

Biodiversity Duty

Initial Considerations Report 2023

Oxfordshire County Council



December 2023

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Biodiversity

Biodiversity refers to the variety of all life, including plants, animals, fungi, and micro-organisms. Biodiversity provides us with everything necessary for survival, from fresh water, clean air and climate regulation to food and medicines and much more. These benefits do not come from individual species but from a rich variety of species working together.

Unfortunately, the UK's biodiversity is much depleted – it is estimated that we have less than half of our biodiversity remaining (the global average is 75%), we have seen a 19% loss since 1970. The UK is one of the world's most nature-depleted countries. We are in the bottom 10% globally and last among the G7 group of nations. These declines in biodiversity have been caused by habitat loss and fragmentation through development and farming, as well as pollution and climate change.

Despite these losses, Oxfordshire still supports some valuable wildlife, including rare habitats such as flower-rich floodplain meadows along our river valleys, pockets of fens such as those at Cothill, chalk streams down in the Chilterns, and some of the country's oldest oak trees at Blenheim. We also benefit from strong community interest and action for wildlife. However, having a healthy and biodiverse environment is not just about protecting our rarest wildlife, but also providing an opportunity for commoner species and habitats to thrive.

Fortunately, there is still time for us to act - we can take steps to limit the impact of pressures on the natural environment generated through our work and, through halting declines and increasing biodiversity, we can increase nature's resilience to current pressures (such as climate change). This will help us, and our communities, to benefit from all the things nature provides into the future.

What is the Biodiversity Duty?

In recognition of the importance of biodiversity, the services it provides to support life, and the state of the UK's biodiversity, we now have a new legal duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity while delivering the Council's work across all service areas. Public authorities who operate in England must consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity in England. This is the strengthened 'biodiversity duty' that the Environment Act 2021 introduces.

This means that, as a public authority, Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) must:

1. Consider what we can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
2. Agree policies and specific objectives based on our consideration.
3. Act to deliver policies and achieve our objectives.

When do we need to meet our Biodiversity Duty?

OCC must complete our first consideration of what actions we can take for biodiversity by 1 January 2024, followed by development of policies and objectives as soon as possible after this. This report

sets out the initial first considerations made, work will be undertaken during 2024 to develop this first consideration into policies and objectives

We must then reconsider the actions we can take at least every 5 years. In developing policies and objectives, we will also develop monitoring and reporting standards setting out how frequently we will report on and review our actions. Our first reporting period will run to 1 January 2026.

All future actions suggested in this report and any subsequent suggested actions will be assessed for their feasibility before being scoped in or out of policies and objectives.

Relevant Policies, Objectives and Strategies

Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The Environment Act 2021 introduced a requirement to produce Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS). LNRS will be an England-wide system of spatial strategies that establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits. They will agree priorities for nature's recovery, map the most valuable existing habitat for nature, and map specific proposals for creating or improving habitat for nature and wider environmental goals.

Oxfordshire County Council has been appointed Responsible Authority for production of the [Oxfordshire LNRS](#) and we will be working collaboratively to develop the strategy with the final document likely to be published in 2025.

In the meantime, we will use the existing system of [Conservation Target Areas](#) to help inform strategically where we should prioritise delivery of actions to fulfil our Biodiversity Duty. We have also developed, with the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC), an Interim Nature Recovery Network to inform development of Local Plans during the period before we have published a LNRS.

Species Conservation Strategies and Protected Sites Strategies

These are two other new strategic approaches introduced under the Environment Act, to avoid the need to identify project-specific solutions to protect and restore species and habitats. Development of these strategies will be led by Natural England, but as a Local Planning Authority, we will have a duty to co-operate with Natural England in the establishment and operation of the strategies. We are currently unaware of any such strategies coming forward within Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire Strategic Plan 2022-2025

Our Strategic Plan sets out our vision to lead positive change by working in partnership to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer and healthier county and sets out 9 cross-cutting priorities and commitments:

1. Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work.
2. Tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire.
3. Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.
4. Support carers and the social care system.
5. Invest in an inclusive, integrated and sustainable transport network.

6. Preserve and improve access to nature and green spaces.
7. Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.
8. Play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy.
9. Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.

Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Long Term Sustainable Development

Principle 4 of this strategy aims to enhance the natural environment of Oxfordshire and can be found at [CA APR2021R05 Appendix 1 - Strategic Vision.pdf \(oxfordshire.gov.uk\)](#).

