

# SUTTON COURTENAY LANDSCAPE STUDY



Review changing photo (see options in Appendix)

Final draft report

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# PART 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1 SCOPE AND PURPOSE

This document has been prepared for and commissioned by the Sutton Courtenay Neighbourhood Plan group, who represent the occupants of a village to the north of Didcot. Sutton Courtenay is sited within an area under great pressure for new housing and other development. Together with Bicester, Didcot is one of two settlements in Oxfordshire granted Garden Town status by the government. The key challenge of this designation is to use an understanding of the special character of the area to inform the integration of new housing and 20,000 high-tech jobs into the existing landscape, centred on Harwell, Milton Park and Didcot.

This report has worked to a brief asking for the production of a broad Landscape Character assessment of the whole parish, as well as a separate and more detailed Historic assessment of the Village. Together, these assessments will provide an overview of the wider landscape setting, as well as a more detailed understanding of the village itself, in order to define what makes it special in a local and national context. This will then be used to assist in the drafting of policies by the local community, which are locally-tailored to the conservation and enhancement of the local character of the village and which conform to national and local planning policy.

In combining the two assessments - one traditionally more focused on 'heritage', the other on 'landscape' - this report offers a fresh approach. Its delivery has worked within tight resources, leading to a 'leaner' assessment of significance and in particular, sensitivity to change. It must be emphasised, however, that the two reports provide a framework for considering a range of issues in further depth, involving more input from the local community.

## 2 METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The methodology takes as its starting point the whole of the parish as it has developed to the present day, in accordance with the aims of *The National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF):

- to place good design, local character and conservation of the historic and natural environment at the heart of sustainable development and good planning.
- to conserve heritage assets and their settings in a manner appropriate to their significance and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation.
- for any development to make a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness, drawing on *'the contribution made by the historic environment to the character of place'*.

The NPPF's definition of the historic environment as resulting from 'the interaction between people and places through time' is echoed in the European Landscape Convention's definition of landscape as 'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors'. This simple definition places people and their perceptions at the centre of understanding what makes places distinctive and what benefits they offer, how they have changed into their present form and how they can change in the future.

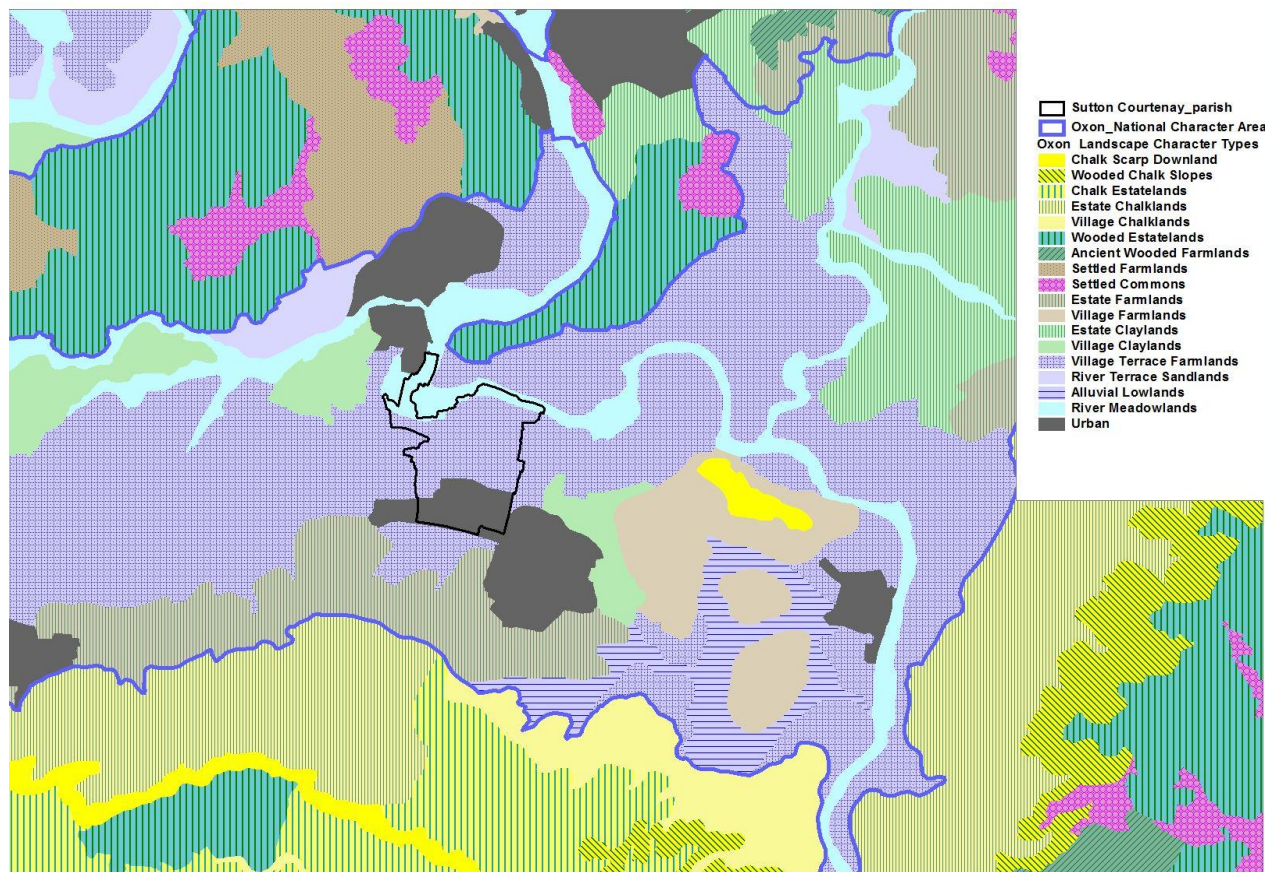
The principle of working from a broad understanding of the context of the site towards a more focused consideration of individual features underpins how this report has been structured. Every effort has been made to add value to what is already known about the area and provide a fresh interpretation of what makes the parish of Sutton Courtenay special for its community. In particular, opportunities for landscape enhancement and the provision of habitats for wildlife are explored in part 4 of this report.

