 WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL	WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
Name and date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 10 SEPTEMBER 2025
Subject	OXFORDSHIRE LOCAL NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr Andrew Prosser, Executive Member for Climate Change and Nature Recovery Email: Andrew.Prosser@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Chris Hargraves, Head of Planning Email: Chris.Hargraves@westoxon.gov.uk
Report authors	Melanie Dodd, Principal Ecologist (Nature Recovery Lead) Email: Melanie.Dodd@westoxon.gov.uk ; and Tatiana Bell, Nature Recovery Officer Email: Tatiana.Bell@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To consider the endorsement of the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy for publication.
Annexes	Annex A: Description of the Strategy Area – circulated separately Annex B: Statement of Biodiversity Priorities – circulated separately Annex C: Species Priority List – circulated separately Annex D: Interactive Local Habitat Map (link in section 11)
Recommendation(s)	That the Executive resolves to: I. Endorse the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy for publication by Oxfordshire County Council.
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	Extensive consultation was carried out by Oxfordshire County Council as part of the preparation of the LNRS including Phase 1 consultation (February to March 2024) Phase 2 consultation (May – June 2024) and Phase 3 (October to December 2024).

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- I.1** This report outlines the purpose and scope of the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and the decision to be made by West Oxfordshire District Council, as a “supporting authority” to endorse the publication of the LNRS by Oxfordshire County Council (the “responsible authority”) [OCC].
- I.2** Members will be aware of the LNRS as a previous report was presented at Informal Executive on 18th September 2024 prior to the last public consultation.
- I.3** The main purpose of the LNRS is to identify locations where the creation and/or enhancement of certain habitats would provide the greatest benefit for nature and the wider environment, including reconnecting habitats as part of an ecological network.
- I.4** However, this does not mean that landowners and managers will be required to implement these measures. Instead, the Government is encouraging the delivery of targeted actions for nature recovery as opportunities for funding and investment arise and as part of other projects and plans. The LNRS itself does not preclude or prevent any other type of land use or development, but it is part of a wider policy framework that helps plan development in a way that protects and improves the natural environment. Councils have a legal duty to consider the LNRS when creating or updating their local plans, which guide where and how building and development happen.
- I.5** The LNRS is comprised of 4 key elements:
 - a) Description of the Strategy Area
 - b) Statement of Biodiversity Priorities
 - c) Species Priority List
 - d) Local Habitat Map
- I.6** The key steps taken in the process are summarised in Figure 1 overleaf.
- I.7** WODC officers has had an integral role in the creation of the Oxfordshire LNRS through the steering group, technical sub-groups and through the public consultation process.
- I.8** As a minimum, supporting authorities are required to confirm that they “raise no objection” to the publication of the LNRS. However, OCC is asking supporting authorities to go further than this, to endorse the LNRS for publication and in doing so, to demonstrate their support for its subsequent implementation.

