

LCT 4: Wooded Chalk Plateau and Valleys

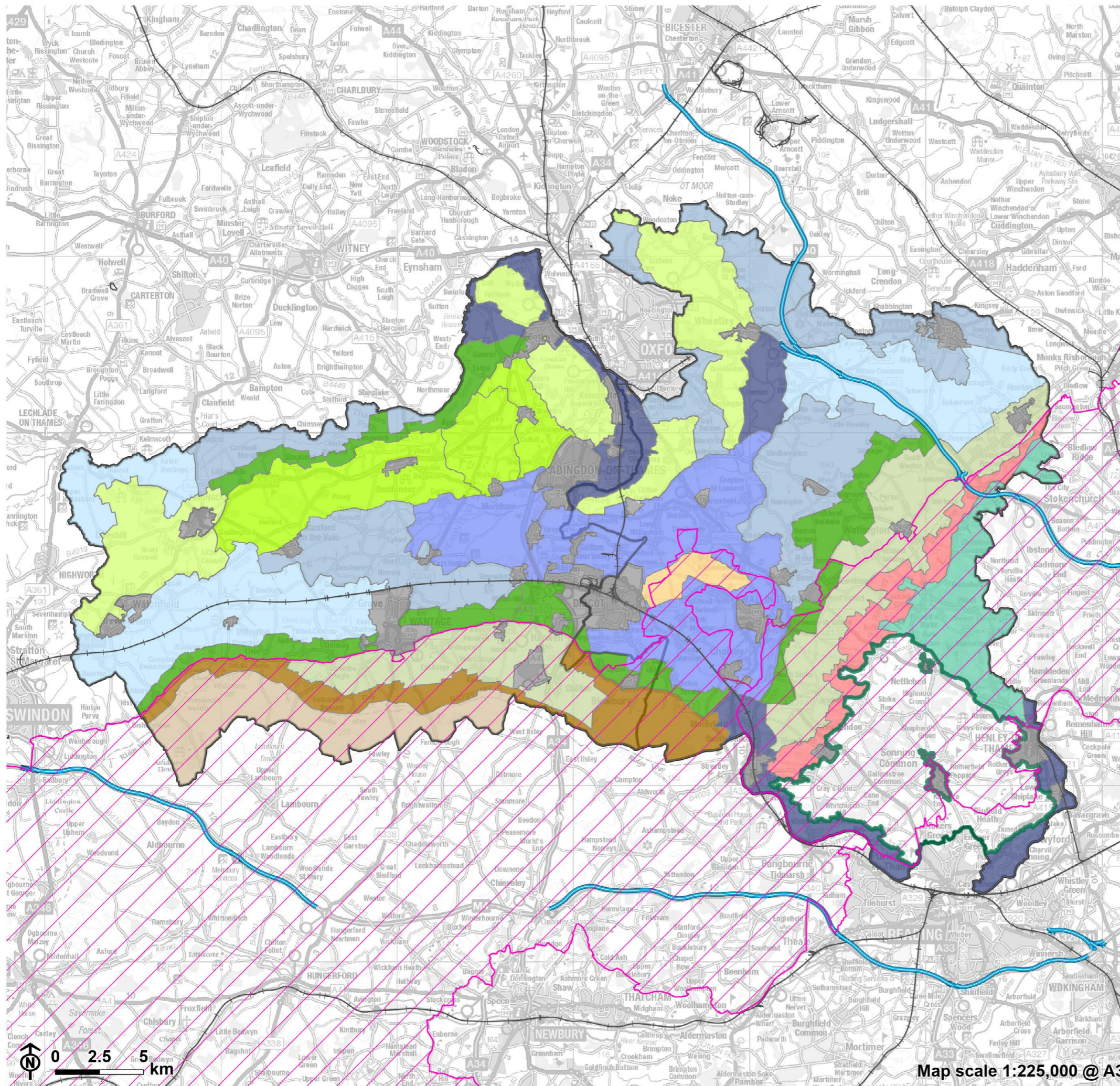
Landscape character type summary

The Wooded Chalk Plateau and Valleys is an elevated landscape dominated by woodland, falling gradually from the Chilterns chalk escarpment down towards the Thames Valley. Small, irregular shallow valleys create an undulating landform.

One landscape character area (LCA) is identified:

- LCA 4A: Chiltern Wooded Chalk Plateau and Valleys.

