

## LCA 7D: Oxford South Ridge Hilltops

### Character Area Summary and Location

Located in South Oxfordshire district, to the south of Oxford and east of Abingdon. It comprises a prominent ridge of higher ground that rises above the valley and vale landscapes associated with the River Thames to the west (LCA 14D) and south (LCA 13B and 13C) and Baldon Brook to the east (LCA 12D).

### Key characteristics

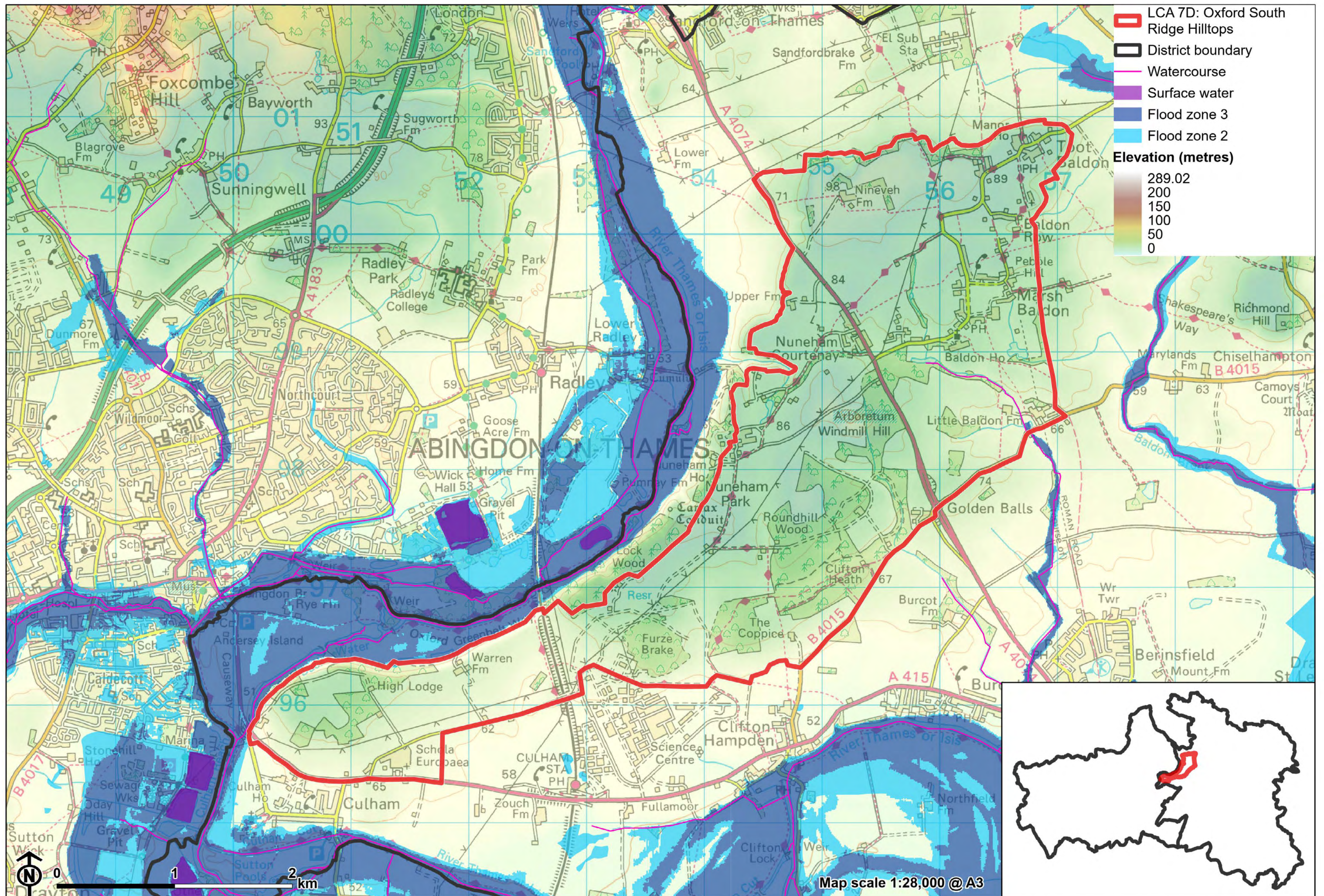
- A limestone ridge that forms a prominent spur of higher ground that rises steeply from the River Thames to the north and west; a gentler rolling plateau landform to the south and east that grades gradually to low-lying floodplains of the River Thames and Baldon Brook.
- A relatively well wooded landscape, with numerous scattered, large woodland blocks and significant stands of deciduous and coniferous woodland at Nuneham Courtenay Park.
- Predominantly large-scale rectilinear arable fields, defined by drainage ditches or low hedgerows with few hedgerow trees; some smaller scale pasture fields with more intact and species rich hedgerows associated with settlements and to the north around Nineveh Farm.
- Nuneham Courtenay Grade I Registered Park and Garden, designed by 'Capability' Brown for Lord Harcourt, comprises an extensive area of 18<sup>th</sup> century parkland and associated estate landscape in the centre of the plateau.
- Low density settlement pattern comprising scattered farmsteads and small villages at Nuneham Courtenay and Marsh Baldon; both villages