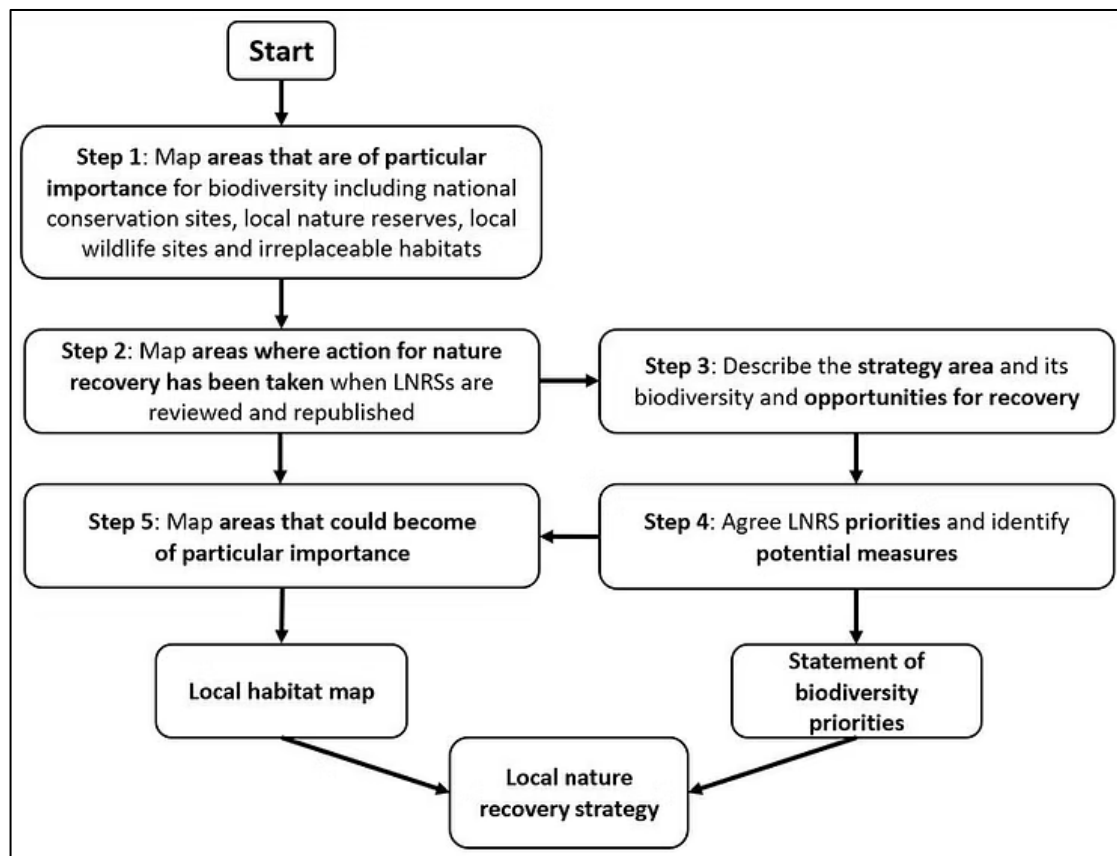


Figure 1: Image taken from the 'Description of the Strategy Area' document (page 15).

- 1.9 OCC intends to publish the final LNRS on its website in early November 2025, therefore, all of the supporting authorities are taking it through their internal decision-making processes between July and October 2025.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 LNRS' are England-wide strategies as stipulated in sections 104 to 108 of the Environment Act 2021 to deliver the Lawton Review principles of 'More, Bigger, Better and Joined' ecological networks¹. The LNRS' were developed to address the depletion of nature within England and to target landscape-scale nature recovery.
- 2.2 OCC was appointed as one of 48 'Responsible Authorities' by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in 2023.
- 2.3 WODC, along with the other Districts, Oxford City Council and Natural England are involved as 'Supporting Authorities'.

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<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20130402170324/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf>

- 2.4 As a supporting authority, Officers represent WODC on the LNRS Steering Group, the supporting authority group, and the communications and engagement and the species prioritisation groups. Officers from various departments have also attended other specific meetings, including one on planning policy considerations.
- 2.5 The LNRS will assist with the implementation of the statutory biodiversity duty placed on public bodies (Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 which was strengthened in the Environment Act 2021), support local plans and become the strategy that is used to define Biodiversity Net Gain 'Strategic Significance' as part of the Statutory Biodiversity Metric Calculation Tools.
- 2.6 The LNRS sets out how and where people and organisations in Oxfordshire could work together to create a more resilient ecological network with great benefits for both people and wildlife. Additionally, the strategy offers recommended actions to be taken in the wider countryside to improve the natural environment across the county.
- 2.7 The publicly available version of the earlier draft LNRS documents and map are still hosted online². A hard copy is available in the Members Room (G16) at the Woodgreen office.
- 2.8 Supporting authorities are required to confirm in writing that they agree to proceed to publication within 28 days of the Responsible Authority providing them with the final publication draft of the LNRS. The Council has worked closely with OCC throughout the preparation of the LNRS and it was agreed that supporting authorities would be given time to take it through their full democratic process. As a result, the final LNRS was received by the Council on 22nd July 2025 and OCC has asked for responses before 21st October 2025.

3. THE OXFORDSHIRE LNRS – AN OVERVIEW

- 3.1 In line with the statutory requirements, the Oxfordshire LNRS is made up of four elements:
- a) The **Description of the Strategy Area** summarises Oxfordshire's biodiversity, habitats and areas of particular importance, as well as the river catchments and underlying geology. It also outlines the opportunities, pressures and a summary of what needs to be done to enhance biodiversity.
 - b) The **Statement of Biodiversity Priorities** has a list of the most important outcomes (priorities) and a list of actions (potential measures) to achieve the recovery of nature in Oxfordshire. There are 40 priorities and 85 priority measures, 40 of which have been mapped on the Local Habitat Map.

