WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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West Oxfordshire District Council

Nature Recovery Plan 2024 – 2030

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January 2024

Contents table

Common abbreviations

BBOWT - Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust

BNG – Biodiversity Net Gain

LNP – Local Nature Partnership

LWVP – Lower Windrush Valley Project

OCC - Oxfordshire County Council

TVERC - Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre

WFT – Wychwood Forest Trust

Introduction

West Oxfordshire is comprised of a mosaic of farmland, semi-natural grassland, woodland, and watercourses. There is also a varied built environment from the district's largest towns of Carterton and Witney to rural towns and villages such as Burford, Charlbury and Eynsham which all contain features which contribute to overall biodiversity resource. The natural environment in the district has experienced large changes over the past century with industrialisation, agricultural intensification and urbanisation, in common with most of south-eastern England. However, there remains a diverse natural environment in the district, rich in different habitats and species.

In June 2019, West Oxfordshire District Council passed a motion to declare a climate and ecological emergency, leading to the development of a Climate Change Strategy. A key theme within this strategy is the Protection and Restoration of Natural Ecosystems. Several strategic objectives were outlined within this theme, including the protection and restoration of Council land and a desire to engage, support and communicate good practice for biodiversity and nature recovery with the West Oxfordshire community. This strategy runs to 2025, and good progress has been made on the objectives – a new Biodiversity and Countryside Land Management Officer post was created, and new habitat management plans were implemented across WODC owned land.

This document aims to take forward and expand on the Climate Change Strategy's objectives and outline the specific objectives and actions that the Council will take to support nature recovery across the district to 2030. The separation of this Nature Recovery Plan from the original climate change strategy will give a more focussed and detailed approach, although links between the two are still strong.

A vision for WODC's nature recovery

The Council fully supports the vision that has been set out for the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership, and adopts its message for this Nature Recovery Plan:

> "Radically enhance nature, its positive impact on our climate and the priority it's given, helping to make West Oxfordshire a place where people and nature thrive".

By 2030, groups across the district such as residents, landowners, Town and Parish Councils and community groups will have come together to help deliver a measurable improvement in the extent and quality of priority habitats and populations of priority species. Wildlife habitats will be protected, enhanced and where possible expanded and linked. There will be a greater awareness and understanding of biodiversity, with opportunities to be involved and collaborate in local wildlife enhancement projects and monitoring. Residents will also benefit from nature recovery activities through co-benefits such as natural flood management, carbon sequestration, cleaner water, and the improvement of their local green spaces and improved access to nature.

Purpose of document

The purpose of this plan is to set out ambitious yet achievable aims and actions to tackle biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation across the district and the wider inter-connected landscape. This plan delivers on the Council's climate and ecological emergency commitments, which have the overarching aspiration to achieve district-wide carbon neutrality and climate change resilience by 2050.

Biodiversity across West Oxfordshire

What is biodiversity and nature recovery?

Biodiversity is a term used to describe the variety of life including all plants, animals, their habitats and the natural systems that support them.

Biodiversity is fundamental to both planet and people. In addition to its key importance, biodiversity also provides a host of services and functions that bring value to our lives, including:

- Provision of food, water, timber and fibre (provisioning services).
- Helping to regulate climate change, floods, disease, waste, and water quality (regulating services).
- Providing recreational, aesthetic and cultural benefits (cultural services).
- Supporting soil formation, pollination, photosynthesis (supporting services).

Nature recovery involves the building of resilient landscapes for the future through natural restoration. This process involves identifying where both healthy and degraded wildlife habitats already exist, how they can be improved and made bigger, and how they can be connected to produce a more resilient landscape using nature-based solutions that introduce natural processes to the landscape.

Undertaking landscape-scale nature recovery will lead to the creation of a Nature Recovery Network - a joined-up system of places needed to allow nature to recover and thrive. The network will provide more space for wild species to live, feed and breed, and help the natural world to adapt to a changing climate and other pressures on the environment.

Biodiversity across West Oxfordshire

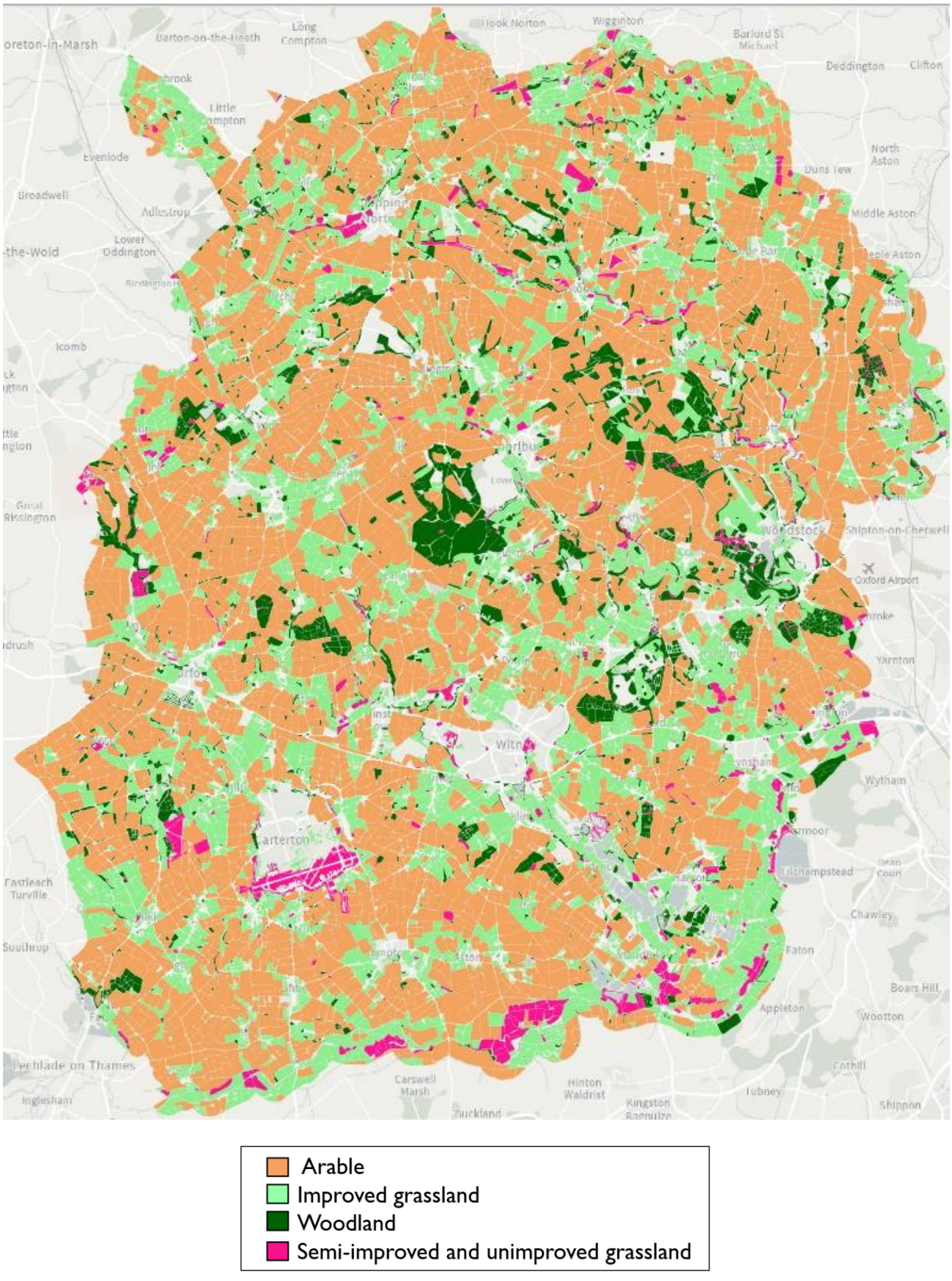
West Oxfordshire is rich in locally distinctive habitat types, including grasslands (including lowland meadows, calcareous and acid grasslands), woodlands (including ancient woodland, lowland mixed deciduous woodland and wet woodland), heathland, wood pasture, parkland and traditional orchards. These in turn are home to a diverse mix of locally distinctive flora, including for example valuable hay meadow and limestone grassland species in the Cotswolds and river meadowlands.

