

 <b>WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL</b>	<b>WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL</b>
Name and date of Committee	<b>OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 4 FEBRUARY 2026</b>
Subject	<b>WEST OXFORDSHIRE NATURE RECOVERY PLAN UPDATE</b>
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr Andrew Prosser, Executive Member for Climate Change and Nature Recovery Email: <a href="mailto:andrew.prosser@westoxon.gov.uk">andrew.prosser@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Accountable officer	Chris Hargraves, Head of Planning Email: <a href="mailto:chris.hargraves@westoxon.gov.uk">chris.hargraves@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Report author	Melanie Dodd, Principal Ecologist Email: <a href="mailto:melanie.dodd@westoxon.gov.uk">melanie.dodd@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Summary/Purpose	To provide a progress update on the delivery of the Council's Nature Recovery Plan (2024 – 2030) and an outline of the requirement to publish a report on the implementation of the Council's statutory biodiversity duty for the reporting period 12 <sup>th</sup> February 2024 to 1 <sup>st</sup> January 2026.
Annexes	No
Recommendation(s)	That Overview and Scrutiny Committee resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Note the progress made in delivering the Nature Recovery Plan (2024 – 2030); and</li> <li>2. Note the requirement to publish a report on the Council's implementation of the statutory biodiversity duty within 12 weeks of the end of the reporting period (26<sup>th</sup> March 2026).</li> </ol>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Putting Residents First</li> <li>• A Good Quality of Life for All</li> <li>• A Better Environment for People and Wildlife</li> <li>• Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency</li> <li>• Working Together for West Oxfordshire</li> </ul>
Key Decision	No

Exempt	No
Consultees/ Consultation	Tatiana Bell, Nature Recovery Officer Leighton Simmons, Senior Ecologist HannAah Kenyon, Climate Change Manager

## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- I.1 This report summarises the actions taken to implement the Council's Nature Recovery Plan (2024 – 2030) since April 2025. It follows on from the progress report presented to Overview and Scrutiny on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2025 and is the second such report.
- I.2 This report also outlines how this links to the requirement to publish a report on the Council's implementation of the statutory biodiversity duty in accordance with Defra guidance.

## 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In 2019 West Oxfordshire District Council declared an ecological and climate emergency, and a standalone Nature Recovery Plan (2024 – 2030)<sup>1</sup> was adopted by the Council on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2024<sup>2</sup>.
- 2.2 The Nature Recovery Plan links to two of the Council's corporate 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.
- 2.3 The Nature Recovery Plan is broken down into three themes as follows and includes specific actions to support nature recovery across the district to 2030.
  - 1. Facilitating communities and partnerships for landscape-scale nature recovery;
  - 2. Protecting and improving existing biodiversity on sites owned and managed by the Council; and
  - 3. Safeguarding biodiversity through policies and new development.
- 2.4 Section 3 below outlines the progress that has been made against the specific actions identified under these three main themes.
- 2.5 This report also explains how the Council is complying with its 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 Under this legislation, the Council is required to publish a report on action taken to address the biodiversity duty, including statutory Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), up to 1st January 2026 (the end of the first reporting period as defined by Defra). Reporting will thereafter be required every 5 years.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/nvtbk0ob/nature-recovery-plan-2024-to-2030.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://meetings.westoxon.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?Alld=4220>

2.7 In line with Defra guidance<sup>3</sup>, the Council can set the start of this reporting period. This will be from 12<sup>th</sup> February 2024 when statutory Biodiversity Net Gain for major developments in England was introduced and close to when the Nature Recovery Plan was formally adopted (14<sup>th</sup> February 2024). This means that it aligns with the requirement to provide details on the implementation of BNG as part of the biodiversity duty report.

### 3. MAIN POINTS (PROGRESS WITH THE NATURE RECOVERY STRATEGY TO DATE)

3.1 Good progress has been made in relation to nature recovery in West Oxfordshire since the Council's Nature Recovery Plan was adopted in February 2024.

3.2 Officers use a project tracker to ensure actions are delivered in line with the priorities of the adopted plan and meet monthly with the Executive Member for Climate Action and Nature Recovery to discuss progress.

3.3 Projects have been prioritised where they fulfil a statutory requirement, are externally funded and/or strengthen partnership working and empower local communities and organisations to ensure progress within existing available resources.