## PART 2 WHAT MAKES SUTTON COURTENAY DISTINCTIVE

### 1 NATIONAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) and more recently Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC), have been developed at both a national and local level throughout England. At the national level, 159 National Character Areas (NCAs) have been defined in England and provide an understanding of how landscapes have evolved, the drivers for change and the benefits that they bring to people and wildlife. Sutton Courtenay is sited within **NCA 108**, the **Upper Thames Clay Vales**.

At a more local level, character assessment leads to the identification of different types of landscape each of which contain a range of features that contribute to local distinctiveness and which make one place different from another. Oxfordshire has its own Landscape Character Assessment, known as OWLS (the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study), based on an underlying framework of Land Description Units that now covers almost half of England. Oxfordshire County Council is currently updating their Landscape Character Assessment, through incorporation of the county wide HLC into the existing landscape framework. The Landscape Character types (LCT) map, shown below (Map 1), is an extract taken from this work.

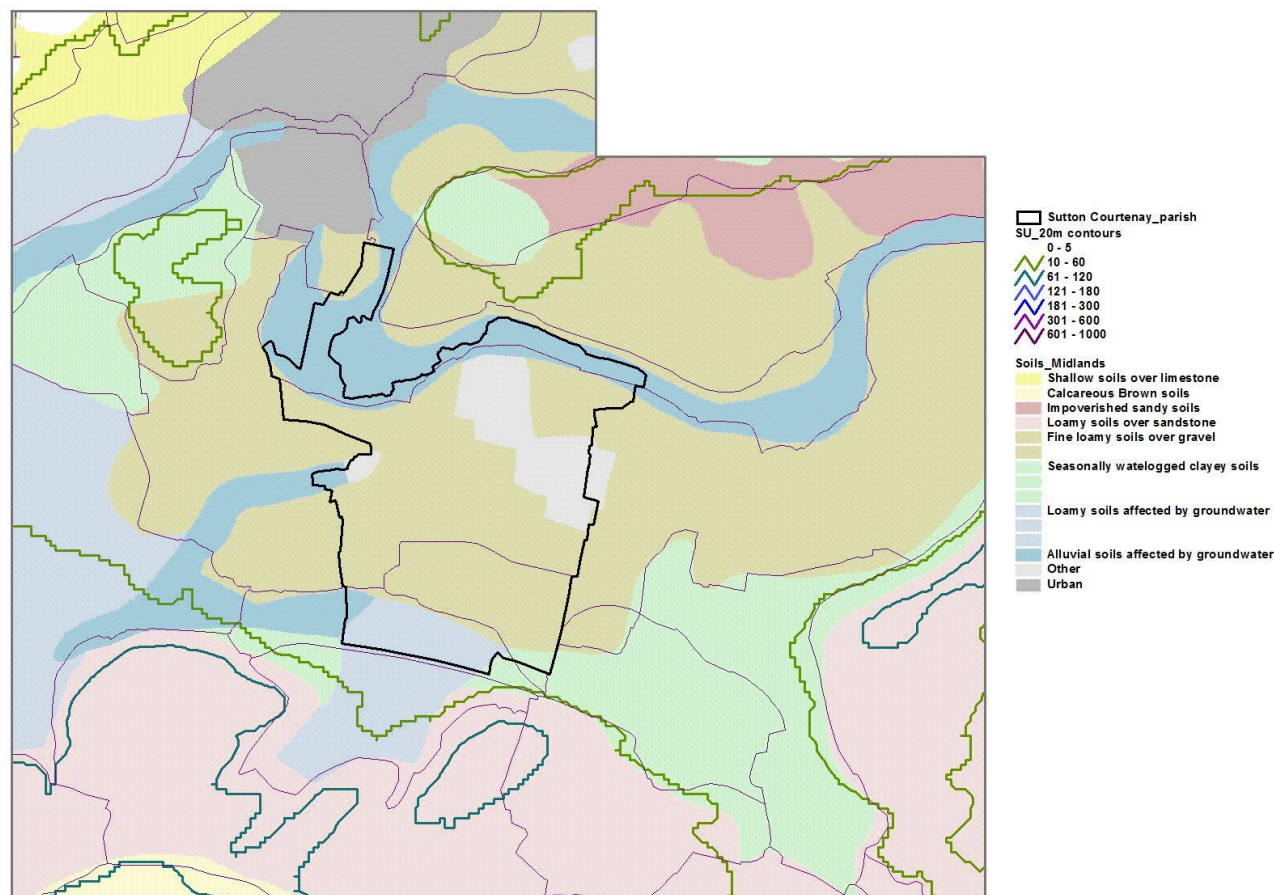


**Map 1 Landscape Character Types in South Oxfordshire**

The Upper Thames Clay Vales NCA (shown as a purple line) is a broad belt of open, gently rolling, lowland farmland stretching from Aylesbury to Swindon. The underlying geology comprises a belt of Lower Cretaceous Gault Clay and Jurassic Kimmeridge Clay, associated with a band of Upper Greensand rocks which create an area of more rolling landform within the Vale. The clays are covered in many places by more recent fluvio-glacial and alluvial drift, which gives rise to the relatively flat, low lying terrain around Sutton Courtenay. The soils derived from the fluvio-glacial drift are well drained sandy loams, used for cereals/short term grassland, while the heavier alluvial soils along the river are used for stock rearing. The Upper Thames Clay Vales are bordered by the chalklands of the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs (NCA 116) and Chilterns (NCA 115) to the south/east and the more wooded Mid-Oxfordshire (Corallian) Ridge to the north.