West Oxfordshire is predominantly farmed landscape, with a topography and geology that lends itself well to growing crops; high Agricultural Land Class Grades are found in the south of the district in particular. Over half of the district is made up of arable land (56%), in addition to a significant area of improved grassland (around 23%) that is largely managed as permanent pasture for livestock or cut for silage.

Semi-natural and unimproved grassland is a rarer but more valuable habitat across the district. Small areas of limestone grassland can be found along river and stream valleys, which support a diverse mix of invertebrates and bird life. Floodplain meadow areas along West Oxfordshire's rivers and tributaries are biodiverse habitats, especially where managed traditionally to encourage the growth of rare wildflowers such as snake's-head fritillary and great burnet.

The district has small but important areas of woodland, making up around 5% of the district's land area. These are generally found on the ridges that lie between river valleys and are associated with historic parklands – these include Wychwood Forest that lies within the Cornbury Park Estate and Eynsham Hall, and Blenheim. These woodland areas are generally made up of ash, oak and elm, and in well managed areas host associated flora such as violets and helleborines. Clusters of ancient trees are also present in these estates.

Figure 1: Largest areas habitat types across WODC



West Oxfordshire lies within the River Thames catchment area, with the Thames itself and its tributaries, including the River Evenlode and River Windrush, running through the area. Other key watercourses include the River Dorn, River Glyme, Coombe Brook and Shill Brook – all of these and their associated riparian habitat support a wide range of species including otters, kingfishers and rare freshwater invertebrates. The district's rivers are surveyed for water voles on a regular basis by BBOWT – numbers have generally remained stable over the last 10 years, with the River Windrush identified as a particular stronghold for this species (BBOWT, 2023). As well as these key habitats, smaller areas of habitats including scrub, parkland, lakes and fen are also present in small quantities, each with their characteristic associated flora and fauna.

The district's biodiverse landscape intrinsically holds value in the form of natural capital – this is described as "elements of nature that directly or indirectly produce value to people, including ecosystems, species, freshwater, land, minerals, the air and oceans" (Natural Capital Committee, 2013). From natural capital assets such as habitats, water and ecosystems, we derive benefits in the form of ecosystem services – these can either directly provide resources, e.g. timber and fish production, regulate our environment, e.g. improving air and water quality, or give cultural benefits such as a sense of place or aesthetic beauty. Residents across the district will be receiving multiple benefits from it's habitats – in particular, with its floodplain meadow and riverine areas, the valley is likely to be providing a wide range of regulating ecosystem services including carbon storage, water quality, flood resilience and pollination.

Like much of the county, the district's biodiversity has suffered overall declines during the last few decades (Wild Oxfordshire, 2017). Several key factors that have impacted on a wide range of West Oxfordshire's species populations include:

- Habitat loss – Losses of large areas of semi-natural grasslands and floodplain meadows are mainly due to agricultural intensification from the mid-20th century onwards. This was further worsened by losses through sand and gravel extraction, urban and industrial development and hydrological changes to river floodplains. (Rothero et al., 2016).

- Habitat fragmentation - The continuing fragmentation of the landscape through the removal of hedgerows, and increase in infrastructure and other development, has increased the isolation of remaining patches of good habitat and the species they support. In turn this increases the probability of further extinctions of the district's rarer species (Butaye et al., 2005). The losses and fragmentation of semi-natural grasslands, in combination with climate change impacts, are thought to have contributed to the local extinction and decline of some invertebrate species, including butterflies (Van Dyck et al., 2015) and bumblebees (Rothero et al., 2016).

- Climate change - Climate change causes changes in temperature and rainfall leading to shifts in species composition. Changes in the frequency of intense rainfall events, particularly following periods of dry weather, contributes to increased soil loss and related nutrient runoff from agricultural land. This affects local water quality as well as putting strain on local biodiversity and ecosystems (Defra, 2012). Regular summer flooding in Oxfordshire on the scale of 2007 could threaten the conservation value of semi-natural grasslands (BBOWT, 2010).

- Pollution – Water quality and river habitats have been severely impacted by historic modifications to watercourses and pressures from human activity. In recent years, sewage treatment works and Combined Sewage Overflows across the district's rivers are having long term negative effects on aquatic and riparian species. Riverfly monitoring by volunteers (in 2018, 2019) has indicated a reduction in invertebrate diversity and abundance in the River Windrush, and macrophytes in the reach between Burford and Witney have also seen

dramatic declines (Windrush Catchment Partnership Plan, 2021). Grayling, probably the best indicator of water quality, have almost completely disappeared from the River Windrush and populations of coarse fish species such as roach and barbel have notably declined (Cotswold Rives Trust, pers. comms). Other forms of pollution can also have negative impacts on local wildlife populations, such as light pollution and air quality.

- Agricultural intensification – A significant area of the district is used for agriculture. Intense farming practices have resulted in the loss of hedgerows on farms, and increased nitrogen on surrounding environments. The use of pesticides is also having significant negative impacts on pollinator communities (Godfray H.C.J., 2014).

- Disease - The impact that disease has on the landscape has also been significant in recent years. In addition to highly destructive Dutch Elm disease which has killed millions of trees over the last 50 years, ash dieback is expected to kill 95-99% of ash trees in Britain (Hill et al, 2019), changing the composition of large areas of woodland across the district and beyond.