3.4 The following progress update is ordered by the themes and objectives of the Council's Nature Recovery Plan.

#### 4. Facilitating communities and partnerships for landscape-scale nature recovery

a) *Collaborate with councils, regional and local partners to identify and deliver strategic opportunities for the restoration of natural ecosystems, improving habitat connectivity, wildlife corridors and nature-based solutions in land-use management*

##### Service Level Agreements

4.1 The Council currently has three Service Level Agreements (SLAs) in place relating to nature recovery actions – the Evenlode Catchment Partnership, Wild Oxfordshire, and the Wychwood Forest Trust. These started in April 2024 and are managed between the Council's Ecology and Communities teams.

4.2 The SLAs are now in Year 2. Mid-year reports were received in November 2025 and progress review meetings have been held, with support from the WODC Community Funding Officer.

4.3 **Evenlode Catchment Partnership (ECP)** – the Council is a key partner, and officers continue to attend regular meetings, including as a member of the Steering Group. The catchment management plans and priorities for the coming 5 years are under review. The annual funding provided by the Council covers the core function of the partnership, which enables the ECP to implement projects with co-benefits for flood alleviation and nature recovery.

4.4 **Wild Oxfordshire** provides ecological advice and support to parishes and community groups in West Oxfordshire, and a regular 6-weekly meeting has been arranged to foster a close

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/reporting-your-biodiversity-duty-actions>

working relationship and to increase collaboration for projects and events. Since April 2025, 24 groups have been supported, and 5 community training events have been held.

4.5 **Wychwood Forest Trust (WFT)** works with communities to protect and restore habitats and advise local landowners and organisations on ecology and conservation. The Trust are due to sign a lease agreement with the Council for Barnes Meadow (formerly land of Eton College) alongside an initial short term management plan. Their work spans a wide range of activities, but due to lack of capacity and staff turnover issues in 2024-25, most of the workload fell to the CEO. One of the key projects, the “*Windrush in Witney*” has stalled, but we have been assured that this is scheduled for 2026 (further details in 4.6 below). As such, the SLA objectives were reviewed by officers (Oct 2025), and additional projects were agreed (Dec 2025). These are: Jubilee Way Witney (hedgerow laying by WFT volunteers), initial set-up for a new Millennium Woodland Management Project and Foxburrow Wood.

#### Windrush in Witney Project

4.6 As mentioned above, the submission of the development bid to the National Lottery has been further delayed. Unfortunately, due to the reasons outlined above, the WFT has not been able to progress this project as it would have liked. Officers have regular meetings with the WFT CEO to maintain momentum and a meeting with partners is due to take place in February 2026 to review the current situation and ensure that the project remit is still fit for purpose. The aim is to submit the development bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund in Year 3 of the SLA (2026-27) to ensure the project is underway before Local Government Reorganisation.

#### Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)

4.7 After almost 2 years in development, the Oxfordshire LNRS<sup>4</sup> was published on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2025 by Oxfordshire County Council with the endorsement of all the supporting authorities.

4.8 WODC officers had an integral role in the creation of the strategy through the steering group, technical sub-groups and through the public consultation process.

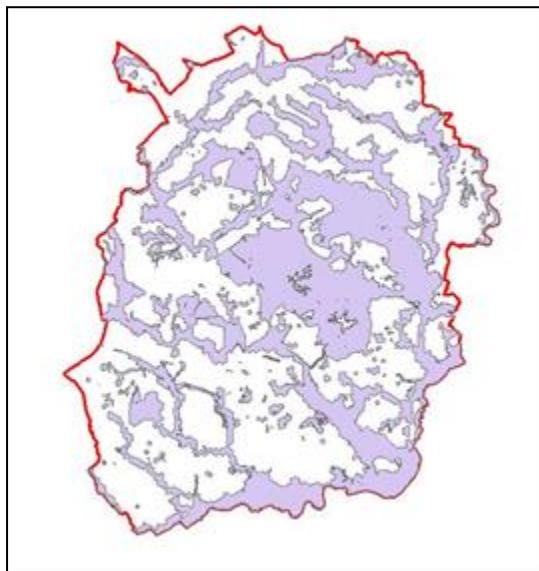
4.9 The Council were the first supporting authority to endorse the LNRS at their Executive meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2025. Shortly before this, a meeting was held to explain the map and LNRS structure with Executive Members and a subsequent wider Member Briefing about the LNRS took place on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2025.