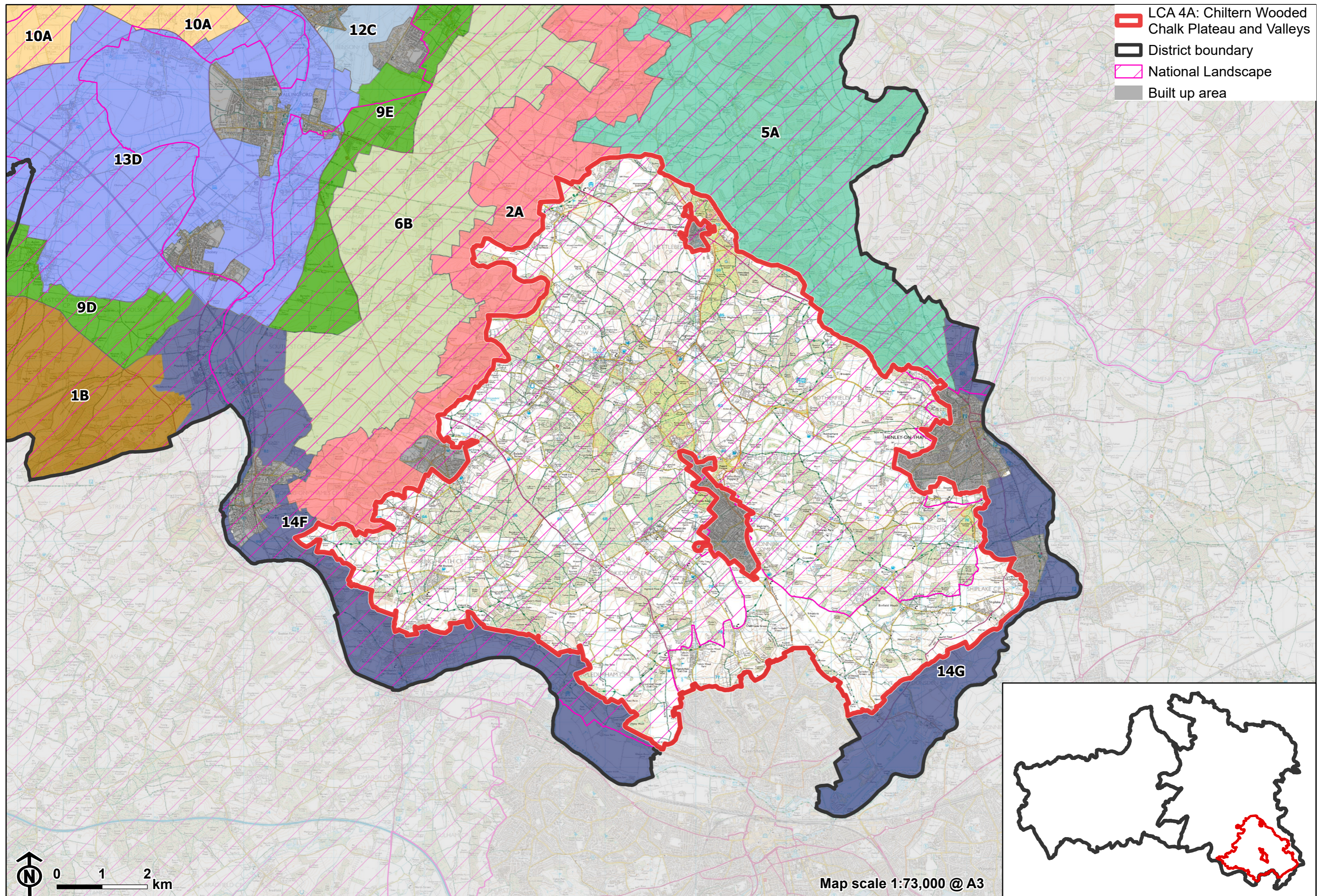
Landscape Character Type Overview



- 4: Wooded Chalk Plateau and Valleys
- District boundary
- National Landscape
- Motorway
- Railway
- Built up area
- Other LCT's**
- 1: Open Chalk Escarpment and Upper Slopes
- 2: Wooded Chalk Escarpment
- 3: Open Chalk Dipslope
- 5: Wooded Chalk Ridges and Valleys
- 6: Chalk Escarpment Foothills
- 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