Oxfordshire Climate and Natural Environment Policy Statement

In November 2022 Oxfordshire County Council Cabinet agreed a Climate and Natural Environment Policy Statement to ensure environmental considerations are placed at the heart of policy and decision-making across the County Council. This included re-affirming commitment to shared environment principles for [Oxfordshire](#), grouped into seven strategic objectives as follows:

1. Bring Oxfordshire to net zero carbon as early as possible in the 2040s
2. Adapt to the challenges of climate change
3. Protect, restore, enhance and create new nature areas and natural capital assets
4. Use natural resources sustainably
5. Be an exemplar for environmental sustainable development
6. Ensure that existing and new communities see real benefits from our approach
7. Resource our ambitions, monitor and review regularly

It is intended that the policies and objectives developed through this piece of work will form policy to support these existing policies, strategies and objectives.

How action for biodiversity helps achieve national goals and targets

The [Environmental Improvement Plan \(EIP23\)](#), published in January 2023, sets out government plans for significantly improving the natural environment.

By 2030, the government has committed to:

- halt the decline in species abundance
- protect 30% of UK land

By 2042, the government has committed to:

- increase species abundance by at least 10% from 2030, surpassing 2022 levels
- restore or create at least 500,000 ha of a range of wildlife rich habitats
- reduce the risk of species extinction
- restore 75% of our one million hectares of terrestrial and freshwater protected sites to favourable condition, securing their wildlife value for the long term

Our review of actions we can take for biodiversity will take these commitments into account, seeking measures which will help to achieve them.

Internal Staff Survey

Between 9th October and 30th November an internal survey was undertaken on Let's Talk Oxfordshire to gather information from staff across all survey areas on current and potential future actions for biodiversity that could be undertaken during the course of their work. Information was also collected through an interactive whiteboard session during a Lunch and Learn event on 7th November. A summary of the information gathered is provided in Appendix 1. This has been used to inform the information presented in this document.

Cross-cutting Actions for Biodiversity

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)

We support and fund the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC), alongside all Oxfordshire and Berkshire Local Authorities and the Environment Agency.

TVERC holds over 3 million records of flora and fauna across Berkshire and Oxfordshire, as well as information about Local Wildlife and Geological Sites, NERC Act S41 Habitats of Principal Importance, Conservation Target Areas, and Nature Recovery Networks. They collect this data from the general public, skilled volunteers/amateur recorders, professionals working for wildlife charities and government agencies, and ecological consultants.

The information is critical in supporting Oxfordshire County Council in taking action for biodiversity. It helps ensure action is focussed where it will have the most benefit, informs our land management activities to ensure we protect rare species and habitats, and is critical in supporting our role as planning authority to make informed decisions and to evidence strategic plans.

Oxfordshire Wildlife Sites Project

Alongside the Districts, we fund and support the Oxfordshire Wildlife Sites Project, which is a partnership project led by the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) and the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) on behalf of the Oxfordshire Local Authorities. The project undertakes a rolling programme of survey and selection of Local Wildlife Sites according to agreed selection criteria. It also liaises with the owners of Local Wildlife Sites to arrange access for survey and provide advice on conservation management of their sites.

Support of the Oxfordshire Wildlife Sites Project enables us to deliver biodiversity actions across a range of Council service areas:

- Alongside nationally designated sites and irreplaceable habitats, Local Wildlife Sites form the core areas of existing importance for nature conservation from which the Local Nature Recovery Strategy will develop an approach to buffer, extend and join up habitat to create a nature recovery network.
- The selection of Local Wildlife Sites, and maintenance of up-to-date data relating to them is also key to informing our planning policy and development management functions, ensuring

that we appropriately identify Local Wildlife Sites through the planning process, and can correctly apply the planning policies which protect them.

- The identification of Local Wildlife Sites also helps inform our own land management where they fall within our ownership
- The project plays an important role in ensuring that Local Wildlife Site owners have good awareness of the importance of their land for biodiversity and receive good advice on appropriate land management.

Data on the proportion of Local Sites in positive conservation management in England is collected by Defra. In Oxfordshire, 52% of Local Wildlife Sites are considered to be in positive conservation management in 22/23. For context, the equivalent figure across England in 21/22 was 43%.

Table 1. Proportion of Local Sites in positive conservation management in Oxfordshire

	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Cherwell	23%	45%	47%	Assessment not required by DEFRA due to pressure from Covid	Assessment not required by DEFRA due to pressure from Covid	49%	47%
South	32%	40%	48%			56%	54%
Vale	37%	41%	48%			49%	49%
West	28%	51%	57%			55%	60%
Oxford City	32%	28%	39%			44%	39%
Oxfordshire County Council	34%	47%	51%			52%	52%

Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership

The Council supports, funds and participates in the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership, an organisation of key partners working together to radically enhance nature, its positive impact on our climate and the priority it is given, helping to make Oxfordshire a county where people and nature thrive. The OLNP has three key focus areas:

Nature Finance
Nature Recovery
Nature and Health

Involvement in these areas supports OCC's delivery of biodiversity conservation and enhancement across a range of services including planning, public health, climate adaptation and production of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, as well as extending this approach through partnership working.

