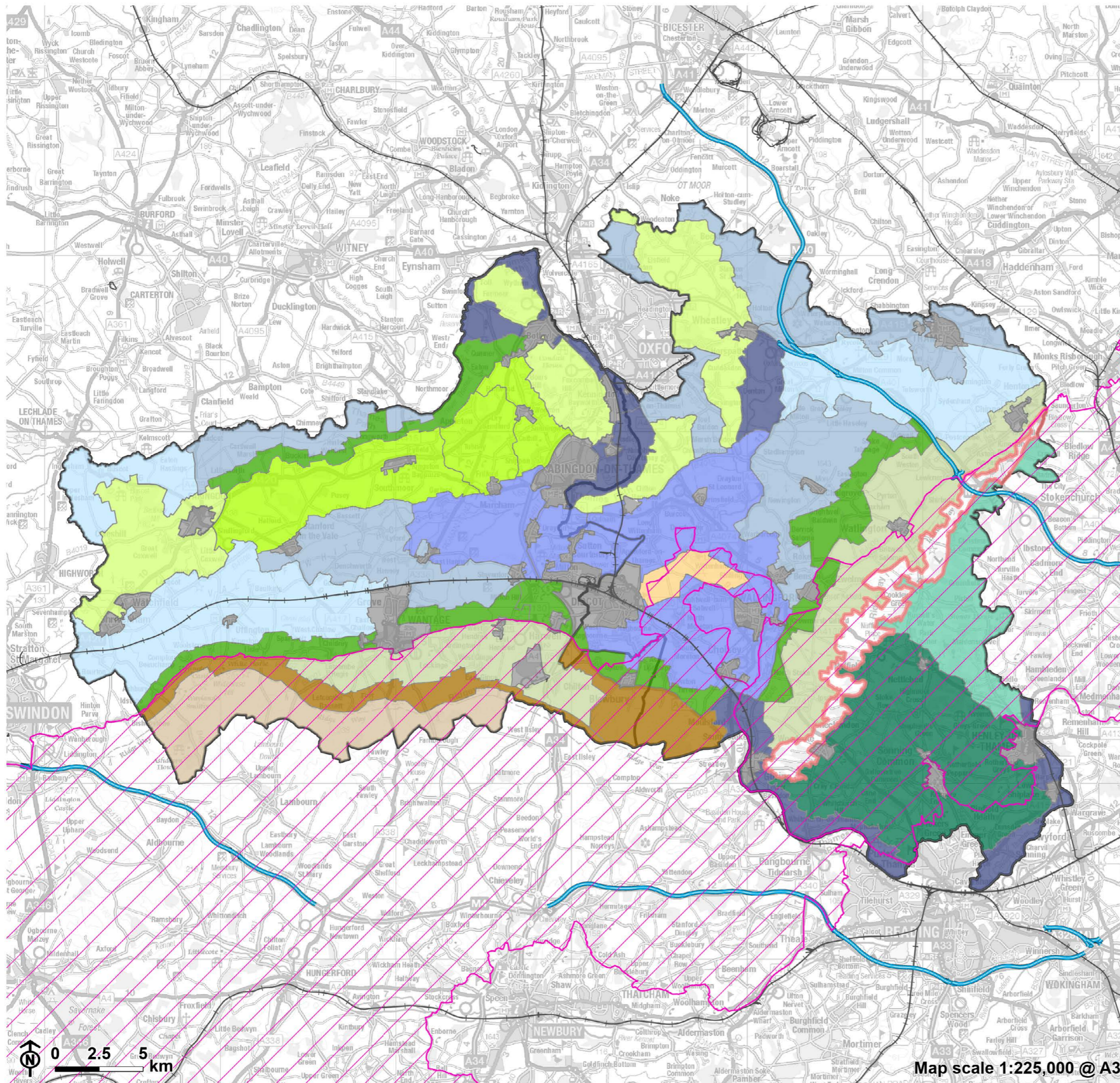
The Wooded Chalk Escarpment is a prominent belt of steeply sloping land towards the western edge of the Chilterns National Landscape, which forms a dramatic backdrop to the chalk footslopes and lower-lying landscape of the clay vale below.