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Character Area Location

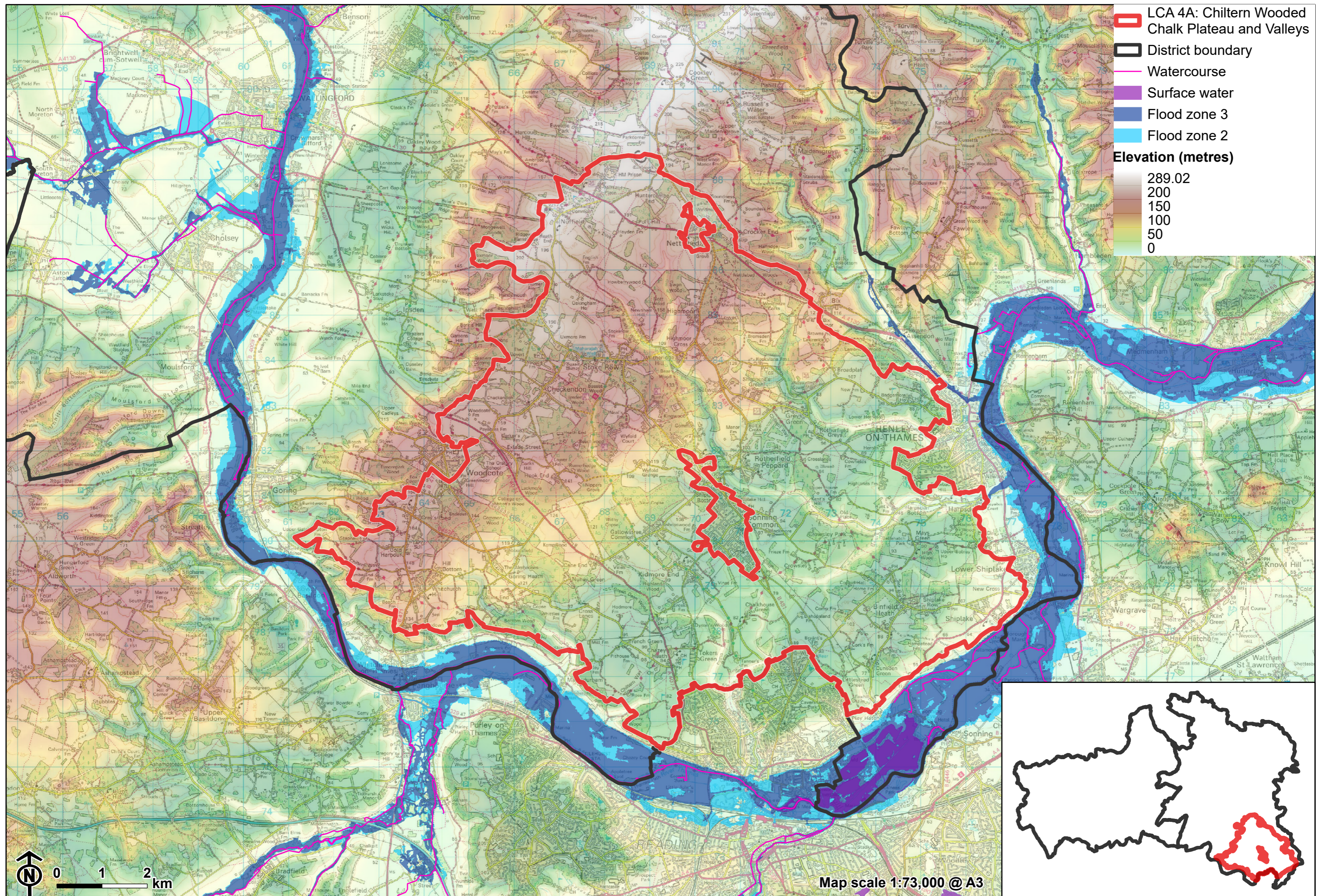
This LCA comprises the south of the Chilterns dip slope, to the east of the Wooded Chalk Escarpment (LCA 2A) and north of the Thames valley (LCA 14F and 14G). The majority of the LCA is located within the Chilterns National Landscape.