Lower Windrush Valley Project

The LWVP coordinates action designed to generate benefit from the legacy of mineral extraction, focusing on:

- Nature conservation
- Access to the countryside
- Landscape improvements

With a focus on the river valley which stretches along 7 miles of the River Windrush from Witney to its confluence with the River Thames at Newbridge

The LWVP was set up by Oxfordshire County Council in 2001 and continues to be hosted by the Council. It has delivered a significant number of achievements including:

- Advice on habitat management to minerals operators, landowners and fisheries.
- New nature reserves at Rushy Common and Standlake Common created through mineral extraction and now managed by the LWVP.
- Supporting local community groups to access funds to create and manage wildlife habitats
- Bird hide key scheme that enables safe access to three bird hides at the nature reserves.
- Improved access including two sections of a long distance footpath along the river Windrush. Community walks, talks, events and a regular group of conservation volunteers.
- Educational opportunities for schools, colleges and universities.
- Research projects with environmental organisations such as the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) and Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT).
- Work in partnership with national and local environmental organisations such as RSPB and BBOWT

The current Strategic Plan for the project runs from 2015-2025 and identifies 25 actions relating to community, nature and economy.

Community Action Groups Oxfordshire

CAGs Oxfordshire is a network of over 100 community action groups across Oxfordshire, working together to build an Oxfordshire with resilient and empowered communities, so that people and planet can thrive within ecological limits.

Member groups work in their local communities, organising events and projects to take action on issues including waste, transport, food, energy, biodiversity and social justice.

During 2023 a specific project on Communities and Nature has given grants to 5 groups to deliver projects that deepen people's connection to nature. This has included:

International Trees Foundation (ITF) with partner Refugee Resource: The project is working with adults, children and young people who are currently receiving psychological, social or practical support from the organisation, to engage them in a series of woodland activity sessions.

HomeStart Oxford: supporting a fun day in half term in Witney to provide nature activities for families

Banbury CAG/Bridge Street Community Garden: working with Sunrise Multicultural Project to run free gardening session for female refugees and asylum seekers living in hotels.

Oxfordshire African Caribbean Mutual Association (OACMA): to run a community garden in Blackbird Leys

Oxford Community Action (OCA): to organise family friendly hikes

Future Actions for Consideration

- Continue to fund and support the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre to ensure our decisions are informed by the most up-to-date environmental data.

- Ensure that up-to-date environmental data is accessible to all OCC service areas and integrated appropriately into systems and applications.
- Continue to support the Oxfordshire Wildlife Sites Project, investigate opportunities to provide longer-term funding commitments. Review with partners the potential to further develop the project, with an aim to ensure that data is kept as up-to-date as possible, to seek to increase the proportion of LWS in positive conservation management, and support delivery of the LNRS.
- Review future biodiversity actions within the Lower Windrush Valley Project through a refresh of the Project Strategy
- Review the potential to extend the LWVP approach elsewhere within the County
- Support the Oxford/Bernwood/Ray project
- Continue to support, fund and engage with the OLNP, investigate opportunities to provide longer-term funding commitments.
- Continue to support CAGs Oxfordshire, ensure they are engaged in development of the LNRS and consider how their future work can help support delivery of the LNRS

Managing land to improve biodiversity

Current baseline

Oxfordshire County Council owns around 900,000 m² of property assets across 909 sites across the county. This includes, corporate buildings and offices, nurseries and schools, leisure centres and field study centres, libraries, fire stations, children and family centres and household waste recycling centres, community-run facilities, residential and care assets and an investment portfolio which includes land and buildings.

Designated nature conservation sites

OCC currently is in ownership of 4.29 hectares (ha) of land located within statutory designated wildlife sites and 20.52ha located within non-statutory wildlife sites. While the majority of this land is located along highway boundaries, OCC is in ownership of the following sites:

- Shellingford crossroads quarry SSSI (geological) assessed as in favourable condition in 2013, with no management plan in place but ad hoc vegetation clearance to maintain visibility of geological features previously undertaken ([SSSI detail \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk/SSSI/detail/naturalengland.org.uk/))
- Stratton Audley quarries SSSI (part, geological) assessed as in destroyed condition in 2022 due to vegetation encroachment and flooding, with no management plan in place ([SSSI detail \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk/SSSI/detail/naturalengland.org.uk/))
- Crecy Hill LWS assessed as in poor ecological condition by OCC in 2023, with no management plan in place
- Stratfield brake DWS assessed as in good ecological condition by OCC in 2023, currently managed by the Woodland Trust

- All RVNRs assessed in varying levels of ecological condition between 2016 and 2023, with 6 out of 32 sites in full active management

OCC is also in ownership of significant portions of the following sites:

- Horspath wildlife conservation area LWS ecological condition and implementation of management plan currently unknown
- Carterton grassland LWS ecological condition and implementation of management plan currently unknown
- Milhamford field and quad LWS ecological condition and implementation of management plan currently unknown
- Stratton Audley quarry LWS ecological condition and implementation of management plan currently unknown

In addition, the following sites are also under ownership by OCC and managed for nature conservation without formal designation:

- Stanford in the Vale Community Woodland managed by a local community group with input from OCC to establish woodland
- Dean Common managed by the Wychwood Forest Trust with input from OCC to establish woodland, waterbodies and species rich acidic grassland
- Centenary Community Woodland, Charlbury managed by a local community group with input from OCC to establish, maintain and enhance woodland
- Neyott's Meadow managed by a local conservation organisation along with input from OCC to establish lowland meadow
- Wendlebury Road Community Woodland managed by a local community group to maintain and enhance woodland
- Littleworth Nature Reserve managed by a local community group to maintain and enhance woodland

National Landscapes

Three National Landscapes (formerly referred to as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty), the Chilterns, the Cotswolds and the North Wessex Downs extend into Oxfordshire covering approximately 25% of the county's area. AONBs are primarily designated to conserve and enhance their natural beauty but they also seek to further education and enjoyment of the area.

National Landscapes are seen as one of the key delivery areas for achieving 30% of biodiversity-rich land by 2030, and as such efforts to further nature recovery work in these areas is only going to increase through Management Plan policies, project work and partnership working.

The North Wessex Downs National Landscape is also seeking accreditation under the IUCN's (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Green List Standard for protected areas and has been accepted as a UK candidate for Green List Status.

Oxfordshire County Council supports and works with the protected landscapes on their statutory Management Plans, which are a material consideration to the Council's Planning function. In

addition, under S85 of the CROW Act and the recent amendments of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB) Oxfordshire County Council 'must seek to further' the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of a National Landscape when exercising or performing any of its functions and contribute to the delivery of the Management Plans.

Oxfordshire County Council works in partnership and supports the National Landscapes in their project and strategy work relating to biodiversity including making links to their respective Nature Recovery Plans.

The Council also supports and hosts two National Trails, the Thames Path and The Ridgeway, latter of which is actively working on becoming a more biodiverse corridor through appropriate verge management.

Verge maintenance policy and Road Verge Nature Reserves

Oxfordshire County Council, as the Highway Authority, is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of grass verges alongside the carriageway network throughout Oxfordshire excluding motorways and trunk roads.

In 2023 an updated Highway Verge and Vegetation Management strategy ([Verge \(oxfordshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk)) was implemented. This policy encompasses Oxfordshire County Council's corporate vision, objectives and embraces the nine priority themes of the Council. The policy is also informed by the Local Transport Connectivity Plan, the Highway Asset Management Plan, the Energy Strategy, and the Carbon Management Plan. The priority themes include:

- Put action to address the climate emergency at the heart of our work;
- Improve access to nature and green spaces.

Policy RVP7 refers to promotion of biodiversity through appropriate verge management, including reference to RVNRs. There are currently 32 RVNRs located within Oxfordshire that have been designated based on one or more of the following criteria and each RVNR is subject to specific management requirements based on the designated feature(s) present:

- Supports a species which is classified as critically endangered, endangered, vulnerable, near threatened or Nationally scarce in the National or County Red Data Book or very rare, rare, very scarce or scarce (as defined by Day 2001).
- It supports a good example of a plant community that represents a habitat characteristic of Oxfordshire or is a Habitat of Principal Importance (listed under Section 41 of the NERC Act 2006)
- It supports any animal species protected under legislation or supports a rare animal species or rich community of animals in the context of the county's fauna.

Tree strategy

OCC's tree strategy ([Tree policy for Oxfordshire | Oxfordshire County Council](https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk)) recognises trees as a critical component of the climate change adaptation infrastructure and are also a core element of the biodiversity, amenity and landscape of Oxfordshire.

The aim of the tree policy is to:

- Outline the commitment to Climate Adaptation through proactive tree care and tree planting in built-up areas by introducing a “presumption in favour of trees” throughout the built environment and the countryside alike;
- promote and encourage care for existing trees to maximise their Climate and biodiversity value, amenity value and public benefits by ensuring they reach optimal life expectancy; and
- deliver on the ambition to increase canopy across Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP)

The LTCP outlines a clear vision to deliver a net-zero Oxfordshire transport and travel system that enables the county to thrive while protecting the environment and making Oxfordshire a better place to live for all residents.

Policy 30 states OCC will:

- a. Embed the protection, maintenance and enhancement of Green Infrastructure (GI) into relevant guidance and decision-making processes in order to improve connectivity of the GI network, its environmental and community value.
- b. Work to deliver a transport network that achieves and where possible exceeds government and local biodiversity net gain targets.

