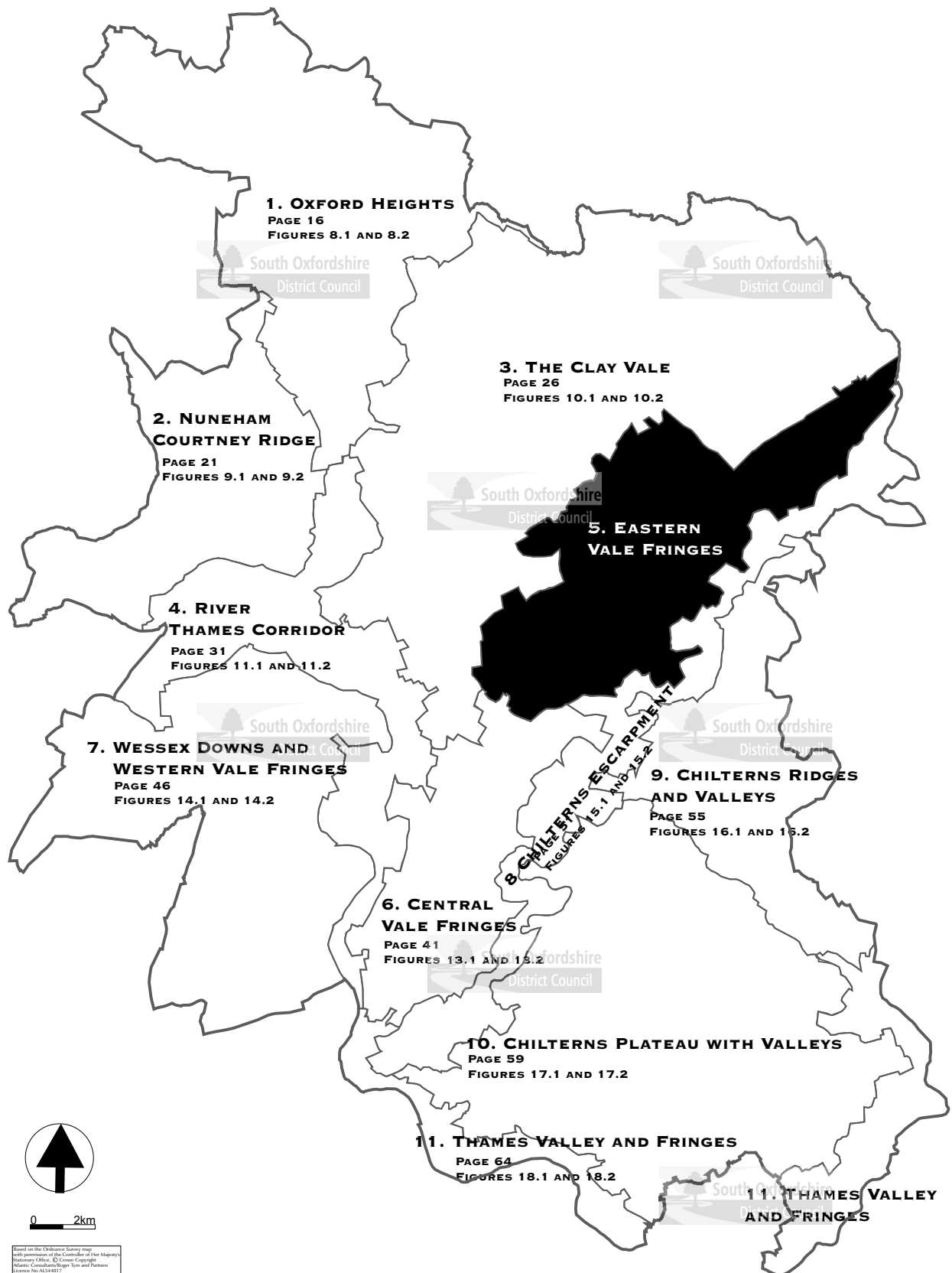


# CHARACTER AREA 5: EASTERN VALE FRINGES



## Landform and landcover

This character area forms the eastern section of a distinctive belt of low, rounded hills, approximately 3 to 4 kms wide, which follow the base of the towering Chiltern escarpment and form a transitional zone between the chalk uplands and the low-lying clay vale.