Key characteristics

- Undulating landscape formed by plateaux dissected by an irregular pattern of shallow small-scale valleys.
- Heavily wooded containing extensive areas of Ancient Woodland, with beech common. Irregular pattern of arable and pasture fields defined by a strong structure of species-rich hedgerows, creating an enclosed wooded farmland character.
- Remnant commons and heaths have a mosaic of open areas, scrub, acid grassland and woodland.
- Typical Chilterns settlement pattern of small villages, hamlets and farms scattered among woods and commons, connected by a distinctive pattern of winding rural roads; larger settlements on the periphery have a more modern character, including Sonning Common, Henley-on-Thames and Woodcote.
- Medieval settlements, covered by Conservation Area designations and/or containing clusters of Listed Buildings, provide a sense of time-depth; traditional building materials are typical of the Chilterns, and include red brick, silver-grey flint, oak timber framing, black weather boarding, thatch and plain tiles.
- Distinctive estates and parkland landscapes at Checkendon Court and Greys Court with formal avenues, freestanding trees and estate boundaries, create a sense of place and sense of time-depth.

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- Extensive network of public rights of way, including the promoted Chiltern Way, provides recreational access across the landscape.
- A rural landscape, although busy roads and the adjacent urban edges of Caversham and Henley-on-Thames locally reduce tranquillity.
- The undulating topography and strong woodland cover combine to generally limit long-distance views across the plateau. Occasional views to the urban edges of Reading and Caversham.



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Beech woodlands provide enclosure (near Stoke Row):



The parkland landscape at Greys Court:



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Enclosed plateau landscape of wooded farmland (Bones Lane):



Modern housing at Whitchurch Hill with horse grazing:



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Description

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

- The landform is underlain by Upper Chalk, laid down in the Cretaceous period, overlain by extensive clay-with-flints and gravel deposits. This creates a distinctive plateau, dissected by an irregular pattern of shallow, small-scale dry valleys, resulting in an undulating landscape. Land heights range from 60 metres Above Ordnance Datum (AOD) in the valleys and adjacent to the Thames, up to a high of 212 metres AOD at Nuffield.
- A heavily wooded landscape, with extensive areas of Ancient Woodland, a few of which are plantations on Ancient Woodland sites (PAWS). The beech woodlands at Bear, Oveys and Great Bottom, Harpsden and Lambridge Woods are also designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This creates an enclosed mosaic of wooded farmland.
- Commons at Rotherfield, Crowlsey Park, Kingwood and Nuffield are dominated by acid grassland, forming a mosaic of open areas, scrub and woodland with birch, gorse and bracken typical species.

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

- Predominantly arable, with some pasture fields, especially close to settlements. Fields are contained within a strong structure of woods, species-rich hedgerows and trees, although there has been some reinforcement by post and wire fencing. Some areas of pasture have been converted to horse grazing, with associated fencing and horse tape. Pockets of open farmlands around Caversham and Nuffield have a weaker landscape structure, where the gentler gradients have encouraged intensive arable cover.
- A number of golf courses, with typical greens, fairways, roughs and bunkers are found across the area.
- Typical Chilterns settlement pattern of small hamlets and farms scattered among extensive woods and commons, linked by narrow lanes enclosed by tall hedgerows.
- Many settlements date from the early middle ages, which saw enclosure and clearance of 'wastes' and colonisation of previously unpopulated areas. Clusters of loosely grouped farmsteads were established on the plateau and new small fields

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were carved out of the extensive common woods, a process known as 'assarting'. Conservation Areas are designated at Checkendon, Stoke Row, Nettlebed, Shepherd's Green, Rotherfield Peppard and Grey's Green. Traditional building materials are typical of the Chilterns as a whole, and include red brick, silver-grey flint, oak timber framing, black weather boarding, thatch and plain tiles.