Statutory and non-statutory sites for nature

A large number of areas and sites across the district have been designated due to their importance for wildlife on local to national scales. Key statutory (i.e., those protected by law) and non-statutory sites are summarised below, with maps illustrating their locations in Figures 2 and 3:

Statutory sites

- Special Area of Conservation (SAC) – part of the Oxford Meadows SAC, Cassington Meadows, lies partially within West Oxfordshire's boundaries. This area consists of a cluster of neutral hay meadows and fen, which are surviving remnants of semi-natural vegetation in an area now characterised by intensive arable farming and gravel extraction.
- Local Nature Reserves (LNR) – these sites are designated for their special local interest either biologically or geologically. The district has two LNRs – Crecy Hill LNR, which has a diverse flora and invertebrate population on its calcareous grassland habitat, and Saltway LNR which has the largest known British colony of the very rare downy woundwort.
- National Nature Reserves (NNR) – two sites have received this statutory designation, the Wychwood NNR and Chimney Meadows NNR. The Wychwood NNR is one of the largest areas of ancient semi-natural oak and ash broadleaved woodland in Oxfordshire, with large herds of fallow deer and notable flora including early purple orchid and less common plants such as herb paris and autumn crocus. Chimney Meadows NNR is located in the floodplain of the River Thames and has a spectacular display of wildflowers during the summer months and often provides a safe haven for breeding curlew.
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – there are 44 SSSIs across the district, so designated for a wide range of habitats including floodplain meadow, woodland and acid grassland and fen.
- Cotswolds National Landscape – the CNL sits across a large proportion of the north and west of the district, covering around a third of its area. It is the largest National Landscape in England and Wales and was primarily designated for the rare limestone grassland habitats as well as the old growth beech woodlands that typify the area.

Figure 2: Existing statutory site locations

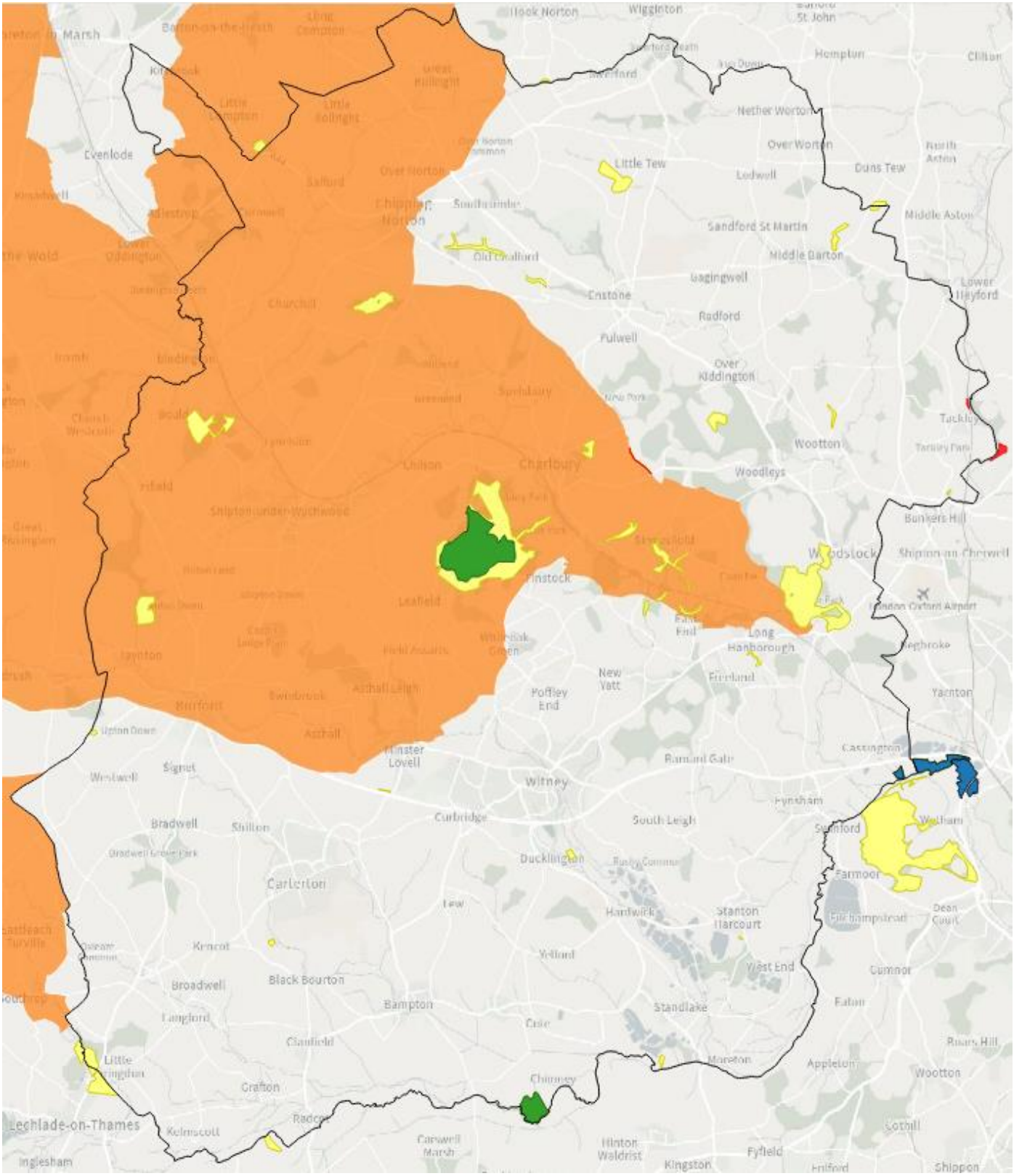
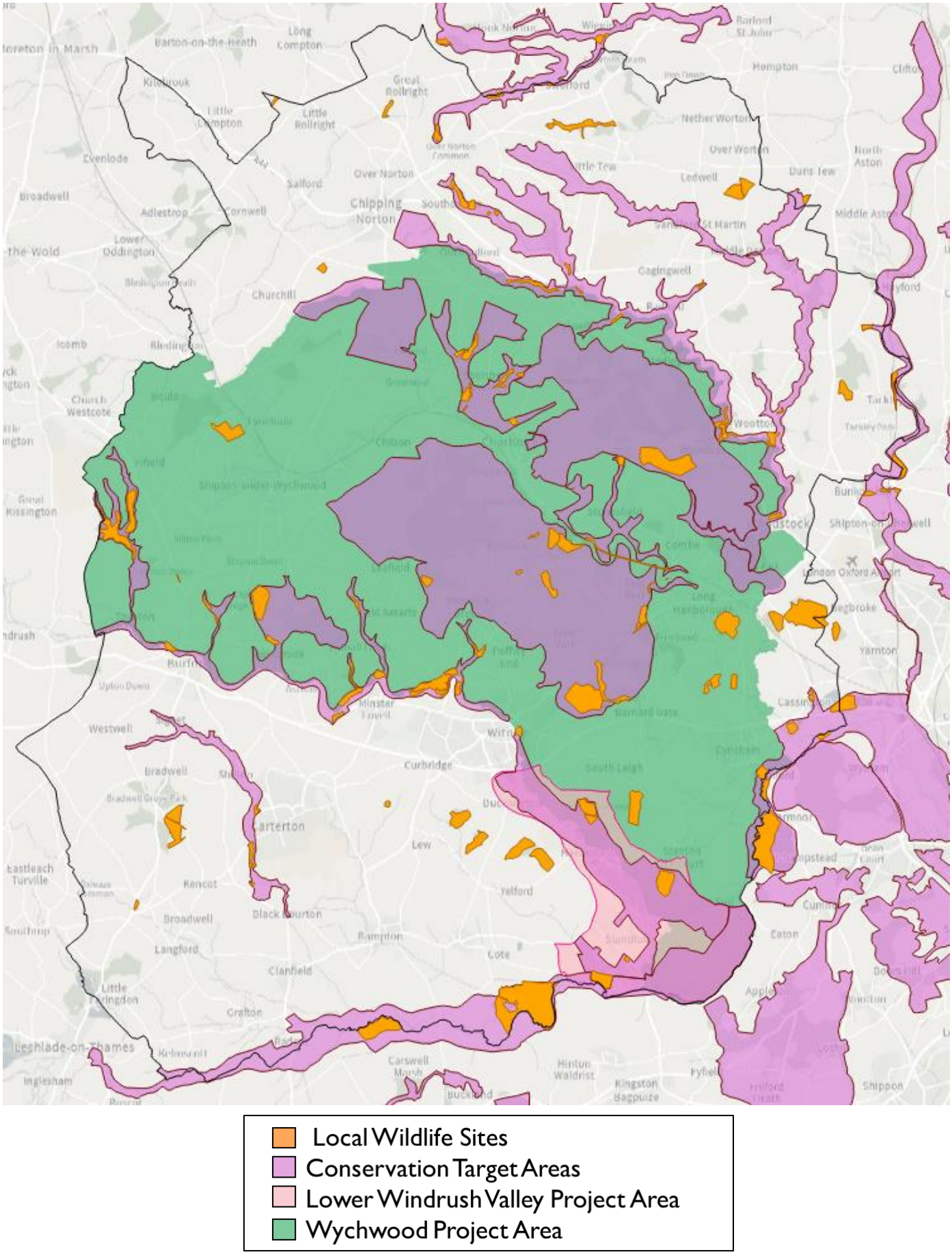