One landscape character area (LCA) is identified:

- LCA 2A: Chiltern Wooded Chalk Escarpment, running from Chinnor in the north-east to Goring in the south-west.



Landscape Character Type Overview



2: Wooded Chalk Escarpment

District boundary

National Landscape

Motorway

Railway

Built up area

Other LCT's

1: Open Chalk Escarpment and Upper Slopes

3: Open Chalk Dipslope

4: Wooded Chalk Plateau and Valleys

5: Wooded Chalk Ridges and Valleys

6: Chalk Escarpment Footslopes

7: Ridge Hilltops

8: Ridge Slope

9: Vale Edge Slopes

10: Lower Vale Hills

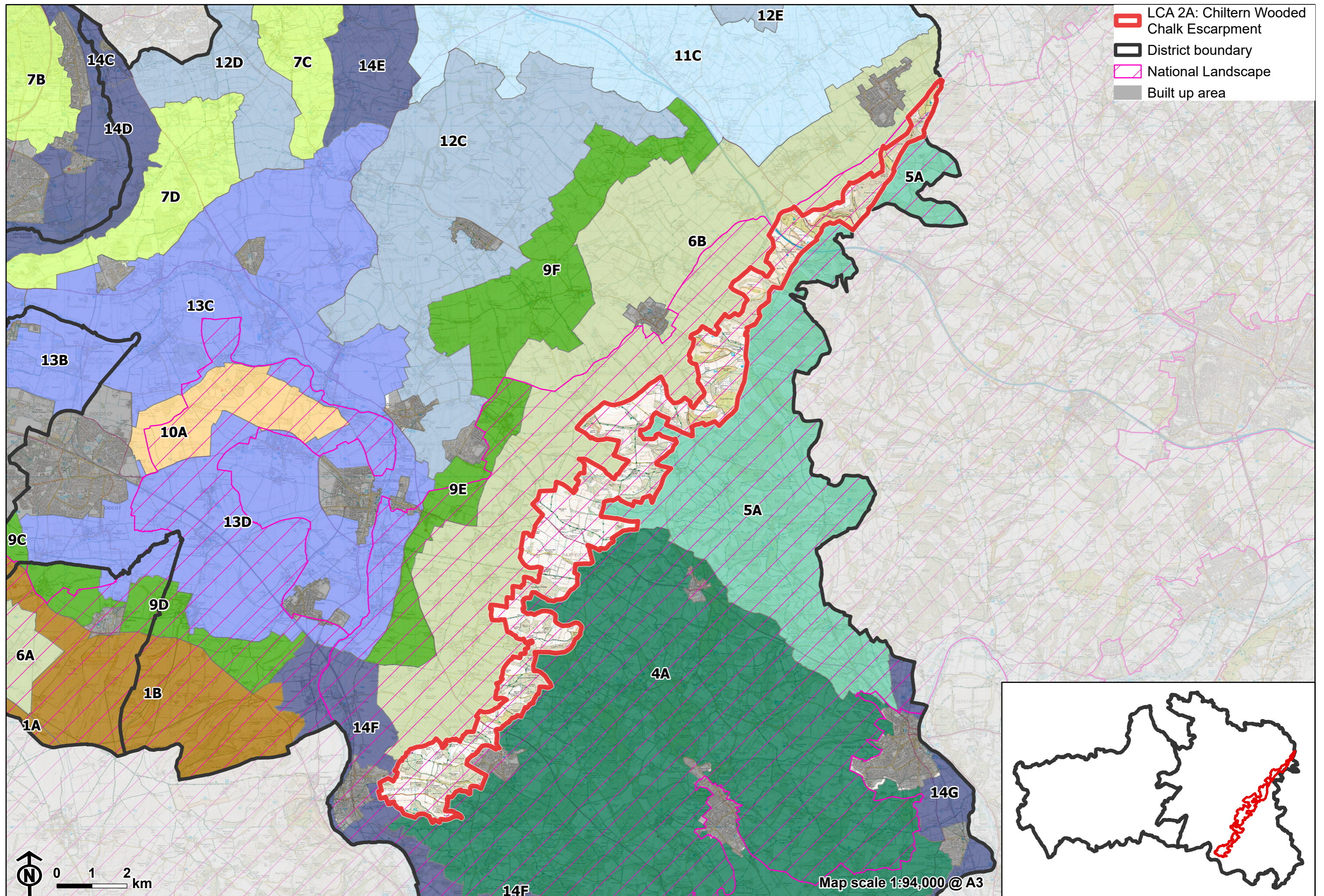
11: Upper Vale

12: Middle Vale

13: Lower Vale

14: River Valley

Map scale 1:225,000 @ A3



## LCA 2A: Chiltern Wooded Chalk Escarpment

### Character Area Location

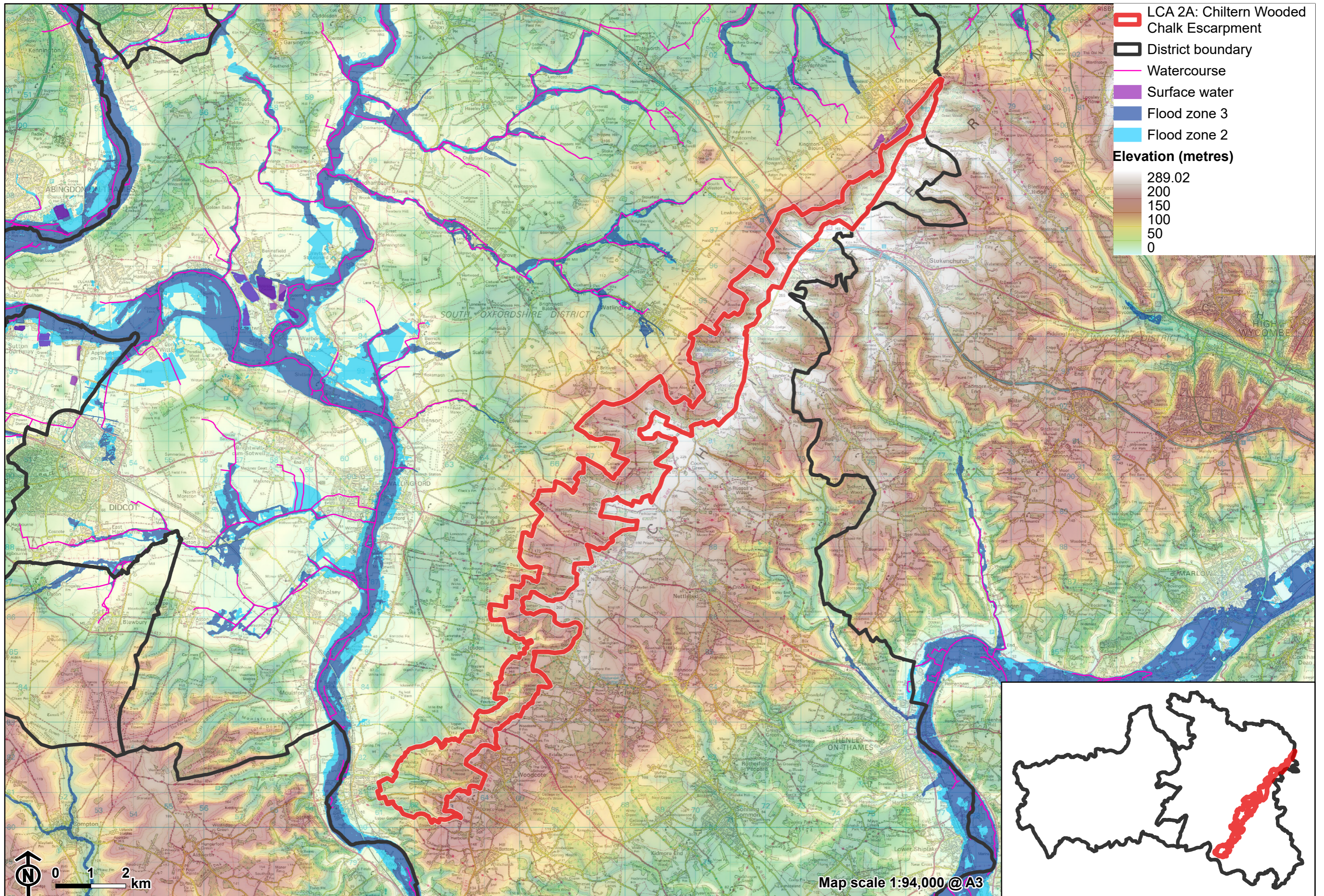
The LCA is located between the village of Chinnor to the north-east and the town of Goring to the south-west. It comprises the steep face and top of the Chilterns escarpment, that overlooks the Escarpment Footslopes (LCA 6B) to the west and lower-lying vale landscapes beyond. The LCA is located entirely within the Chilterns National Landscape.

