

Consultation Draft



Sonning Common



Character Assessment and
Design Statement 2013

Summary

Unlike very many of the villages in South Oxfordshire, Sonning Common is a product of the 19th and 20th centuries. As a result, it may not exhibit many of the characteristics of a 'typical' Chilterns village but that does not mean that it lacks a distinctive character. In fact the village has a very distinctive character, one that is important historically and one that the residents value and wish to see understood and enhanced as any future development takes place.

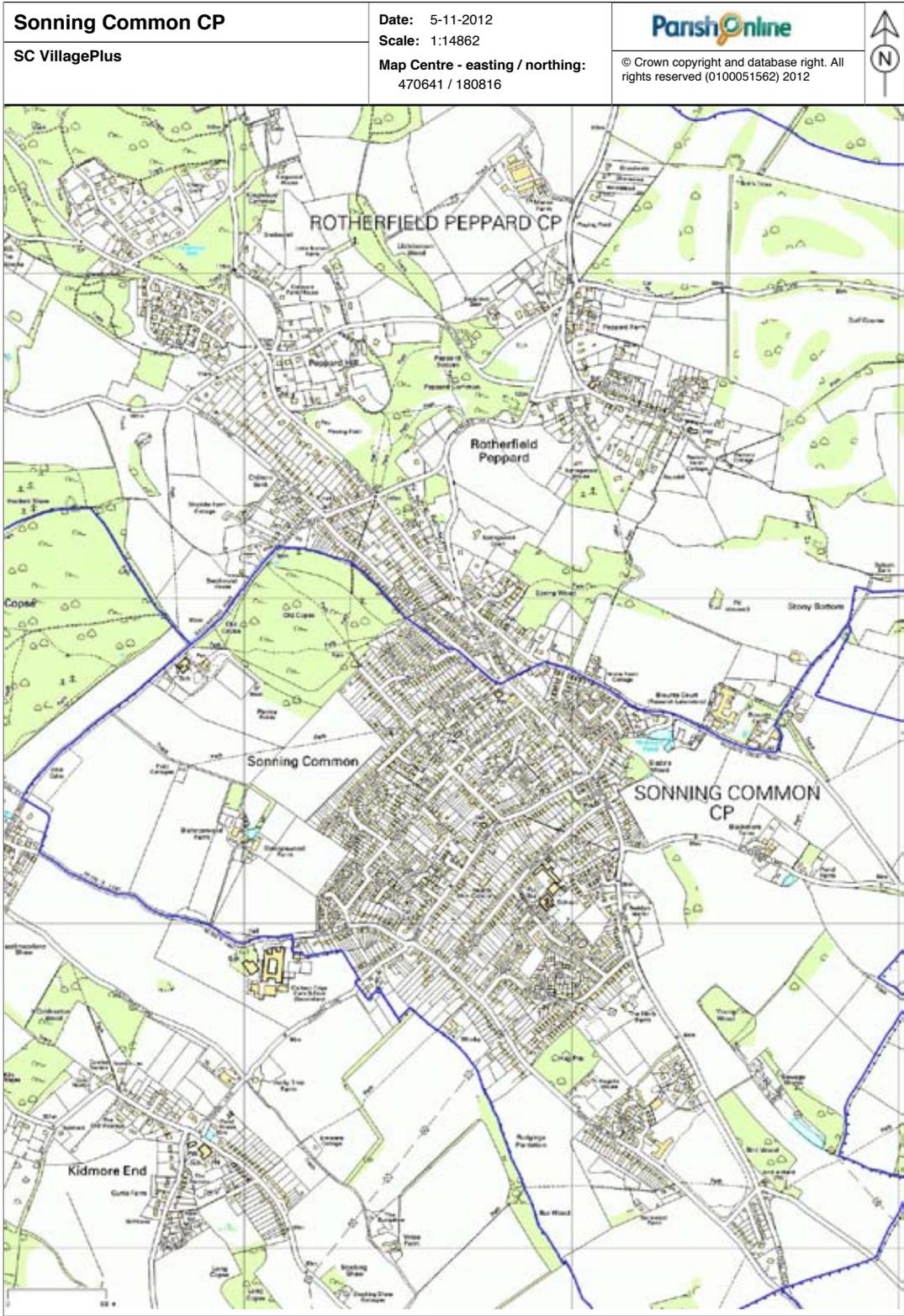
The village also has an important and distinctive landscape setting shaped very much by dry valleys to east and west and surrounding woodland (that also creeps well into the village itself). Most importantly, the village is bounded closely by an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and that too needs to be respected in the future, especially given that some likely development sites are on the edge of the village.

As part of the community's work in preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP), and given that new developments were certain to take place, it was felt important to produce not just a Character Assessment of Sonning Common but to move on to produce a Design Statement. The aim is that this report will be used by developers, applicants, the local authorities and the community, ideally to work together to ensure that any future developments are in the right place and designed in the right way to respond to and enhance the village's valued local character.

As will be seen, the baseline work on this report was done very much by local people through a series of local surveys. These surveys were developed by the Parish Council's consultants, Place Studio (part of the wider Localism Network). The consultants and the NDP Working Group all then contributed to this summary report.

See overall village map overleaf.





Introduction

This Character Assessment and Design Statement has been produced in its own right as a summary statement outlining the character of the built form of Sonning Common in its landscape setting, but also to provide evidence to inform subsequent decisions about site selection for possible future development and about the content, layout and design of any such development.

The intention is to secure status for this report as some form of Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) or given some other type of endorsement, linking it to South Oxfordshire District Council's now adopted Core Strategy.

Background information on relevant national and local planning policy is included in Appendix A. Most importantly, this Assessment takes fully on board some of the key aspirations in the National Planning Policy Framework 2012 (NPPF), notably:

- It has been developed within the principle of “empowering local people to shape their surroundings”.*
- It is about “making places better for people”.*
- It completely reflects the principle that new development should “take account of the different roles and character of different areas”.*
- It is based on “an understanding and evaluation of ... defining characteristics”.*
- It reflects the wish” to promote or reinforce local distinctiveness”.*
- The community expects “applicants ... to work closely with (them) to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community”.*
- The community assumes that the District Council will give value to the principle that “Proposals that can demonstrate (early engagement) in developing the design of new development should be looked on more favourably.”*

This Assessment and Statement should also be read in conjunction with the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment completed for possible development sites.



Methodology

This section is often relegated to an Appendix but the overall approach needs to be described here because of its innovative nature, notably in terms of community involvement.

Landscape

For the landscape assessment and guidelines the consultants supporting the community work drew from several sources in developing the initial survey methodology, in particular nationally accepted methods and criteria for landscape character assessment and the approach recommended in "Unlocking the Landscape" published by the CPRE. The former provides the baseline of professional criteria, the latter provides ways of enabling local people to engage in landscape assessment using the main criteria. In developing the detail of the methods used, reference was also made to District Council policy (in Appendix A).

The result was a survey form that could be used by local people to appraise their own landscape. Using a variety of means, the Working Group identified volunteers willing to use the survey form. Given the very large area around the village, and several obviously varied landscape characters, the overall area was subdivided solely to make the survey work more manageable. In the end around 40 small groups of people (often pairs) undertook surveys. Where one sub area was covered by more than one group, a summary was produced. This was partly for general verification and partly because some people chose to do a particular area near where they live because a development site had been suggested there.

Settlement and Buildings

For the assessment of the village itself, the methods used drew mainly from the guidance produced by the Countryside Commission for the development of Village Design

Statements (VDSs). Whereas, in landscape work, assessment and guidelines are often kept separate, VDS work traditionally includes both assessment and design guidelines. As the Commission guidance had been partly written by a member of the consultant team who had taken further the ideas in that guidance, some other adapted, but well proven, approaches were also introduced. The specific adaptation of VDS work drew from the later Town Design Statements. This was the introduction of work to define 'Character Areas' within the village. This was partly because there appeared to be some quite different areas but also, again, to make the community survey work more manageable across what is quite a large village. Ideas were also drawn from English Heritage guidance about Character Assessment. Once again, use was made of the local policy material (Appendix A) when developing the specific methods.

The result was a second survey form for some initially suggested character areas. As with the landscape work, volunteers undertook surveys. 30 surveys were completed (see photo overleaf) and summaries per area were then produced.