## 2 THE LANDSCAPE AROUND SUTTON COURTENAY

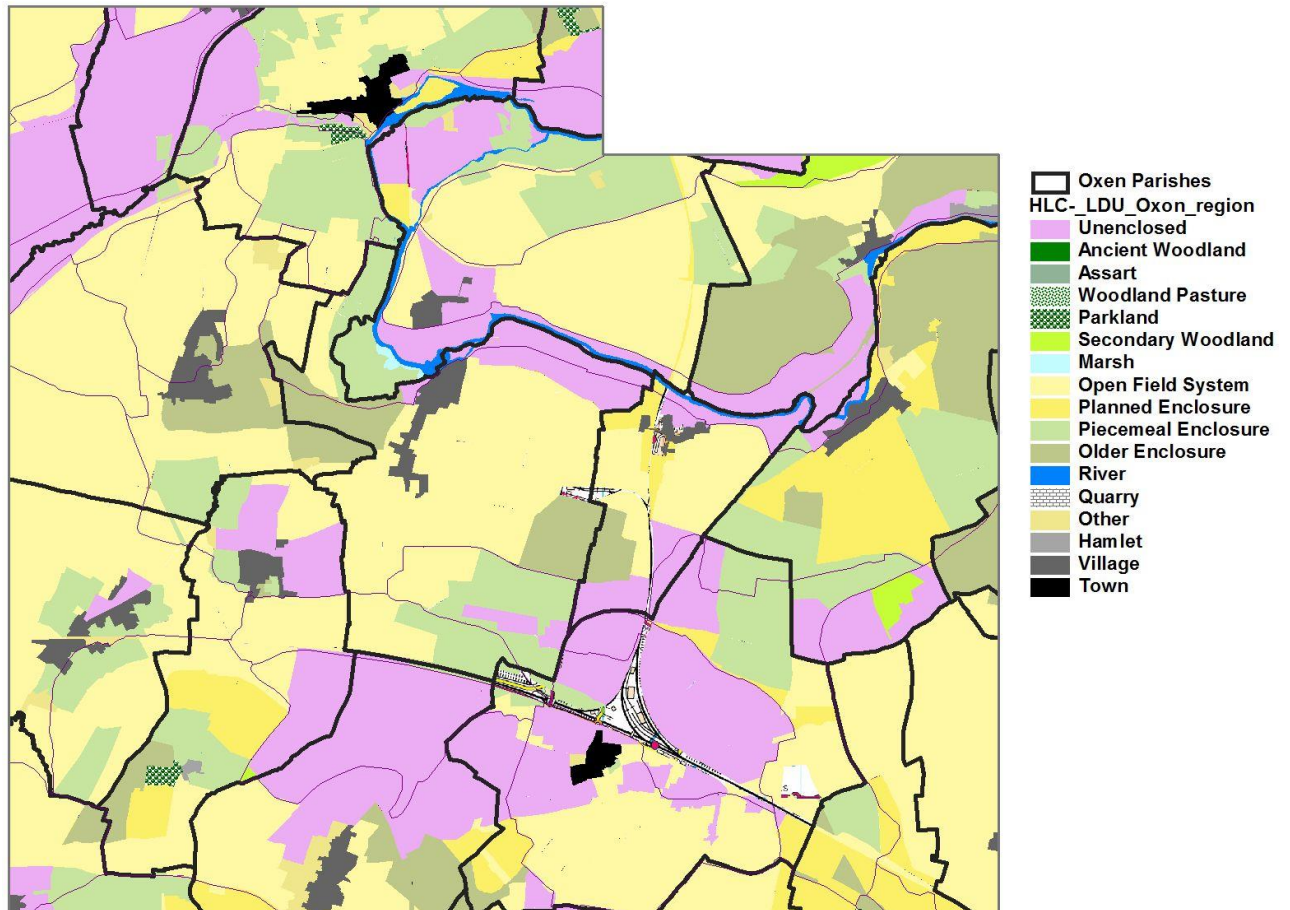
Map 2 shows the underlying natural character of the landscape in and around Sutton Courtenay, which comprises a low Greensand ridge framing a lower lying vale of Gault Clays to the north. Much of this lower lying land, drained by the River Thames and its tributaries, is associated with deposits of fluvio-glacial drift, which gives rise to calcareous loamy soils over chalk gravel. These soils are variably affected by groundwater and are overlain in places by thin strips of alluvium along the river corridors themselves, giving rise to heavier, clayey soils with naturally impeded drainage.



**Map 2 Natural character of the landscape**

The Agricultural Land Classification map for London and the South East classifies most of the area in Sutton Courtenay, apart from the alluvial floodplain lying along the Thames, as Grade 2 land. Much of this land is thus under cereal cultivation, while the lower lying areas along the river are under grass. Most of the high quality, agricultural land to the east of Sutton Courtenay has been lost to sand and gravel extraction and subsequent infill with waste.