### Key characteristics

- Distinctive steep escarpment of the Chiltern Hills, comprising a smooth and well-defined chalk landform heavily incised with spurs and valleys, resulting in a complex form and character.
- Heavily wooded, including characteristic beech-yew woodlands. Outside of the woodlands a mosaic of semi-natural habitats includes chalk grassland, dry grasslands and scrub.
- The woodlands are interspersed with a mixture of pasture and arable land, creating a distinctive, historic character and sense of place.
- Sparsely settled with isolated farms nestling in hollows along the lower slopes and within the coombes and minor valleys. More concentrated settlement at Woodcote, on the shallower slopes to the south.
- Network of winding roads and lanes, often sunken and lined with tall hedgerows, climbing the scarp face or within minor valleys linking the vale edges to the west with the plateau top to the east.

## LCA 2A: Chiltern Wooded Chalk Escarpment

- Long distance views to the east and across Oxfordshire to the west and north from the highest points, including Watlington Hill, contrast with a sense of enclosure within wooded areas. Modern development at Watlington and Chinnor is visible from high points.
- A rural and peaceful character, with the main roads cutting east-west across the scarp the main local detractors, including the M40 at Stokenchurch Gap.



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**Chalk landform heavily incised with spurs and valleys (Warren Hill):**



**Long distance westward views across Oxfordshire from Watlington Hill:**



**LCA 2A: Chiltern Wooded Chalk Escarpment**

**Woodlands interspersed with grazing pasture (The Rectory):**



**Tall Hedgerow lined sunken lane (Warren Hill):**





# Description

## Natural (landform, water, semi-natural land cover)

- This character area comprises the steep chalk escarpment of the Chiltern Hills, ranging from 100 metres Above Ordnance Datum (AOD) to up to around 250 metres AOD. Notable high points include Bald Hill (within the Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve), Watlington Hill and Kingston Wood.
- Although it has the typically smooth and well-defined profile of chalk landform, the escarpment is heavily incised with spurs and valleys, which give it a more complex form and character. The steepness of the scarp also varies, with quite gentle slopes towards the southern end (in places it hardly reads as an escarpment at all) becoming increasingly steep and more dramatic moving northwards.
- The thin, calcareous soils on steep slopes are unsuited to cultivation. The landform is blanketed in Priority Habitat 'deciduous woodland', predominately beech-yew, including extensive areas of Ancient Woodland. Species-rich chalk grassland, mixed chalk scrub and juniper are found in the unwooded areas. The area is internationally designated as the Aston Rowant Special Area of Conservation (SAC), as one of the best remaining examples of UK lowland juniper scrub on chalk and ash-beech-yew woodland. There are numerous other ecological designations within the area including Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

## Cultural/social (land use, settlement, infrastructure, historic character)

- Non-wooded areas are mostly used for pasture, but there is a dominance of arable cultivation around Harcourt Hill (north-west of Nuffield) where gradients are less steep. Arable cultivation has resulted in typically larger fields with weak or absent hedgerow structure, although there are linear belts and stands of planted woodland.
- The steep scarp face itself is virtually devoid of buildings with only a few isolated farms nestling in hollows along the lower slopes and within the

## LCA 2A: Chiltern Wooded Chalk Escarpment

coombes and minor valleys. There are country mansions at Watlington Park and Swyncombe House, surrounded by sloping parkland.