Figure 3: Existing non-statutory site locations



Non-Statutory sites

- Conservation Target Areas (CTAs) – the CTAs identify some of the most important areas for wildlife conservation in Oxfordshire, where targeted conservation action has the greatest benefit. Eight CTAs are present across the district, centred primarily around its rivers and woodland areas.
- Local Wildlife Sites – these are sites that have been surveyed and selected by the Oxfordshire Wildlife Sites Project, jointly run by BBOWT and TVERC, as some of the country's most valuable wildlife areas. There are 100 Local Wildlife Sites in West Oxfordshire, totalling 1583 hectares of habitat.
- Wychwood Project area – this area and associated project aims to restore the landscape character and mix of habitats associated with the Royal Hunting Forest of Wychwood.
- Lower Windrush Valley Project area – this strategic area has a network of important habitats including floodplain meadows and lakes formed by the gravel extraction that has occurred in the valley. It has particular importance for resident migratory waterfowl.
- Windrush in Witney Project area – this area consists of a network of floodplain meadows and pathways into the Lower Windrush Valley, fundamental component of the town's landscape character.

Local groups and partnerships

The district is fortunate in having a number of local groups and initiatives currently working to support nature's recovery;

- Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership – the OxLNP is an organisation of key partners working together to radically enhance nature. It aims to develop strategies and plans, influence relevant local and national government policy and legislation; establish voluntary working groups and task and finish groups as required; and lever resources into the sector. The partnership's outputs guide and influence the work of LNP members and others.
- Evenlode and Windrush Catchment partnerships – hosted by Wild Oxfordshire and Cotswold Rivers Trust respectively, the catchment partnerships help local people and organisations work together to improve river water quality, enhance biodiversity, improve flood management and resilience to climate change, and build greater community engagement with the river and its tributaries.
- Wychwood Forest Trust - this conservation charity works with local communities to protect and restore the spaces once part of the historic Wychwood Forest - 120 square miles and 41 parishes in West Oxfordshire. They also run projects promoting the Wychwood's unique cultural identity and help people learn traditional rural skills and crafts such as dry-stone walling and hedgelaying.
- Lower Windrush Valley Project – set up in 2001 following extensive mineral extraction works across the valley, the LWVP works with environmental organisations, mineral operators, landowners and communities to deliver a wide range of initiatives that aim to strengthen and develop the evolving landscape of the valley, protect and enhance the biodiversity it supports, and improve opportunities for people to access and enjoy the countryside.
- Wild Oxfordshire – this charity seeks to create a more natural, resilient, and biodiverse Oxfordshire for the benefit of all and primarily collaborates with individuals, communities and organisations offering expert and bespoke ecological advice through their community ecology programme. They also carry deliver targeted conservation action with initiatives such as the Curlew Recovery Project and the Oxfordshire Hedgerow Heroes Project.

- Cotswolds National Landscape – this organisation works to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Cotswolds AONB, increase understanding and enjoyment of its special qualities, and foster the social and economic well-being of local communities. Their network of over 400 wardens enables them to have wide-reaching impact across their area.
- North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster – this group is made up of 137 farms covering 42,000 hectares with a vision to lead landscape-scale regeneration of the farmed environment and local food networks through collaboration and knowledge exchange.
- Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) – West Oxfordshire is located in the western-most area that this Wildlife Trust covers, with sites such as Chimney Meadow and Foxholes nature reserves managed by its volunteers and staff. BBOWT also manages the Oxfordshire Local Wildlife Sites Project provides free wildlife surveys and information about conservation.

The groups listed above are some of the larger organisations that operate within the district; many others also work more locally to deliver significant impacts such as local Nature Recovery Groups, Long Mead, Burford Environment Action Group, Green Fifield.

Key policy influences

This Nature Recovery Plan does not sit in isolation - it considers and is aligned with a range of national, regional, and local policies and plans to ensure cohesion and a net positive contribution to wider strategic initiatives across the district and beyond.

National policies

Environment Act 2021 – this national framework for environmental protection aims to improve air and water quality, tackle waste, improve biodiversity and make other environmental improvements. Key drivers of action around nature recovery include:

- Biodiversity Net Gain - this is a new approach to development that aims to leave nature in a measurably better state than it was beforehand with onsite ecological enhancement, using off-site measures as a last resort. Using habitat data, a site's biodiversity value can be quantified both before and after a development has been delivered. A minimum biodiversity gain of 10% will be mandatory for major developments from January 2024, with requirements for minor developments coming later in the year.
- Local Nature Recovery Strategies – this is a new, England-wide system of spatial strategies that will establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits. An Oxfordshire LNRS is being produced by a partnership of organisations, co-ordinated by OCC, which WODC will feed in to as a key stakeholder – a Nature Recovery Network will also be created as the spatial element of the plan.

Natural England has also recently introduced the Green Infrastructure Framework. This provides a number of tools and guides for planners, developers and communities investing in nature in urban areas and creating climate resilient towns across England. Mapping tools, green infrastructure standards and principles, and process journeys all form part of the Framework.