Rural settlement is the result of how people have settled and farmed the land and used its resources. In England a clear distinction can be drawn between areas, such as the Chilterns where settlement is scattered in loose clusters throughout the countryside and other areas, mostly in central England, where the majority of households are concentrated in villages with only a few isolated farmsteads within the wider countryside. This strongly nucleated settlement pattern, characterised by medium-sized, historic rural villages, is a key feature of the Upper Thames Clay Vale. Most villages are linear in shape, but a few are more nucleated with a central core of older buildings. The rural settlement pattern around Sutton Courtenay, established by the 11<sup>th</sup> century, shows this pattern clearly (see map 3 below) and it is dominated by villages which served extensive open fields with little woodland. Although there has been some new development, the vernacular character is strong in most villages, with many brick and clay tiled buildings, along with some older timber framed buildings, either with thatched roofs, or clay tiles.



**Map 3 Cultural character of the landscape**

Two distinct types of landscape occur within the Sutton Courtenay area, excluding the urban area of Didcot.

### **3 RIVER MEADOWLANDS**

#### ***Overall character***

The River Meadowlands are characterised by flat, alluvial floodplains associated with lowland river valleys. This is a quiet, sparsely settled landscape with a predominantly pastoral character, distinguished by tree lined watercourses and a regular pattern of medium-sized hedged fields.

#### ***Key characteristics***

- Broad alluvial flood plain.
- Major watercourse with an associated network of wet ditches.
- Pastoral farming with areas of open water due to mineral extraction.
- Medium sized regular hedged fields with scattered hedgerow trees.
- Dense willow corridors bordering watercourses and ditches.
- Sparsely settled.

#### ***Geology and landform***

This is a low-lying, linear landscape associated with alluvial soils along the river Thames that are prone to seasonal flooding. Permanent pasture and numerous ditches are an indicator of the heavy soils and poor drainage.

#### ***Land use and vegetation***

Although traditionally a pastoral landscape with remnants of unimproved neutral and marshy grassland, arable farming also occurs on areas of slightly more elevated and better drained land. Tree cover is a key visual feature with dense corridors of willow and ash bordering ditches and watercourses. Woodland is insignificant and largely restricted to secondary tree cover and scrub around flooded gravel pits.

### ***Cultural pattern***

The River Meadowlands are a planned landscape of medium-large sized fields, with pockets of smaller fields, reflecting a geometric pattern of late parliamentary enclosure. Most of these fields are enclosed by thorn hedges, with open ditches in places. Hedgerow trees are often a characteristic feature of this landscape, with ash, willow and sycamore as the main species. They are often closely spaced, creating filtered views, particularly alongside ditches and in pastoral areas.

### ***Landscape Strategy***

Narrow, meandering rivers, flanked by grazing meadows and riverside trees are distinctive features of this landscape, where they combine to create a peaceful, undisturbed character. The continuity of the river corridor is formed by permanent pasture along the floodplain and where there is regular flooding patches of wet grassland and marsh still occur. Such features evoke a strong sense of naturalness and give river meadowland landscapes a special quality that is now rare in Oxfordshire.

***Conserve and restore the distinctive unsettled, wetland character and pastoral continuity of these historic riverside landscapes.***

## **4 VILLAGE TERRACE FARMLANDS**

### ***Overall character***

A flat, intensively farmed landscape associated with fertile, free draining soils over deposits of terrace sands and gravels. Lines of streamside trees often provide a strong sense of enclosure in an otherwise open landscape. Historic, nucleated linear village settlements are a key feature, closely associated with the surrounding arable farmland.

### ***Key characteristics***

- A low lying, gently rolling topography.
- Productive soils mostly managed for arable cropping
- Medium to large-sized hedged fields.
- Thinly scattered hedgerow trees, which are mostly ash.
- Lines of streamside trees
- Prominent village settlements scattered throughout the area.

### ***Geology and landform***

To the north of Didcot this landscape is associated with recent fluvio-glacial drift which gives rise to the relatively flat, low lying terrain around Sutton Courtenay.

### ***Land use and vegetation***

The landscape is dominated by arable farming with some semi-improved, neutral and wet grassland around villages and bordering ditches/small streams. Woodland is generally not a characteristic feature, except for occasional small deciduous and mixed plantations. There are also small tree clumps throughout the area, particularly around villages, farmhouses and in some fields. These consist mainly of ash, willow and poplar.

### ***Cultural pattern***

The field pattern is largely characterised by regular, medium to large-sized arable fields with some smaller grass fields. Thorn hedgerows are a distinctive feature of this landscape and are particularly prominent along roadsides, trackways and areas where grassland predominates. Hedgerow trees are generally sparse, with ash as the dominant

tree species along with willow, poplar and dead elm. Lines of streamside trees often create a sense of enclosure in this flat landscape.

***Landscape Strategy***

Intensive arable production is a dominant feature in this landscape, resulting in a variable field pattern with many gappy/low cut hedgerows. Tree cover is limited, but many of the streamlines crossing the river terrace are well treed, often creating a strong sense of enclosure and scale in this flat landscape. In an area where the fertile, free draining soils are well suited to intensive cropping, it is these primary linear features, along with roadside and parish boundaries that hold the key to conserving/enhancing landscape character.