- Traditional building materials are typical of the Chilterns as a whole, with a predominance of red and silver-grey brick and flint. Farmsteads are often characterised by large timber framed barns, typically clad with black, horizontal weather boarding and with gable walls constructed out of brick and flint. Many farmsteads and associated barns are Grade II Listed Buildings.
- Time depth is provided by a general lack of development and predominance of Ancient Woodland. This is added to by the presence of prehistoric monuments, such as bowl barrows on Chinnor Hill and Grim's Ditch (along the route of The Ridgeway), which are all Scheduled Monuments.
- The scarp has a distinctive pattern of roads, with sunken lanes with tall hedgerows climbing the scarp face or minor valleys from the vale and other minor roads linking the scattered farmsteads along the plateau top.
- The M40 motorway is a prominent feature where it carves a route through the chalk scarp at the Stokenchurch Gap.
- Excellent access along public rights of way, with long distance and promoted routes including the ancient Icknield Way, Chiltern Way, The Ridgeway and Oxfordshire Way. Areas of Open Access Land are also found within the woodlands.
- Much of the area is owned and managed by Natural England (including Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve (NNR)) and the National Trust, providing further recreational access and associated car parking and visitor facilities.

### Perceptual (views, tranquillity, associations)

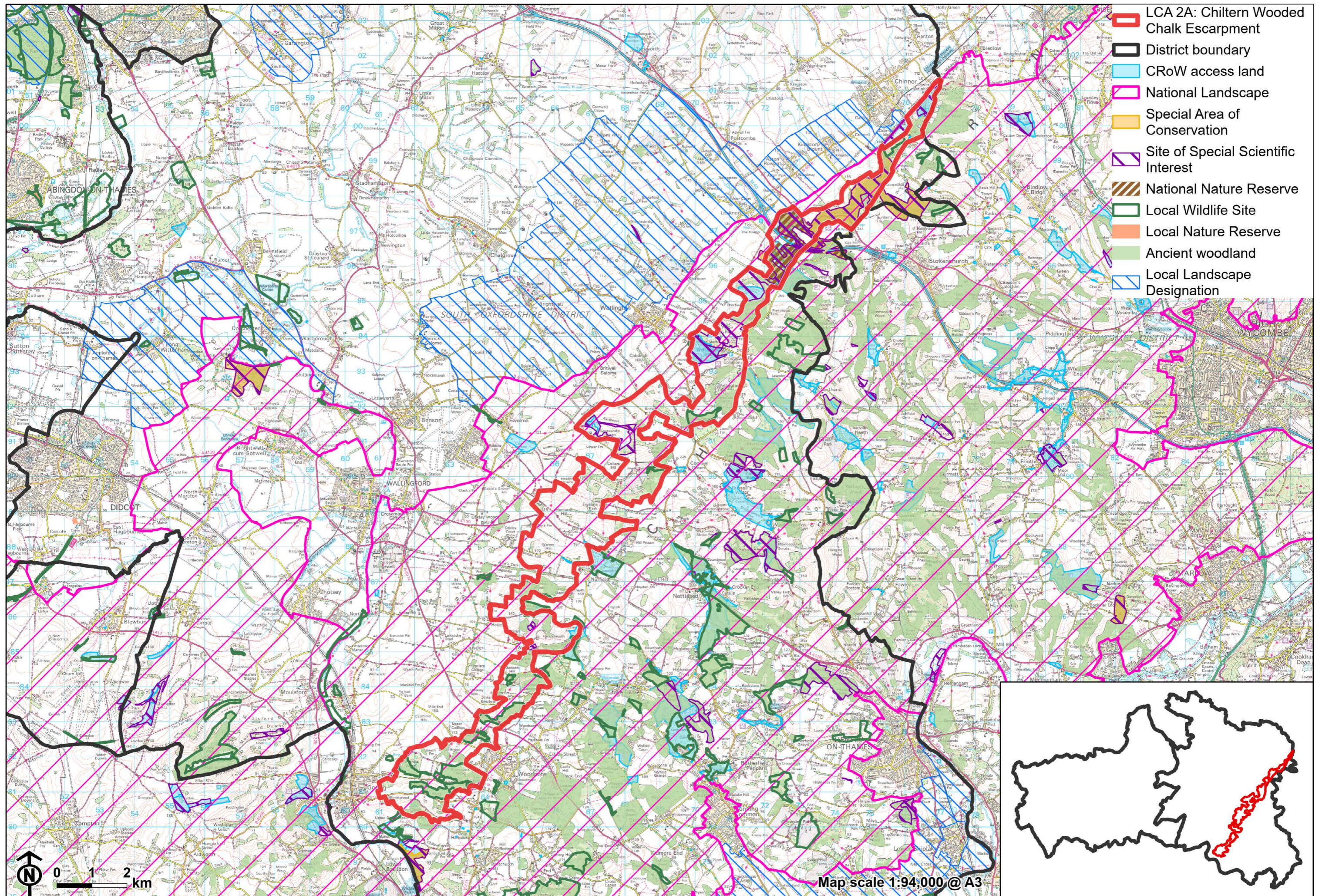
- The height of the escarpment offers long distance and panoramic views to the west and north across Oxfordshire. Notable viewpoints include Watlington Hill and Bald Hill, which are served by formal and informal car parks.