With the introduction of the Environment Act 2021, local authorities must also comply with the new, strengthened 'biodiversity duty', where public authorities who operate in England must consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity. As a local authority, the Council

must consider relevant strategies: LNRSs, species conservation strategies and protected site strategies and:

- Understand their relevance to the Council.
- Be aware of how these strategies affect land that the Council owns or manages and actions that can be taken to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- Consider how the Council can contribute to the strategy.

Local policies

Oxfordshire Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan, 2023-2050 – this document, commissioned by the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, includes a route map and joint climate and nature-based actions that the Oxfordshire local authorities can take together to provide a catalyst for positive action across the region. The most relevant action is Action 12, which seeks to "Explore opportunities to enhance carbon sequestration through land use change, including targeted habitat restoration and creation".

West Oxfordshire District Council Plan 2023-2027 – the Council Plan documents key aims and priorities to improve the district for its residents. Relevant priorities include:

- Priority 2 – "Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All", with actions including "Ensure the timely provision of built and green infrastructure which meets the needs of existing and incoming residents and that supports health and care to enable physical and mental well-being, community cohesion and delivers a high quality of life."
- Priority 3 – "Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife", with actions including "Work with others, and fulfil our statutory obligations, to ensure that land, air and water support biodiverse habitats, reduce pollution and bring about nature recovery to the District, putting it at the forefront of local decision making."
- Priority 4 – "Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency", with actions including "Encourage the use of nature based solutions to sequester carbon and combat the risks arising from climate change at a river catchment scale, such as restoration of meadows and trees to reduce flooding and improve water quality."

West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan 2031 – The West Oxfordshire Local Plan sets out a vision of the district to 2031 and provides an overarching framework to guide and deliver that vision. Relevant policies include:

- Policy EH2: Landscape character
- Policy EH3: Biodiversity and geodiversity
- Policy EH4: Public realm and green infrastructure

The new West Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan 2041 is currently being prepared to update planning policies and proposals, ensuring they effectively tackle vital issues like nature recovery and climate change.

WODC Carbon Action Plan – this document is due to be published in 2024, and sets out actions to reduce the Council's carbon footprint and to carbon inset/offset residual emissions.

Cotswolds National Landscape Management Plan 2023-2025 – this is a statutory plan, which sets out the vision, outcomes and policies for the management of the Cotswolds National Landscape

for the period 2023-2025. The plan defines the landscape's key qualities, and sets out its key issues including the climate emergency, Nature's decline and the Ecological Crisis and Health and societal changes. Key relevant policies include;

- Policy CE7: Biodiversity and nature recovery
- Policy CE8: Rural land management policy
- Policy CE9: Problem species, pests and diseases

Cotswolds Nature Recovery Plan 2021 – this plan was developed by the Cotswolds National Landscape in partnership with the Cotswolds Nature Recovery Forum. It gives details on the species and habitats of the Cotswolds, and what we action can be taken to help them flourish and spread across the landscape.

Our work to date and role as a Council

WODC produced its first Climate Change Strategy in 2020, with "Protection and Restoration of Natural Ecosystems" as one of its key themes. A full time, permanent Biodiversity and Countryside Land Management Officer has been employed since its publication, who has led on different initiatives and made progress against the strategy's objectives. Key actions within this are listed below:

- A review of land management practises across key sites has been undertaken to improve them for both people and wildlife. Working with the ground's maintenance team at Ubico, grass cutting and vegetation management regimes have changed to allow for longer flowering periods for pollinators and more traditional management of wildflower meadows.
- A series of biodiversity projects were undertaken in 2022 to kick-start the Council's response to the ecological emergency – these include:
    - Setting up a hedgehog highways scheme, where residents are invited to create a hedgehog hole in their gardens to improve connectivity for urban hedgehog populations
    - Creating wildflower meadows across our public open green spaces.
    - Planting hedgerows and trees in strategic locations across our estates with the help of volunteer groups, schools and Council employees.
    - A BioBlitz at Kilkenny Lane Country Park to encourage members of the public to observe wildlife at the site and collect data for the local environmental records centre.
    - Establishing a new conservation volunteer group at Kilkenny Lane Country Park.
    - Expanding the reach of the Witney Woodland Volunteers with a licence to manage Deer Park South.
    - Providing tools and training to the Witney Woodland Volunteers to better manage Deer Park Wood.
- Connections to other environmental organisations such as the Wychwood Forest Trust, Wild Oxfordshire and Lower Valley Windrush Project have been strengthened with new projects and partnership work.

- Advice has been given to several Town and Parish Councils on land management, and where relevant worked with Ubico to change maintenance regimes on their land to improve habitats on Council owned land.
- Officers are members of the Windrush and Evenlode Catchment Partnerships, shaping catchment plans and reviewing project work delivered by these groups.
- WODC is a member of the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership, sitting on several of the sub-groups that guide the partnership's activities.
- WODC financially supports groups such as Wild Oxfordshire, the Wychwood Forest Trust, TVERC and the Local Wildlife Sites Partnership

The Council's Planning Service also continue to assess the ecological impacts of planning applications that are submitted across the district. Key actions from this team over the last few years include:

- Biodiversity Officer Capacity to assess planning applications has increased.
- Guidance around biodiversity net gain and its best practice use has been developed by the Council's planning ecologists and is used to secure tangible improvements to developments' green infrastructure and ecological value.
- The Salt Cross Area Action Plan was accepted by the Planning Inspector with a policy requiring the scheme to achieve 25% biodiversity net gain.
- Officers have helped to shape county-wide policies, and continue to input into the Oxfordshire LNRS and LNP.

In addition to the work above, the Council has worked to ensure that biodiversity is considered in its decision-making processes. Each report and decision brought to the Council's Executive and Cabinet meetings includes a section on the proposal's climate and ecological emergencies implications – here officers detail any anticipated impacts on land use, wildlife and habitats as a result of the proposal.

Consultation

This Nature Recovery Plan has been prepared in consultation with key officers, Councillors, local environmental groups and local communities, to gain a full understanding of the barriers and opportunities available to delivering the plan.

One of the key changes following the local environmental group consultation was the change in name from "Biodiversity Action Plan" to "Nature Recovery Plan". This was made after suggestions that the term "Biodiversity Action Plan" is a more antiquated environmental term, and new name would be more positive and forward looking, to signal the alignment with the new Local Nature Recovery Strategy and a wider reinvigorated conservation effort. Additional actions and claficiation were added in the document where deemed appropriate.

The public consultation feedback generally reflected diverse opinions on biodiversity and environmental strategies. Positive responses highlighted eagerness to collaborate, emphasizing partnerships with community groups aligned with the plan's goals. Participants emphasized the necessity of promoting biodiversity education in schools and extending the plan's coverage to include all new housing developments. Some respondents also highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to address challenges such as climate change effects, waterway clean-up,

and collaborative efforts with local landowners and farmers. The feedback generally indicated a desire for tangible, measurable actions, greater collaboration with local communities and stakeholders, and a stronger focus on immediate environmental concerns while balancing long-term biodiversity preservation.