Other Results

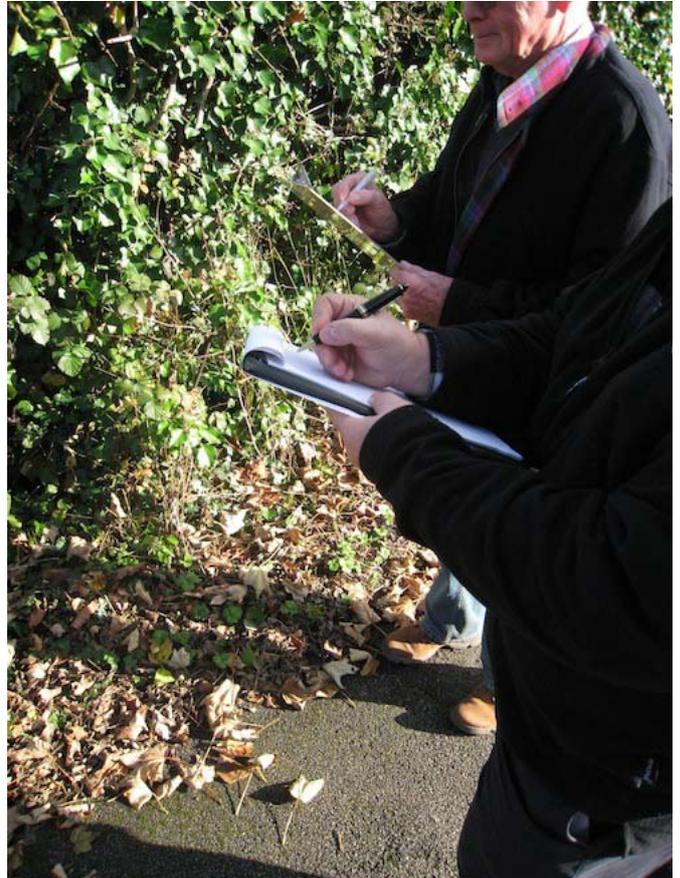
This report is also informed by the results from exercises conducted with local people at a 'Design Day' drop-in event in April 2012. These included:

- Memory Maps ('draw what you can of the village on this paper in any way you wish') – these provided a good summary of the key valued features or landmarks in and around the village.

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- Character Areas – local people's ideas about the different character areas of the village helped to inform the areas later surveyed.
 - Why Live Here? – this post-it exercise generated a wide range of views and ideas, many of which were linked in some way to the character of the village.
 - Like/Dislike – in essence a similar exercise to the one above but just asked in a different way and also generating comments about character.

Once all community landscape and settlement/buildings surveys had been completed the consultant team undertook their own verification process to check the community results and pull them together into this report also using the material from the memory maps etc. The report was also shared with the NDP Working Group and refined further.

Both main survey forms are included in Appendix B.



A Brief History

Around 1850 a traveller going north from Reading along what is now the B481 would have passed through open landscape dotted with occasional areas of woodland. Along the way a road would have forked left along what is now Kennylands Road. Along either road there were small isolated groups of dwellings but no village as such.

A map of 1880 shows that the Bird in Hand pub and Reddish farm are probably the earliest buildings but there is the beginnings of development around what is now Wood Lane and Woodlands Road near the Hare and Hounds, also along Baskerville Road. One or two houses date back to the 1790s.

By 1900 it seems that there were c.40 houses in the area. There were a few more plots beginning to appear by then on the north side of Wood Lane. These were largely erected by Arthur Janes, who was responsible for many of the houses in Sonning Common. At this time, 1902–14, Sedgewell Road and Grove Road were developed, as was Kennylands and various houses along Peppard Road. The Butchers Arms pub was built near Widmore Pond so was much used by horses and carts. (The pub was moved to Blounts Court Road and developed in the 1930's by Brakspears.)

Shops had opened by around 1900, Stannards store in Wood lane was opened in 1902 and Plumbs Store (site of the Coop today) as well as Brinds the Butcher at the corner of Wood Lane in 1905. Some shops opened along Peppard Road and Swan's Garage opened – one of 3 garages in the village. Heath and Watkins also opened at the top of Wood Lane. The village was developing and was by now largely self-sufficient. It slowly expanded in the period between the wars, with a number of house built as infill in all the roads, and by 1951 the population had grown to 1450.

In 1951 the parish of Sonning Common was

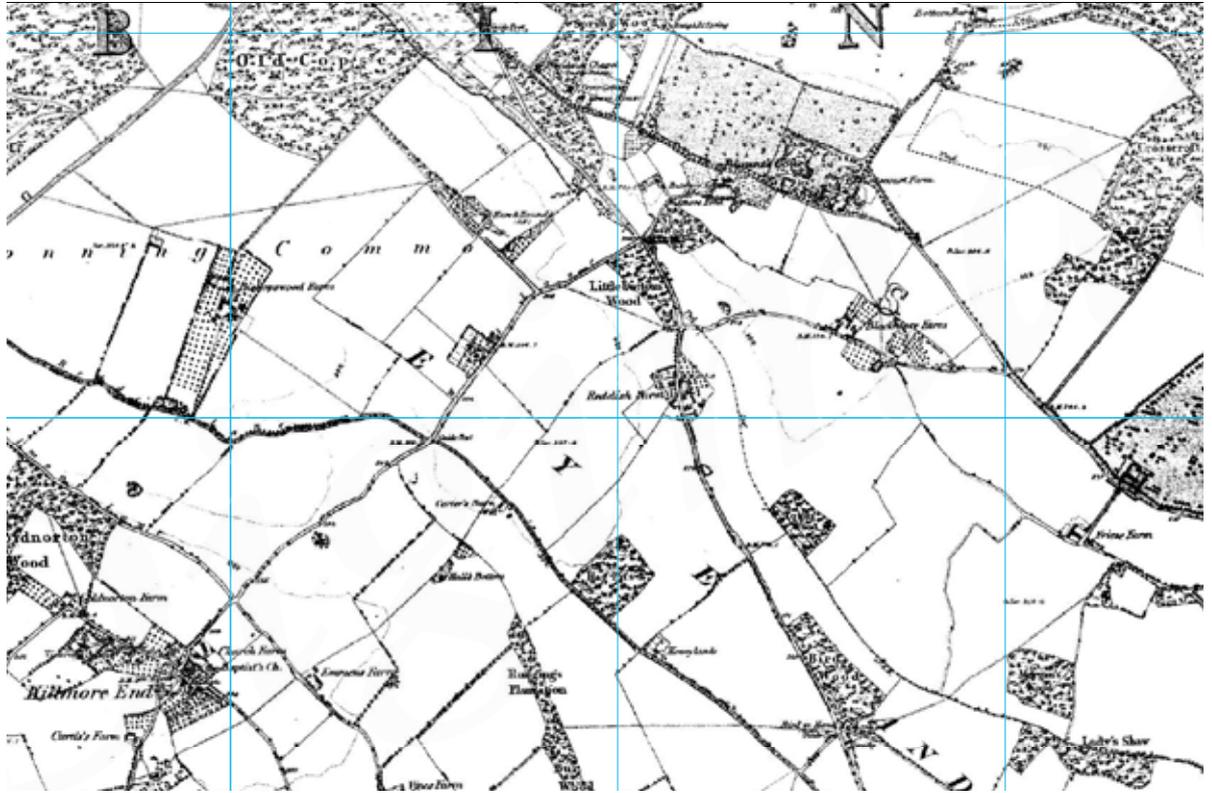
set up, carved out of the adjoining parishes as it was now large enough to have an identity of its own. On the map of 1960 all of Wood Lane and Grove Road are lined with plots. A school is shown on the map and Wood Lane is now the main shopping centre, with a Post Office and two groups of shops each side. At this time Chiltern Edge Secondary School was built and the school in Grove Road became a Primary School.

Now comes the biggest change to the village in its history, largely as a survey carried out by South Oxfordshire to determine where much needed houses could be built. Sonning Common was described as the most important 'no place' in South Oxfordshire; which meant it was open to development. It was then that the estates of Westleigh Drive, Orchard Avenue and Churchill Crescent were built, increasing the population to 4,100 in 1971, making the village the largest in the area. In addition, Beech Rise and adjoining roads grew up and there was development along Shiplake Bottom. The Christ the King church (part of the parish of Kidmore End) was built, the dentist moved in to Wood Lane and the Health Centre was built. Kennylands School, which was owned by Essex County Council, was sold and the retirement development of Essex Way was built. In 2000 the Millennium Green was purchased for an public open space in perpetuity.