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are covered by Conservation Areas, with that at Nuneham Courtenay also covering the wider associated parkland.

- A good network of public rights of way allows access across the landscape, including the Oxford Greenbelt Way and Shakespeare's Way.
- Predominantly rural character; areas of comparative inaccessibility in particular create a rural and remote character, particularly in the south. Some localised intrusion of main roads, overhead power lines and built development
- Views generally reduced by landform and tree cover resulting in an enclosed and intimate landscape; some longer views available from hillsides and higher ground.







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**Pasture fields bordered by mature trees (near Nuneham Courtenay):**



**Enclosed, tree-lined lanes funnel views (Baldon Lane):**





**Large-scale arable agriculture foregrounds views to Bluebell Wood:**



**Large power pylons cross arable fields (Thame Lane):**



## Description

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

- A limestone ridge that forms a prominent spur of higher ground rising above the River Thames to the west and south. A rolling plateau landform ranging around 80 metres Above Ordnance Datum (AOD), with the highest land at Ninevah Farm in the north at 105 metres AOD.
- The valley sides fall steeply to the west (within LCA 14B), but grades more gently to the south and east, towards the low-lying floodplains of the Rivers Thames and Baldon Brook respectively.
- A relatively well wooded landscape, with numerous, scattered woodland blocks (often recorded as priority habitat deciduous woodland) and significant stands of deciduous and coniferous woodland at Nuneham Courtenay Park.
- Two small blocks of Ancient Woodland lie in the east – Sands Corner Copse and Hanginglands Copse.
- Outside of the woodlands, priority habitats include lowland meadows and traditional orchards.

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

- Land use is predominantly agricultural with large areas of arable land and some smaller areas of pasture around settlements.
- A predominantly large-scale rectilinear field pattern, defined generally by low or gappy hedgerows with few hedgerow trees or drainage ditches; around settlements and to the north around Nineveh Farm there is a smaller-scale field pattern with a more intact and species rich hedgerows. Fieldscapes are typical of Parliamentary enclosure.
- Nuneham Courtenay is a Grade I Registered Park and Garden (RPG), comprising an extensive area of 18<sup>th</sup> century designed parkland and

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associated estate landscape in the centre of the plateau. This was designed by 'Capability' Lancelot Brown for Lord Harcourt.

- Low density settlement comprising scattered farmsteads and small villages at Nuneham Courtenay and Marsh Baldon; both covered by Conservation Areas, with that at Nuneham Courtenay covering the wider associated parkland. The villages typically developed around a central green; the green at Marsh Baldon is a fine surviving example. Limestone rubble, timber-framing, brick and tile or thatch roofs form a local vernacular.
- Nuneham Courtenay was originally located on high ground overlooking the Thames, but was subsequently demolished and rebuilt as a model estate village in its present location in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Its original site was used for Lord Harcourt's 'villa with a view'.
- The A4074 crosses through the area and the A415 defines the south-western edge; other roads connecting the villages retain a minor, rural character. Access via road is relatively restricted, particularly in the south-west.
- The Cherwell Valley Line (railway) passes through the area to the west and is bordered by the Oxford Greenbelt Way.
- A strong network of public rights of way, including the Oxford Greenbelt Way and Shakespeare's Way.

### Perceptual (views, tranquillity, associations)

- Predominantly rural character but some localised intrusion of main roads, overhead power lines and built development; areas of comparative inaccessibility in particular create a rural and remote character. The Tranquillity Assessment for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse categorises 12% of the LCA in Zone 1 ('areas of high tranquillity') and 87% in Zone 2 ('areas of some tranquillity').
- Electricity pylons are a strong visual detractor in this landscape, particularly in the south-west where there are views to the industrial estate on Abingdon's southern edge.

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- Views generally reduced by landform and tree cover resulting in a more enclosed and intimate landscape; some longer views available from hillsides and higher ground.

