



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 16 APRIL 2025
Subject	Nature Recovery Plan Update
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr Andrew Prosser, Executive Member for Climate Change and Nature Recovery Email: andrew.prosser@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Hannah Kenyon, Climate Change Manager Email: hannah.kenyon@westoxon.gov.uk
Report author	Tatiana Bell, Nature Recovery Officer Email: tatiana.bell@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To update on the delivery of the Nature Recovery Plan
Annexes	None
Recommendation(s)	That Overview and Scrutiny Committee resolves to: I. Note the progress made in delivering the Nature Recovery Plan.
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Putting Residents First• A Good Quality of Life for All• A Better Environment for People and Wildlife• Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency• Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Melanie Dodd, Principal Ecologist Email: melanie.dodd@westoxon.gov.uk

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1** This report outlines the key actions completed and currently underway to deliver the Nature Recovery Plan and is the first annual progress report.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1** The UK has experienced widespread ecological degradation and is amongst the most nature-depleted countries in the world, with just 50% of our native biodiversity remaining. The natural world provides a variety of benefits (ecosystem services) that have direct positive impacts to our wellbeing and the economy, for example climate mitigation, water cycles, the control of floods, clean air and water, pollination, and recreation.
- 2.2** In 2019 West Oxfordshire District Council declared an ecological and climate emergency.
- 2.3** The protection and restoration of natural ecosystems is one of the key priorities in the adopted Climate Change Strategy 2021-25. A standalone Nature Recovery Plan was adopted in February 2024 and takes forward and expands on the objectives of the Climate Change Strategy. It includes specific actions to support nature recovery across the district to 2030.
- 2.4** The Nature Recovery Plan links to two of the Council's priorities – 'Creating a better environment for people and wildlife' and 'Responding to the climate and ecological emergency'. It also indirectly links to the priority 'Enabling a good quality of life for all' as the natural world affects water and air quality and is a wellbeing resource.
- 2.5** The Nature Recovery Plan is also a formal report of the Council's implementation of the statutory biodiversity duty under Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, which was strengthened by the Environment Act 2021.
- 2.6** The Nature Recovery Plan is broken down into three parts:
 - i) facilitating communities and partnerships for landscape-scale nature recovery.
 - ii) protecting and improving existing biodiversity on sites owned and managed by the Council.
 - iii) safeguarding biodiversity through policies and new development.
- 2.7** To accelerate the delivery of the plan, a Nature Recovery Officer post was created. The Lead Nature Recovery post has been vacant for part of 2024/25 due to the transfer of the Nature Recovery function to the Planning Directorate. From 1 April 2025, Nature Recovery will be managed under Planning Policy and delivered by a team of nature recovery specialists and ecologists, with the Climate Change Manager retaining strategic oversight on Climate and Nature Recovery projects.

3. MAIN POINTS

- 3.1** Since the adoption of the Nature Recovery Plan, good progress has been made with the resources available. Officers use an action tracker to ensure projects and actions are delivered in line with the priorities of the adopted plan.
- 3.2** Projects have been prioritised where they fulfil a statutory requirement, are externally funded and/or strengthen partnership working and empower local communities and organisations.

- 3.3 Since February 2024, the following projects have been delivered by the Nature Recovery Officer and the Climate Change and Nature Recovery Manager with the statutory planning requirements being undertaken by the Principal Ecologist and Assistant Ecologist.

Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy

- 3.4 The draft Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) has been developed by Oxfordshire authorities and has been publicly consulted on this year. The Council is a Supporting Authority, and officers are part of the steering group, and the communications and engagement group.
- 3.5 The Council submitted a formal response to the public consultation, including comments on Council owned sites to ensure they were accurately represented, as well as feeding through comments from specialist officers.
- 3.6 The strategy is currently on track to be published in autumn 2025 (a final consultation with Supporting Authorities to be undertaken over the summer), identifying over 30% of Oxfordshire for targeted nature recovery action.