This 'shelf' of higher ground is formed by an outcrop of Middle and Lower Chalk, with a small area of malmstone (Upper Greensand), which fringes the Gault Clay of the vale. These permeable, calcareous rocks produce the smoothly rolling landform and light, loamy soils that are characteristic of chalk areas and which contrast with the low-lying, subtle relief and heavy soils of the clay vale.

The productive and easily worked sandy brown earth soils have been cultivated over a very long period and are now predominantly under intensive arable land use, with large-scale fields bounded by straight hedgerows typical of the later enclosures. Linear belts, clumps and blocks of woodland are quite frequent features, providing some structure and enclosure in the landscape.

## Settlement and buildings

This belt of landscape has provided a favoured area for settlement since prehistoric times. The Icknield Way, a prehistoric thoroughfare, followed the outcrop of dry, permeable rocks between the wet land of the vale and the steep Chilterns escarpment, and the numerous pure springs that emerge along the scarp foot have attracted a long string of villages from Chinnor to Ewelme [6].

Many of the existing settlements were established by Saxon times (eg. Pyrton, Watlington and Lewknor) and the basic pattern of settlement has changed very little since then. The Saxon period also accounts for some other patterning in the landscape, with the boundaries of 'strip parishes' (long, linear land holdings which run up into the Chiltern Hills) following the line of early routeways. The whole countryside below the Chilterns is patterned by the intersection of transverse and parallel routes, visible in the existing lattice work of footpaths and bridleways [5].

Many villages were originally nucleated in form, with buildings typically clustered around a church and central open space but during the last two centuries many villages have developed a more linear form (eg. in Pyrton where the encroachment of the manor and park deflected other buildings along an ancient highway). Some former villages were deserted in medieval times, such as Clare where a single farm now occupies the site of 37 former households [5].

Many of the area's settlements have an attractive core of historic buildings. Earlier buildings were timber-framed with wattle and daub infill, replaced later by brick nogging. Brick and flint are widespread with some examples of the local soft 'clunch' or chalk stone used in association with brick dressings. Roofs are typically red tiles with occasional thatch.

## THE EASTERN VALE FRINGES



1 Air photograph showing the landscape of the Eastern Vale Fringe around Shirburn.

2 Typically smooth, rounded profile of the rolling downs landscape near Lewknor.



## Landscape and visual character

Landscape character within this area is fairly consistent, with coherence and unity provided by the underlying chalk or greensand geology which produces the characteristic smooth, rolling landform and grey, flinty soils. Typically this rural landscape is dominated by large, rectangular fields, mostly under arable cultivation, with a good structure of hedgerows and linear tree belts, particularly towards the east. The character of the area is also influenced by the impressive backdrop of the Chiltern escarpment which enhances the quality and sense of enclosure of the landscapes at its foot.

The main variations in landscape character (see Figure 12.1) are between:

- the smoothly rounded **downs and vale fringe** landscapes of the chalk and malmstone hills;
- areas of **parkland and estate farmland** landscape;
- one small area of **floodplain pasture** along one of the minor river valleys which encroach into the area;
- and a couple of areas undergoing **mineral** extraction or **landfill** operations.

### *Downs and vale fringe landscapes*

These are the predominant landscape types within the area, forming a consistently rolling agricultural landscape of smooth, rounded landform and gentle valleys. The structure of hedgerows, trees and woodland belts, and the degree of visual enclosure, are the main factors which distinguish one area from another. These differences are closely related to the nature and intensity of farming practice, with more enclosed landscapes to the east and more denuded, open landscapes further to the west.