² <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/environment-and-planning/local-nature-recovery-strategy>

- The potential measures would also deliver multiple benefits, for example, using nature-based solutions to help with water quality regulation, flood protection and shading and cooling.
 - Specific actions have also been included that aim to deliver nature recovery in **urban** areas. These actions would help to increase biodiversity and natural green spaces in villages, towns, and cities in Oxfordshire and could be referenced by local communities in funding applications for nature recovery projects. Recommended actions include increasing street trees, creating green roofs, wildlife-friendly gardens and parks, or installing bird boxes, swift bricks and hedgehog homes.
- c) The **Species Priorities List** is a list of species that require specific additional actions that goes beyond the Statement of Biodiversity Priorities. In Oxfordshire, this includes 63 bespoke species actions, which target 105 species.
- Over 800 threatened and near threatened species are expected to benefit through large-scale habitat improvements contained within the Statement of Biodiversity Priorities.
 - Current and historical distribution maps across Oxfordshire are also displayed in this document for some species and some distribution maps have been added onto the Local Habitat Map.
- d) The **Local Habitat Map** - an online and interactive map tool that shows:
- Existing areas of Oxfordshire that are important for biodiversity;
 - Areas that could become particularly important for biodiversity – these are priority locations for creating a nature recovery network in Oxfordshire, and mapped with a range of habitat creation and enhancement priorities, as well as some species-specific actions to deliver in these;
 - The social and wider environmental co-benefits of the potential measures, such as flood protection
 - Connectivity across the county and linking areas of particular importance for biodiversity, such as Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Local Wildlife Sites (LWS); and
 - Incorporates existing Conservation Target Areas (see pages 64-66 in the ‘Description of the Strategy Area’).

It should be noted that not all the measures needed to implement the LNRS are included (e.g. where they are wider than a discrete location or are not part of the strategic habitat network) and not all possible components of the network are shown (only the priority linkages).

Users of the LNRS's interactive 'Local Habitat Map' tool will be able to see which nature recovery actions (e.g. woodland creation, fen restoration, pond creation or any of the other mapped actions for habitats or species) have been recommended for specific location(s), to help them to consider the options for a variety of projects.

- 3.2 The LNRS is expected to help people and organisations across the county to coordinate effort and funding opportunities towards the delivery of a network for nature at all scales.
- 3.3 The LNRS identifies just over 40% of Oxfordshire as part of the priority nature recovery network, exceeding the global target for 30% of land to be protected for nature by 2030 (UK Biodiversity Summit, COP15 held in 2022), which Central Government committed to in their Environmental Improvement Plan 2023³.
- 3.4 The '**Areas of Particular Importance for Biodiversity**' in Oxfordshire currently make up around 6.5% of the land mass and account for 5.6% of West Oxfordshire.
- 3.5 The figures for the area within the whole nature recovery network (both the areas of existing importance for biodiversity and those that could become important) are around 40% in both Oxfordshire and for West Oxfordshire, as depicted in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.
- 3.6 The Oxfordshire LNRS was consulted on publicly in draft form from 18th October 2024 to 1st December 2024. This generated around 2,130 responses indicating strong local interest and support for delivering nature recovery in Oxfordshire. This feedback included suggestions for additional biodiversity priorities, actions to take and mapped locations for related projects.
- 3.7 WODC submitted a formal response to the public consultation in October 2024, including comments on Council-owned sites to ensure they were accurately represented, as well as feeding through comments from specialist officers, including Ecology, Flooding, Planning, Climate Change, Nature Recovery and Economic Development.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/criteria-for-30by30-on-land-in-england/30by30-on-land-in-england-confirmed-criteria-and-next-steps>