Service Level Agreements

- 3.7 Service Level Agreements (SLAs) were awarded in August 2024 to environmental organisations who are spearheading landscape scale nature recovery across West Oxfordshire: Evenlode Catchment Partnership, Wild Oxfordshire, and Wychwood Forest Trust. Each recipient report 6 monthly on the progress of their SLAs. The most recent progress reports are from September 2024 and the next update will be received April 2025.
- 3.8 Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP), hosted by Wild Oxfordshire, work to improve the river catchment for people and nature. The Council is a key partner and officers attend regular meetings. The governance of the partnership is being strengthened, following changes in funding.
- 3.9 Wild Oxfordshire has provided ecological advice and support to 48 parishes and community groups in West Oxfordshire this year. They ran two successful community training sessions on bat and reptile surveying which was well received by participants. Wild Oxfordshire also hosted The Local Environment Groups Conference: Local to Landscape Nature Recovery Action which was attended by over 70 participants from 47 environmental organisations and local authorities.
- 3.10 Wychwood Forest Trust works with communities to protect and restore habitats and advise local landowners and organisations on ecology and conservation. They also own a suite of nature reserves, including Gibbets Close Hill and Grimes Meadow in Witney. As part of the Year 1 SLA delivery, Wychwood have:
- Promoted Gibbets Close Hill as a vanguard nature recovery research project for West Oxfordshire within the emerging county LNRS.
 - Created wetland at Gibbets Close
 - Drafted a land management plan for Barnes Meadow in Witney, following a public forum
 - Supported the Kilkenny Lane Country Park volunteers.

Windrush in Witney

- 3.11** Wychwood Forest Trust has submitted a formal Expression of Interest to the National Heritage Lottery Fund (NHLF) for funding to deliver the Windrush in Witney project. This has been approved and discussions with the NHLF are well advanced with an invitation extended to proceed to the next stage of the NHLF application process. The next stage is to submit a development proposal, with the next quarterly deadline of May 2025. The Wychwood Forest Trust has the expertise and previous experience of developing and submitting CLHF bids. A further update on the application will be provided in the Year 1 SLA report.
- 3.12** The Council supports the work programme of Wychwood Forest Trust through, for example, the progression of the bid to the NHLF, and Officers will continue to offer support on bid preparation.
- 3.13** Residents have been consulted on proposals to manage Barnes Meadow (formerly land of Eton College), and a draft management plan has been prepared to manage the land effectively for people and nature.

Climate adaptation

- 3.14** The Climate Change Adaptation Route Map for Oxfordshire 2025-2030 has been developed by Oxfordshire local authorities and sets out priority actions. There are two priority actions that directly relate to nature environment and assets. The first is to ensure climate change adaptation forms a key part of the emerging LNRS for Oxfordshire. The second is to conduct an analysis of Oxfordshire's habitats, species and crops to determine which could be most affected by climate change, including the negative impacts of new pests, pathogens, or Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS). There are discussions around how both actions can be effectively implemented.

Nature based carbon sequestration

- 3.15** The nature-based carbon sequestration project is research based and funded by Innovate UK. It aims to establish how carbon sequestration can be effectively monetarised through carbon codes and the feasibility of setting up a local carbon market for carbon offsetting. The project is collaborative venture between Oxfordshire local authorities and the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership (OLNP) and promotes information sharing with other Innovate UK projects.
- 3.16** The Nature Recovery Officer post is part funded by the project.

Tackling inequalities through nature recovery

- 3.17** Funding has been received from Public Health and has been directed to nature recovery projects in areas facing socio-economic barriers.
- 3.18** Areas of deprivation have been identified that would benefit from targeted actions of nature recovery in their local green spaces.
- 3.19** Engagement with local organisations has enabled the project outcomes to be tailored to local need and build on existing relationships.

Coronation community orchards

- 3.20** The Coronation community orchards scheme provides funding for communities to plant orchards in celebration of King Charles II's Coronation. The grant funding was secured from the Community Living Heritage Fund (CLHF) in 2023. A total of 206 trees have been planted across 16 orchards and range in orchard size from five to 50 trees.
- 3.21** Once grown, the trees will not only provide food but also boost biodiversity, enhance wildlife habitats, produce local food, and encourage communities to engage with nature and their local green spaces.
- 3.22** The scheme has been extended to March 2026.

Verge maintenance

- 3.23** Verge maintenance is under review so that it consistently protects valuable species like orchids. Sensitive locations have been marked on digital maps to ensure that maintenance teams are aware of these areas and avoid damaging valuable species.