#### *Open rolling downs*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk or greensand hills;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation with weak or absent hedgerow structure and large-scale field pattern;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;

- denuded and somewhat bleak and sterile character, with few features of landscape or wildlife value;
- rural character with few detracting influences but large-scale farm buildings tend to be particularly prominent in this very open landscape;
- open landscape results in high intervisibility and extensive views.

#### *Semi-enclosed rolling downs*

Key characteristics:

- distinctively smooth rounded landform of low chalk or greensand hills;
- dominance of intensive arable cultivation but some areas of permanent pasture or grassland;
- large-scale field pattern contained within a comparatively intact structure of hedges, with hedgerow trees and frequent linear belts or stands of planted woodland;
- distinctively 'grey' and flinty soils;
- rural character with few detracting influences, although main roads create some localised intrusion;
- semi-enclosed landscape with moderate intervisibility.

### *Parkland and Estate Farmland*

The main area of parkland and estate farmland is concentrated around Shirburn Castle and Pyrton Manor but there are a number of other smaller examples, around Aston Rowant, Kingston Blount, Britwell Salome House and near Adwell.

Key characteristics:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, or 'estate' landscapes dominated by woodland blocks and clumps of trees;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover;
- low intervisibility.

### ***Floodplain landscapes***

A small area of floodplain pasture is associated with a minor streamcourse north of Lewknor.

#### *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;
- intimate and pastoral character;
- generally low intervisibility.

### ***Mineral and landfill sites***

Two such sites were recorded during the survey, the main one being the chalk quarry at Chinnor with a small landfill operation in a former quarry near Upperton.

Key characteristics:

- disturbed ground under active quarrying or landfilling;
- removal of characteristic vegetation and land uses and introduction of machinery, structures etc that are incongruous within local landscape;
- typically 'scruffy' character to site and surrounding area, often evidenced by litter, dust, poor fencing etc.

## **Landscape management issues**

The few areas of parkland stand out within this area as being of particularly high landscape quality, where a strategy of **conservation** is most applicable (see Figure 12.2). However, the eastern end of this area also has a typically attractive, rural and generally unspoilt character which is strongly influenced by its rolling character, reasonably intact landscape structure and the dramatic and attractive backdrop of the Chilterns escarpment. These landscapes require only modest levels of intervention to **repair** areas which have been weakened by intensive farming or the impact of roads.

To the west of Watlington, however, the impact of modern farming practice has been more intense and the landscape has a particularly denuded and sterile character. Action to **restore** its former diversity and structure would be desirable, taking the historic pattern of large-scale enclosures as a guide to an appropriate density of field boundaries. Quarries and landfill sites are examples of land uses which have disrupted the natural pattern and character of the rural landscape. Here, intervention to **reconstruct** a more sympathetic character and to mitigate adverse landscape impacts would be desirable.

Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to:

- retain important open views from the chalk and greensand hills but encourage some replacement of hedgerows and woodland planting within the 'open rolling downs' landscapes (to restore the former pattern of large-scale enclosures);
- protect any remnant areas of chalk grassland and convert arable land to permanent pasture where possible;
- maintain existing field boundaries and discourage further hedgerow removal and replacement by fencing;
- maintain and restore typical landscape features of existing parklands at Shirburn Castle and Pyrton Manor and other smaller parks within the area;
- mitigate the impacts of quarrying and landfill operations (including urbanising road treatments) and restore to a rural character in keeping with the surrounding landscape;
- improve landscape structure and land management on the fringes of built areas and along main roads to mitigate adverse impacts on the surrounding countryside.

