



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and Date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 14 FEBRUARY 2024
Subject	NATURE RECOVERY PLAN AND NATURE RECOVERY OFFICER
Wards Affected	ALL
Accountable Member	Councillor Andrew Prosser – Executive Member for Climate Change. Email: Andrew.Prosser@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable Officer	Charlie Jackson – Assistant Director, Planning and Sustainability. Email: charlie.jackson@publicagroup.uk
Report Author	Rachel Crookes – Biodiversity and Countryside Land Management Officer. Email: rachel.crookes@publicagroup.uk
Purpose	To present the West Oxfordshire District Council Nature Recovery Plan, which is proposed to be adopted and resourced by the Council from April 2024, and to set out the business case to appoint a new Nature Recovery Officer.
Annexes	Annex A – West Oxfordshire District Council Nature Recovery Plan; Annex B – Outline Resourcing Plan; Annex C – KPI Tracker; Annex D – Summary of Consultation Responses.
Recommendations	That the Executive Resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Approve the West Oxfordshire District Council Nature Recovery Plan and recommend to Council that it is adopted as part of the Council's compliance with the new biodiversity duty.2. Agree to part-fund a Nature Recovery Officer at a cost to the Council of £39,039.00 over 24 months.
Corporate Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Putting Residents First• A Good Quality of Life for All• A Better Environment for People and Wildlife• Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	YES
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The West Oxfordshire District Council Nature Recovery Plan has been developed in close consultation with key officers, stakeholder partners and Councillors within the Council to inform the proposals within this report and Annexes. A six week long public consultation has been undertaken on the Council's online consultation platform, with 177 respondents. Consultation responses are summarised in Annexe D. • Councillor Andrew Prosser.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1** 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 (2021-2025). A key theme within this strategy is the Protection and Restoration of Natural Ecosystems. 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 and managed land.
- 1.2** The West Oxfordshire District Council Nature Recovery Plan (the Plan) has been developed 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 the nature recovery actions from the Climate Change Strategy will give a more focussed and detailed approach, although links between the two are still strong.
- 1.3** The Plan sets out ambitious yet achievable aims and actions to tackle biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation across the district and the wider inter-connected landscape. 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 – the Plan will demonstrate to central government that the Council complies with this new duty. The Plan also 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.

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1** The district is rich in locally distinctive habitat types such as grasslands, woodlands, wetlands, parkland, and agricultural land - a large number of areas and sites across the district have been designated due to their importance for wildlife on local to national scales. Like much of the country, the district's biodiversity has suffered overall declines during the last few decades due to cumulative factors such as habitat loss and fragmentation, pollution, agricultural intensification, and climate change.
- 2.2** The process of "nature recovery" involves the building of resilient landscapes for the future through natural restoration. It 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.
- 2.3** The Plan aims to take forward and expand on the Climate Change Strategy's objectives and outlines the specific objectives and actions that the Council will take to support nature recovery across the district to 2030. As its overall vision, the Plan adopts the same message as is set out for the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership – to "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”.

- 2.4 The actions outlined in the Plan 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 plans and policies from local to national levels, data from the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre, the expertise of officers within the Council and local communities and residents through consultation.
- 2.5 Although the delivery of the Plan will be led by the Council's Biodiversity and Countryside Land Management Officer and climate officers, the success of the Plan will be underpinned by collaboration with local environmental groups, policy makers and residents. The district is fortunate to have organisations and experts currently working to support nature's recovery including the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership, river catchment partnerships, Lower Windrush Valley Project, Wild Oxfordshire, the Wychwood Forest Trust, and others. Working with these groups will help to develop and deliver existing and new nature initiatives across the district.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 3.1 There are three key areas identified within the Plan in which the Council can advance nature recovery across the district and encourage others to participate in landscape-scale positive change. The Council can:
 - 3.2 **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.
 - 3.3 **Safeguard and enhance biodiversity through policies and development.** As a local authority, WODC can ensure that biodiversity is protected and enhanced within the planning system and deliver the key principles for biodiversity set out in national planning guidance. Biodiversity Net Gain (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 most 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.
 - 3.4 **Facilitate communities and partnerships for landscape-scale recovery.** 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.

- 3.5** The Plan is centred around these three areas of action, and the workstreams within it all align with Lawton’s “Making Space for Nature” principles of creating ‘More, bigger, better, more joined up’ spaces for nature.
- 3.6** It is hoped that in following the Plan, 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.