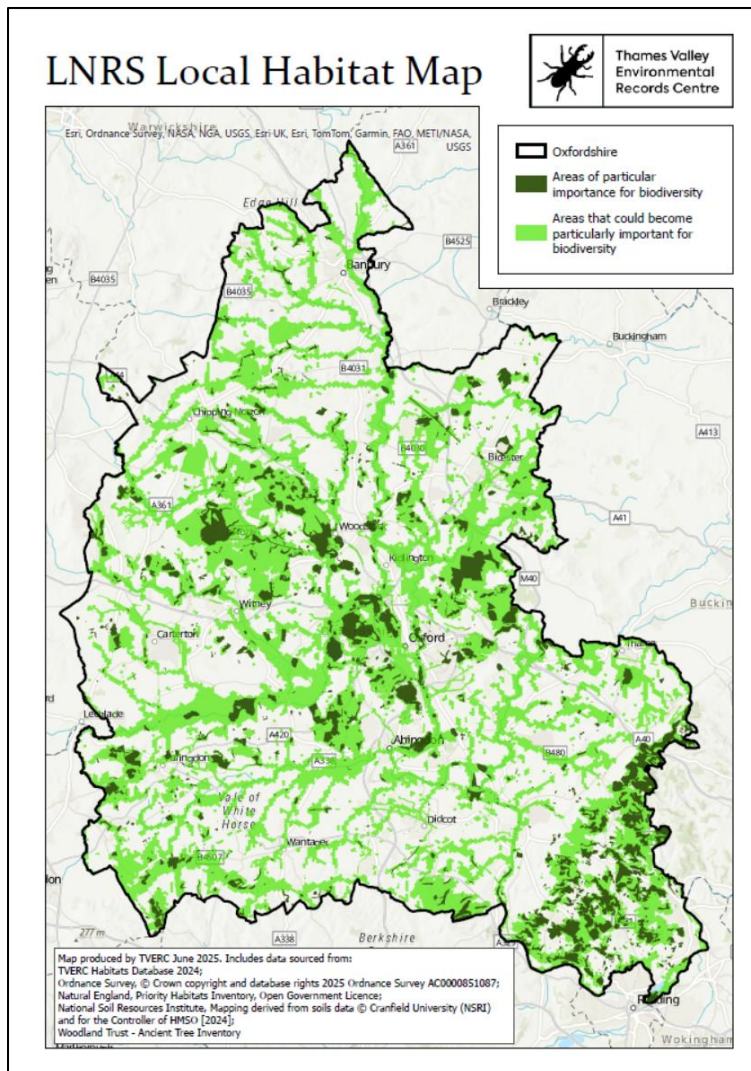


Figure 2: Extent of the priority nature recovery network in Oxfordshire – map taken from the ‘Description of the Strategy Area’ document (page 59).

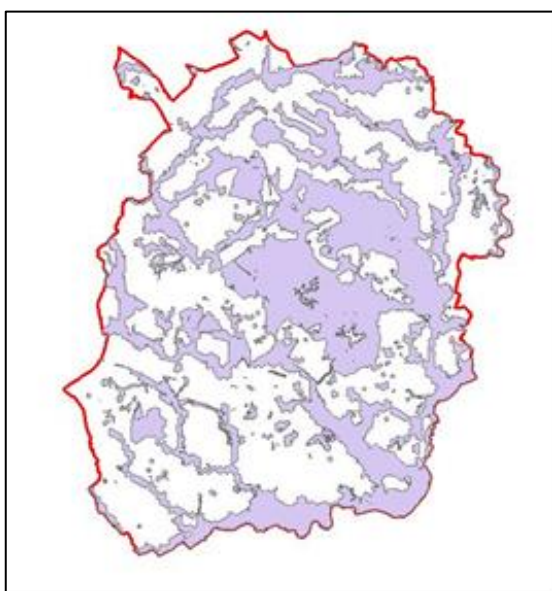


Figure 3: The nature recovery network in West Oxfordshire (GIS map layer).

3.8 The LNRS public consultation was advertised via several Council social media channels, shared on the Climate Action Bulletin, emailed to all Parish Meetings and Town and Parish Councils, as well as schools within the district.

3.9 WODC Officers' consultation comments and responses from OCC are summarised below:

- a) *Comment:* Description of Strategy Area – raised the importance of nature-rich green areas in and around urban areas to enhance the appeal of a place and make it more attractive to residents, workers, visitors and businesses, whilst also boosting the local economy.

Response: A page has been added to the Description of Strategy Area to describe the benefits of nature for people. References to “people and nature” bring more attention to the inter-relationship and benefits for people and nature, explaining how urban areas can contribute towards nature recovery through the LNRS.

- b) *Comment:* Statement of Biodiversity Priorities – under priority 37, reference could be made to the creation of sustainable drainage systems in improving biodiversity with the wider benefit of flood reduction, for example, rain gardens, mini ponds, orchards, wetlands as well as large balancing ponds.

Response: SUDS and other innovative methods to manage water have been specifically added and encouraged within the priority to enhance biodiversity in villages, towns, cities and greenspaces. Additionally, other measures were added to this section to encourage the delivery of wider benefits near to where people live.

- c) *Comment:* Species Prioritisation List – to make the document more accessible, the species could be grouped into taxonomic groups, for example birds, mammals, reptiles, invertebrates, plants, fungi and lichen.