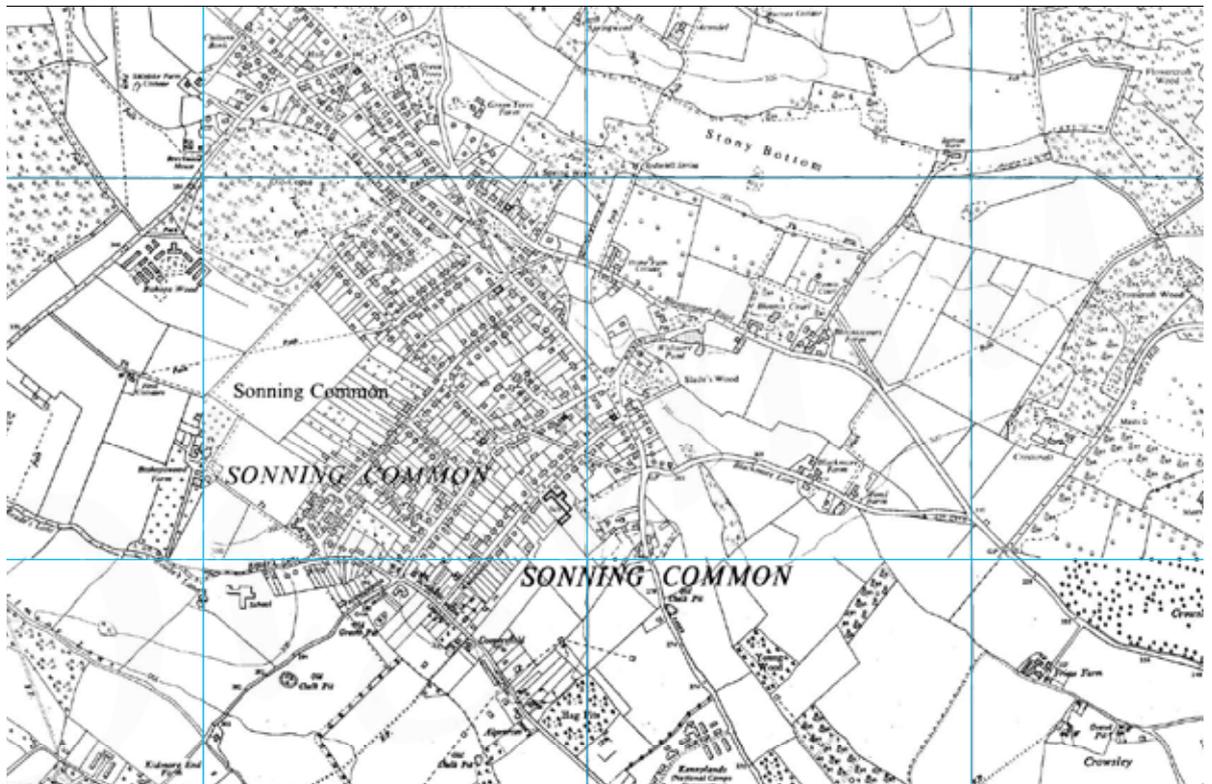
Although further properties were built along Peppard Road (to the east) and Kennylands Road (to the west) these still created a very clear edge to the village on those sides. These boundaries have probably remained as they are because the Chilterns AONB was designated in 1965 and they are also in part the parish boundaries.

See over for historic maps.

1880 map



1960 map



Landscape

As outlined in the policy section (Appendix A), the landscape around the parish is included in a District-wide Landscape Character Assessment (LCA). The assessment examined character at two levels. Firstly, it defined 'Landscape Character Areas'. These are areas of landscape that may be quite diverse in character, but they have broadly similar combinations of geology, topography, land use and vegetation. Although the character areas have a definable physical context and coherent identity, they are inevitably quite diverse in themselves, with differences in landform, land-use, the degree of visual enclosure and the influence of built development. This can all create variations in landscape character and local distinctiveness. Therefore secondly, it also identifies landscape sub-types.

The District-wide LCA places Sonning Common within 'Character Area 10: Chiltern Plateau with Valleys'. The Chiltern landscape around Sonning Common specifically falls mostly under the description of the sub-type, 'Semi-Enclosed Dipslope' (dipslope is a geological term to describe a gentle backslope of an escarpment). Key characteristics listed by the district assessment of the sub-type are:

- "typically level or more gently sloping ground;
- comparatively open fields contained within a strong structure of woods, hedgerows or trees to form a loose mosaic;
- dominance of arable cultivation;
- strong structure of woods and hedgerows generally provides visual containment and results in moderate to low intervisibility;
- distinctive pattern of winding rural roads, irregular field boundaries and scattered rural settlements, typical of 'ancient countryside';
- generally rural and unspoilt character

but with some 'suburbanising' influences within rural settlements and along main roads (eg. A4074, A4130), and localised intrusion of built development and power lines (eg. around Sonning Common and Caversham)."

The district LCA provides the basis for the local level assessment of the landscape character, adding in detail and local perspectives. Much of the above has been shown in the community surveys to be particularly applicable to Sonning Common. The landscape of the parish is noted to have a strong structure formed in landform terms by the dry valleys to east and west and by woods and hedgerows, some of the latter forming an important edge both to the built settlement and the AONB. The overall 'semi-enclosed' nature of the landscape is interspersed with shallow valleys, together with areas of ancient, semi-natural broadleaved woodland that lend a more intimate feel and a sense of connection to nature that is highlighted as a valued quality of the parish landscape. Local people also particularly value the fact that the heavily treed or wooded character 'seeps' across almost all of the built area of the village as well; there is not a sharp divide.

Landform and landcover

The north of the parish presents an enclosed wooded character, which soon gives way to a gently undulating arable farmland comprised of small to medium sized, irregular shaped fields bounded by hedgerows and trees. Dispersed areas of woodland are a significant feature of the parish landscape, especially the ancient, semi-natural broadleaved woodlands of Old Copse and New Copse to the north, and Bird Wood at the southern end of the parish, bounding Peppard Road. Woodland, along with hedgerows, creates important edges in the landscape, adding structure and enclosure to the narrow roads

An example of this is a linear wood on Blounts Court Road made up of a mixture of Sweet Chestnut, Ash and Sycamore thinning out to a hedgerow with mature trees.

The shallow but visually significant dry valleys area are also a feature of the parish landscape, defining the edges and framing the village in some places to east and west as the land slopes gently down from the settlement and up into the surrounding AONB countryside.

Land Use

Arable cultivation is dominant, as noted by the district assessment and adds an important seasonal element to the landscape of the parish with the effects of the growing cycle, especially the summer fields planted with wheat and corn. The cultivation is contained in small to medium sized fields with boundaries that are formed by long established hedgerows and mature trees, valued as important habitats for wildlife. Farm buildings contribute to a strong sense of 'rural countryside'. In the shallow valley to the east, accessed off Peppard Road, is a sewerage works located at bottom of the valley slope, away from view of the road. Other light industrial uses are also located around the parish, principally to the east.

Leisure and recreational use of the land for walking, jogging, enjoyment of wildlife etc. is focused on the Millennium Green (which includes a picnic area) and the woods and fields (including playing fields) to the north. Several public footpaths link the surrounding countryside and the AONB to the built settlement of the parish. This network of footpaths that radiates from the village out to the surrounding countryside is well maintained and the paths are highly valued as access routes.

Roads through the landscape around the village are narrow, enclosed by hedgerows and mature trees. The winding country lanes contrast with the minor roads that form the fairly straight routes through and along the edges of the village. This is illustrated by entering the village from Blackmore Lane to the east, narrow and winding along its whole route with steep edged sunken (or 'Holloway') sections, which exits on to Peppard Road, one of the two main routes through the parish.

Scale and Views

The strong structure of the field boundaries date from the 19th century when the network of regular, medium to small sized fields was created, resulting in clear views across each field, contained by hedgerows and trees. These relatively small scale, contained views also open out at points to give some open views across gently sloping cultivated fields. The gently sloping shallow valleys to the south east and west offer more expansive views to users of public footpaths accessed from Kennylands Road to the west and Peppard Road to the east.