Green space management

- 3.24** Council-owned sites are being managed effectively for nature recovery and biodiversity in line with approved management plans. New ecological surveys and baseline biodiversity metric calculations (with associated habitat condition assessments) will be undertaken this spring/summer to refine the management plans.
- 3.25** AI habitat mapping is being trialled at Kilkenny Lane Country Park and will be ground truthed as part of the ecological survey.
- 3.26** Volunteer groups support the management of three key Council owned sites.
- The Witney Woodland volunteers manage the woodland at Deer Park Wood and Deer Park South. They have hardened paths, replaced fencing, carried out litter picks and received an updated information leaflet about the site and its wildlife. The group also work across other sites in Witney, for example trimming hedges and doing litter picks (including Bathing Place Estate).
 - The Friends of North Leigh Common manage the woodland and invasive species at the common and help restore the heather. The site has been recently surveyed with common lizards, grass snakes and slow worms identified.
 - The Kilkenny Lane Country Park (KLCP) volunteers manage the park, and the group undertake a range of activities from botanical surveys to hedgelaying.
- 3.27** A previous BioBlitz was held at KLCP in 2022, the next one is set to be held at North Leigh Common.
- 3.28** The use of glyphosate and peat compost on council land is being reviewed and alternatives are being explored in collaboration with the Waste and Estates Teams.

Woodgreen biodiversity enhancements

- 3.29** Biodiversity improvements have been implemented in the grounds of the Woodgreen Offices. These include bird, bat and bee boxes, wildflower meadows, native (and neonicotinoid free) bulbs and hedgerows, as well as new benches for staff and visitors to enjoy the wildflower meadow, made by a local joinery company. A new schedule of maintenance works is being developed for the grounds contractor.

Community outreach

- 3.30** Community Town and Parish Guide to Nature Recovery (community biodiversity guide) was launched with Wild Oxfordshire, enabled by UK Shared Prosperity Fund, to provide communities with advice for nature conservation.
- 3.31** Monthly volunteering sessions have continued at Kilkenny Lane Country Park to maintain the green space for both people and nature. Activities have included botanical surveys, seed collection, pond clearance and hedgelaying.
- 3.32** There have been many nature focused community events this year, which have been attended by officers. These include Charlbury's Nature Recovery Day, Survival Ecology Day in Asthall, OLNP annual meeting and the Landscape and Nature Recovery event (annual Town and Parish Nature Summit).

Biodiversity Net Gain

- 3.33** The main areas of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) work have been setting up internal systems and processes, attending training courses, producing guidance, providing advice to planning officers and the planning validation team, supporting the establishment of habitat banks for off-site BNG within the District and preparing a schedule of fees that will be paid to the Council to monitor BNG for the 30 year period by S106 agreement.
- 3.34** The Council pays for software called 'Mycelia', which allows a rapid assessment of the statutory biodiversity metrics as part of the validation process and a more thorough technical review during the determination of the planning application. Officers have provided guidance to the planning validation team to enable them to ensure that correct and appropriate information is obtained.
- 3.35** BNG is a complicated process, and officers are still learning about how to apply BNG to different circumstances, spending a lot of time and effort on problem-solving, advising planning officers on potential courses of action to avoid onerous and disproportionate outcomes.
- 3.36** Officers gave a BNG introductory presentation at the Developer and Agents Forum meeting in September, which was welcomed. A handful of follow-up emails from agents asking questions were also answered.
- 3.37** The knowledge and experience of officers will be used to provide detailed training for the planning team, including enforcement and policy officers, during 2025 as part of the Planning Skills Delivery Fund. The plan is to create a series of short training sessions (for example like the "lunchtime learning" sessions that have been run by other Council departments) to breakdown the requirements, process, and outcomes into manageable amounts, so that officers get the most benefit. Training will also be offered to Members.
- 3.38** Other areas of work under the Planning Skills Delivery project will include preparing a BNG monitoring strategy to inform how the Council should be monitoring the delivery of on-site significant enhancements (within development sites) and habitat banks and using this to report to Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).
- 3.39** Currently, around 27% of the total number of planning applications where officers have been consulted are subject to statutory BNG. Most of the other applications are either

exempt or out of scope, for example householder, listed building consent and self-/custom-build.