Property and Assets Strategy 22/23

The long-term vision for Oxfordshire County Council’s property and estates assets strategy ([Property Strategy 2022/23 \(oxfordshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/property-strategy-2022-23)) is underpinned by six strategic objectives:

- Facilitating service delivery
- Supporting Oxfordshire communities
- Decarbonising our corporate buildings
- Enabling agile working and rationalisation of the estate
- Maximising our potential investments
- Investing in our schools

Public Rights of Way

Informal processes regarding biodiversity are currently implemented when managing Oxfordshire’s public rights of way that include:

- Carrying out only the minimum vegetation clearance required to reduce impacts on biodiversity
- Carrying out works outside of nesting bird season where possible
- Contacting relevant designated sites officers when works are anticipated to impact designated sites of nature conservation
- Identification of badger setts that may be impacted by proposed works and implementing appropriate mitigation including licensing

Future actions for consideration

OCC will undertake a review of land owned to determine the current biodiversity baseline. This approach would assist with planning and property management services in understanding the

biodiversity value of each site, including the potential value of each site to act as biodiversity net gain (BNG) offset area and possible inclusion in a habitat bank primarily designed to provide BNG credits to offset future OCC infrastructure projects.

The review would also provide baseline data for statutory and non-statutory designated sites currently owned or partially owned by OCC and help inform future habitat management plans targeted towards the designated features of each site where required. Where sites of ecological value are identified, they will be assessed against designation criteria, and proposed for designation as appropriate.

A review of project and management processes will be undertaken by OCC to ensure biodiversity and landscape is always considered at the earliest opportunity for new proposals or ongoing management requirements. The earliest stage would include site selection and would build upon the OCC sites review as mentioned above, along with the future LNRS. This approach would reduce the potential for delays in project timelines by considering the potential for seasonal protected species surveys and/or mitigation in a timely manner fulfilling OCC's legal requirements. Using this approach would allow opportunity for biodiversity and landscape considerations such as reduction of vegetation clearance, avoidance of ecologically and landscape sensitive areas or spread of invasive species, or ecological and landscape enhancements could be incorporated into the design with reduced cost. Budgets would then also be designed with biodiversity and landscape considerations in mind.

An online form will be designed and made available for members of the public on OCC's website to submit requests regarding verge management proposals. A review process will then be undertaken of each proposal with the first step assessing the ecological baseline of the proposal area and if the proposed activities are appropriate in increasing or maintain the biodiversity value of the site.

A review will be undertaken of all RVNRs within Oxfordshire. This review will include an assessment of the ecological baseline of each RVNR, and propose any amendments required to the management required to ensure the designated features are maintained and improved. New sites will continue to be designated that meet the RVNR criteria as submitted through the online web form as mentioned above. Sites will be incorporated into full active management on an incremental basis, dependant on funding and logistical constraints. Any proposed areas that do not meet the RVNR criteria, such as new wildflower planting, will be designated as under alternative management and signage provided to ensure they are maintained as proposed.

OCC will review paved walkways, pavements, rooftops, buildings and planters to determine if there are any opportunities for planting. And if so, to determine the most appropriate type of planting and management depending on location.

We will assess the feasibility of incorporating BNG into OCC projects that would otherwise be exempt such as those that do not go through the planning process or fall below the minimum size threshold.

A review of the tree policy will be undertaken by the biodiversity team to ensure factors such as ecological site baseline, location, species to be planted, management and monitoring plans are considered to maximise the biodiversity value of the site where possible.

A specific review will be undertaken to determine the use of pesticides, herbicides, peat and other chemicals across OCC's services with the aim of eliminating, or reducing, their usage as far as possible.

We will consider the development of standards and policies for planting along active travel routes, and incorporation of biodiversity into active travel infrastructure such as cycle parking, including recommendations for ongoing management.

Dim or turn-off streetlighting and lighting of our buildings to reduce impacts on nature and use warmer spectrum LEDs to ensure light levels are not increased leading to impacts on light sensitive wildlife.

Education, advice and raising awareness

Current baseline

Oxfordshire County Council provides input to the following services within Oxfordshire which provide scope for focussed awareness raising of biodiversity:

- Schools – 304 (168 academies and 136 maintained schools)
- Care homes – 123 sites
- Community support service centres – 6 sites
- Museums – 42 sites
- Libraries – 45 sites

Schools

Many of the schools have wildlife areas in their grounds, although there is no central source of information on this.

We have Environmental Learning Cards training available to schools, a practical course aimed at demonstrating and linking environmental topics into curriculum areas.

OCC's Children and Families Service have incorporated guidance for early years practitioners regarding options for incorporating biodiversity into early years development and teaching programmes.