Settlement edge

The settlement edge makes a significant contribution to the distinctiveness of a place and how it relates to its landscape setting. In Sonning Common this is especially true as the boundary of the AONB follows closely the edge of the village. This makes the relationship between the built edge and landscape setting a particularly sensitive one, although the north west boundary is no more than back gardens.

The village is essentially funneled from its widest point in the north to the south where Kennylands Road and Peppard Road meet to form the B481 towards Reading, responding to the two dry valleys east and west. In this

southern end of the village, on both the east and west sides the transition between the built settlement and the landscape around is a gradual one. From the southern end travelling north both roads are bounded by dispersed housing, farmland and woods. From both roads the village is perceived to start some way north from the first dispersed housing in the south, from Peppard Road the village is perceived to start at Westleigh Road .

As the roads move away from each other the immediate settlement edge is formed by the backs of gardens. To the north west this edge can be described in places as blunt, formed by fences and wooden panel fences, though for the most part it is formed of a low (1.5 – 2 metres) hedge. Many residents clearly value the visual link to the countryside as most rear gardens maintain the low hedge only as a garden boundary; very few trees form part of the urban edge to the village in this north western side. The balance between maintaining views out to the countryside for residents and a sensitive AONB edge has clear potential to be enhanced in this area.

To the south west, the edge formed by the back gardens of houses along Kennylands Road is made up of trees, hedgerow and woodland, screened in some places, not in others. The same characteristic is also noted on the eastern edge with belts of mature vegetation forming a 'soft' edge.

Arable fields in most places form the backdrop to the immediate built edge. Detracting characteristics are noted as the intrusion of electricity poles, telephone and power lines is noted in the more open fields.

Landform and landcover also plays an important role in the settlement edge around the village. Gently sloping valleys and wooded areas to the south east and west provide allow buildings to sit discreetly within

the landscape. The settlement edge here is gentle.

Locally Valued Landscape Landmarks and Features

Millennium Green and Public Footpaths: As mentioned above, this was designated for community use at the turn of the century. It is an area of open green space valued as a community recreation resource which links to footpaths and the wider countryside.

Historical and Cultural features: Widmore Pond and its wooded surrounds are of historical significance to the village. This area was once part of the Blount's Court Estate and contains a variety of mature vegetation, forming a gateway to the eastern part of the village. The pond and the area around are also important for wildlife, especially herons, and mature and small carp.

Flora and Fauna: A wide variety of wildlife including kites, buzzards, snakes and small mammals are often observed at various points in the surrounding landscape. The ancient woodlands and well established hedgerows provide important habitats along with other local features including a deep chalk pit in the south east corner of a field to the west of Kennylands Road. Seasonal interest and delight from a wide range of flora, including bluebells along Blackmore Lane are a key element of this locally valued feature.

Woodland: Pockets of woodland around the landscape form edges to the built settlement, roads and fields. From the large ancient broadleaf woodlands of Old Copse and New Copse to the smaller Slade Wood to the east, woodland forms a key element of the character of landscape around the parish.

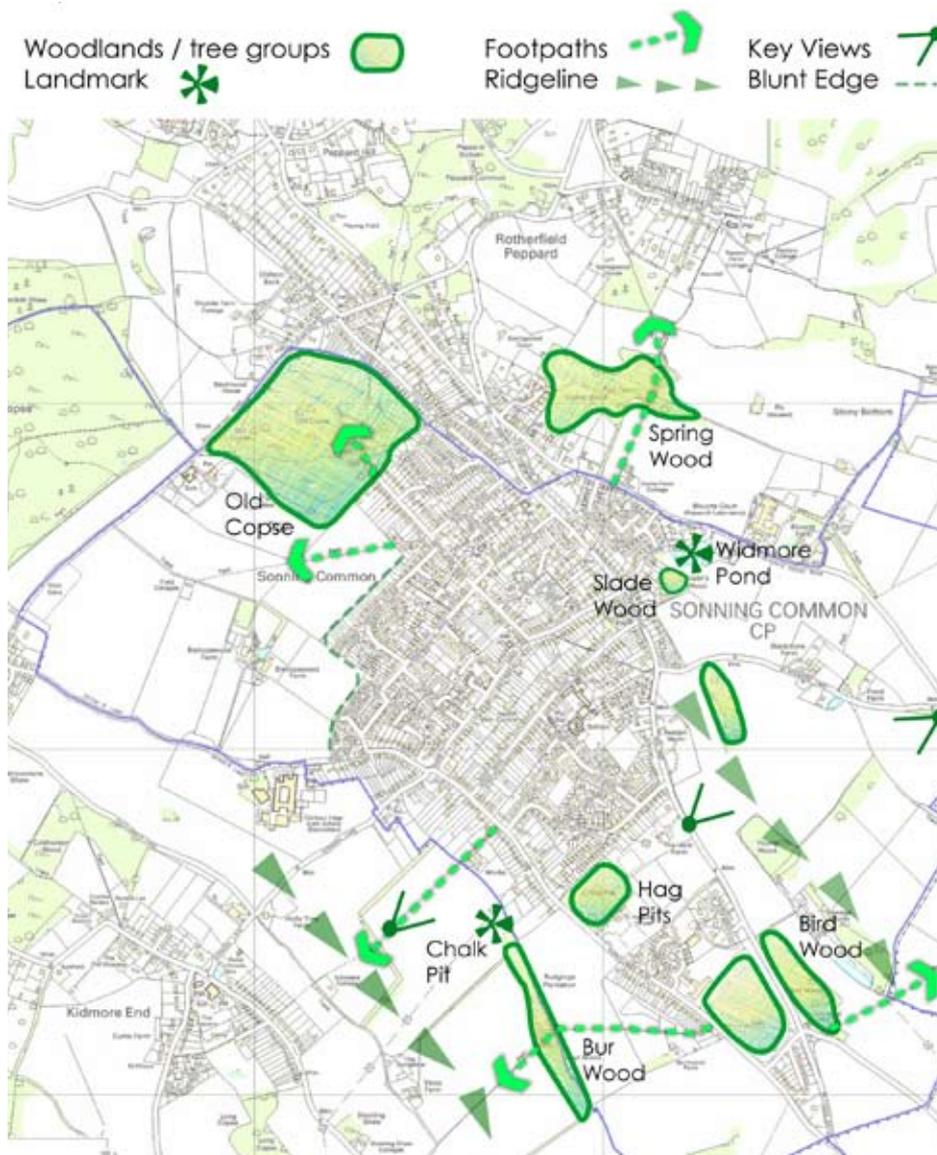
Rural AONB setting: The rural landscape setting of the village is an important quality

with surveyors expressing the importance of the mix of farmland and woodland in the setting of the village. The setting of the village is especially important at its edges where transition between built and natural environment has an impact on the beauty of the AONB.

Views: Views are mostly contained by a strong structure of mature hedgerow and trees, but the gently topography offers surprising open and expansive views at points both

out over the landscape and back in towards the settlement. Travelling along roads on the eastern side, the sense of enclosure and glimpsed expansive views both out from Peppard Road across the landscape and from Blounts Court Road towards the village offer a strong connection between the built and natural environment. Public footpaths also offer the same experience in particular the path from Kennylands Road toward Kidmore End which crosses a large, gently undulating field edged with a mature tree line.

Key features shown in the diagram to the right.