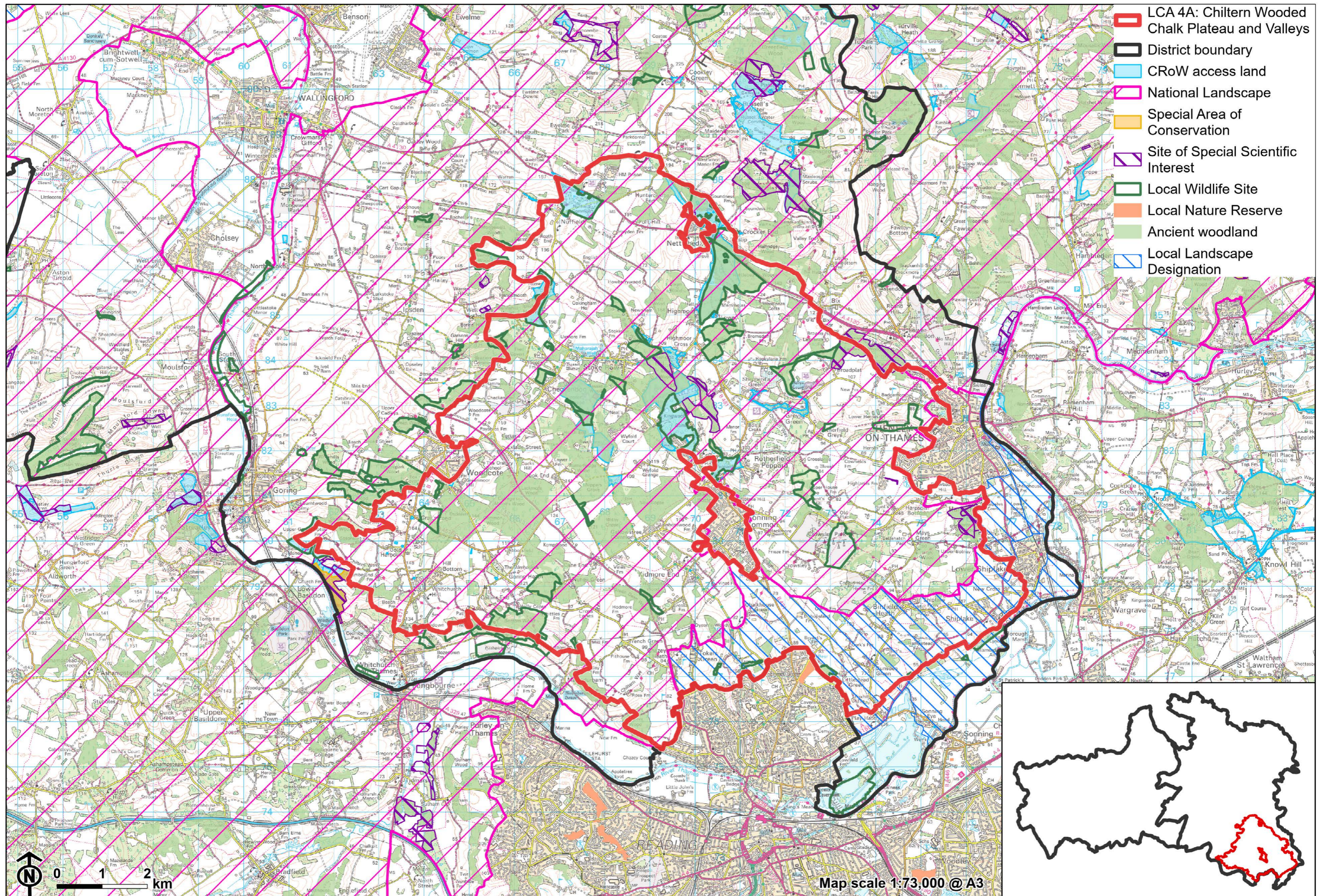
- Distinctive parkland landscapes with formal features such as avenues, freestanding mature trees in pasture, blocks of mature woodland and estate boundaries are found across the area. Smaller parkland landscapes are found on the edges of Henley-on-Thames. Large estates at Checkendon Court and Greys Court (a Registered Park and Garden) are now owned and managed by the National Trust.
- Public rights of way, including the promoted Chiltern Way, provide recreational access across the area. Areas of Open Access woodland and common are concentrated in the north and centre.