4.10 The LNRS contains 4 elements, a description of the strategy area, statement of biodiversity priorities, species priority list (e.g. Water vole and Black poplar) and local habitat map. It sets out how and where actions could be taken to create a more resilient ecological network with wider 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.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/environment-and-planning/local-nature-recovery-strategy-lnrs>

4.11 The local habitat map is an online and interactive tool that shows existing “*areas of particular importance for biodiversity*” and “*areas that could become particularly important for biodiversity*”. These priority locations are the basis for creating a nature recovery network in Oxfordshire. The nature recovery network covers around 40% of West Oxfordshire (as depicted in the image below taken from the GIS map layer).



4.12 The focus has now moved into the ‘transition to delivery’ stage of the strategy and WODC officers have fed into the discussions about how this can best be taken forward.

4.13 The statutory duty to “have regard” to the LNRS as part of the planning process has been recognised and has been used to inform the local plan review, including the Preferred Policy Options Paper and in the separate Spatial Options consultation. It is anticipated that where development is close to, or in an area identified within the LNRS mapped network, opportunities for nature recovery will be identified, such as the creation of specific habitats or contribution towards off-site enhancements. This could be achieved through onsite and offsite BNG.

4.14 The publication of the LNRS means that it is now the basis for the “*strategic significance*” multiplier in the BNG metric calculations. Any habitat creation and enhancements provided within development sites or habitat banks that specifically relate to potential measures within the LNRS will receive a slight uplift in number of units. This has been communicated to developers via the WODC website and direct to all those who still need to discharge the statutory planning condition.

4.15 The LNRS is being used as a reference to inform the Ecology Team’s specialist comments on planning applications, particularly about BNG to ensure that the new statutory duty is met. The use of the LNRS will be covered in the ongoing training being provided to the Development Management team on BNG and other ecological issues.

#### Climate adaptation project

4.16 Priority actions from the Climate Change Adaptation Route Map for Oxfordshire 2025-2030<sup>5</sup> have been implemented with partner authorities, stakeholders and communities, including leading on the embedding of climate resilience into existing plans, strategies and policies. For example, wider environmental benefits arising from the implementation of nature recovery actions were added to the Oxfordshire LNRS.

4.17 The WODC Climate Team will continue to lead on implementing actions from the Route Map with partners, including developing and sharing case studies and resource materials with communities to help us prepare for climate impacts.

4.18 WODC is the Oxfordshire climate adaptation champion over the next year and will actively promote climate resilience across the county.

4.19 The project is ongoing, and it is expected that this will continue post- local government reorganisation.

#### Working with Town and Parish Councils/Meetings

4.20 Numerous emails and climate and nature bulletins have been circulated over the last 2 years offering support to town and parish councils/meetings from both WODC and Wild Oxfordshire.

4.21 In October 2025, a Town and Parish survey asking for details relating to the statutory biodiversity duty and climate action was first sent out with subsequent reminders. To date, there have been 11 responses, with 6 requesting additional support to create their Biodiversity Duty Policies.

4.22 Due to the low response rate to the survey, online research was undertaken and revealed that a total of 21 town/parish councils/meetings in West Oxfordshire have published biodiversity policies.

4.23 The focus for 2026 will be on assisting the 6 town/parishes that have requested support in partnership with Wild Oxfordshire's community ecology team as well as continuing to support other town/parish councils/meetings more broadly. This will be in line with the Community Town and Parish Nature Recovery Guide<sup>6</sup> (published March 2024).

#### Coronation Community Orchard Scheme

4.24 The scheme was funded by the Coronation Living Heritage Fund (CLHF) in 2023 and was due to finish in March 2025, and, as previously reported, Defra granted an extension to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026.

4.25 Following large promotion efforts from both the Ecology and Communications teams, a further 9 orchard applications have been submitted and are in various stages of completion in this third, and final, round of applications.

4.26 Permission was also granted by CLHF for pruning workshops to be provided to successful applicants, increasing awareness and understanding of management techniques. Two

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Climate-Change-Adaptation-Route-Map-for-Oxfordshire.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/62602eef03c83769e0539df4/66191d1dc3c59118c39d57c1\\_community%20town%20and%20parish%20guide%20to%20nature%20recovery.pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/62602eef03c83769e0539df4/66191d1dc3c59118c39d57c1_community%20town%20and%20parish%20guide%20to%20nature%20recovery.pdf)

workshops (one for young and one for older orchards) have been arranged for February 2026.

