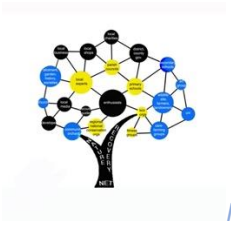

Nature Recovery Network

Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project

We hugely welcome the report for its foresight and ambition! Well done Rachel!

We would like to suggest a mechanism for delivery that we have been pioneering in Eynsham and surrounding villages for the last 5 years, which addresses the challenges of the resource-restricted environment that we are operating in today. The mechanism that we have developed ensures that local nature recovery in W Oxon is scaleable, sustainable and inclusive. This is a bottom-up network that starts with the people on the land (communities and larger landowners) connecting up, **in the place where they all live,** the local environmental experts with local enthusiasts and councillors, and then extending outwards to form partnerships with district and county councils and regional eNgos. The contrasts with the largely supra-district mechanism of delivery outlined in the document. This mechanism goes the other way (ie top-down, outside-in) and is constrained by the capacity of the supra-district organisations eg Wild Oxfordshire, to identify land across the whole County and then to forge links with the landowners and communities restore it. The last 30 years has shown how difficult it is to get this model to work. This top-down model also creates many links in a chain that unnecessarily depletes resource-poor, often volunteer, groups doing the work on the ground.

We would suggest, from our experience (including as one of the current WODC case-studies) that a more efficient and faster route for WODC to facilitate the protection our local nature, and get spades, in the ground is to adopt a more flexible network approach that involves identifying the actual people on the ground in the district doing the work (it may be a parish council, it may be an eNgo or it may be a skilled community group) and facilitate their work directly through the district councillors.

We speak both as initiators of the Nature Recovery Network in Eynsham and surrounding villages and initiators of the *Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project* (TVWMRP). Both projects have adopted the same approach and both have received national recognition. (Chair of EA and of Natural England visited in 2021. Natural England's nature recovery network advisors from every NE region, visited in 2023 to understand the model; we received numerous awards).

Over the past 5 years, TVWMRP has developed Oxfordshire's first nature recovery network of the UK's rarest floodplain meadow, along the Thames and Cherwell. Only 4 square miles of this habitat survives in the UK - a large proportion of which is in West Oxfordshire (25% of these surviving wildflower meadows are upstream of Oxford), including the largest continguous areas of this habitat in country: Pixie/Yarnton/Oxey Mead SSSIs.

In the Eynsham area, TVWMRP has already developed a nature recovery network of floodplain meadows and associated habitats of over 250ha, in collaboration with neighbouring landowners (including OCC, local companies and farmers) to recreate meadows, to join up the surviving rare

ancient meadows. We are in discussion with our neighbours to extend it upstream as far as Stanton Harcourt. We are also in dialogue with the landowners downstream, which include OCC's Wharf Farm (50ha), Smiths land (50ha) and Blenheim (100ha). Blenheim and Smiths are already engaged in nature recovery plans on some of this land. The Wharf Farm is currently ear-marked for mineral development by OCC. If this last piece of land (50ha) could be brought into the project, we would join up with the SSSI meadows at Port Meadow. This would be the first and largest newly connected nature recovery network in Oxfordshire.

The local community (inc scouts, beavers, schools, vulnerable adults) has been integral to this landscape-scale restoration project from the outset, through our *Nature Recovery Network,* carrying a range of monthly/annual environmental surveys led by our local experts and coming together to propagate the rarer wildflower plants and trees to plant out as part of the landscape-scale restoration. Over the last 3 years we have been surveying: terrestrial and water invertebrates, water quality at 10 sites around Eynsham and 2 in South Leigh, plants, birds, reptiles, water voles, otters and bats. All these surveys are led by local experts with the participation of the community and the data is fed into TVERC. The plant propagation group, which includes participants of Long Mead's carefarming programme (adults with learning disabilities and autism, students with special needs, people with mental and physical health challenges) propagate up to 10,000 rare wildflower plants per year. Partners include FarmAbility, Bridewell, Bartholomew School, primary schools etc. Our experts are also carrying research (funded by NE) into the propagation charactertics of floodplain meadow species and on invertebrates in floodplain meadows. Our nature recovery network of schools (funded by Natural England) has engaged the schools and communities in 8 villages, and produced Phase 1 Habitat Surveys of all the schools with recommendations for biodiversity gain, while bringing together key teachers and community members for a range of workshops. Our ambitious Hedge in Time Project aims to connect up the villages engaged in our *Nature Recovery Network* by hedgerow as part of the landscape scale restoration project.

We would encourage WODC to consider the flat network model, which we have pioneered so successfully, that has brought together communities in 8 villages around Eynsham and 2 on the outside of the river in a number of projects over the past 4 years. The *Nature Recovery Network* in Eynsham and surrounding villages has over 550 members and now includes more, and more highly qualified ecology experts, than any of the County's eNgos.

Catriona Bass and Prof Kevan Martin
Long Mead Foundation