Libraries

Oxfordshire Libraries have signed the Green Libraries Manifesto, co-ordinated by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information professionals. Recent biodiversity actions have included planting for bees and butterflies outside Abingdon Library, and promoting hubs for GroWet, where local people are encouraged to help save Oxfordshire's historic wetland and freshwater habitats by growing rare wetland plants at home and in community centres, then planted back in the wild.

Website

We host the Climate Action Oxfordshire website which provides a community resource of ideas of practical things residents can do reduce climate impacts, including nature-related activities.

We are working to reduce single occupancy car use and promoting active travel through creating and reviewing travel plans and running campaigns.

Oxfordshire County Council is the waste disposal authority in Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire has the highest recycling and composting rate in the country (59% in 2016/17) and residents produce one of the lowest amounts of waste/head. Together with recycling and composting, energy recovery means we divert over 95% of our waste from landfill. We host the Waste Wizard, and online look-up tool that tells residents where they can repair, donate, recycle and dispose of an item they no longer need, aiming to help reduce the number of items thrown away.

Staff

We are rolling out the award-winning [carbon literacy](#) training to our staff, and training on climate action is mandatory for all staff.

A climate outreach officer has been appointed to develop and deliver stakeholder engagement and outreach strategy. Their aim is to engage, inspire, motivate and facilitate action on climate change including promoting resilience to a changing climate across a wide range of audiences in Oxfordshire.

Future actions for consideration

Develop a communications plan for biodiversity, seeking to build on encouraging behaviour change alongside our communications around climate action and waste reduction.

A review of actions and responsibilities undertaken by schools, care homes, community support service centres, museums and libraries will be undertaken focusing on where existing work, and new opportunities to further educate or raise awareness of biodiversity. Best practice guidance and examples will then be shared with all sites.

Include articles on biodiversity in the Oxfordshire Schools News weekly newsletter, identify further opportunities for Children and Families and Governors Services to provide advice and information on biodiversity to schools.

Biodiversity champions nominations will be asked for from each service area within OCC. This will help to ensure biodiversity is considered at the earliest stage in each team's function appropriately allowing the biodiversity team to provide advice as soon as possible and maximise biodiversity gain. Biodiversity champions will also be required to record positive impacts on biodiversity within their service group and report back to the biodiversity team to aid the reporting aspect of the Biodiversity Duty.

All service area teams within OCC will be contacted with an offer to attend one or more team meeting per year to help educate and raise awareness of biodiversity, with a particular focus on how each team may encounter biodiversity within their respective roles and identify areas for

further specific training and guidance. The feasibility of extending this invite to town and parish councils will be considered. These meetings will also be used to assess the requirement for specialised guidance relating to biodiversity for individual teams or roles. The option of holding meetings on sites designated for wildlife conservation owned by OCC will be explored.

The feasibility of providing information on the external website, museums, libraries, care homes, community support service centres and schools and internal intranet will be assessed including the exploration of regular training or e-learning course for OCC service teams with the aim of raising the profile of biodiversity.

Incorporate staff action for biodiversity (e.g. volunteering to improve nature) into staff wellbeing offer and wellbeing newsletter

Consider developing a volunteer graduate trainee role within the Biodiversity Team.

Internal policies and processes

Current baseline

Our existing internal policies and processes for staff and facilities have already been reviewed in light of our policy commitment to be carbon neutral by 2030. Many of the resulting measures will also help to conserve and enhance biodiversity. Analyses by others of organisational biodiversity footprints (e.g. University of Oxford) have demonstrated that the largest biodiversity impacts are commonly through indirect effects of resource use and waste in external supply chains.

Streetlighting

38% of carbon our emissions come from street lighting. 92% of our street lighting has been replaced with energy efficient LEDs, with an aim to replace all by 2024 (with exception of heritage lighting columns). This will cut CO2 emissions by 70% saving 6,000 tonnes of CO2.

We are working with communities to dim street lighting or switch off for periods of time when it is considered appropriate to do so.

Buildings

Approximately 33 per cent of our carbon emissions arise from our buildings. We have secured £3m to allow decarbonisation and energy efficiency measures across seven of our corporate buildings, nine schools and one fire station. The majority of this work is now completed with the remainder due to be finished in 2023.

A move to energy-efficient LEDs in council buildings has reduced the energy used for lighting by around 70 per cent. Further savings have been made by installing motion sensors and boiler controls.

We are developing a decarbonisation programme in line with our property strategy that will ensure that our buildings are on the path to net zero.

Transport

Approximately 23 per cent of our carbon emissions arise from fleet and staff travel.

Virtual meetings are prioritised, and staff incentive schemes are in place to make cycling, public transport, and the transition to electric vehicles easier and more cost-effective for our staff.