4.27 There is a contingency plan for any remaining funds (agreed with CLHF) to offer ongoing training and support for successful applicants during the summer and autumn of 2026. This will enhance the orchards that have been planted by creating and managing wildflower meadows as the “understorey” beneath the trees.

***b) Improve understanding of the district habitats and enhancement opportunities***

**Oxfordshire Local Wildlife Sites Project**

4.28 The Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) Project has been funded by WODC through an annual SLA with the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) and a contribution to the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) for many years.

4.29 LWS are non-statutory designated sites for biodiversity, which gain a degree of protection from development through local plan policy.

4.30 There are 102 LWS in West Oxfordshire totalling 1,761.8 hectares. The area has increased by 24.7ha since 2024.

4.31 The proportion of ‘Local Sites’ (including LWS and local geological sites) in England where positive conservation management is being implemented or was implemented in the last 5 years is one of the national biodiversity indicators.<sup>7</sup> In 2024-25, 48% of Local Sites were in positive management in West Oxfordshire.

4.32 The Oxfordshire LWS project was reviewed during 2025 to enhance the outcomes for nature recovery, including providing additional support to landowners on management, and LPAs have been asked to match the increased funding need.

4.33 TVERC are responsible for the survey, assessment and selection of LWS and aim to survey each site once every 10 years. There is a backlog of sites to be assessed and selected, which is also being addressed as part of the funding considerations.

4.34 The recently received TVERC 2024-25 annual report confirms that 13 LWS were surveyed and assessed against the selection criteria.

4.35 BBOWT are responsible for the provision of management advice to the owners of LWS.

**Wildlife Data**

4.36 TVERC provide twice yearly updates of wildlife data to WODC under their annual SLA. This incorporates data on LWS, local geological sites, priority habitats, protected and notable species and invasive non-native species.

4.37 The updates are received by the Ecology and GIS teams and reported on through the Council’s Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) produced by the Planning Policy Team.

4.38 TVERC’s 2024-25 annual report confirms that 270,102 new records were added to their database, of which 16,268 were in West Oxfordshire, and they processed 113 data search enquiries in the district.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/england-biodiversity-indicators/16-local-sites-under-positive-conservation-management>

*c) Work across Council departments to link the objectives of the Plan with other Council Plan (2023-2027) priorities*

Tackling inequalities through nature recovery project

4.39 This project is in its 2<sup>nd</sup> year with funding provided by Public Health and is directed towards nature recovery projects in areas facing socio-economic barriers, based on the 2019 and 2025 Index of Multiple Deprivation maps. Engagement with local organisations has enabled the project outcomes to be tailored to suit local needs and build on existing relationships. The project plan timeline has been agreed for remainder of the project, including ongoing outreach work.

Nature-based carbon sequestration

4.40 The Innovate UK funded nature-based carbon sequestration project continued for a second year and the first phase has now been completed.

4.41 The Nature Recovery Officer post was part funded by the project and they were instrumental in the drafting and finalising of reports and attended regular meetings alongside Climate Officers.

4.42 A final presentation was given to Innovate UK on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2025, and the final documents are published on the OLNP website<sup>8</sup>.

Potential for other Council Service Areas to take forward nature recovery actions

4.43 Officers have been working in collaboration with several Council teams over the last few years to deliver biodiversity conservation and enhancement, and actions in the Nature Recovery Plan for the last 2 years, including Assets, Ubico Contract Management, Communities and Wellbeing and Climate, but there is an aspiration to share this further and build engagement and capacity within the Council to take on more projects.

4.44 As a way of taking this forward, a WODC Officer Nature Recovery Group will be set up to provide a place where staff from different service areas can receive training about nature recovery, the LNRS, the types of actions that they could take forward and signposting for further advice.

*d) Improve communication and community involvement*

Community outreach

4.45 Conservation volunteer groups have been publicised to increase awareness and invite more people to join. The monthly volunteering sessions continue 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 hedge laying.

4.46 The potential for a BioBlitz is in discussion with partner organisations, aiming for it to be held in May 2026 at North Leigh Common.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.olnp.org.uk/report-enabling-nature-based-carbon-sequestration-in-oxfordshire---innovate-uk>

**4.47** Officers are currently working with schools on an ad-hoc basis when enquiries are submitted. Officers are in regular contact with 6 schools directly and 7 schools have taken part in the Coronation Community Orchard Scheme.