Aims and objectives

There are three key areas within which WODC can advance nature recovery across the District, and encourage others to participate in landscape-scale positive change. The District can:

1. Protect and enhance biodiversity on sites owned and managed by the Council.
2. Safeguard and enhance biodiversity through policies and development.
3. Facilitate communities and partnerships for landscape-scale recovery.

1. Protect and enhancing biodiversity on Council owned sites

WODC owns and manages approximately 106ha of green space, which includes parks, fields, greens and public open spaces within housing estates. Although work has been done to improve these sites for wildlife and people in recent years through working with Ubico and volunteer groups, there is more that can be done to protect and restore habitats and species across the Council's landholdings. There are also new opportunities that the Council can take to expand and improve Council landholdings and connect with others to better improve habitats across the district.

2. Safeguard and enhance biodiversity through policies and development

As a local authority, WODC is able to ensure that biodiversity is protected and enhanced within the planning system, and deliver the key principles for biodiversity set out in national planning guidance. BNG is a new approach to development that aims to leave nature in a measurably better state than it was beforehand on a site – a 10% improvement will be mandatory for major schemes from January 2024, and the majority of other schemes from April 2024. The Council's planning team is currently collating an evidence base to propose a 20% net gain for major schemes. The Council's planning teams are working to ensure BNG is delivered and monitored effectively through the planning system, and developers are well informed through Design Guides and Design Codes to support this. There are also opportunities through the development of the new Local Plan to strengthen policies around ecological protection and recovery, drawing from best practice guidance.

3. Facilitate communities and partnerships for landscape-scale recovery

As outlined in the "Local groups and partnerships" section above, West Oxfordshire has a wealth of local environmental groups and knowledge that the Council can potentially link in with to develop and deliver existing and new initiatives on a landscape-wide scale. By collaborating with groups, the Council can facilitate the restoration of natural ecosystems, improve habitat connectivity, and implement nature-based solutions to help mitigate against climate change. There are also organisations that specialise in data collection and collation that can inform a better understanding of trends of key habitats and species across the district.

Connections within the District Council's teams, such as Estates, Communities, Development Planning and Flooding can continue to be strengthened, through collaborative projects of mutual benefit. WODC Communications team uses several platforms on which the Council can promote opportunities for conservation volunteering and share best practice with others. Bespoke outreach activities could also take place to encourage residents to better engage with the natural world.

These three focus areas form the structure of Nature Recovery Plan, set out in the section below. All actions set out within this align to Lawton's "Making Space for Nature" principles of 'More, bigger, better, more joined up', - delivering action on a landscape scale will lead to more resilient, healthy and connected ecosystems, and improve habitat quality and species populations across the district.

Nature Recovery Plan

The purpose of the Nature Recovery Plan is to provide direction for the Council, local groups, officers and Councillors, giving a comprehensive set of actions to achieve nature recovery across the district and deliver on the three key areas outlined above. The Plan outlines actions that both contribute to and go beyond the Council's biodiversity duty.

The actions will be taken both in the short term over the next 1-3 years, and as part of multi-year programmes to support longer-term success. The Plan has been informed by the plans and polices outlined above, data from TVERC, the expertise of officers within the Council and local communities and residents through consultation. The success of the Nature Recovery Plan will be underpinned by collaboration with local environmental groups, policy makers and residents.

Delivering the plan

The delivery of the Nature Recovery Plan will be led by WODC's Biodiversity and Countryside Land Management Officer and other members of the Council's climate team. A large number of the actions rely on partnerships with other local groups and Council teams – this collaborative effort will help us extend action beyond Council land. The roadmap below sets out an indicative timeline of how some of these actions could be delivered to 2030.

Monitoring and reporting

Actions will be monitored using a series of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and progress reported annually. This process will help identify actions which require further support and others where more ambitious targets can be developed as delivery progresses and recognise actions that are looking unlikely to be achieved. The Nature Recovery Plan sets out actions required over the next seven years to support nature recovery across the district; however, the plan will be a flexible and living document. It will be reviewed and updated in response to changes in the policy and legislative climate, future opportunities and the results of annual monitoring.

Resourcing implications

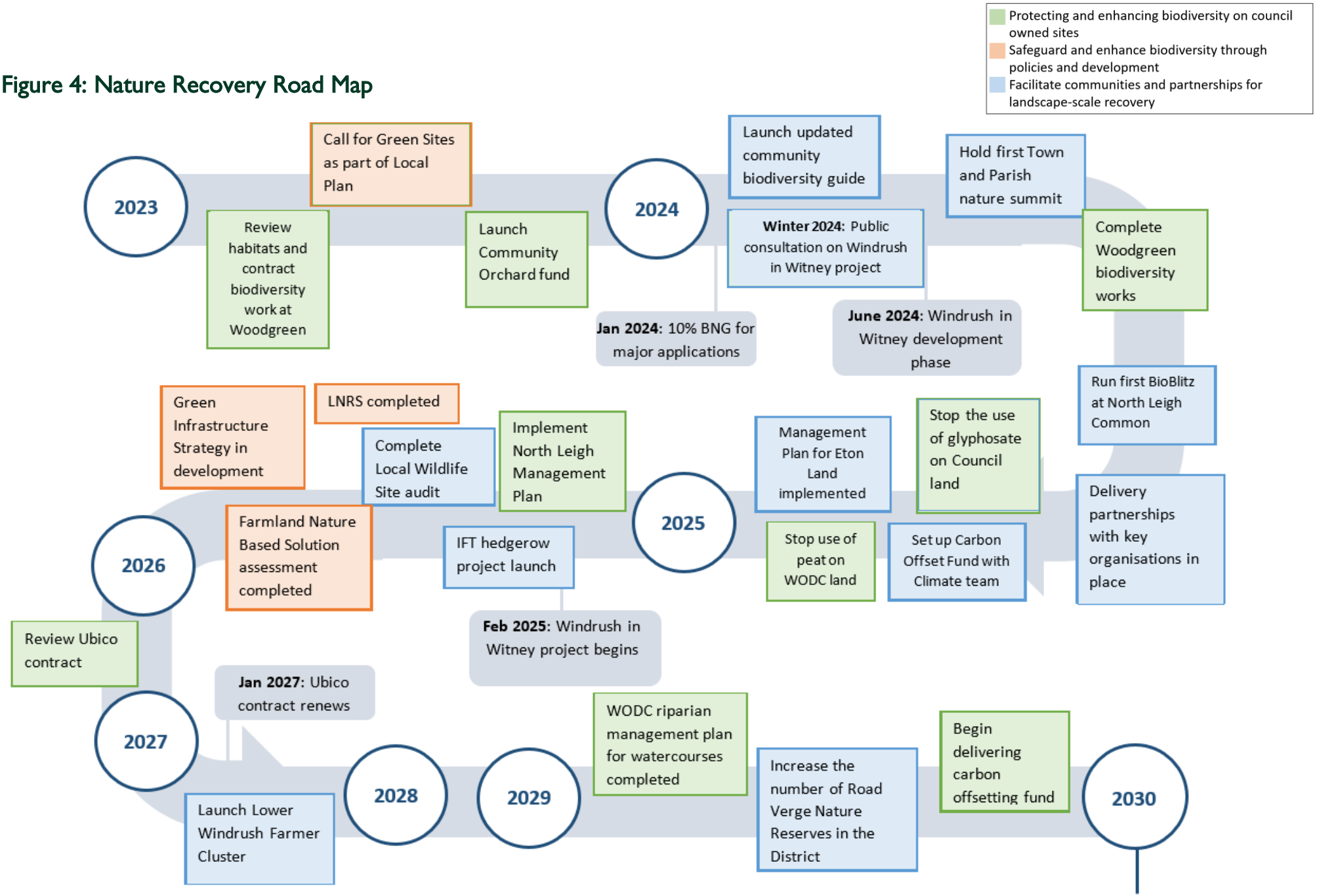
The workstreams outlined below demonstrate the extensive actions that WODC can take to improve biodiversity on Council owned land and beyond. Securing resources to deliver these actions will be critical to achieve nature recovery across the district. Actions may require separate Council approvals to secure funding and resources to implement them. This will be understood in more detail at the scoping stage of each project.