## Planning and development issues

Large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within open countryside areas. The ability of the landscape to accommodate smaller-scale development will depend upon:

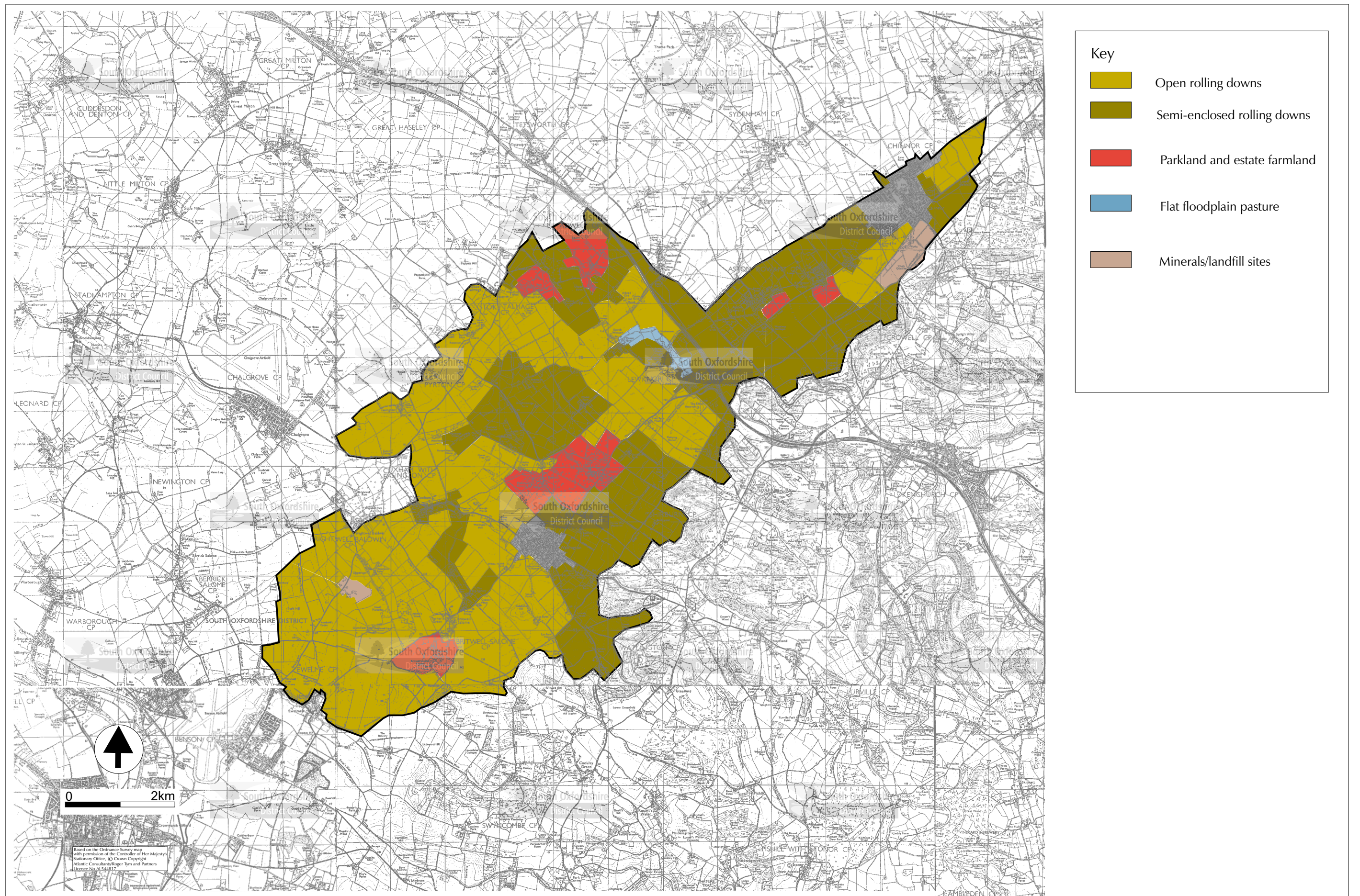
- the potential impacts on distinctive **landscape and settlement character**;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic **landscape quality** and valued features and the overall sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the **visual sensitivity** of the receiving landscape.