**4.48** There have been many nature-focused community events this reporting period, which have been attended by officers. These included:

- 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2025: A River Sings film screening in Chipping Norton Town Hall (ECP)
- 10<sup>th</sup> June 2025: Conservation Target Area Leads and Friends meeting at Long Mead Foundation, Eynsham
- 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2025: Doughnut Economics workshop by the Oxfordshire Community Action Groups (CAG) at Asthall Manor
- 25th October 2025: WODC Waterways Fair in the Witney Corn Exchange
- 9th October 2025: Witney Town Council's first Eco Fair
- 17<sup>th</sup> October 2025: Ramsden Parish Council meeting
- 8th November 2025: Annual Town and Parish Nature Summit "*Secrets of the Soil*" in Rosehill Community Centre, Oxford
- 12th November 2025: OLNP annual forum and LNRS launch in the Natural History Museum, Oxford
- 28<sup>th</sup> November 2025: AGM Hailey Community Woodland

## **5. Protecting and improving existing biodiversity on sites owned and managed by the Council**

### **a) *Protect and enhance biodiversity on sites owned and managed by the Council***

#### Green space management

**5.1** Approved land management plans for Council-owned and managed sites are being implemented, including specific actions for biodiversity. New ecological surveys and baseline Biodiversity Net Gain baseline assessments were undertaken in the spring and summer of 2025 to provide updated information and recommendations for enhancements. These are being used to inform a review of the land management plans at 5 sites as follows: Deer Park Wood, Deer Park South, Kilkenny Lane Country Park, North Leigh Common and Millers Mews Meadow, Witney.

**5.2** Volunteer groups support the management of four of these sites.

- The Witney Woodland volunteers manage the woodland at Deer Park Wood and Deer Park South. They have expanded the orchard, put up a new owl box, installed a new information board and carried out litter picks. The group also work across other sites in Witney, for example trimming hedges and 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 heathland habitat.
- The Kilkenny Lane Country Park volunteers manage the park and undertake a range of other activities as mentioned above.

- 5.3 The management of North Leigh Common is a specific action in the Nature Recovery Plan, and this is partly funded through contributions from the Newt Conservation Partnership for the great crested newt ponds. Several site visits have been carried out, and reptile surveys are ongoing, thanks to Crocodiles of the World (CotW). The review of the land management plans referred to above will be carried out in conjunction with the volunteer group and CotW.
- 5.4 Officers fed into the Waste and Environmental Services mini-business case review on street cleansing and grounds maintenance in April 2025 to ensure that nature recovery was incorporated.

#### Woodgreen biodiversity enhancements

- 5.5 Officers monitored the biodiversity improvements that were implemented in the grounds of the Council's Woodgreen Offices during 2024/25. These included bird, bat and bee boxes, wildflower meadows, native (and neonicotinoid free) bulbs and hedgerows. The wildflower meadow has successfully established, and wooden signs were installed.
- 5.6 A poster was created to explain the ecological value of the meadow habitat beyond the flowering season, allowing the seed heads to remain as food for birds and to provide cover for insects and hedgehogs. The wildflower meadow was cut on 16<sup>th</sup> October 2025.
- 5.7 The wildflower meadows and other enhancements will continue to be monitored, and officers will liaise with the Ubico contracts manager as necessary to ensure that appropriate maintenance is implemented.

#### Road Verge Nature Reserves

- 5.8 A road verge maintenance review is underway, and the feasibility of the Council managing more Road Verge Nature Reserves is being considered in conjunction with Oxfordshire County Council, WODC Assets and Ubico.

#### Herbicide and peat

- 5.9 The Council's Nature Recovery Plan aims to completely phase out the use of glyphosate and peat, except for limited exceptions where no technical alternatives exist e.g. for the eradication of non-native invasive species.
- 5.10 The use of glyphosate on council land is being monitored by the Assets and Ecology teams in conjunction with Ubico. It is no longer being used at the Council Offices in Woodgreen, and alternatives are being trialled here with a view to expand to other areas if successful.
- 5.11 The amounts of glyphosate used (exclusively on sealed surfaces) in the last 3 years is summarised below based on the spray records received from Ubico.

Date	Amount (litres)
2023	9.6
2024	13.5
2025	12.45

**5.12** Peat compost will no longer be used on behalf of the council and Ubico are seeking an exemption from the Environment Agency (expected March 2026) to develop a composting facility at the depot on Station Lane, as an alternative source of compost.