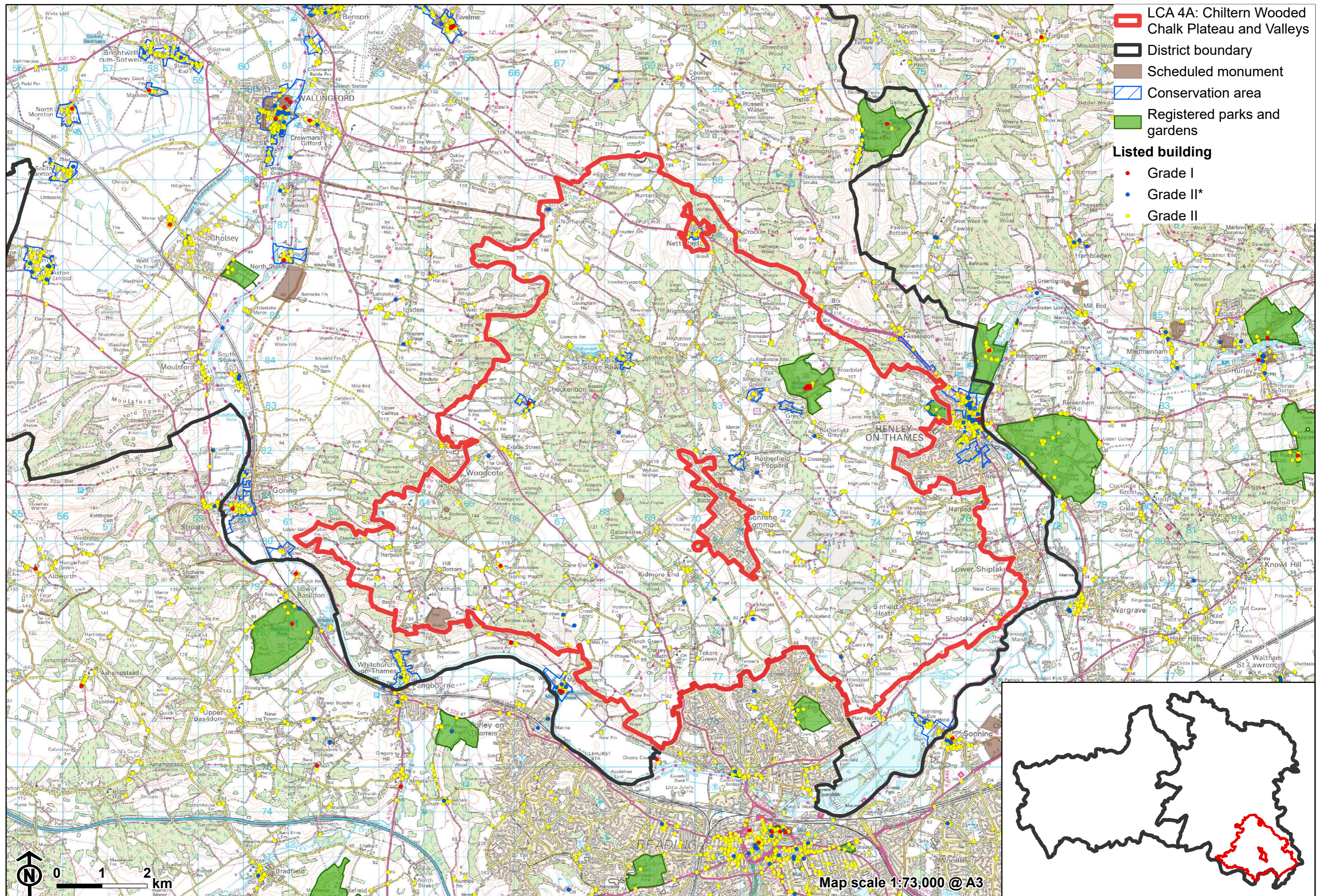
Perceptual (views, tranquillity, associations)

- Long distance views are limited from roads across the plateau due to the undulating topography and strong woodland cover. There are occasional views towards the urban settlement edges of Reading and Caversham.
- Red kites are often seen in the skies above the area.
- Contrast between the enclosed, intimate and small-scale character of the dry valleys, and the more open broader plateau landscape above.
- A largely rural and unspoilt landscape, with good experience of dark night skies. Local detracting influences include the road noise from the busy A4074, A4155 and A4130 which cross the area, and more localised effects of suburban land uses on the edges of Caversham and Henley-on-Thames, including golf clubs and educational facilities. The Tranquillity Assessment for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse categorises 32% of the LCA in Zone 1 ('areas of high tranquillity') and 65% in Zone 2 ('areas of some tranquillity').
- Electricity pylons run north of Caversham and are locally intrusive in views. Small areas of modern housing within older villages also detract from the traditional, rural character prevalent across most of the landscape.