Response: This was taken to the LNRS Communications and Engagement Working Group who supported this change and the species was separated into high level groupings such as amphibians, birds, mammals and reptiles.

- d) *Comment:* Request for the wider benefits of the LNRS in the Statement of Biodiversity Priorities to be added to the Local Habitat Map.

Response: Natural Capital data from Oxford University and the Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery will be shared alongside the LNRS data on the final map viewer to enable people to build projects that target biodiversity enhancement as well as achieving wider benefits in priority areas. This means that the separate “wider benefits” data can be added and amended as and when necessary, rather than waiting for the formal LNRS

review. On the list of biodiversity priorities there are also indications of which ecosystem services, or wider benefits, could be best delivered through each priority and the relevant actions.

- e) *Comment:* Request for additional areas of WODC-owned and managed land to be included on the local habitat map.

Response: Sites have been incorporated that align with the LNRS task to prioritise locations. Not all of the additional areas requested by supporting authorities, local partners or local people could be added as the mapped locations would not represent a prioritised network of nature in Oxfordshire. However, any unmapped areas should not be interpreted as ignorance of what is happening there, as they are still important spaces for nature recovery work. The LNRS does not intend to prevent work happening in unmapped locations and actions listed in the Statement of Biodiversity Priorities can still be delivered anywhere in the county.

- 3.10** OCC and the Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery analysed the comments and published a consultation response report, and are currently working on a “You Said, We Did” document, which will be published alongside the LNRS.
- 3.11** The Council’s Nature Recovery Plan contains actions that are relevant to the LNRS, including feeding into its publication, supporting its delivery and transferring relevant policies from the LNRS into the upcoming Local Plan. Progress on the delivery of the Nature Recovery Plan was discussed at Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 16th April 2025.
- 3.12** With regard to the relationship between the LNRS and local planning policy, the Government’s statutory guidance⁴ confirms that LNRS’ are important tools for helping local councils plan development in a way that protects and improves the natural environment. Councils have a legal duty to consider these strategies when creating or updating their local plans, which guide where and how building and development happen.
- 3.13** When deciding on planning policies or development proposals, councils should use this information in the LNRS to guide decisions, for example, by protecting key areas, directing development away from sensitive sites and securing the implementation of potential measures within developments. By aligning local plans with the LNRS, councils can make better-informed decisions that balance development needs with nature recovery, ensuring the best areas for habitat improvement are safeguarded and enhanced.
- 3.14** LNRS can also play a critical role in supporting Biodiversity Net Gain, particularly offsite gains to ensure that they are delivered in a way that maximises their biodiversity and

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1146160/Local_nature_recovery_strategy_statutory_guidance.pdf

located where the habitat creation and enhancement will have most benefit (“strategic significance” multiplier in the biodiversity metric calculation tool).

- 3.15** In recognition of this, the West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2041 Preferred Policy Options Consultation Paper contained around 32 no. references to the LNRS, including within the core objectives and the core, place-based and development management policies. The aim is to ensure that developers are contributing effectively and meaningfully to local nature recovery, particularly the implementation of the opportunities in the LNRS.
- 3.16** WODC will have further opportunity to consider how the LNRS can influence the policies and strategy of the Local Plan as it continues to take shape.

4. ENDORSING THE LNRS

- 4.1** Helping to deliver the outcomes and targets in the LNRS is an important part of WODC’s commitment to nature recovery, including the implementation of the Council’s own Nature Recovery Plan⁵.
- 4.2** As a minimum, in accordance with the legislation, WODC is asked to confirm that it “raises no objection” to the publication of the LNRS. However, having reviewed the LNRS and been involved in its preparation, Officers believe that the final LNRS is a comprehensive, well thought through and innovative strategy that will help to drive the recovery of nature in Oxfordshire. Officers are therefore recommending to Members that the strategy should be formally endorsed for publication, as requested by OCC.
- 4.3** Endorsement would demonstrate the Council’s commitment to the LNRS and its use to inform decisions, plans, strategies and projects. It would act as a clear message to local residents, communities and partners that the Council fully supports the aims and objectives of the LNRS and would like to see it being used and implemented locally by as many people and organisations as possible. This would help to ensure that all plans and projects are based on up-to-date information and take account of the opportunities for nature recovery identified in the LNRS.
- 4.4** Endorsing the publication of the LNRS would align with Council’s commitment to deliver its Nature Recovery Plan, including the following three key aims and objectives:
- a) Facilitating communities and partnerships for landscape-scale nature recovery;
 - b) Protecting and enhancing biodiversity on sites owned and managed by the Council;
and
 - c) Safeguarding and enhancing biodiversity through policies and development.