4. NATURE RECOVERY OFFICER

- 4.1** The Biodiversity and Countryside Land Management Officer will lead the delivery of the Plan; however, additional officer resource is required to assist with implementation.
- 4.2** The Nature Recovery Officer position will provide opportunities for collaboration with external partners on biodiversity enhancement projects and nature recovery. This will include running volunteer sessions to enhance Council sites, coordinating biodiversity related communications, working with Town and Parish Councils, and overseeing events to increase the public’s engagement with the natural world.
- 4.3** This new post will also deliver the Council’s Coronation Living Heritage Fund Community Orchard Scheme (2024-25) and monitor long-term progress of the scheme.
- 4.4** Part of the new officer’s role will be to secure funding for projects that will deliver against the Plan.
- 4.5** The post will be advertised as a full-time position with a 24-month fixed contract, ideally suited to a graduate with an ecology background and an interest in climate change. The Council can look to make this post permanent once its value has been demonstrated overtime.
- 4.6** The post will be seed funded from Innovate UK’s (IUK) Fast Followers programme (0.8 FTE) for 15 months from 1 April 2024 to 30 June 2025. As part of the IUK project, the officer will be required to take part in the Fast Followers events such as carbon and nature finance training that will equip the officer with relevant skills.
- 4.7** The Council would need to fund 0.2 FTE for 15 months (1 April 2024 – 30 June 2025) then a full-time post for nine months (1 July 2025 – 31 March 2026).

5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 5.1 The Council does not adopt the Plan. This risks a lack of clarity on the Council’s contribution to the new biodiversity duty to central government, which will first need to be reported in 2025. There may also be reputational risks to this course of action, especially due to the wide publicity of the online consultation and public declaration of the Council’s commitment to tackling the climate and ecological crises.
- 5.2 The Plan could also be scaled down from its current level of ambition to smaller projects and a shorter timeframe. However the public consultation and personal communications with internal officers indicate that the Plan as it stands is both ambitious and achievable.
- 5.3 Not employing a Nature Recovery Officer would provide insufficient resource to deliver the Plan.

6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 The Council has committed to responding to the climate and ecological emergencies by taking climate and nature action.
- 6.2 The Council has a biodiversity duty to consider what can be done to conserve and enhance biodiversity in the district. The Plan will deliver against this biodiversity duty and facilitate landscape-scale nature recovery.
- 6.3 A Nature Recovery Officer is required to deliver the Plan and achieve nature recovery across the district.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Securing resources to deliver the actions outlined in the Plan 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 – there are therefore no capital funds are being requested for the 2024/25 budget.
- 7.2 Oxfordshire’s Local Nature Partnership are undertaking work 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. 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.
- 7.3 The following actions are proposed for delivery in the financial year of 2024/5 with associated costs outlined below. Capital items are to be funded through the Climate reserves in this financial year.

Action	Cost
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	£6,000.00

Provide annual funding to volunteer groups managing WODC sites e.g. Friends of North Leigh Common, Kilkenny Lane Conservation volunteers, Witney Woodland Volunteers	£750.00
Run an annual BioBlitz to promote wildlife recording at different Council-owned sites	£750.00
Total	£7,500.00

7.4 The costs of a Level 1 specialist are:

	Year 1	Year 2	Total
Employee costs	£38,345.00	£39,212.00	£77,557.00
Grant funding 80% in first 15 months	£30,676.00	£7,842.00	£38,518.00
Council funded	£7,669.00	£31,370.00	£39,039.00
	£38,345.00	£39,212.00	£77,557.00

7.5 It might be possible to stretch the grant funding to cover 100% of employee costs in the first 15 months; however, this is not yet confirmed.

8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 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: Local Nature Recovery Strategies, 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.

8.2 Adopting and implementing the Plan will ensure that the Council is complying with the new biodiversity duty. The Plan and associated KPI tracker will function as a reporting tool to feed back to central government on action taken by the Council in connection with this.

9. RISK ASSESSMENT

9.1 There is a reputational risk to the Council if it does not use its position to influence positive change for nature recovery, especially considering the new statutory biodiversity duty and its commitment to the ongoing climate and ecological emergency.

9.2 Some actions do not have funding allocated to them for delivery. It should be noted that is a risk that not all the actions will be completed by 2030, due to the existing lack of officer and financial resources to support all projects incorporated.

10. EQUALITIES IMPACT

10.1 Adopting and implementing the Plan for the Council will see positive action to improve the biodiversity and value of nature across the district and will have a shared benefit for all.

11. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATION

- 11.1** Adopting and resourcing the Plan will see benefits to local wildlife populations, such as new and improved areas of habitat for species to live, feed and breed. This will also help the natural world adapt to a changing climate and other pressures on the environment.
- 11.2** As well as improved habitats, actions within the Plan will also deliver co-benefits such as natural flood management, carbon sequestration, cleaner water, and the improvement of their local green spaces and improved access to nature.
- 11.3** A Nature Recovery Officer will support the Biodiversity and Countryside Land Management Officer in delivering the actions set out in the Plan to achieve nature recovery across the district.

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 12.1** None

(END)