#### Non-Native Invasive Species

**5.13** No Japanese knotweed control was carried out in 2025.

**5.14** Himalayan balsam was removed by Ubico at Bishops Farm on the River Windrush, Witney and at Langel Common in 2025.

### **6. Safeguard and enhance biodiversity through policies and development**

#### *a) Drive nature recovery through the planning and development process*

##### Staffing

**6.1** Since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025, nature recovery has been managed under the Council's Planning Policy Team, which comprises an ecology sub-team including 3 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) planning ecologists and 2 FTE Nature Recovery Officers.

**6.2** The Principal Ecologist and the new Senior Ecologist (started 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2025) roles both cover 50% planning ecology and 50% nature recovery, equating to 1 FTE planning ecologist and 1 FTE Nature Recovery Officer (replacing the vacant Lead Nature Recovery Officer post).

##### Development Management

**6.3** The Development Management and Ecology teams continue to ensure that high-integrity ecological information is submitted with planning applications.

**6.4** The Ecology Team is consulted on the majority of planning applications where there are ecological issues (533 since August 2024, see the table in section 6.13). The information submitted with planning applications is reviewed to ensure that it is robust, appropriate and sufficient to comply with legislation, policy and best practice.

**6.5** Planning officers are provided with regular training on protected species, sites and other issues in addition to BNG to ensure that they understand the key issues, and that they carry out basic accuracy reviews of ecological reports. This improves response time to applicants.

##### Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

**6.6** BNG continues to be an area of ongoing learning and updated West Oxfordshire guidance is being prepared (to replace the interim guidance on the Council's website from 2023).

**6.7** Specific BNG guidance was published on the council website<sup>9</sup>, defining strategic significance (re. the LNRS) and on-site significant enhancement.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/planning-and-building/wildlife-and-biodiversity/biodiversity-net-gain-bng/>

- 6.8 Six training sessions have been provided for the planning team, with further sessions planned.
- 6.9 The Mycelia software continues to be an integral part of the assessment of the metrics that are submitted with planning applications. Ecologists provide ongoing support to the planning validation team with initial checks in line with national validation requirements to ensure that appropriate information is received.
- 6.10 WODC submitted a response to the Defra BNG small sites consultation on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2025.
- 6.11 A strategy for monitoring the delivery of on-site significant enhancements (within development sites) and habitat banks is currently being developed.
- 6.12 The table below provides an overview of progress on planning applications where the Ecology Team were consulted since August 2024. The “Up to 13.03.25” column was previously reported to O&S in April 2025. The second column provides a cumulative total for planning applications up to 8<sup>th</sup> January 2026.

Summary of planning applications since August 2024	Up to 13.03.25	Up to 08.01.26
Completed planning applications with ecology responses	163	533
Completed planning applications where BNG relevant	38	141
Completed Biodiversity Gain Plan discharge of condition applications	6	19
Planning applications awaiting more ecological information	72	56
Planning applications awaiting more information on BNG specifically	42	35
New live consultations – ecology comments to be provided	57	46
<b>Total number of ecology team consultations</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>635</b>
<b>Total number of BNG relevant planning applications</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>% of total no of applications where statutory BNG is required</b>	<b>27.4%</b>	<b>27.7%</b>
Planning applications awaiting a SI06 agreement to secure payment of BNG monitoring fees to the Council	3	11
Planning applications refused where for BNG applicable	2	19
Planning applications withdrawn where BNG applicable	2	10

- 6.13 The second SI06 agreement for a habitat bank in West Oxfordshire has been prepared and a final review is being carried out by Legal Services. The landowner has been supported by the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE) and officers visited the site in October 2025.
- 6.14 A formal process for establishing future habitat banks is being developed to ensure that due diligence checks and other criteria are met.
- 6.15 Officers have attended OLNP BNG focus group meetings to discuss the integrity of the off-site BNG market, including habitat banks. The result of this is the Oxfordshire NatureMark, which was launched on the OLNP website<sup>10</sup>. This is a quality assurance process that habitat banks can use to demonstrate integrity and transparency. It was the first of its kind in England.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.olnp.org.uk/biodiversity-net-gain-bng-sites-in-oxfordshire>

**6.16** BNG monitoring fees have been obtained by S106 agreement for some planning permissions where there are onsite significant enhancements to cover the Council's costs associated with the statutory 30-year monitoring period. The fee schedule was published on the Council's BNG webpages in November 2025.