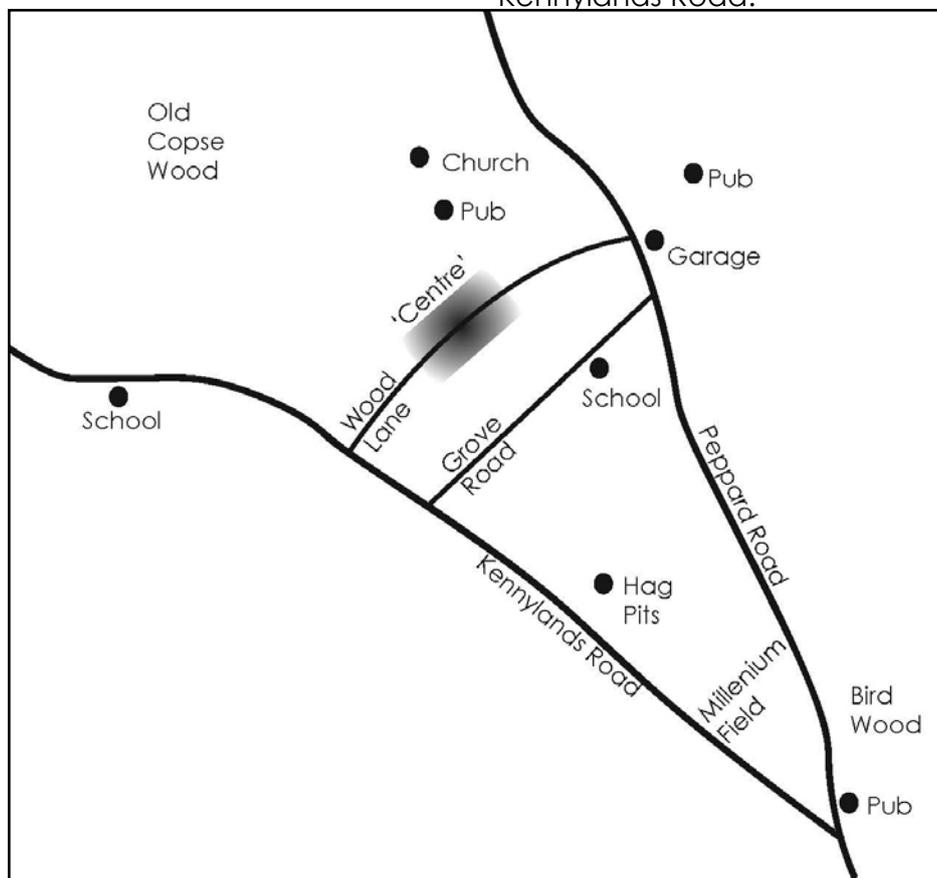
Settlement

Overall Structure

As shown by all the results from the Design Day, but especially from the 'memory maps', the basic structure of Sonning Common is as on the diagram below.

The overall 'skeleton' is formed by the two main roads to east and west with two secondary roads – Wood Lane and Grove Road - linking directly between them. Baskerville Road and Westleigh Drive form secondary links from east to west but not so directly. Not shown on the diagram are a number of footpaths, often along old field boundaries, and important because, for example, they link Wood Lane and Grove Road or go out into the countryside (eg. across the field north of Orchard Avenue).

The main landmarks within this 'skeleton' are the village centre (Health Centre, shops, village hall, post office, businesses etc.), the Primary and Secondary Schools (the latter now in Sonning Common Parish), the CofE church, several pubs, Millennium Green, several nearby woods (notably Old Copse and Hag Pits) and the garage on Peppard Road. These are also all facilities, ie. no particular house stands out (including the well hidden Reddish Manor). Note also that although the Secondary School is seen as part of the village it is in Kidmore End and that the three churches did not feature in many memory maps. Bus stops are clearly important to people, but probably for their practical use, not as visual landmarks. There is a major commercial research facility sited to the east of the main settlement and a 'yard' of small scale commercial uses to the west, behind Kennylands Road.



Character Areas

Although 10 possible Character Areas were used for the community surveys, this was purely for practical reasons to focus residents' work. There are, in summary, just two main characters to different parts of Sonning Common. However, the two main types of area are quite interspersed across the village so there are some sub areas for each type, each with its slightly different character. The two main types of area are:

- **Plotlands:** Areas developed at different time but essentially as a series of plots with houses along relatively straight roads.
- **Estates:** Areas developed as small or large estates of houses, sometimes as very small backland development, arranged along mostly winding roads and culs-de-sac.

Plotlands

This basic pattern of development accounts for around two thirds of the area of Sonning Common (but not of the number of houses as densities here are lower). 'Plotlands' development of this type took place all across the country in the later part of the 19th century through to the interwar period. Sonning Common is a very good example of this pattern.

Plotlands development emerged initially in the late 1800s as a way of providing opportunities to households on lower incomes to have built for themselves (or build their own) houses on plots outside of larger cities, often where one member of the household worked (so commuting was necessary). Farmers laid out basic roads and drains and divided land into plots which were then sold either individually or in small groups. They also laid down very basic rules such as a building line and heights. (It is worth noting that many very early plotland developments were not

entirely legal!) Although many plots were sold individually, a builder might buy several plots, build houses on all then sell most, keeping one for himself at, in effect, no cost. From 1918 onwards the approach widened out to attract middle and higher income households, so plots become larger, as did houses, and some were developed as small estates, even if still as plots along a road.

This form of development, mainly of fairly straight 'grid type' roads with plots directly off them, was still common through to the 1950s and it is almost possible to work out which fields or areas of land in Sonning Common were sold by relating the current pattern to the pre-existing field pattern. In some parts of the village the pattern continued until very recently. However, unlike the stereotypical English village, development did not happen in simple concentric circles out from the original core along Wood Lane. Different stretches of road and land were sold off at different times, probably by different landowners, and in a way that seems almost random. Some gaps appeared early on and were not filled in until later, or have not yet been filled (see the gap along Kennylands Road opposite Hag Pits).

From the start, but more so over time as demand increased and land values soared, some developments appear to have been speculative, ie. more than one identical or similar house at a time, some semi-detached, some in small groups (eg. recently along the east side of Shiplake Bottom). In some cases later on, plot width started to reduce, as did garden length, however on-plot parking and/or garages started to be included.

Because development involved the landowner in providing nothing more than what is called 'sites and services' (ie. roads, sewers etc.) it was only later that street lighting was added. This also meant that the very

green feel to the older streets is created not by street trees (none were planted) but by all the trees, shrubs etc. grown in the (large) gardens. Almost every plotlands house has a tree 'backcloth' as seen from the street, some of these trees probably being in place before the development occurred.

As there was no long-established core to the village, this apparently fragmented, piecemeal approach to land release and development resulted in an equally fragmented distribution of village facilities – church, shops, school etc. Two clear groupings resulted, however. One is the line of shops, petrol station etc. and Catholic church along Peppard Road and the other is what is described by residents as 'the centre' along

Wood Lane. Although some buildings in this centre are purpose built, some are converted houses on their original plots. A few other facilities are located almost in isolation around the village.

All of the above patterns can be seen in Sonning Common. Almost by definition, they do not form discrete areas or estates, and there have been many changes over time both within plots (completely new houses built) or as plots were sold to access backland development, so it is impossible to make a simple list of areas of clearly distinct character.

Four different examples below illustrate this:



Estates

After World War 2, as the population almost doubled from the 1950s onwards, the general form of development in Sonning Common changed significantly as a result of national changes in land values and in private ownership, and with the rise of 'developers' (and so forth). However, some roadside plot development still took – and takes - place.

No longer did most landowners retain ownership of land and sell small areas to self-build people or small developers (usually just builders). Instead, a whole field or series of fields was sold at one time to a developer to build 'housing estates' and then sell the houses.

In Sonning Common, some of this took place on new fields (eg. Red House Drive), some on those parts of fields that had been left behind and undeveloped once the roadside line of plots had been sold (eg. (Ashford Avenue)

The photographs here and overleaf show four estate type layouts from slightly different periods:



and in some cases land was bought back from owners of plot developments to create access to new estates behind. The latter shows for example along Baskerville Road where Orchard Avenue 'at the back' was added later in the remainder of the original field used for the earlier plots.

More recently a number of generally quite small estate developments have happened on backland sites that had previously been parts of large plots or tucked behind and either used or unused over the years. Many of these are simply a single cul-de-sac lined with houses.

Estates from this time on until now, as is the case in all those in Sonning Common, were very much planned and designed around national rather than local standards; developers' standards but also highway engineers' and planners' standards. They were also almost always speculative. Given the design preferences of the times, the



pattern of these is therefore mostly of winding roads and culs-de-sac.

Plots generally became narrower and less deep, the resulting back gardens being small, some very small. Front gardens were almost always open rather than fenced/ walled. These estate developments were also planned very much around the car in terms of road layouts and off-road pull-ins and garages (though the latter are now rarely used, often resulting in cars reverting to parking along streets).

Because of the smaller plots and greater percentage of site area used for roads, there is less opportunity for significant greenery, although people in the Westleigh Drive area for example have planted their own and many people gain great visual benefit by being able, as it were, to 'borrow' the landscape benefit from trees planted in old plots to the rear of them.

The one main exception is in the area of Ashford Avenue and Pages Orchard, which was originally council housing. These areas are mostly quite rectilinear, a hybrid between a plotlands layout and an estates layout.