Valued qualities

- Located mainly within the Chilterns National Landscape, and displays many of the special qualities including distinctive Beech woodlands, chalk grassland, common land and heaths, historic sunken lanes, public rights of way, and distinctive local building materials.
- Plateau dissected by a number of dry valleys, creating a distinctive undulating landscape. This, along with extensive woodland cover, contributes to the scenic quality, reflected in its designation as a National Landscape. The area outside of the National Landscape shares its qualities to the extent that it has been included within the Chilterns Dipslope Local Landscape Designation.
- Extensive areas of Ancient Woodland including distinctive Beech woodlands at Bear, Oveys and Great Bottom Woods, Harpsden Wood and Lambridge Wood SSSIs, provide ecological value and contribute positively to the landscape.
- Remnant commons and heaths with their distinctive mosaic of open areas, scrub, acid grassland and woodland.
- Distinctive Chilterns settlement pattern of small historic villages and hamlets, linked by a network of winding roads and sunken narrow lanes enclosed by tall hedgerows; the open landscape provides gaps between these and a rural setting.
- Distinctive estates and parkland landscapes which create a sense of place and sense of time-depth.
- Recreational value of the promoted Chiltern Way and areas of Open Access Land which provide access to the landscape.
- Highly rural character, with an often intimate, enclosed character. Relative tranquillity and relatively dark skies are special qualities of the Chilterns National Landscape.





Forces for change

- Agricultural intensification, diversification and farm amalgamation which is leading to loss of hedgerows, trees and woodland. This, along with a decline in management of existing woodlands and trees, is affecting the wooded farmland character and enclosed visual character.
- Decline in acid grassland and heath due to a reduction or cessation of traditional grazing management. This is reducing the extent of this ecologically valued habitat and is affecting the distinctive mosaic of habitats found on remnant commons and heaths.
- Inappropriate or inconsistent management of existing parklands, which is affecting these distinctive areas of landscape and the sense of place they provide.
- Proposals for development and the introduction of other urban fringe uses and activities (such as sports pitches) on the edges of settlement, including Sonning Common, the eastern edge of Woodcote, the north-western edge of Henley and northern edge of Caversham, will increase the size of the villages and will affect the distinctive Chilterns settlement pattern of small historic villages and hamlets. Modern building styles are often of different character to the rest of the settlement and poorly reflect the local historic vernacular.
- Proposals for further housing development at Highlands Farm to the south-west of Henley-on-Thames will locally erode the rural character of the landscape and will have an adverse effect on the distinctive Chilterns settlement pattern. Modern building styles are often of different character to the rest of the settlement and poorly reflect the local historic vernacular.
- The Wooded Chalk Plateau landscapes are susceptible to the impacts of climate change, including:
 - Changing temperatures and extreme weather events are creating vulnerabilities in 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 grassland (for example

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loss of perennials, expansion of drought-tolerant ephemerals and dominance of grasses in the sward of chalk grassland).

- 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 area's distinctive wooded character.

- Retain and enhance characteristic woodland cover 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 (including creation of glades). 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; when establishing new hedges, aim to diversify the range of species and select species and provenances adapted to a wider range of climatic conditions.
- Retain and enhance the remnant areas of commons and heaths with their distinctive mosaic of open areas, scrub, acid grassland and woodland; encourage traditional grazing management.

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).
- 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

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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.

Maintain the highly rural character of the landscape, which provides separation between individual settlements, helping to retain their individual identities and the distinctive Chilterns settlement pattern.

- There is very limited scope for development that would not detract from the valued qualities of the Chiltern Wooded Chalk Plateau and Valleys. Avoid the adverse impact of any new development on local character and on the distinctive scattered settlement pattern.
- Use careful design, in terms of siting, scale, style and layout to stay in keeping with existing settlement character and to preserve the openness of areas/features which are important to the landscape setting of settlements. Any new development should be small-scale, and should use materials which are in keeping with, or complement, the local vernacular of red brick, flint, timber-framing, weatherboarding and thatch or tile roofs.
- Light pollution should be avoided in this landscape and existing light pollution reduced. Consider the impact of lighting, both external and internal, on dark skies and tranquillity (refer to the guidance in the Dark Skies / Light Impact Assessment for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse).

Historic parts of villages should retain a relationship with their rural landscape settings which contribute to their distinctive historic character.

- Maintain physical and visual connectivity between conservation areas and prominent features in settlement setting.