***Conserve and enhance the vernacular character of rural villages and strengthen the surrounding structure and pattern of primary hedgerows and hedgerow trees.***



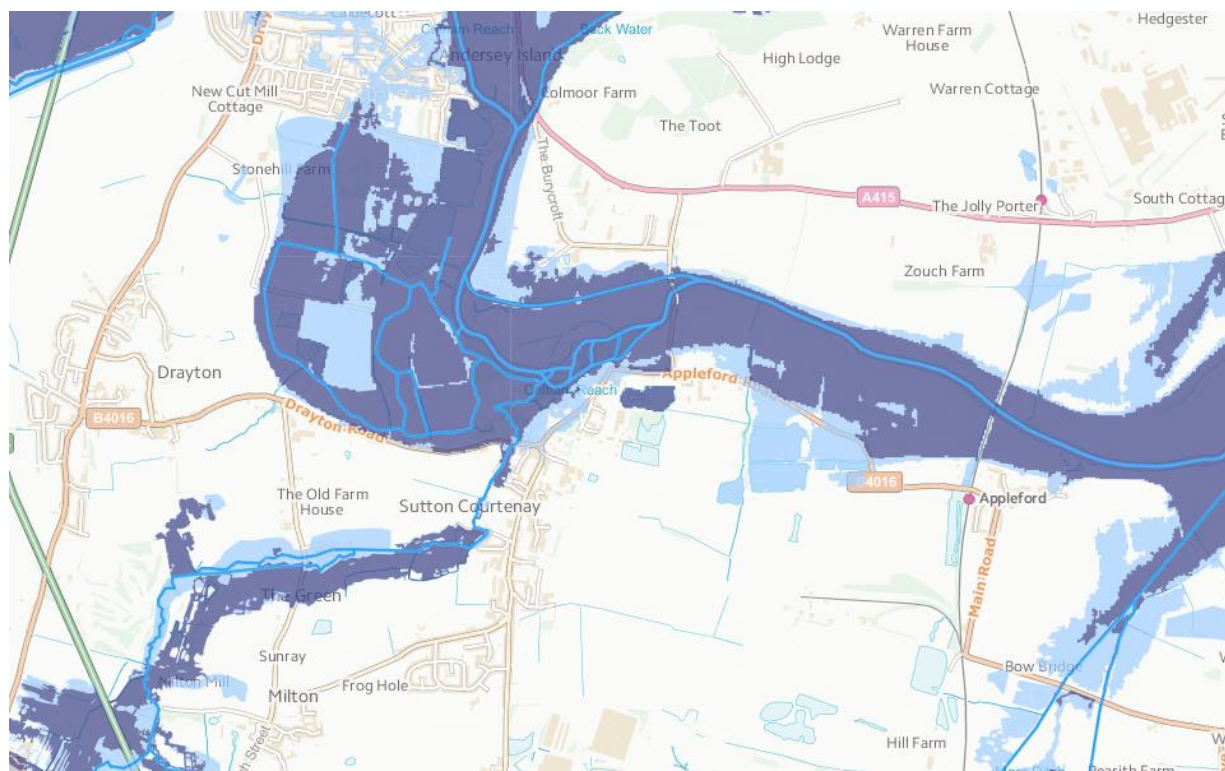
### PART 3 SENSITIVITY TO CHANGE

Sutton Courtenay is located in an area under great pressure from development and a key principle underpinning the designation of Didcot Garden Town has been to ensure that the benefits offered by the environment are understood and integrated into all development in the region. Whilst there is acceptance on the part of the community at Sutton Courtenay that the future will see more pressure for development, there is a strong desire to ensure that the village retains its own separate identity and that any proposals take account of the significance of the whole parish and its respective areas. Recommendations for the conservation and enhancement of the landscape are set out in Part 4.

The analysis of sensitivity is based upon the assumption that a landscape with a clearly defined and strongly unified character will be more sensitive to change by virtue of the fact that such landscapes are less able to accommodate 'alien' features that do not conform to the existing pattern. Thus, any analysis of sensitivity needs to look separately at the inherent character of the landscape, both ecological and cultural, and the visual experiential aspect.

**Sensitivity of the natural environment** - in a national context the oldest, (and by implication most sensitive) landscapes are those that still survive in a semi-natural state (i.e. heathlands, wetlands, etc), or which include relic patches of semi-natural habitat and/or ancient woodland. Most landscapes in the lowlands, however, have been settled and improved for agricultural production and, as a result, any surviving semi-natural habitat is almost invariably associated with the cultural pattern (woodlands, field boundaries and other manmade features). The extent of these patches is strongly related to the intensity of land use within different landscapes. Arable landscapes, for example, are usually intensively managed with little space for wildlife, whereas old pastoral landscapes usually have greater wildlife diversity.

Sensitivity to flooding is also related to the natural environment in areas affected by fluctuating groundwater levels. This is particularly prevalent along the broad alluvial corridor of the river Thames and also to a lesser extent adjacent to the Mill Brook as shown on Map 4.