See over for overall summary.

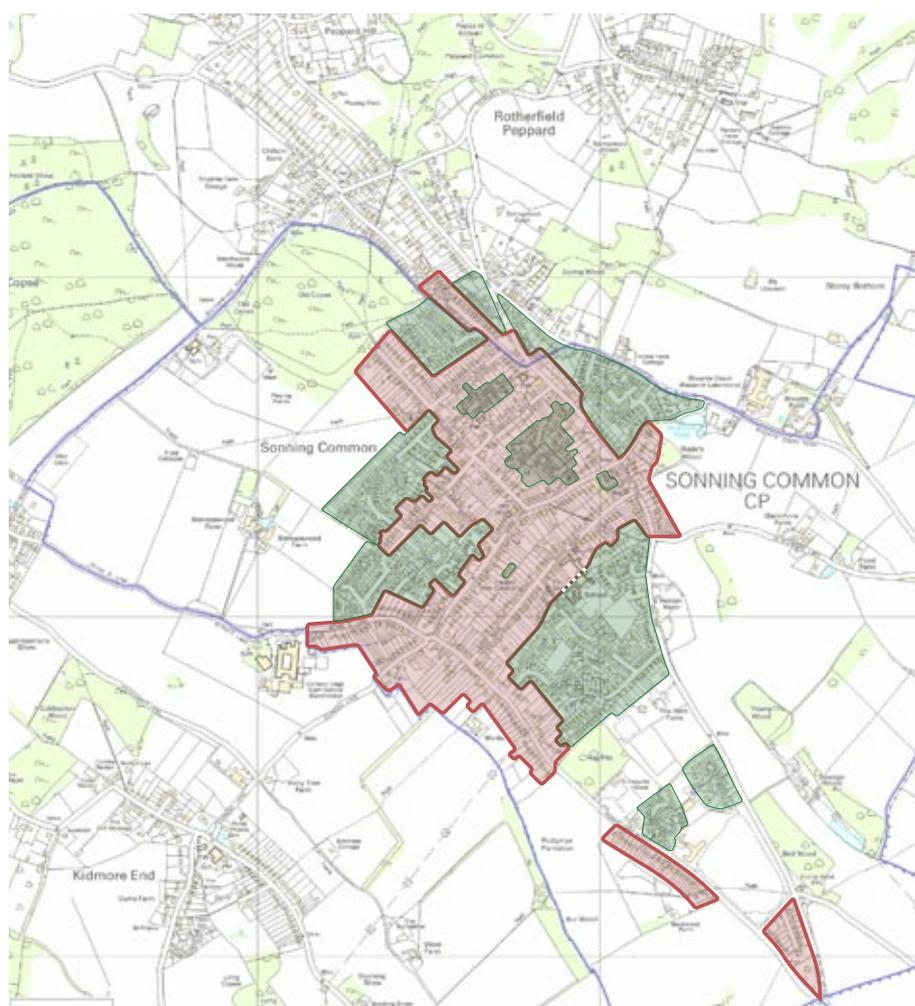


Character Areas Summary

The map below shows the two main character areas – plotlands and estates. The key point to note is that all the 'estates' areas are either groups of winding roads with culs-de-sac off (as with Beech Rise) or single culs-de-sac (as with Inglewood Close). These were deliberately designed to *not* be used as through routes. It is also important to note that one result of the historic pattern is that there is no roadside public space ('village green') in Sonning Common. At the same time, there is a remarkably 'green' feel throughout the whole village as a result of long term tree planting, shrubs, hedges etc. in private front and rear gardens. Even if in back gardens, trees are mature enough to provide a significant backcloth visible from the street.

This means that, for anybody - resident or visitor - moving around Sonning Common, the basic character is created by the straighter roads and plot-by-plot development of the plotlands areas. This is what shapes the overall and very distinctive nature of the village.

Estates
Plotlands



Buildings

The relatively recent development of Sonning Common means that there are very few buildings now remaining from before around 1880. There is only one Listed Building in the Parish, the cottage at 4, Blackmore Lane, but that is well outside the main village and isolated. The remaining old buildings from Reddish Manor, either side of Peppard Road, are from an older period but are not visible enough to help to create any pattern from an earlier time. It seems remarkable that these are not listed at all.

Plotlands Houses

A few of what may be the very first houses along Wood Lane from the 1880s still exist, as below, for example:



These give the classic appearance of plotlands houses, being very simple, originally perhaps timber-framed bungalows (but not style medieval timber-framed). Others from this period may remain but they have either just been clad in brick (the timber-framed versions were cold and did not always last long) or have been so substantially extended that the original is no longer obvious. It also appears that many of the houses on the earliest plots have been knocked down then completely rebuilt at some time, many in the interwar period.

Beyond that, there are examples of many different styles of house. Despite this, the basic 'rules' applied over the years, whether by landowner, builder or public authority, produce a basically very consistent pattern:

- Heights are all one or two (main) storeys.
- Forms are bungalow, chalet (bungalow with roof rooms), two storey house, two storey house with roof rooms.
- Most are detached but some are semi-detached and there are a few short terraces.
- The building lines are constant along whole stretches of road, sometimes all the road.
- The deep-set building lines occasionally produce quite long front gardens, sometimes even at the expense of back gardens.
- The early establishment of the set-back building line was not done to enable off-road car parking, although that is the effect it has had since with the result that off-road cars are mostly well hidden behind hedges.
- In fact the hedges, walls, shrubs and trees along the fronts of plots are important in setting the character of the plotlands streets as much as the houses themselves.
- Rear gardens also often contain mature trees and hedgerows, visible from the road and (as mentioned earlier) creating a green backcloth.
- In fact the greenery at front and rear often provide a consistent frontage and backcloth shielding quite varied building sizes, forms and styles.

In most cases the details are consistent, if applied to produce a remarkable variety of styles. The most common features are:

- Brick walls – most using local, ie. Thames Valley clay bricks.
- Some painted rendering on walls.

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- Clay roof tiles.
 - Chimneys.
 - A mix of gables, hipped roofs, porches, garages, from simple basic forms to complex ones (either as a result of extensions or as initially built).

Some of the more recent developments have introduced materials and details that are not obviously local, eg. some (false timber) boarding on fronts and some false half-timbering. (Whether these are appropriate or not in the future, given that variety and change has been such a constant feature in village development, is debatable – see design guidelines).

The final point to make is that many of the more recent single or few plot developments have used house types that are in fact very similar to those being used on whole estates (if often larger).

Below are four examples of plotlands houses:



Estate Houses

The variety within the plotlands area almost provides a history of layouts and styles from the 1880s to today. The same is true of the estates houses; there are examples of many of the classic variations from around the 1960s through to today.

Some basic features are broadly common in both plotlands and estates:

- Heights are all one or two (main) storeys.
- Forms are bungalow, chalet (bungalow with roof rooms), two storey house, two storey house with roof rooms.
- Some are detached or semi-detached, some are in short terraces (eg. of four houses).
- The building lines are constant along whole stretches of road, often all the estate (though the roads are often winding rather than straight which changes the visual effect considerably).

Other features are different:

- The original designs included provision of parking in various forms – garages, on-plot (in front garden), a few garage blocks.
- However, car ownership rates have increased and many people also no longer use their garage for their cars (they are storage, sometimes an extra room). This means that cars are extremely visible either in front gardens or on the street.
- Developers often limited (and still do) the nature and degree of planting possible in front gardens so only occasionally are there hedges or large trees – the visual front line is the fronts of houses, front gardens are 'open'. (Though some people are now planting trees and hedges.)
- Rear gardens are generally quite small. They are often well planted but there are physical limits to this and trees are not yet

fully mature.

- Rear garden boundaries vary from minimal hedges to walls.

The 'palette' of building materials is more varied than in the plotlands areas and reflects national rather than local preferences. The list includes:

- Brick, tile-hung, rendered, false half-timbered, boarded walls, occasional use of flint.
- Clay or concrete roof tiles.
- Only occasional chimneys.
- Style variations around basic form, mix of materials, gables, porches, window shapes and sizes.

There are also some older people's developments from more recent years. These are different in form and layout but generally fit in with other houses in terms of their general design and details.

Once again questions arise about what is now appropriate for the future that will help to enhance the distinctiveness of the village.

Four Estate layout examples from different periods are shown overleaf.