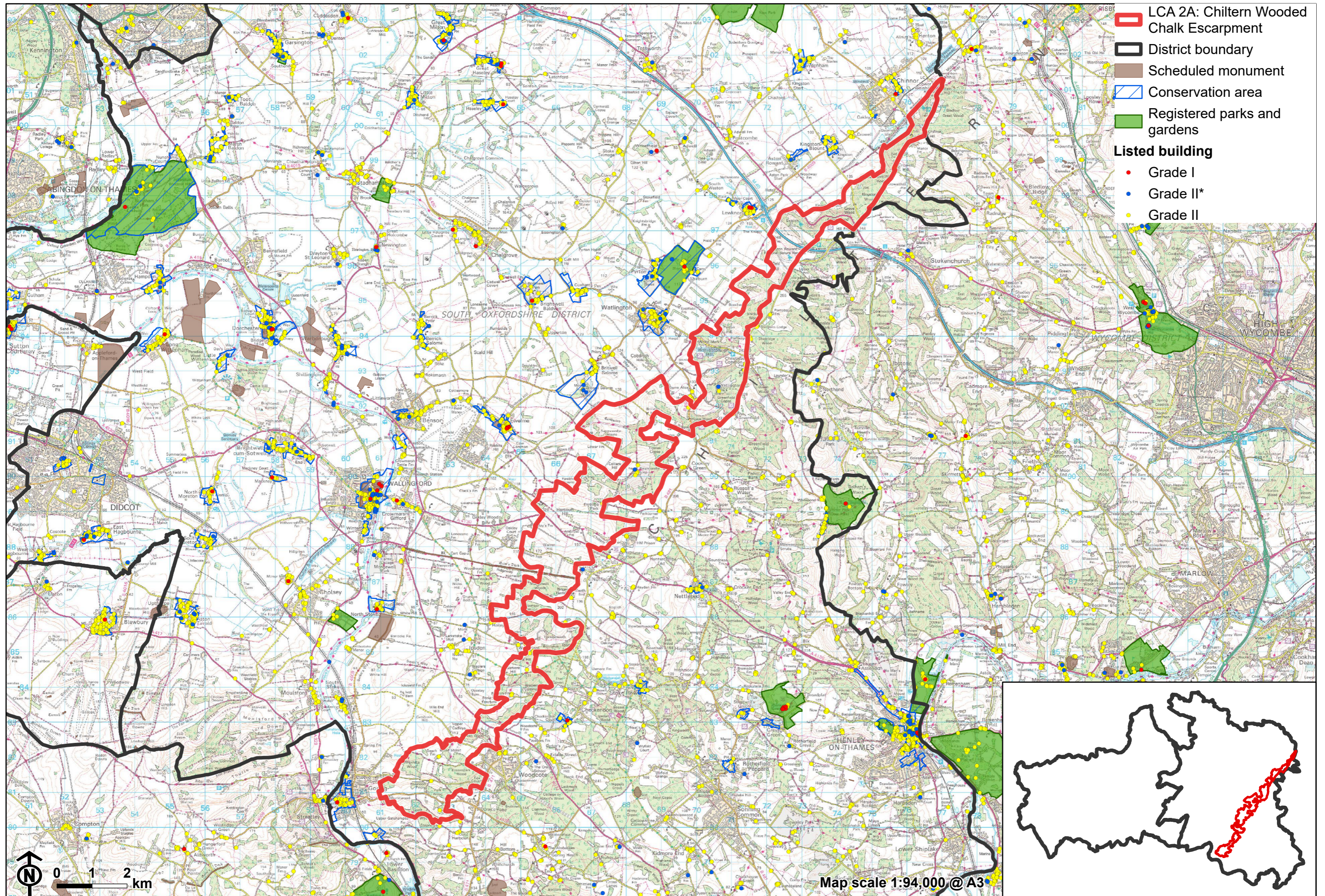
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- The escarpment is prominent in views from the surrounding lower lying areas and forms a wooded backdrop to much of South Oxfordshire.
- Semi-natural chalk grassland has a distinctive character with seasonally colourful wildflowers and scented herbs, and scrub adds more visual texture.
- Red kites are often seen and heard in the skies above the area.
- A rural and tranquil character, with a strong sense of enclosure and intimacy in the densely wooded areas; contrasting with an elevated, expansive character in the more open locations. The Tranquillity Assessment for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse categorises 46% of the LCA in Zone 1 ('areas of high tranquillity').
- The M40 motorway at the Stokenchurch Gap and A4074 in the south are visual and aural detractors. Modern settlement edges at Chinnor and Watlington are visible from the highest points of the escarpment, but the elevation of the escarpments means that there is still a sense of separation from these intrusive landscape elements. The Tranquillity Assessment for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse categorises 54% of the LCA in Zone 2 ('areas of some tranquillity').
- The Dark Skies Assessment for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse categorises 90% of the area within its two darkest assessment bands.