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 can be used as a guide to the potential suitability of development proposals within the Eastern Vale Fringes, as explained on page 6.

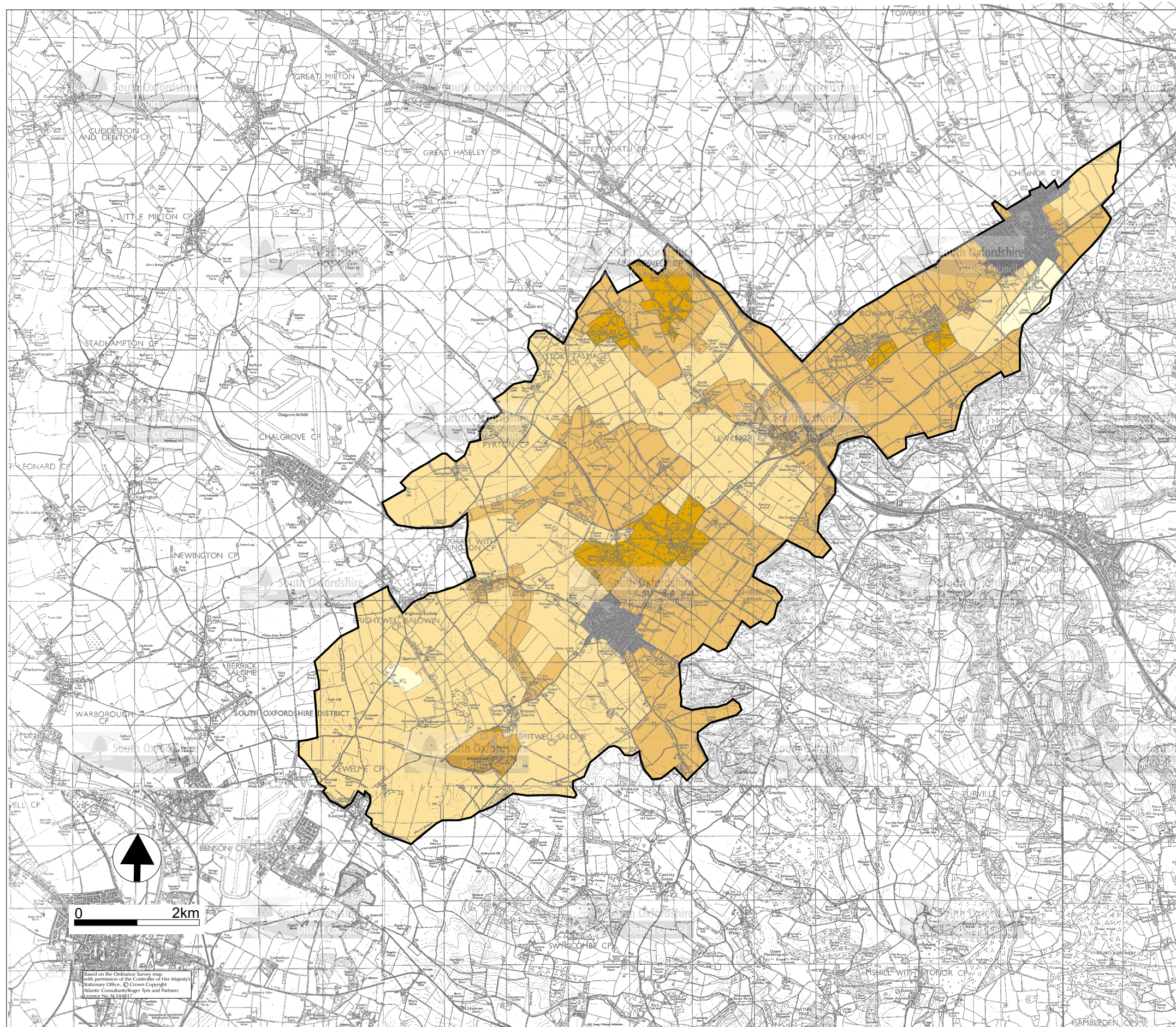
Some specific conclusions are that:

- the high quality parkland landscapes within this area are particularly sensitive to change and least able to accommodate new development;
- the semi-enclosed rolling downs landscapes benefit from a more intact landscape structure and the strong backdrop of the Chilterns escarpment, but their scenic quality (part AONB) and visual prominence makes them sensitive to development;
- development within the open arable downs landscapes will be highly prominent unless closely associated with existing built form;
- landscapes with strong landform and a mature structure of woods and hedgerows are less visually exposed and may be more able to absorb change but they are generally of higher landscape quality and therefore sensitive to development;
- special attention should be paid to creating strong landscape 'edges' to settlements to reduce the urbanising influences of development on adjacent countryside and to prevent ribbon development and the coalescence of settlements.









- KEY:**
- Conserve
  - Repair
  - Restore
  - Reconstruct



**Table 5.1: Eastern Vale Fringes - Landscape and settlement character**
**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Parkland and estate farmland	Open rolling downs	Semi-enclosed rolling downs	Minerals and landfill sites
<b>LANDSCAPE CHARACTER</b>						
<b>Scale</b>	large			●	●	
	medium	●	●			●
	small					
<b>Diversity</b>	complex		●			●
	moderate	●			●	
	simple			●		
<b>Structure</b>	strong	●	●			
	medium	◆			●	●
	weak			●		
<b>Enclosure</b>	open			●		
	semi-enclosed	●			●	●
	enclosed/intimate		●			
<b>Boundaries</b>	straight	●		●	●	●
	sinuous		●	●	●	●
	stone walls					
	hedges	●	●	●	●	●
	hedgerow trees	●	●		●	
	estate boundaries		●			
<b>SETTLEMENT/BUILDING CHARACTER</b>						
<b>Location</b>	hilltop		●	●	●	
	ridgetop					
	hillside		●	●	●	
	valley side					
	valley floor	●				
<b>Size</b>	individual dwellings	●	●	●	●	
	hamlets		●	●	●	
	small village			●	●	
	large village			●	●	
	town					
<b>Pattern</b>	dispersed	●	●	●	●	
	concentrated					
<b>Form</b>	nucleated	●	●	●	●	
	linear		◆	◆		
<b>Materials</b>	stone ('clunch' - chalk stone)	◆	◆	◆	◆	
	brick	●	●	●	●	
	flint	●	●	●	●	
	cob					
	timber frame	◆	◆	◆	◆	
	tiles	●	●	●	●	
	thatch	◆	◆	◆	◆	
	slate	◆	◆	◆	◆	

**Table 5.2: Eastern Vale Fringes - Landscape quality and sensitivity**

**Key**

- Typical characteristic
- ◆ Occasional characteristic

		Flat floodplain pasture	Parkland and estate farmland	Open rolling downs	Semi-enclosed rolling downs	Minerals and landfill sites
<b>LANDSCAPE QUALITY AND SENSITIVITY</b>						
<b>Scenic quality</b>	high	●	●			
	medium			●	●	
	low					●
<b>Sense of place</b>	strong	●	●			
	medium				●	
	weak			●		●
<b>Intrusive influences</b>	uncommon	●	●			
	occasional				●	
	frequent			●		●
<b>Other heritage values</b> (eg. Historic Park or Garden, SSSI, Conservation Area etc.)	uncommon	●				●
	occasional			●	●	
	frequent		●			
<b>Visual sensitivity</b>	high			●		
	medium	●			●	●
	low		●			
<b>Sensitivity to change</b>	high	●	●			
	moderate			●	●	
	low					●
<b>Management strategy</b>	conserve		●			
	repair	●			●	
	restore			●		
	reconstruct					●