## Valued qualities

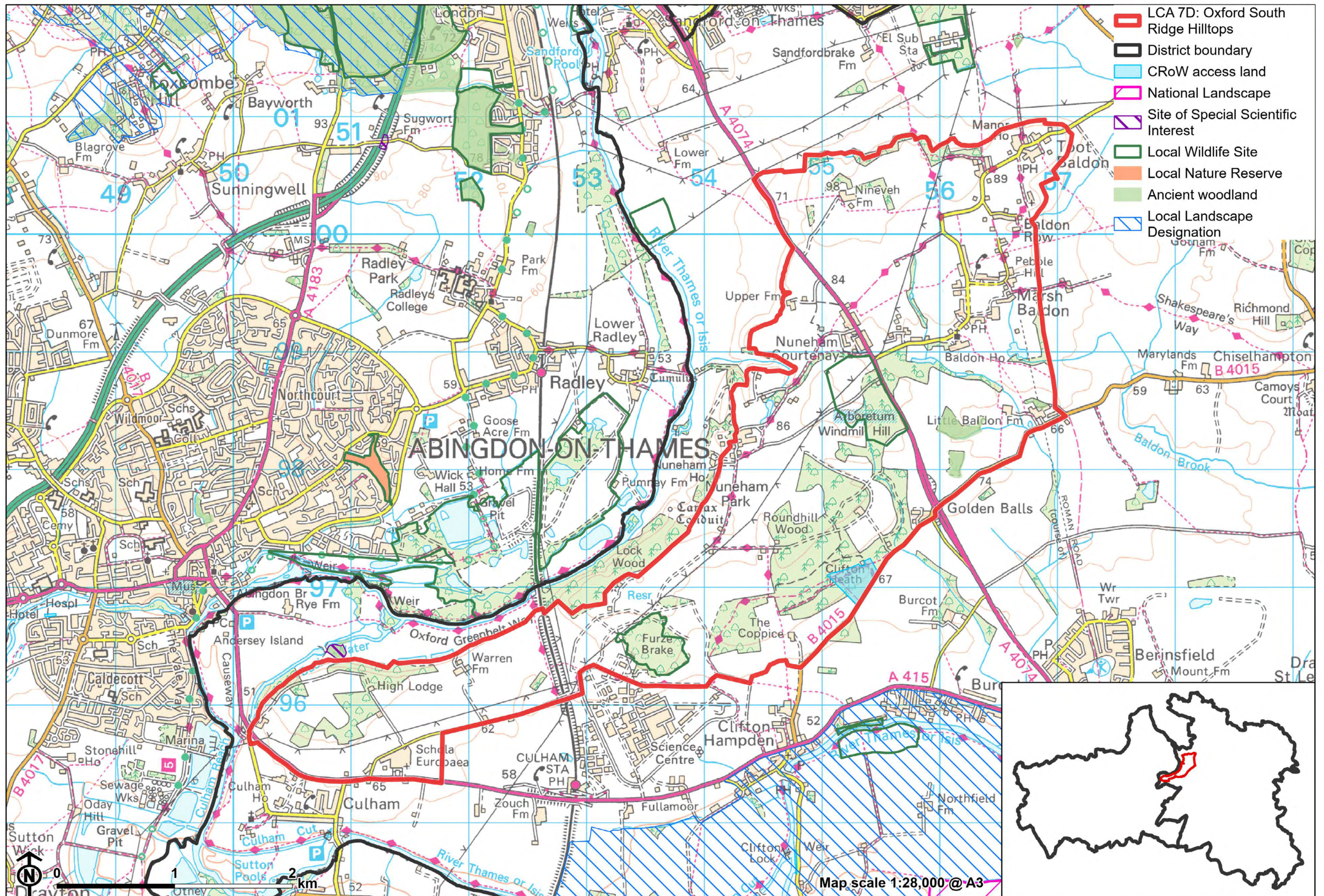
- Distinctive steeply rising spur of higher ground rising above the River Thames, which contrasts with the surrounding lower-lying river valley and vale landscapes to the west, south and east.
- Woodland cover with significant stands of deciduous and coniferous woodland, provide a distinctive landscape pattern.
- Semi-natural habitats such as calcareous fen, acid and limestone grassland, Ancient Woodland and lowland meadows provide ecological value and contribute positively to the landscape.
- Surviving smaller scale pasture fields with relatively intact and species rich hedgerows associated with settlements and to the north around Nineveh Farm; this contrasts with the predominant more open large-scale rectilinear arable fields.
- Sparse historic settlement pattern of scattered farmsteads and villages/hamlets; the open landscape forms gaps between these which helps to retain their individual identities.
- Conservation Areas and Listed Buildings in Nuneham Courtenay and Marsh Baldon provide historic character and time-depth; the open landscape provides a rural setting to these, directly abutting the historic core in places.
- Remnant areas of orchards to the north of Marsh Baldon provide links to historic land uses, contribute to historic landscape character, and provide texture and visual interest to the landscape.
- Nuneham Courtenay RPG, which provides time-depth and historic landscape character and creates a distinct sense of place and parkland character.
- Recreational value of public rights of way, including the Oxford Greenbelt Way and Shakespeare's Way.