#### Local Plan review

**6.17** Officers are providing ecological input into the preparation of the emerging Local Plan, including as part of the preferred policy options paper in June 2025 and spatial options paper in November 2025.

**6.18** Increasing the minimum BNG target from 10% (current statutory requirement) to 20% was included for major developments and a nature recovery policy to secure contributions from developments (linked to the LNRS) is also being explored.

#### Priority Species Compensation Scheme

**6.19** The Council signed up to participate in a 12-month priority species compensation scheme pilot with NatureSpace (an existing delivery partner for the Great Crested Newt District Licensing Scheme) in December 2025.

**6.20** The aim of this new scheme is to provide developers with an alternative option for off-site compensation for certain priority species. The pilot will cover four priority species – Skylark, Linnet, Yellowhammer (farmland bird priority species) and hedgehog. The scheme is likely to be expanded to include other species after the pilot.

**6.21** A presentation for planning officers and ecologists was provided by NatureSpace on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2026.

***b) Take a strategic approach to development-funded nature recovery for optimum outcomes***

**6.22** There are no relevant updates for this section of the Nature Recovery Plan to date, beyond ongoing work on green infrastructure (through WODC local plan review), identifying strategic projects to implement the LNRS (led by Oxon LNP, OCC) and BNG (as reported above).

**6.23** A full Green Infrastructure Strategy is not currently being taken forward. This may be re-considered once the local plan review is completed and there is staff capacity to progress.

## **7. Statutory Biodiversity Duty Report**

**7.1** Officers are currently preparing the first report on the Council's implementation of the statutory biodiversity duty to comply with the legal requirement in the Environment Act 2021. The reporting period is from 12th February 2024 to 1st January 2026.

**7.2** The Defra guidance<sup>11</sup> confirms that the report must include the following by law and sets out an example report structure for local authorities:

- *a summary of the action you've taken to comply with the biodiversity duty*

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/reporting-your-biodiversity-duty-actions>

- *how you plan to comply with the biodiversity duty in the next reporting period*
- *any other information you consider appropriate*
- *the actions you've carried out to meet BNG obligations*
- *details of BNG resulting, or expected to result, from biodiversity gain plans you've approved*
- *how you plan to meet BNG obligations in the next reporting period*

**7.3** As reported previously, the Council's Nature Recovery Plan equates to the “policies and objectives” requirement to demonstrate how the statutory duty is being implemented. Therefore, the O&S progress updates provided here and in April 2025 will be the basis for the biodiversity duty report, alongside specific data relating to statutory BNG.

**7.4** The legal requirement is for the biodiversity duty report to be published within 12 weeks of the end of the first reporting period, i.e. 26<sup>th</sup> March 2026.

**7.5** The next reporting period will run from 1st January 2026 – 1st January 2031, which aligns with the timeframe for the existing Nature Recovery Plan (2024-2030) and therefore, its implementation will continue to ensure compliance with the statutory biodiversity duty.

## 8. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

**8.1** To not progress the delivery of the approved West Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Plan (2024 – 2030). 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.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

**9.1** The West Oxfordshire 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.

**9.2** The Overview and Scrutiny progress updates on the implementation of the Nature Recovery Plan form the basis for the statutory biodiversity duty report.

## 10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

**10.1** External funding has been secured where it assists in delivering actions in the Nature Recovery Plan.

**10.2** Partnership working amplifies outcomes and presents excellent value for money.

## 11. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

**11.1** BNG is a statutory requirement through the planning application process, but apart from S106 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.

**11.2** The statutory biodiversity duty is a legal requirement in the Environment Act 2021 and the first reports on how this is being implemented must be published by 26<sup>th</sup> March 2026, and every 5 years thereafter. The Council's Nature Recovery Plan was the first step in the process, as this met the requirement to publish 'first considerations' and 'policies and objectives'. The historic and ongoing implementation of the Nature Recovery Plan therefore forms the basis of the Council's first report (currently in preparation).

## **12. RISK ASSESSMENT**

**12.1** None.

## **13. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

**13.1** None.

## **14. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS**

**14.1** The Council's Nature Recovery Plan responds to the declared climate and ecological emergency through accelerating nature recovery and climate action in the district. Actions taken to implement the plan should therefore have a positive impact in relation to the climate and ecological emergencies.

## **15. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

**15.1** The Council's published Nature Recovery Plan 2024-2030 is available here:

<https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/environment/climate-action/climate-action-and-what-we-are-doing/>.

(END)