⁵ <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/nvtbk0ob/nature-recovery-plan-2024-to-2030.pdf>

5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 5.1 The Council could choose to raise an objection to the publication of the LNRS. There is a specific legal process for this, and the Council would have to issue a 'Publication Advisory Notice' to the Responsible Authority and the Secretary of State stating why the publication cannot be justified based on the results of the consultation and explaining why the LNRS is materially deficient. Considering our findings so far, this would be a difficult position to support and demonstrate.
- 5.2 The Council could choose not to endorse the LNRS for publication. However, this would contradict three of the priorities in the Council Plan 2023-2027:
- a) *Priority 2: Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All* – including the provision of green to improve physical and mental well-being;
 - b) *Priority 3: Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife* – fulfilling the council's statutory biodiversity duty, enhancing biodiversity, supporting nature recovery and contributing towards the production of the LNRS; and
 - c) *Priority 4: Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency* – including encouraging the use of nature-based solutions.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 This report raises no direct financial implications for the Council. Any financial implications arising from the subsequent delivery phase of the LNRS would be taken through the usual democratic processes and the financial implications will be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- 6.2 DEFRA have committed to providing funding to Responsible Authorities for the transition to delivery of the LNRS, with details to follow later this financial year.
- 6.3 Partnership working amplifies outcomes and presents excellent value for money, so external funding would need to be sourced to enable the implementation of LNRS projects.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 This report raises no direct legal implications, other than having a bearing on the Council's statutory biodiversity duty, i.e. the Council's Nature Recovery Plan, and the implementation of wider nature recovery and climate-related projects.

- 7.2** The Environment Act 2021⁶ requires Responsible Authorities in England to prepare and publish Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) and the Environment (LNRS) (Procedure) Regulations 2023⁷ make provision in relation to the preparation of the LNRS, particularly the procedure to be followed in their preparation and publication, and review and re-publication, which the council will follow.

8. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 8.1** This report presents no significant risks. WODC are already implementing actions within the LNRS through their Nature Recovery Plan and encouraging others to do so. WODC will continue to work collaboratively with the other local authorities in Oxfordshire into the delivery phase to ensure continuity through Local Government Reorganisation.

9. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 9.1** This report raises no issues in terms of the Equalities Act 2010 or the Public Sector Equality Duty. The report has been screened using the Council's Equality Impact Assessment and no implications have been identified. The report is not recommending the introduction or adoption of, or change to, a WODC service, policy, strategy, practice, plan or team structure at this stage.
- 9.2** The decision to be made by Executive is purely about whether WODC should endorse the publication of a strategy that will support people to make informed choices about the implementation of nature recovery projects in the future. It does not require any action and will not have a significant impact on any staff or members of the community.
- 9.3** However, a key aim of the LNRS is to be as inclusive as possible. In order to realise the potential for nature recovery in the county, it is aimed at all potential users and delivery partners. The final published version of the LNRS will be designed with accessibility in mind and will be supported by several targeted user guides for different groups; including individuals (e.g. residents), farmers and landowners, town and parish councils and parish meetings, schools, community groups and businesses, as well as planning officers, to provide guidance about how it can be used.

10. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1** The Oxfordshire LNRS sets a strategic vision and framework that will be used to drive forward nature recovery in Oxfordshire with recognition of the role that nature-based solutions play in providing multiple benefits for people and climate resilience.

⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/30/contents>

⁷ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2023/341/made>

- 10.2** Use of the Sustainability Impact Assessment Tool is not appropriate for the high-level strategy set out in this report. The climate and ecological impacts of actions that the Council may take to deliver the LNRS will be assessed using the Sustainability Impact Assessment Tool as they come forward.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1** Annex A, B and C should be viewed in conjunction with the interactive LNRS Local Habitat Map available to view here: (please copy and paste into your browser)
https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/3362a5d771624e3abe54c4e9a9b1d77c?views=View#data_s=id%3A944edc60bf854ea4b269f1c1cfa072ef-197e3fba635-layer-3-3%3A22165
- 11.2** Please note that the documents contained in Annexes A, B and C are still draft and are subject to final minor amendments by the OCC design team for publication (e.g. minor errors to be corrected and links added).

(END)