Work is being undertaken by Oxfordshire's LNP to investigate the financing of nature's recovery using private sources of finance such as private investors carbon credits, and BNG offset funding, and working with businesses to address material risks and dependencies on the landscape. This is best articulated in the Oxfordshire Nature Finance Strategy. Grants have historically been used to deliver ecology projects across the district – these range from a local level (e.g. Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment) to a national level (Esme Fairburn and the National Heritage Lottery

fund). There are also opportunities to use funding from other internal WODC teams if working on collaborative projects, for example within communities and leisure, and funding can also be acquired through Westhive to fundraise for specific projects in partnership with local communities.

The Council's climate change team, and other teams within the Council, will continue to seek out and welcome any proposals of partnership working to further nature related actions.

Figure 4: Nature Recovery Road Map



Protect and enhance biodiversity on Council owned and managed land

1) Protect and enhance biodiversity on sites owned and managed by the District Council

WODC owns and manages approximately 106ha of green space, which includes parks, fields, greens and public open spaces within housing estates. Although work has been done to improve these sites for wildlife and people in recent years through working with Ubico and volunteer groups, there is more that can be done to restore biodiversity across the Council's landholdings.

Key delivery partners

Friends of North Leigh Common, Kilkenny Conservation Group, offset providers, recording groups, Ubico, Witney Woodland Volunteers, Wychwood Forest Trust

Actions

- Continue working with Ubico on Council owned sites to enhance biodiversity across the estate, and extend the areas with targeted biodiversity management
- Develop and resource the long-term management of North Leigh Common
- Stop the use of glyphosate across all WODC land, and seek alternative weed management strategies such as hot foam or mechanical removal
- Stop the use of peat compost across all Council owned land
- Employ best practice procedures to eradicate invasive non-native species such as Himalayan Balsam and Japanese knotweed across Council owned sites
- Undertake botanical surveys of key Council sites in 2024 and 2030 - Deer Park Wood and South, Kilkenny Lane Country Park, North Leigh Common, Witney floodplain meadows.
- Implement biodiversity features at WODC offices at Woodgreen in Witney
- Provide annual funding to volunteer groups managing WODC sites e.g., Friends of North Leigh Common, Kilkenny Lane Conservation volunteers, Witney Woodland Volunteers
- Develop and resource a management plan for the Eton Land with the WFT
- Identify and create community orchards in public estates
- Review and potentially expand wildflower areas across Council owned estates in Witney and Carterton
- Proactively manage woodland areas within WODC's public estates

Key Performance Indicators

- % of Land Management Plan actions successfully completed by Ubico annually
- m3 of North Leigh Common in active management
- Litres of glyphosate used annually by Ubico on Council owned land
- Litres of peat compost used by Ubico on Council owned land
- m3 of invasive species on Council land
- Flora species diversity and abundance at each site
- m3 of habitat enhanced at Council owned offices
- £ annually given to groups for maintenance costs
- Site in active management
- Number of orchards created
- m3 of Council owned wildflower meadow areas
- Number of proactively manage woodland areas within WODC's public estates

Co-benefits

Air and water quality, access to public green spaces, carbon sequestration, improved natural flood management

Risks and dependencies

- Balance between managing spaces for both wildlife and people
- Requires coordinated partnerships with multiple stakeholders, including Ubico and volunteer groups
- Resourcing of Ubico
- Selling or purchasing WODC land

Safeguard and enhance biodiversity through policies and development

2) Drive nature recovery through the planning and development process
The mitigation and enhancement of biodiversity on developments is one of the key functions of WODC's planning department. The integration of high quality green infrastructure on these schemes is key to ensure they see gains for both people and wildlife. BNG is a new approach to development that aims to leave nature in a measurably better state than it was beforehand on a site – a 10% improvement will be mandatory for major schemes from January 2024, and the majority of other schemes from April 2024. The Council's planning team is currently collating an evidence base to propose a 20% net gain for major schemes. The Council's planning teams are working to ensure BNG is delivered and monitored effectively through the planning system, and developers are well informed through Design Guides and Design Codes to support this.
Key delivery partners
BNG offset providers, Councillors, developers, Publica BNG lead, WODC planning department
Actions
• Ensure that planning applications provide high integrity ecological surveys and reports • Implement Oxfordshire's BNG Guiding principles into the Local Plan, and explore the potential implementation of a higher BNG requirement than the mandatory 10% national benchmark • Feed relevant policies developed by the LNRS into the upcoming Local Plan • Provide regular BNG training opportunities for planners and ecologists • Work closely with offset providers to deliver appropriate gains in strategic locations within the district where BNG offsetting is required • Increase the capacity of our ecology team to effectively evaluate applications for BNG • Keep our biodiversity guidance up to date for developers through SPDs and guidance notes • Monitor on-site BNG to ensure the targeted habitats and conditions are being achieved • Encourage Town and Parish Councils to include policies around biodiversity, nature recovery strategies or Local Green Space within their Neighbourhood Plans
Key Performance Indicators
• % BNG in the Local Plan • % of LNRS suggested policies in Local Plan • Ecology training sessions per year • Developer financial contributions towards offsetting through developments • Number of FTE WODC planning ecologists • Number of years since developer biodiversity guidance updated • % schemes monitored by WODC • Number of Neighbourhood Plans containing polices related to nature recovery
Co-benefits
Air and water quality, access to public green spaces, carbon sequestration, local cooling, improved natural flood management
Risks and dependencies
• Availability of land for offsetting across the district • Requires co-ordinated partnerships with multiple groups • Resourcing of planning and ecology team