Map 4 Environment Agency Flood Map for Sutton Courtenay

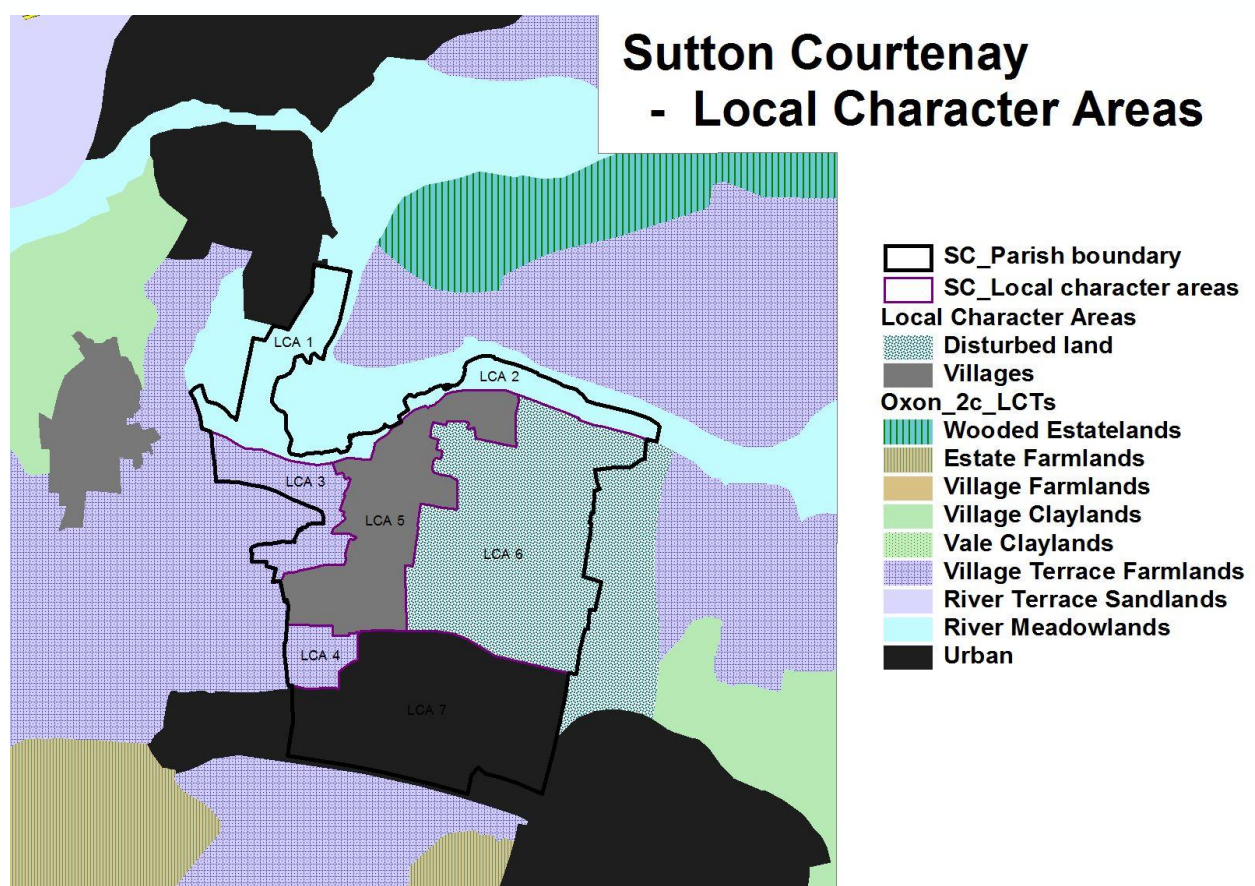
- Flood Zone 3: 1 in 100 chance of flooding each year
- Flood Zone 2: 1 in 1000 chance of flooding each year

**Sensitivity of historic character** – the inherent cultural sensitivity of a landscape is closely related to the nature and pattern of key elements that define the character of a given area. Landscapes with 'time depth' (i.e. those that display

a long and continuous history of evolution), together with those that are characterised by a clear and consistent pattern of key elements, tend to be more sensitive to change than landscapes of more recent origin, or those that have fewer distinguishing feature.:

**Visual sensitivity** - relating to the degree to which new development is likely to cause a visual impact on the setting of an existing historic settlement such as Sutton Courtenay. At a broad scale, visual sensitivity relates to the openness of a landscape – a sloping, treeless landscape may be more sensitive to the visual impact of new development compared to a flat, more wooded landscape. The extent and pattern of woodland cover and characteristic landform (valley, rolling, steeply sloping, upstanding etc) are both attributes contained with the LDU database and can be used to map visual sensitivity as part of the desk-study context.

Within the parish of Sutton Courtenay, breaks in the continuity of the two main landscape types and variations in the condition / impact of change, result in a further sub-division into 7 separate local character areas as shown in Map 5.



**Map 5 Local Character Areas**

**Area 1 - River Meadowlands /gravel pits to the north of Drayton Road**

A mixed area of land use, including a series of flooded and restored gravel pits within a matrix of fields used for livestock grazing.

**Sensitivity to development** – although part of a landscape that has locally been very disturbed by sand and gravel extraction, this area provides many opportunities to conserve and restore wet grassland habitats along the River Thames floodplain and for encouraging the regeneration of trees and wetland habitats along watercourses (see the second and third points in the first section of Part 4 below).

**Area 2 - River Meadowlands to the east of Sutton Bridge**

A strip of fields along the alluvial floodplain, bounded by the river to the north and land affected by sand and gravel extraction to the south. This is an intensively managed arable landscape.

**Sensitivity to development** – although intensively managed as arable farmland, the river floodplain is still intact in this area. As in area 1 above, there is thus an opportunity for re-creating wet grassland along the river floodplain and for encouraging the regeneration of trees and wetland habitats along the river.

### **Area 3 - Village Terrace Farmlands to the south of Drayton Road**

This is the main area of Village Terrace Farmlands within the parish and it links well with the adjoining areas of this landscape within the parishes of Drayton and Milton.

**Sensitivity to development** – overall, this area is big enough and functions coherently enough to retain a distinctive rural character within a partially urbanized setting. Although the natural character of the landscape is rather weak, the cultural pattern is sufficiently coherent and survives well enough to be moderately sensitive to change. Visual sensitivity is also moderately strong due to the relatively open nature of the landscape. New development should thus be resisted within this area.