- 3.40** The following figures are an overview of progress with planning applications where officers have been consulted since August 2024:

Summary of planning applications since August 2024

Date	13.03.25
Completed planning applications with ecology responses	163
Completed planning applications where BNG relevant	38
Completed Biodiversity Gain Plan discharge of condition applications	6
Planning applications awaiting more ecological information	72
Planning applications awaiting more information on BNG specifically	42
New live consultations – ecology comments to be provided	57
Total number of ecology team consultations	292
Total number of BNG relevant planning applications	80
% of total no of applications where statutory BNG is required	27.40%
Planning applications awaiting a S106 agreement to secure payment of BNG monitoring fees to the Council	3
Planning applications refused including for BNG issues	2
Planning applications withdrawn where BNG relevant	2

- 3.41** Officers will be working with the planning admin team to ensure that the Council will be in a good position to report to Defra on BNG in January 2026, including identifying what data is needed and making sure that this can be collected easily.
- 3.42** Officers have spent a significant amount of time in the preparation of a S106 agreement for the Pudlicote Farm Habitat Bank in collaboration with the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (who have been supporting the landowner), the Council's legal team and the landowner's legal representatives. The Development Control Committee resolved to delegate authority to the Head of Planning to enter into this agreement and to enter into future such agreements on 24th February 2024. The S106 agreement for Pudlicote Farm Habitat Bank was sealed on 18th March 2025.
- 3.43** A second S106 agreement for another habitat bank at Radford Farm is currently in hand.
- 3.44** These habitat banks create and enhance habitats within the district that contribute towards nature recovery, particularly the aims and objectives set out in the LNRS. Another area of work for officers will be to create a formal habitat bank establishment process that can be published on the Council's website to inform future consideration of those put forward by landowners in the future.
- 3.45** Officers attend the OLNP BNG focus group, which comes together to discuss the integrity of the off-site BNG market, including habitat banks.
- 3.46** The full BNG burdens funding from Defra has been claimed as of the end of March 2025 (£26,807). No announcement has been made by Defra for any additional funding in the next financial year.

- 3.47** There remains an ambition to increase the percentage BNG to 20% in the Local Plan Review process. A clear rationale and evidence base for this will be required. However, ongoing discussions are being had about how this could be implemented and the need to also consider the qualitative aspects of BNG (see Local Plan Review section below).

Local Plan review

- 3.48** Officers are working on the Local Plan review, including the strategic site assessment process and the development of key policies relating to climate, nature recovery (including the LNRS) and BNG.
- 3.49** Officers are considering how to take account of the qualitative aspects of BNG, potentially with an emphasis on a design-led approach as part of the green infrastructure proposals.
- 3.50** Adopted or draft policies from other Local Plans are being reviewed.
- 3.51** Some of the key performance indicators included in the Nature Recovery Plan have been overtaken by events or superseded by the statutory BNG and LNRS processes, for example, the call for sites for nature recovery and their inclusion in the local plan – this is likely to be a direct link to and requirement to contribute towards the aspirations of the LNRS rather than specific sites for nature recovery.
- 3.52** Green infrastructure is still a key priority for the Local Plan and is seen as being the main mechanism for bringing together BNG, climate and nature recovery as part of the design of a development site. This forms part of the ongoing discussions between officers.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1** To not progress the delivery of the approved Nature Recovery Plan. This would not meet the Council's statutory biodiversity duty under the Environment Act 2021 and would be to the detriment of people and nature

5. CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1** The Nature Recovery Plan continues to be delivered with projects being prioritised that meet statutory requirements, manage council-owned land, secure external funding opportunities, and facilitate partnership working.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1** None associated with this report.
- 6.2** External funding has been secured where it assists in delivering actions in the Nature Recovery Plan.
- 6.3** Partnership working amplifies outcomes and presents excellent value for money.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1** BNG is a statutory requirement through the planning application process, but apart from SI06 agreements for securing 'on-site significant' habitat enhancements, associated monitoring fees and off-site habitat banks, there are no other implications to report at this

time. A monitoring strategy is being developed as the Council will need to ensure it complies with the requirement to report on statutory BNG to Defra. The first report is expected in January 2026.

- 7.2** The Council is also obliged to legally report to Defra on the statutory biodiversity duty at regular intervals – the Nature Recovery Plan was the first such report ('first considerations' and 'policies and objectives' reports combined). Updates to the Nature Recovery Plan will ensure that the Council keeps abreast of the legal requirement to report on progress.

8. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 8.1** None.

9. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 9.1** None.

10. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1** The Nature Recovery Plan responds to the declared climate and ecological emergency through accelerating nature recovery and climate action in the district.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1** The Nature Recovery Plan is available here:
<https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/environment/climate-action/climate-action-and-what-we-are-doing/>.

(END)