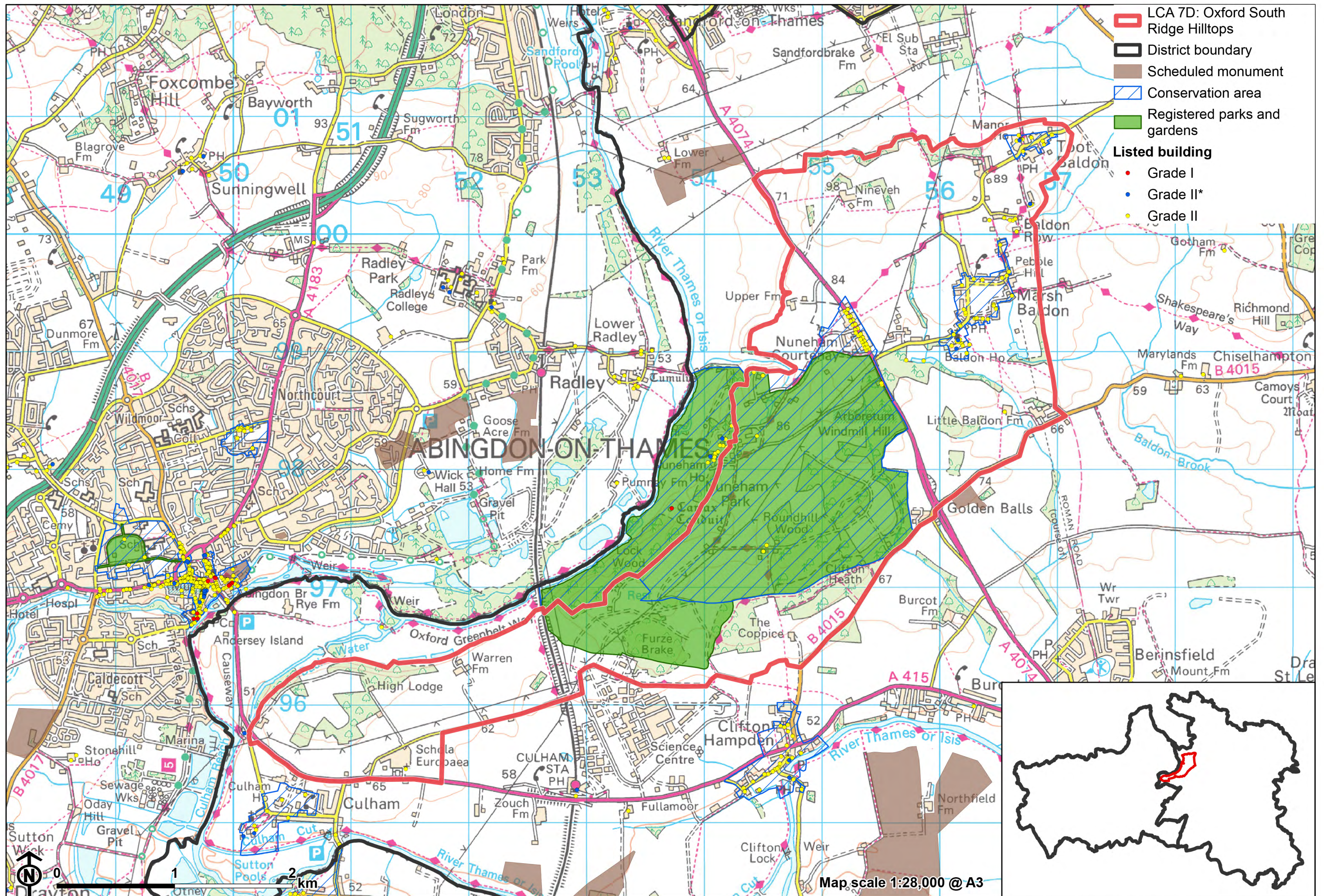
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- A predominantly rural character, with sense of enclosure and intimacy due to landform and woodland cover; some longer outward views available from hillsides and higher ground.