The council is committed to rationalising its fleet and transitioning to electric vehicles. We now have a fleet of 32 electric vehicles and 46 charge points across 19 council sites. Our budget plans for 2023/24 include investment in a fleet to support our climate objectives and reduce whole lifecycle costs.

Our fire and rescue service is partnering with hydrogen fuel engineering firm ULEMCo, and with funding from Innovate UK, is helping to develop the UK's first hydrogen fuelled fire engine.

Green electricity

We have moved to a REGO-backed (Renewable Energy Guarantees of Origin) green electricity supply for our estate and highways assets (streetlights, traffic signals and signs).

Although we are purchasing REGO backed energy we have chosen not to count this as a carbon offset as we are committed to reduce our reliance on grid electricity. We have an energy hierarchy approach to energy reduction as set out in our 2020.

Schools

Schools are being supported on energy efficiency measures through our [Action on Carbon and Energy in Schools](#) initiative.

Supply chain

We spend over £500m a year with contractors and suppliers to deliver critical services for residents. In order to generate additional economic, social or environmental benefits from our activity we have created a social value policy. The policy encourages suppliers to commit to providing additional social value that will benefit local communities. Our policy uses the National Social Value Measurement Framework to set out social value themes, outcomes and measures that can be objectively assessed.

Alongside the commitment to realise net zero emissions from the corporate estate by 2030, Oxfordshire County Council is committed to working with its supply chain to reduce emissions and ensuring they are increasingly aligned to science-based targets for net zero emissions.

[Policy Position on Reducing Oxfordshire County Councils Supply Chain Emissions](#)

Decision Making

Climate impact assessments are now carried out to ensure our decision-making is aligned with our climate commitments. This includes some high-level assessment of biodiversity impacts.

Corporate Key Performance Indicators

OCC currently has one Key Performance Indicator (KPI) related to biodiversity: 'Achieving the statutory 10% Biodiversity Net Gain for OCC as Local Planning Authority for Minerals and Waste applications, and where OCC is the applicant in developments.'

Employee benefits

These are provided in line with sustainability goals

Future actions for consideration

- Develop a biodiversity footprint for the Council, commit to becoming nature positive by 2030, and identify the actions needed to achieve this.*
- Integration of biodiversity conservation and enhancement assessment alongside, or as part of, Climate Impact Assessment tool (e.g. a Natural Environment and Climate Impact Assessment)
- Identify opportunities to connect with other existing governance and tools around the climate programme and forthcoming work relating to circular economy.
- Create a baseline for OCC waste impacts and develop a road map towards embedding circular economy principles
- Review supply chains and procurement contracts to identify areas where biodiversity impacts and waste can be minimised and ensure procurement is sustainable
- Embed circular economy principles into our property strategy to ensure all new buildings are designed to minimise waste and pollution, circulate products and materials and regenerate nature.
- Ensure biodiversity is included within scope of measures for Social Value Procurement
- Develop a template to include carbon, waste reduction and biodiversity in specifications for procurement
- Review current KPIs relating to biodiversity and explore how the implementation of additional KPIs could help track and meet targets related to biodiversity throughout the service areas of OCC

*= it should be noted that to undertake a thorough assessment of the biodiversity footprint of the Council could be a very involved piece of work. For example, University of Oxford have developed a method see [Analysis: the biodiversity footprint of the University of Oxford \(nature.com\)](https://www.nature.com/articles/15101)

Planning (Including Preparation for Biodiversity Net Gain)

Current baseline

Biodiversity net gain (BNG) is an approach to development or land management that aims to leave the natural environment in a measurably better state than it was beforehand. From January 2024 development projects not falling under the small sites definition (apart from exempt developments) will need to achieve a 10% biodiversity net gain.

OCC has roles in planning both as Local Planning Authority in determining minerals and waste planning applications, and for Regulation 3 developments (planning applications made by OCC such as those for highways and schools).

We are also a statutory consultee on larger District and City applications, draft Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans for a range of matters as they relate to County Council functions including Highways, Education, Public Rights of Way, Public Health, and as Lead Local Flood Authority.

Objective 3 of the Oxfordshire Environment Principles

This objective is to protect, restore, enhance and create new nature areas and natural capital assets, and within this a commitment is made to achieve and where possible exceed government and local biodiversity net gain targets with an ambition of achieving 20% biodiversity net gain. As an adopted OCC Strategy, this policy statement is a material consideration in the consideration of

Regulation 3 planning applications, and all OCC led developments should therefore seek to achieve 20% BNG.