### Valued qualities

- Located entirely within the Chilterns National Landscape and displays many of the special qualities including distinctive Beech and Yew woodlands, chalk grassland, historic sunken lanes, public rights of way and Open Access Land, and distinctive local building materials.
- Distinctive wooded ridge, which forms a dramatic backdrop to the low-lying vale landscapes and affords long-distance views to the west and north.
- The mosaic of woodland, scrub and chalk grassland (with the latter being very rare in England) are distinctive features which contribute positively to the landscape. The ecological value of these features is also reflected in numerous international and national nature conservation designations, including Aston Rowant SAC, SSSI and NNR and Chilterns Beechwoods SAC.
- Distinctive pattern of sunken narrow lanes enclosed by tall hedgerows climbing the scarp face or minor valleys.
- Sense of a historic character, with Ancient Woodlands in traditional management, winding lanes and small, scattered farmsteads.
- Sparsely settled landscape of isolated farmsteads and houses.
- Recreational value of an extensive network of public rights of way network, including promoted routes, and areas of Open Access Land.
- Long distance and panoramic views to the west and north across Oxfordshire from high points such as Watlington Hill and Britwell Hill.
- Highly rural character, with a tranquil character and a strong sense of enclosure and intimacy in the densely wooded areas.





### Forces for change

- Agricultural intensification, diversification and farm amalgamation, which could affect the characteristic mixture of arable and pastureland and ecologically valued woodland and grassland habitats.
- Decline in management of existing woodlands and trees which could affect the distinctive wooded character of the escarpment.
- Introduction of tall structures such as communication masts and electricity pylons on the vales to the west, which affects the highly rural character of the landscape, as well as views to and from the escarpment.
- Development expansion and infilling on the western and south-western edges of Woodcote, which is affecting the sparsely settled character of the landscape to the south. Modern building styles are often of different character to the rest of the settlement and poorly reflect the local historic vernacular.
- Pressure for large individual houses, with large areas of glazing in prominent locations. The glare from glazing can be very visible in this largely unsettled landscape.
- Recent expansion at Watlington and Chinnor is evident in views from Watlington Hill, Chinnor Hill and Beacon Hill. Pressure for further development in these towns, and other settlements on lower ground will impact on views from the chalk escarpment.
- The Chalk Escarpment landscapes are susceptible to the impacts of climate change, including:
  - Changing temperatures and extreme weather events are creating vulnerabilities in chalk grassland landscapes, leading to increased soil erosion and run-off.
  - Drier summers and wetter winters could cause changes in plant and animal species and community composition of chalk grassland (for example loss of perennials, expansion of drought-tolerant ephemerals and dominance of grasses in the sward of chalk grassland).