### **Area 4 - Village Terrace Farmlands to the south of the village**

A small area of Village Terrace Farmlands surrounded in part by residential development within the villages of Sutton Courtenay and Milton and a major area of commercial development to the south and east. Only to the west, beyond Sutton Road and the village of Milton, is there any link to the main area of this landscape type.

**Sensitivity to development** - despite the containment of this area by development, a large part of the land is a designated historic site, while the open agricultural character provides a valuable gap with the adjoining, heavily urbanized area to the south and east. This makes the area very sensitive to change.

### **Area 5 - Sutton Courtenay village and adjoining eastern plots**

Sutton Courtenay, like many villages in this area, displays evidence of having been planned around a main street, with lanes enabling access to river meadows and arable land in former Medieval Open fields. A description of the village can be found in the more detailed Historic assessment of the Village.

**Sensitivity to development** – dating back to at least the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Sutton Courtenay retains a strong historic character and sense of place. Only at the southern end of the village is there any significant amount of more modern, sub-urban style residential development. The village thus retains a relatively strong rural character and it is important that any further new development, within some of the farmland plots between the eastern edge of the settlement and adjoining area of former mineral extraction sites, should be designed with an appropriate style and sufficient open space to fit snugly into the older part of the village. New development should not be allowed along the western edge of the village, which still retains a strong rural character (see notes for character area 3 above).

### **Area 6 - Disturbed land to the east of the village**

A former area of Village Terrace Farmlands extending into the neighbouring parish of Appleford. This area has been completely changed in character by extensive sand and gravel extraction and subsequent re-use as a large scale waste disposal site.

**Sensitivity to development** – although this area has a very disturbed, rather weak character, it is not suitable for new development due to its use as a former waste disposal site. There are opportunities, however, for the creation of a new, more ecologically/visually interesting and accessible landscape in this area (see the last point in the first section Part 4 below).

### **Area 7 - Urban area bordering Didcot to the south**

A former area of Village Terrace Farmlands, extending to the parish boundary along the railway line and beyond, that has been completely changed to an urban landscape - including the old Didcot power station and associated more recent commercial/industrial development.

## **PART 4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSERVATION AND ENHANCEMENT**

These recommendations are intended to inform the Neighbourhood Plan and to encourage/facilitate local management activity within the parish of Sutton Courtenay and beyond. Such activities would take place over and above the statutory mechanisms that exist for the protection of the natural and historic environment:

### **1 CONSERVE AND ENHANCE LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS**

Conserve and restore the local characteristics that make the parish of Sutton Courtenay distinctive and ensure that measures to achieve this are incorporated into all land management / development proposals. Opportunities and resources should be sought to implement the following:

- Encourage the restoration and management of primary hedgelines along roadsides, trackways and parish boundaries within the Village Terrace Farmlands. This should be done through the new Countryside Stewardship scheme, to restore the structure of the remaining farmed landscape;
- Seek opportunities to conserve and restore wet grassland habitats along the River Thames floodplain and other streamlines, such as the Mill Brook;
- Seek to enhance the visual and ecological continuity of the Village Terrace Farmlands and River Meadowlands landscapes by encouraging the regeneration of trees and wetland habitats along watercourses;
- Draw up and seek opportunities to implement a strategic plan for the creation of a new, more unified landscape in the area of disturbed ground between Sutton Courtenay and Appleford.

### **2 RETAIN AND EXTEND LOCAL GREEN SPACES**

Retain and enhance existing Local Green Spaces and seek to identify other land that should be preserved and enhanced to benefit nature and people. NPPF guidance (para 76) states that 'By designating land as Local Green Space local communities will be able to rule out new development other than in very special circumstances.' Para 77 states that designation should only be used:

- where the green space is in reasonably close proximity to the community it serves;
- where the green area is demonstrably special to a local community and holds a particular local significance, for example because of its beauty, historic significance, recreational value (including as a playing field), tranquility, or richness of its wildlife;
- where the green area concerned is local in character and is not an extensive tract of land.

### **3 RETAIN KEY VIEWS WITHIN AND AROUND THE VILLAGE**

Identify and retain key views within the village, to / from the village and within the wider landscape, including views over the River Thames. A key feature of the village is the view along the main street in the northern part of the settlement, into which its historic buildings face, reinforced by open space, brick walls and planting. This contrasts with the narrower village street to the south of the road junction.

As regards views to and from Sutton Courtenay, particular attention should be given to those from footpaths surrounding the village and from routeways extending into/connecting with the Main Road within the village.

Within the wider countryside, most of the best views lie within the open countryside to the west of the village and over the lower lying floodplain of the River Thames from Drayton Road.

### **4 BE SENSITIVE TO THE SIGNIFICANCE AND SETTING OF CHANGE**

Need to ensure that any change is sensitive to the significance and setting of heritage assets and natural features. New development in particular, should respect the scale, form, orientation, materials and density of neighbouring areas and seek opportunities to conserve / enhance local features, green spaces and views. The following guidelines need to be considered for different types of development:

1. Any change within and around Sutton Courtenay village must protect, complement or enhance, the historic rural character of the settlement and its hinterland, as identified in the Historic Village Appraisal. Applicants must explain in a Design and Access, or Heritage Statement, how the proposed development will protect, complement or enhance the historic rural setting of the Parish, including the Conservation Area and Listed Buildings.
2. New buildings within historic settlements must comply with Conservation Area and local plan policies and in all cases should be sensitive to:
  - public and private space around the site.
  - access to and the layout of the site and its wider setting in the landscape, including how buildings are set back within their plots.
  - the scale, massing and form of neighbouring buildings. Ideally new elements should not compete with, or overwhelm traditional farm buildings.
3. Conversion / restoration of historic buildings into dwellings might include some new building, the demolition of modern / insignificant buildings and/or the opening of spaces to better reveal the significance of heritage assets in their setting.