3) Take a spatially strategic approach to nature recovery	
There are opportunities through the development of the new local strategic plans to strengthen policies around ecological protection and recovery, drawing from best practice guidance, and deliver gains for biodiversity.	
Key delivery partners	
Communities, farmers, landowners, OCC, residents, Town and Parish Councils, WODC planning department.,	
Actions	
• Develop a Green Infrastructure Strategy for the district • Have a call for and include sites identified for nature recovery as part of the next Local Plan and GI Strategy • Undertake an assessment of farm Land Grades across the district for targeted nature based solutions and BNG unit creation, in partnership with Evenlode/Windrush catchment partnership • Consider the purchase of land for biodiversity offsetting purposes	
Key Performance Indicators	
• GI Strategy published • Number of sites identified for nature recovery included within the Local Plan	• Farmland nature based solutions assessment completed • Sites acquired by WODC for purpose of offsetting
Co-benefits	
Access to public green spaces, air and water quality, carbon sequestration, improved natural flood management,	
Risks and dependencies	
• Resourcing production of plans • Uncertainty around BNG legislation, offsetting payments and conservation covenants • Willingness of landowners to engage in nature recovery	

Facilitate communities and partnerships in the district for landscape-scale recovery

4) Work 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	
WODC has a wealth of local environmental groups and knowledge that we can potentially link in with to develop and deliver existing and new nature initiatives across the district. By collaborating with groups, and facilitating wider action, strategic opportunities for the restoration of natural ecosystems, improve habitat connectivity, and implement nature-based solutions to help mitigate against climate change can be maximised. The Oxfordshire LNP forms a key part in leading and informing action within this priority,	
Key delivery partners	
Community groups, farmers, landowners, OCC, Oxfordshire LNP, residents, schools, Town and Parish Councils, TOE, TVERC, WTC, Witney Woodland Volunteers, Wild Oxfordshire,	
Actions	
• Develop and fund the Windrush in Witney Project • Set up delivery partnerships with key organisations such as Lower Windrush Valley Project, Wild Oxfordshire and Wychwood Forest Trust • Continue to feed into the Oxfordshire LNRS and action plans beyond this • Engage in the forming of the final Nature Recovery Network to ensure WODC land with high ecological value or potential is included • Work with OCC with their Woodland Creator Accelerator Fund project • Work with OCC on the Oxfordshire Climate Adaptation Project • Support OLNP on the Enabling Nature-based Carbon Offsetting in Oxfordshire Project, including by helping to identify potential delivery sites • Work with Town and Parish Councils on assessing and enhancing their landholdings for biodiversity • Run WODC “Nature Summit" annual forum to showcase local project work • Facilitate the development of a Windrush Farmer Cluster • Identify land in WODC ownership that could become resident managed for community benefit • Link with International Tree Foundation and Wild Oxfordshire on a district-wide hedgerow planting scheme • Work with OCC to identify more Road Verge Nature Reserves for designation in the District, and support with appropriate management and monitoring of existing verges • Promote and showcase wildflower grasslands and good verge management for biodiversity for town and parish Councils and other land owners	
Key Performance Indicators	
• Windrush in Witney Project delivered • Number of SLAs with environmental groups • Continued WODC contribution at OxLNP meetings and projects • Trees planted in the district through WCAF project • Number of Town and Parish Councils with biodiversity projects	• Number of nature summits delivered • Formation of a Windrush Farmer Cluster • Number of resident-led land stewardship schemes • Metres of hedgerow planted through planting scheme • Number of RVNRs in active management

Co-benefits
Improved natural flood management, carbon sequestration, air and water quality, access to public green spaces
Risks and dependencies
• Requires co-ordinated partnerships with multiple groups • Grant funding may not be successfully secured • Officer resource and capability • Resourcing the long term management of sites and features

5) Improve understanding of the district's habitats and enhancement opportunities
Data is required to gain a picture of how species populations are responding to changes in land use and climate, as well as where funds can best be directed for nature recovery. There are organisations that specialise in data collection and collation that can assist in better understanding ecological trends across the district.
Key delivery partners
BBOWT, offset providers, OxLNP, recording groups, TVERC,
Actions
• Resource an audit of the district's Local Wildlife Sites to understand the condition of these sites, and understand where BNG resources could be used • Receive public wildlife records from TVERC on a twice-yearly basis • Support the development and implementation of a green finance strategy across the county
Key Performance Indicators
• Number of Local Wildlife Sites surveyed • Receipt and analysis of data from TVERC • Green finance strategy actioned
Co-benefits
Air and water quality, carbon sequestration, improved natural flood management,
Risks and dependencies
• Officer resource and capability • Requires coordinated partnerships with multiple groups • Willingness of landowners to engage in nature recovery and provide access to data

6) Work across Council departments to link the objectives of this Strategy with other Council Plan 2023-2027 priorities

There are connections within the District Council's teams that can be strengthened – there are strong links with our internal teams such as Estates, Communities, Development Planning and Flooding, which can be improved on to develop collaborative projects that benefit each team's agendas.

Key delivery partners

EA, flood management team, healthy place shaping team, NHS, landowners, OCC, residents, tree team, Windrush Catchment Partnership, WODC climate change team

Actions

- Work with the Council's communities team to deliver nature and health initiatives in strategic locations, such as the recent UKSPF Deer Park Access improvement project and acting on some of the next steps in the Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery's 'equitable distribution of accessible green space' report.
- Investigate the potential for green prescribing on a district-wide scale, in partnership with the Council's communities team and ONLP, linking in with the Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire Integrated Care Strategy
- Work with the flood management team to develop and resource a riparian management plan for watercourses across the Council's estate
- Work with the climate change team to develop a carbon offsetting strategy
- Work with the Planning Policy team in relation to the development of the emerging Local Plan 2041 and BNG

Key Performance Indicators

- Number of projects completed with communities team
- Number of surgeries with green prescribing practices
- Local Plan published with strong ecology and BNG policies
- Metres of WODC owned riverside in active management for nature
- Carbon offsetting strategy successfully completed

Co-benefits

Air and water quality, carbon sequestration, Improved natural flood management, resident mental and physical health

Risks and dependencies

- Officer resource and expertise
- Requires coordinated partnerships with multiple groups

7) Improve communication and community involvement
WODC has a strong Communications team, with several platforms on which the Council can promote opportunities for conservation volunteer and best practice to others. Bespoke outreach activities could also take place to encourage residents to better engage with the natural world.
Key delivery partners
Friends of North Leigh Common, Kilkenny Conservation Group, offset providers, WODC planning team, recording groups, Ubico, Witney Woodland Volunteers, Wychwood Forest Trust
Actions
• Regularly promote opportunities for conservation volunteering on the Council's website, climate bulletin and greenlight nature and climate online hub • Disseminate best practice on creating and managing biodiverse spaces to Town and Parish Councils • Run an annual BioBlitz to promote wildlife recording at different Council-owned sites • Work with schools across the district to deliver biodiversity enhancements on their sites and encourage pupils to interact with the natural world • Encourage Town and Parish Councils to include policies around biodiversity, nature recovery strategies or Local Green Space within their Neighbourhood Plans
Key Performance Indicators
• Continued social posts and bulletin • Number of Town and Parish Councils engaged with WODC on biodiversity • Records collected from BioBlitzs • Number of schools engaged with WODC on biodiversity
Co-benefits
Access to public green spaces, sense of place, enhanced health and wellbeing of local communities
Risks and dependencies
• Requires co-ordinated partnerships with multiple groups • Time and resources needed from several parties

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