Non-residential Buildings

The few genuinely public buildings, ie. not conversions of houses, include (this is not exhaustive):

- The village hall (and that for Kidmore End which is in fact in Sonning Common Parish)
- The schools
- The churches
- The health centre

Some examples of these are shown below.
These are from different periods and there

is no consistent style. The same applies to private buildings, some of which are used by the public, some are not. These include (again not exhaustive):

- The shops and pubs,
- The service station, the car cleaners,
- The Herb Farm and
- Some offices and commercial uses.



Overall Design Guidelines

This section uses the results of the above assessment to generate some Design Guidelines for Sonning Common. Guidelines are included in terms of Landscape but those for Settlement and Buildings have been combined because the nature of the built areas of the village is such that the character (of plotlands areas in particular) is set by the layout pattern as much as by the buildings. The guidelines focus in particular on housing but some guidelines are also included for other types of development. The overarching principle is that:

Any new development should not be 'anywhere design' but clearly relate to, and add to the distinctiveness of, Sonning Common.

These guidelines are a summary only. Any applicant will be required to demonstrate through their application not only that they have understood the details of any specific site and its village character and landscape context, but also how they have responded to that in their design. If formal Design and Access Statements are used, these should include the necessary demonstration.

The group producing this assessment and these guidelines is particularly concerned that what is in this document should actually be used by landowners, developers, architects, surveyors, planning officers and councillors when projects are being proposed and developed. To that end there is a section on using the guidelines which includes a Pre-Application Community Involvement Protocol which it is hoped each applicant will sign up to (informally) in order to maximise the chances of appropriately located, designed and landscaped developments.

Landscape Guidelines

- Sensitive boundary treatment to any development on the settlement edge should demonstrate either the conservation or, if appropriate, the repair of the landscape 'edges' around Sonning Common.

- In line with national policy guidance, the protection and enhancement of the landscape and scenic beauty of the AONB setting to the village should inform any design proposals.
- Suburbanising influences such as powerlines, lighting and signage should be sensitively integrated and avoided in new developments.
- Key distant and short views to and from the village and its landscape setting should inform design approaches, and design proposals should demonstrate how a project would sit within the landscape.
- In particular new development should have regard to views from existing rights of way and the maintenance of those routes.
- Ridgeline development is inappropriate.
- Links to existing habitats and the creation of new ones should be considered in order to safeguard and enhance local wildlife.
- New tree planting to benefit the landscape setting of the village is important.

Settlement and Buildings Guidelines

Housing

- Within plotlands areas, and along Kennylands Road/Reades Lane and Peppard Road, the most important

guideline is that any development should respect and ideally reinforce the plotlands character.

- On any deeper development plots, the character of development behind the plotlands frontage is less critical but it needs to relate to that around it.
- Building lines should be set to ensure spacious front gardens and an opportunity to take cars off the road.
- Clear front garden boundaries should be established with walls, fences or hedges.
- Occasional trees should be encouraged along or near front boundaries.
- Within estates areas, layouts can vary in line with the latest general best practice, provided that this does not impact on plotlands areas.
- The District and Chilterns Design Guides provide good practice guidance on this in terms of layout.

In both cases:

- Two storeys or two storeys with rooms in the roof is a maximum height.
- House forms should be a mix of detached, semi-detached and bungalows with some short terraces (no more than four houses).
- Within the above volumes, buildings can include more than one unit (ie. by breaking into flats flats) but external staircases etc. should be avoided.
- Small amenity spaces can be introduced if they relate to the surrounding development pattern.
- Styles, forms and sizes can, perhaps should, vary within any development.
- The prevailing wall material should be brick but areas of rendering are also appropriate. Local colour bricks should be used wherever possible.
- Clay tiles should be used for roofs.
- Non-local details and materials such as half-timbering should be avoided.

Other Buildings

- Some more employment provision is suggested for the village and improvements to the secondary school buildings.
- Any developments should be modest in scale, include landscaped on-site parking and use materials that are complementary to their context in tone and colour.
- Any development along one of the main roads should include some form of front wall or hedge along the pavement line.

For all buildings

- National and local standards should be applied with care, for example through the use of porous paving in front gardens.
- The community is keen to support projects that aim to achieve eco-building standards.

General Use of this Document

The guidelines above are deliberately general and are not meant to determine specific design solutions or to discourage contemporary design. They are a 'backstop' to prevent the worst. Each site will have different aspects and hint at different solutions so, to be more positive and ensure the best, the way forward that Sonning Common Parish Council wishes to promote is of working jointly with potential applicants/developers from as early as possible in the design process to increase the chances of appropriate solutions that celebrate and enhance local distinctiveness and which are supported by all parties.

Sonning Common Parish Council therefore fully endorses the following statement quoted earlier from the National Planning Policy Framework:

“Applicants will be expected to work closely with those directly affected by their proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community. Proposals that can demonstrate this in developing the design of the new development should be looked on more favourably.”

The way in which this will happen is outlined in the (separate) **Sonning Common Pre-application Community Engagement Protocol**.



APPENDIX 1: POLICY CONTEXT

Overall National Policy

Significant changes occurred to the planning system following the election of the Coalition government in 2010. The previous fragmented Local Development Framework system was consolidated into a single Local Plan system and all previous Planning Policy Statements (PPSs) are no longer valid. National guidance suggests that the use of Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD) should be considered an exception, yet the latest funding regime set up by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to support Neighbourhood Plans (2012) makes clear that such funding can be secured for documents that become SPD.

There is as yet no new national policy that relates specifically to character, local distinctiveness, design and landscape. The key document is the National Planning Policy Framework of 2012 (NPPF). This makes a number of significant mentions of design and landscape. In paragraph 17, in relation to design, the NPPF states that planning should:

“be genuinely plan-led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings, provide a practical framework within which decisions on planning applications can be made with a high degree of predictability and efficiency (and) be a creative exercise in finding ways to enhance and improve the places in which people live their lives; always seek to secure high quality design and a good standard of amenity for all existing and future occupants of land and buildings; take account of the different roles and character of different areas, recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and supporting thriving rural communities within it.”

Abstracting from paragraphs 56 to 66, under the main heading of “Requiring Good Design”, the NPPF then states the following:

- “The Government attaches great importance to the design of the built environment. Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, is indivisible from good planning, and should contribute positively to making places better for people.
- Local and neighbourhood plans should develop robust and comprehensive policies that set out the quality of development that will be expected for the area. Such policies should be based on stated objectives for the future of the area and an understanding and evaluation of its defining characteristics.
- (Developments should) respond to local character and history, and reflect the identity of local surroundings and materials, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation.
- Design policies should avoid unnecessary prescription or detail and should concentrate on guiding the overall scale, density, massing, height, landscape, layout, materials and access of new development in relation to neighbouring buildings and the local area more generally.
- It is proper to seek to promote or reinforce local distinctiveness.
- Planning policies and decisions should address the connections between people and places and the integration of new development into the natural, built and historic environment.
- Applicants will be expected to work closely with those directly affected by their proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community. Proposals that can demonstrate this in developing the design of the new development should be looked on more favourably.”

In the section on “Conserving and Enhancing the Natural Environment” it states the following about landscape issues in particular (again abstracted):

- “The planning system should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes ... (paragraph 109).
- Local planning authorities should take into account the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land (paragraph 112).
- Local planning authorities should set criteria based policies against which proposals for any development on or affecting landscape areas will be judged. Distinctions should be made between the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites... (paragraph 113).
- Great weight should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (paragraph 115).
- Planning permission should be refused for major developments in these designated areas except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated they are in the public interest.

Consideration of such applications should include an assessment of:

- the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;
- the cost of, and scope for, developing elsewhere outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and
- any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities, and the extent to which that could be moderated (paragraph 116)."

National Landscape Policy

As a result of work by national bodies, England has been divided into 159 'National Character Areas' (NCAs) each defined by a unique combination of landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity and economic and cultural activity. Sonning Common sits in 'NCA 110 Chilterns', an area of chalk hills and plateaux with escarpments and dry valleys. Below the NCAs sit county and/or district-wide Landscape Character Assessments (see below). NCAs do not have statutory status.

'Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONBs) are also part of national policy and have considerable status in policy (see NPPF above). 'Areas of Great Landscape Value' (AGLV) were also introduced, although with no statutory backing. It is uncertain whether they still apply or can be used to shape policy.