## Forces for change

- Loss or poor management of woodland, hedgerows and hedgerow trees, which affects the wooded character of the landscape.
- Agricultural intensification, diversification and amalgamation of fields into larger parcels of arable land, which threatens the surviving smaller-scale field patterns including in the vicinity of settlements.
- Increased development pressure from the Strategic Allocation adjacent to Culham Science Centre, and from the Science Centre which may impact on views south from the ridge hilltops and the wider setting of Nuneham Courtenay RPG.
- Increased recreation on the Oxford Greenbelt Way which may lead to a demand for greater visitor facilities, including car parks, altering the rural character.
- Pressure for recreational and community uses to the west, which would replace arable land with parkland and associated buildings, access and outdoor play structures. This would affect the rural character of the landscape by introducing amenity and recreational uses.
- Pressure for solar development and associated infrastructure (cable routes etc) to the north, within both this and the adjacent vale and river valley landscapes. This would undermine the rural character of the landscape and introduce infrastructural elements into views across the landscape. It would also affect the rural setting of the historic settings of Nuneham Courtenay and Marsh Baldon.
- The Ridge Hilltops landscape may be susceptible to the impacts of climate change, including:
  - 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, and a greater risk of wind-throw and loss of mature trees.



- 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.
- 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.
- Intensification of adjacent land use leading to increased impacts on hedgerows such as pesticide drift and nutrient enrichment.
- Changing temperatures, drier summers and wetter winters and extreme weather events are creating vulnerabilities in chalk/limestone grassland landscapes, including increased soil erosion and run-off; changes in plant and animal species and community composition; and an increased fire risk.
- Increase in storm damage could affect veteran and mature trees, and designed landscapes.

## Landscape strategy and guidelines

Woodland blocks and mature tree cover should continue to contribute to rural character and provide ecological value, landscape structure and a sense of enclosure and intimacy.

- Retain and enhance woodland blocks and tree lines; conserve and manage the Ancient Woodlands to improve landscape character and encourage biodiversity.

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- 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.
- Explore opportunities to expand and connect existing woodland and tree cover through natural regeneration or small-scale planting, particularly around settlements. This will strengthen landscape character and bring benefits for biodiversity.
- Seek to prevent further loss or poor management of hedgerows and hedgerow trees and encourage their restoration/reinstatement. Consider re-introducing a smaller-scale field pattern to complement those areas surviving around settlements and to the north; when establishing new hedges, aim to diversify the range of species and select species and provenances adapted to a wider range of climatic conditions.
- Use trees and woodland to integrate development into the landscape, including that associated with amenity/recreational uses.

Important habitats, including calcareous fen, lowland meadows and acid and limestone grassland, should be retained as distinctive landscape elements with high biodiversity value, and enhanced where possible. Opportunities to enhance ecological value of intensively managed arable farmland should also be considered.

- Manage grassland habitats to enhance their 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).
- Manage arable land to enhance its biodiversity value and connectivity, by maintaining and expanding the area of land available for uncultivated arable field margins. Seek to maximise the diversity of margins to provide a range



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of habitats and to assist in the movement of species through the landscape and include species and cultivars that are able to tolerate and flower under hotter, drier summers.

- Seek opportunities to enhance habitat connectivity by creating green corridors and networks.

Maintain the open and wooded rural character of the landscape which forms the wider setting to Nuneham Courtenay RPG and forms gaps between individual settlements, helping to retain their individual identities and their rural character.

- Maintain the low-density settlement pattern of villages set around central greens, and minimise the impact of any new development on local character and on views from other areas. Any new development should use materials which are in keeping with, or complement, the local vernacular of limestone rubble, timber-framing, brick and tile or thatch roofs.
- Maintain the valued recreational use of the landscape which allow appreciation of views and landscape character.
- Consider impact of any development in adjacent areas on outward views, particularly for solar panel applications. Refer to the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Renewable Energy Study.

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 features in settlement setting, including Ancient Woodlands and the parkland at Nuneham Courtenay and traditional orchards to the north of Marsh Baldon.

Maintain and enhance remnant orchards on the edge of Marsh Baldon and the historic character, texture and visual interest they provide.

- Encourage the traditional farming practice and maintain and restore orchards and other horticultural uses where appropriate, including the remaining older orchard trees which have visual and biodiversity value and sense of time depth.

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Estates and parklands, and the historic value and character they provide, should be conserved and enhanced.

- Conserve and manage historic parkland at Nuneham Courtenay, including its landscape park and pleasure grounds. Replant key ornamental tree species to retain the parkland character where necessary.