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- Drier summers leading to an increased fire risk affecting grassland habitats.
- Deciduous woodlands are facing decline due to warmer winters, altered rainfall patterns, drier summers and increased frequency of extreme events; there may be a shift in vegetation type and composition, increased competition from invasive species, greater numbers of insect and mammal pests, a greater risk of infection by various soil and water-borne pathogens, and a greater risk of wind-throw and loss of mature trees.
- Higher average temperatures and drier summers could lead to changes to community composition in arable field margins; an increase in bare ground and an increased risk of dieback in drought prone locations; the introduction of new crops and associated changes to management could alter the area and type of field margins; and an increase in agricultural use of summer insecticides which could reduce insect numbers and pollination.
- Drier summers and wetter winters may lead to increased mortality and die-back of certain hedgerow tree species; an increased occurrence of insect pests and pathogens could lead to a potential loss or significant reduction in populations of key hedgerow tree species; and increased storm activity may lead to the loss of mature and veteran trees within hedgerows.
- Intense rainfall events and increased winter rainfall resulting in flooding, erosion and damage to buildings and structures, including heritage assets.



# Landscape strategy and guidelines

Conserve and enhance the distinctive pattern of elements (including Beech Yew woodlands, chalk grassland, historic sunken lanes, public rights of way and Open Access Land, and distinctive local building materials) which contributes positively to the character and special qualities of the Chilterns National Landscape.

Conserve and enhance the escarpment's distinctive wooded character.

- Retain and enhance characteristic woodland cover, in which beech and yew are prominent, and explore opportunities to expand and connect this through natural regeneration or small-scale planting to strengthen landscape character and bring benefits for biodiversity; conserve and manage the Ancient Woodland sites.
- Encourage the appropriate management of woodland, including to reduce the impacts of pests and diseases and to increase its age structure and structural heterogeneity. Consider the promotion of natural colonisation adjacent to existing woodland, allowing locally native species to develop resilience to the pressures of climate change through natural processes.
- Seek to prevent further loss or decline in the quality of boundary hedgerows and encourage their restoration/reinstatement, whilst maintaining characteristic long-distance views north and south; when establishing new hedges, aim to diversify the range of species and select species and provenances adapted to a wider range of climatic conditions.

Increase the quantity and biodiversity of chalk grasslands.

- Manage chalk grassland to enhance its biodiversity value and appearance; ensure best practice management through suitable grazing regimes and avoiding agrochemical and fertiliser inputs; manage recreational routes to avoid/minimise disturbance; and manage scrub vegetation appropriately to maintain the open character (a certain amount of scrub can be beneficial, especially on sites that are prone to heat stress or drought, due to its shading effect potentially providing refuge for invertebrates).

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- Consider opportunities to increase the area of chalk grassland through re-creation and restoration around existing areas, and ensure that areas that might act as refugia from climate change (such as areas with north facing slopes, complex micro-topography and/or low nitrogen levels) are under optimal management.

Maintain the historic character of the landscape and its public accessibility.

- Maintain the valued recreational use of the landscape which allow appreciation of views and landscape character.
- Conserve the pattern of sunken narrow lanes enclosed by tall hedgerows, ensuring that their character is not lost through unsympathetic highway works, unnecessary signage, lighting, or removal of hedgerows and trees.

Preserve the largely undeveloped character of this landscape, protecting characteristic long views outwards from the LCA and considering the role of the area as an undeveloped backdrop to views back from the vale.

- Avoid any adverse impact from new development on local character, tranquillity and sense of separation from developed areas, and on views from other areas. Use careful design, in terms of siting, scale, style, layout and materials to stay in keeping with existing built character and to preserve the openness of the landscape and areas/features which are important to the landscape setting of settlements on or below the escarpment.
- Light pollution should be avoided in this landscape and existing light pollution reduced. Consider the impact of lighting, both external and internal, on night-time views from lower ground (refer to the guidance in the Dark Skies / Light Impact Assessment for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse).
- Protect and where possible enhance long-distance views to the west and north.
- Consider impact of development in adjacent areas, such as the vales and escarpment footslopes, on views outwards from the National Landscape.