National Settlement Character Policy

There is no national policy specifically on settlement and built character assessment. As outlined in the section on Methodology, the only links are to national guidance (non-statutory) on Village Design Statements and guidance from English Heritage on conservation areas specifically (though used more widely).

Local Policy

The adopted South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) Core Strategy addresses character in design terms in a section on 'Design Quality'. This includes Policy CSQ3. Though not in the policy, the general text refers to the pre-existing 'South Oxfordshire Design Guide' and 'Chilterns Building Design Guide', stressing that these provide the framework for evaluating design quality. This general text also mentions support for Village Design Statements.

The draft Core Strategy addresses landscape issues in its 'Environment' section that includes Policy CSEN1. This is supported by the South Oxfordshire District-wide Landscape Assessment SPG (Supplementary Planning Guidance). This refers to the Chilterns AONB and also points out that large parts of the District outside of the AONB are nevertheless recognised as Areas of Great Landscape Value (AGLV). As above, it is uncertain what status, if any, AGLVs still have.

The SODC Landscape Character Assessment places Sonning Common within 'Character Area 10: Chiltern Plateau with Valleys'. The landscape character around Sonning Common specifically falls mostly under the description of a 'Semi-Enclosed Dipslope' with small areas of the landscape, mostly to the north, being described as 'Wooded Dipslope'. These are elaborated later in the Landscape section.

The Chilterns AONB Management Plan 2008 -2013 is also very relevant. Its section on development, sets several aims of which the following are most important:

- Ensure that the natural beauty, local distinctiveness and aesthetic qualities of the built environment of the Chilterns are conserved.
- Ensure that all new development contributes to the special qualities of the built environment of the Chilterns.
- Improve the built and natural environment of the Chilterns, particularly degraded landscapes, to enhance its distinctive character.

The Plan also highlights key issues, including:

- The Chilterns and surrounding areas are under considerable pressure to accommodate significant numbers of new houses.
- The retention of open space and the need to try and restrict the scale of new development are key to conserving the natural beauty of the AONB.
- New development of all types needs to respect vernacular architecture, settlement character and the local landscape. This will require developers to do more than try to use standard designs. The Board has published guidance on design and the use of building materials.

The key (relevant) policies are:

- D1. Conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Chilterns AONB, by reinforcing the local distinctiveness of the built environment.
 - D2. Promote the highest standards of development which respect vernacular architectural styles and represent high environmental standards in terms of energy and water efficiency.
-

-
- D4. Support the sustainable use of local natural resources, notably timber, clay (bricks and tiles) and flint, for local building purposes.
 - D6. Seek enhancement of the quality of the landscape of the AONB by the removal or mitigation of existing visually intrusive developments.
 - D7. Pursue opportunities for landscape improvement and creation of green space (green infrastructure) when development is proposed in, or adjacent to, the boundaries of the AONB.
 - D9. Encourage appropriate densities on new housing developments which reflect the local context, whilst having regard to the special qualities of the AONB
 - D15. Support the demand for local building materials by seeking their use in new developments, in accordance with the Chilterns Buildings Design Guide and related Supplementary Technical Notes.

There is also a 'Chilterns Historic Landscape Characterisation' Report.

Application to Sonning Common

It is worth noting that almost all of the settlement of Sonning Common was excluded from the AONB such that the boundary takes a dramatic sweep around the village, running close to the eastern, northern and western edges. Although the eastern and western edges have some simple logic – they stop at the settlement edge (at the time of AONB designation) – part of the northern edge simply cuts across the built area with no apparent logic. It is also noticeable that the built area of Sonning Common was excluded from the earlier AGLV area, the boundary coming up to Kennylands Road to the West and Peppard Road to the east. The net effect of this is to leave the village isolated as a 'white hole' in the overall designations map. This is nevertheless important and relevant because many of the potential development sites that have been put forward are either in or abut the AONB or AGLV.

The rationale for this 'white hole' is now lost in the mists of time but it probably relates to the fact that, as explained in the main text, Sonning Common is not what might be called a 'typical' Chilterns or South Oxfordshire village in character terms. In fact Sonning Common has a very distinctive built character, one that should be understood and celebrated in new developments, but that character does not relate to the general nature of what is addressed in either the South Oxfordshire or Chilterns Design Guides. Although both guides provide good basic parameters for quality design, they do not apply overall to Sonning Common. This should be recognised at District Council level and this Assessment and Statement should take precedence when assessing the appropriateness of designs.

APPENDIX 2: METHODS USED

LANDSCAPE SETTING SURVEY

Description

Place a tick against the suggested words that apply, use your own words if you wish - these are just hints - and add in the boxes any other observations you have.

1. Landform	
Flat..... Gently sloping..... Strongly sloping.... Steep..... Mixture	Any other observations?

2. Landcover	
Open farmland..... Farmland with trees.... Farmland with woods... Woodland..... Farm buildings Varied	

3. Field Boundaries - type	
Hedgerows (shrubs)..... Hedgerows (trees & shrubs).... Trees..... Walls..... Fences..... Mixture	

4. Field Boundaries - form	
Straight boundaries..... Curving boundaries..... Mixture	

5. Field Size	
Small..... Medium..... Large..... Mixture	Any other observations?

6. Water and drainage	
Dry..... Wet ditches and ponds... Streams..... Occasional streams Areas liable to flood	

7. Views across the landscape	
Long..... Medium..... Short.....	Any other observations (eg. key features)?

8. Sense of enclosure	
Exposed..... Open..... Enclosed	
Enclosed by: Landform..... Woodland..... Buildings..... Field boundaries....	

9. Transport pattern - type	
Main road..... Minor road..... Private roads/tracks	

10. Transport pattern - form	
Straight..... Winding..... Sunken..... Elevated....	

11. Other Access	
Public Footpath... Bridleway..... No Access.....	

12. Views towards/into the village	
Long	
Medium...	
Short.....	
None	

13. Built Settlement Edge - type	
Hedgerows (shrubs)	
Hedgerows (trees & shrubs)	
Trees	
Walls	
Fences	
Mixture	

Gentle	
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Now some Broader Judgements!

Scenic quality – sounds, smells, colours?

Sense of place – associations for you now or over time?

Any heritage values – archaeological or cultural features? whatever

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If you had to pick just one or a few of all the aspects above that most helps to shape the character of the area, what would it/they be?

--

Other comments?

--

Is this a distinct area? Are the boundaries sensible? Should it be combined with others?
Should it be sub-divided?

--

VILLAGE CHARACTER AREA SURVEY

General

1. What's the general pattern of the roads and 'blocks of buildings? If there are a few, can you show them on the map? (*Regular, irregular, straight, curved, small blocks, large blocks, narrow, wide open, contained, spacious etc.*)

2. What's the general mix of buildings? (*All residential, some mixed, commercial, industrial, other? Mark any non-residential uses on the map.*)

Houses

3. Are they all on one building line or does that vary? (*On pavement, with small front gardens, with large front gardens?*)

4. Can you guess when all (or different ones) were built?

5. What heights are they? (*All one height on each house or are there extensions etc. that are different?*)

6. Would you call the houses very small, small, medium-sized, large, very large?

7. What are the main building materials used? (*On walls, roofs, chimneys, windows etc.*)

8. Are front gardens open or closed in? (*If open, just grass or bushes etc.? If closed, low walls,*

11. Are there major trees in front or back gardens? *(On their own or in lines? Do those lines go off into the surrounding areas? If so, show those on the map.)*

Roads and Public Areas

12. What are the roads like? *(Wide, narrow, about right? Is there on-street parking? Does that limit access/movement? Well maintained?)*

13. Are there always pavements to walk along? Well maintained?

14. Are there other footpaths that link through the area or into other areas? *(Use map)*

15. Are there street signs? *(Lots? Just a few? Necessary? Too many?)*

16. Is there street lighting? Are columns obtrusive or low key? Light pollution?

17. Do you feel entirely safe here? At night? Would children feel/be safe?

Now some Broader Judgements!

18. Are there any features, additions, oddities that detract from or damage the character of the area?

19. Are there any features, additions, oddities that help to create a clear character for the area?

20. If you had to pick just one or a few of all the aspects above that most helps to shape the character of the area, what would it/they be?

21. Other comments?

22. Is this a distinct area? Are the boundaries sensible? Should it be combined with others? Should it be sub-divided?