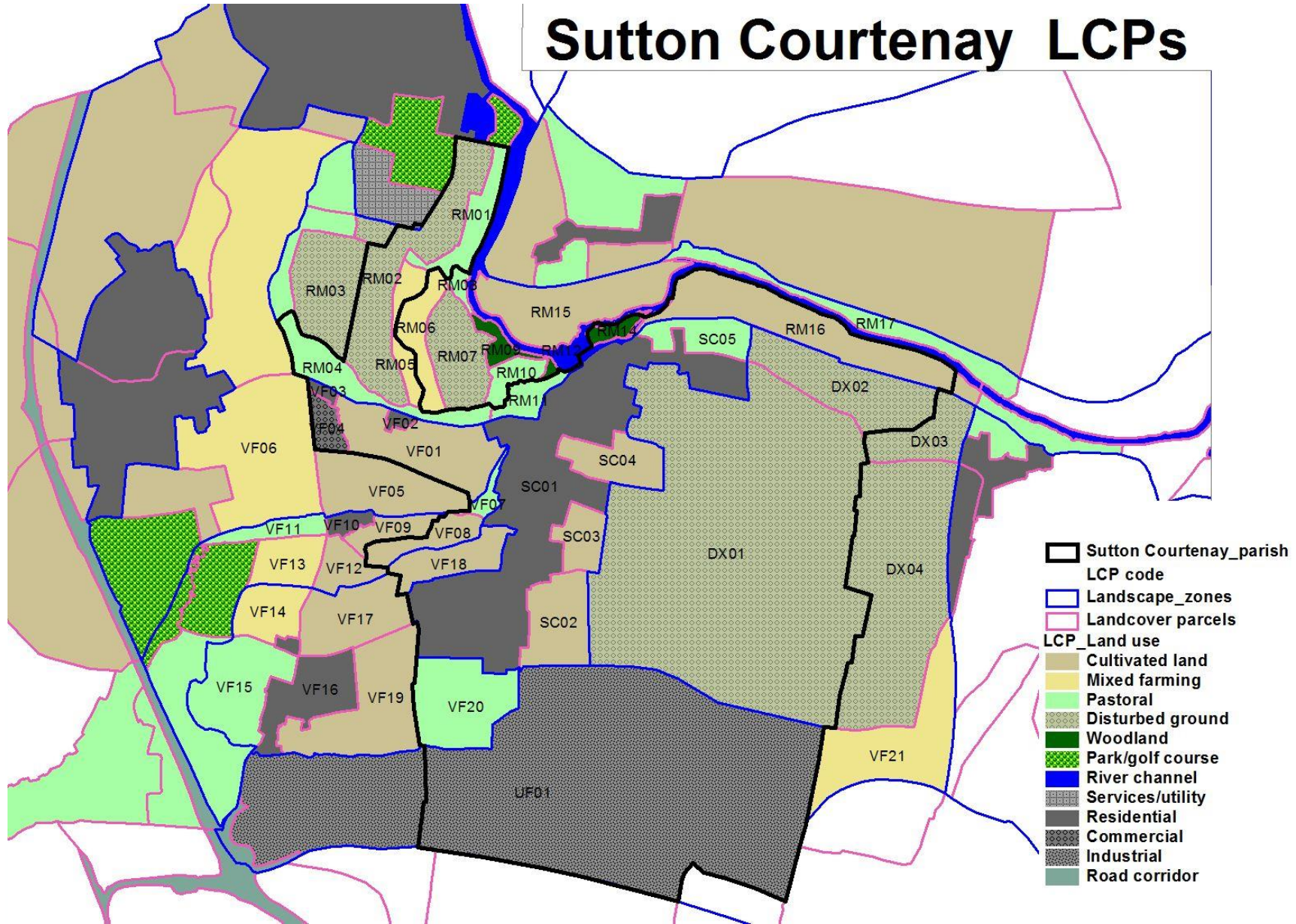
## Appendix

### LANDCOVER PARCELS

Each of the Local Character Areas within the parish have been subdivided into smaller Landcover Parcels (LCPs) as shown on Map 6 below. These provide more manageable pockets of land for planning / carrying out practical land management activities with landowners and land managers. Each of these parcels of land comprises different land uses and/or field patterns, bounded by streamlines, roads/trackways, or the parish boundary. The River Meadowlands have been subdivided into 12 LCPs within the parish, the Village Terrace Farmlands into 17 LCPs and the disturbed land to the east of the village into 2 LCPs. Individual LCPs can vary from small patches of land a few hectares in size, to much more extensive areas of arable land over 50ha. Although the Local Character Area containing Sutton Courtenay also includes 4 isolated parcels of farmland, most of the area includes the urban landscape associated with the village. Together with the more recent urban development in the southern part of the parish, both areas could also be subdivided into discrete landcover parcels, reflecting different phases of development and areas of green space (see historical assessment of village).

Each LCP is defined by a 4 digit code comprising 2 letters to define the type of landscape of which it is a part (thus **SC** - Sutton Courtenay Village, **RM** - River Meadowlands, **VF** – Village Terrace Farmlands, **DX** - Disturbed land, **UF** - the Urban Fringe of Didcot), followed by a number. These are shown on the map below. Information related to each of the LCPs can be found in the associated GIS database.

# Sutton Courtenay LCPs



Map 6 Landcover parcels map of Sutton Courtenay

## Choice of Front page photos