Minerals and Waste Core Strategy 2017

The vision for minerals planning in Oxfordshire in 2031 includes the requirement for restored mineral workings to enhance the quality of Oxfordshire's natural environment and the quality of life for Oxfordshire residents by:

- Delivering a net gain in biodiversity, and making a significant contribution to establishing a coherent and resilient ecological network, through the creation of priority habitats at a landscape scale;
- enhancing the green infrastructure within Oxfordshire, providing opportunity for access to the countryside and recreation activity; and
- helping to reduce the risk of flooding and adding to flood storage capacity.

Minerals Planning Objective X is: Implement a biodiversity-led restoration strategy that delivers a net gain in biodiversity, and contributes to establishing a coherent and resilient ecological network, through the landscape-scale creation of priority habitat.

This vision and objective are primarily secured through Planning Policy C7: Biodiversity and geodiversity and Planning Policy M10: Restoration of minerals workings. These policies seek to conserve biodiversity and deliver biodiversity net gain.

Oxfordshire BNG Principles

OCC chair and participate in the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership BNG working group to share best practice in preparing for BNG locally. This group has agreed the Oxfordshire BNG Principles, which in summary are:

- LPAs should aim to adopt a minimum requirement for BNG of 20% or greater in the next iteration of their Local Plans.
- Work towards a coordinated approach for the delivery of BNG across all local authorities in Oxfordshire
- Local authorities policies should incentivise local delivery of offsite BNG.
- Use offsite BNG to create priority habitats to help meet national and local targets.
- Use BNG funds to support the priorities in the emerging Local Nature Recovery Strategy
- Be precautionary in the application of the metric
- Ensure robust verification of BNG monitoring plans by suitably qualified persons organisations at key points in the delivery cycle
- Onsite and offsite BNG plans have the same level of scrutiny
- Access to the BNG market should be equitable

District Level Licencing

OCC holds a District Level Great Crested Newt Licence operated with or partners, NatureSpace, to offer an alternative route to the traditional protected species licencing for this species. The District Licence ensures that developers pay for their proposed development impacts, and the funds are used to create great crested newt habitats off-site with NGO partners. The compensatory habitats

are created in strategic locations for GCN, away from the pressures of development and are managed for the long term.

BNG secured during 2023

During the period 1 Jan 2023 – 29 Nov 2023 42 Reg3 planning applications were determined, and 54 minerals and waste applications. BNG did not apply to the majority of these, as they were details pursuant to conditions, non-material amendments or screening opinions. Where appropriate, these types of applications will still have been assessed for impacts on biodiversity or to ensure previously secured biodiversity enhancements were appropriately delivered.

There were 2 minerals and waste applications that secured BNG, a waste application which secured an onsite 6.43% net gain in area habitats, and a minerals application which secured an onsite 26.82% net gain in area habitats. Historically, restoration of some minerals sites has secured significant areas for nature conservation, but this has not been assessed quantitatively through the use of biodiversity metrics.

There were 2 Reg3 developments which secured BNG, these were highways schemes for slip roads at Lodge Hill interchange on the A34, and Shores Green on the A40. The Lodge Hill scheme secured a 16.6% net gain in offsite hedgerow habitats and secured 10% net gain in area habitats through delivery by the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment. The Shores Green scheme secured a net gain of 18.67% area habitats, 50.78% hedgerow habitats, and 317.79% watercourse habitats through a combination of onsite measures, an offsite agreement for management of Fox Burrow Wood with the Wychwood Trust, and purchase of units from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment.

These statistics do not reflect work during 2023 on applications not yet decided which are currently within the planning system and will be required to secure BNG, including the two Highway Infrastructure Schemes (HIFs) and some significant minerals and waste applications, including the Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme.

Statutory Consultee role

Linked to this objective, we have published Local Standards and Guidance for Surface Water Drainage on Major Development in Oxfordshire as part of the Oxfordshire Flood Toolkit. This provides Oxfordshire specific information on the planning, design, and delivery of surface water drainage, designed to reduce the risk of flooding and maximise environmental gain, including water quality, water resources, biodiversity.

The Healthy Place Shaping team comment on planning application to increase blue and green infrastructure within masterplanning, advocating for growing spaces, mature trees, biodiversity net gain and a variety of species within new developments. They also comment on planning policy and recommend that policies promote enable easy access to nature-rich green spaces to enable connection with nature

Future actions for consideration

Local Planning Authority role

- Undertake a quantitative assessment of levels of change in biodiversity that restoration of minerals sites in Oxfordshire has secured in the past, to inform development of future Minerals and Waste Local Plan policy in the context of mandatory BNG.

- Take into consideration the Oxfordshire BNG Principles in developing Minerals and Waste Local Plan Policy, including incentivising local delivery of BNG, creation of priority habitats to meet national targets, and supporting the priorities in the emerging LNRS.
- Develop a Business Case for the creation of a Habitat Banking Vehicle to facilitate the delivery of BNG on OCC landholdings and take this forward as appropriate.
- Work with the Districts and City to agree common standards we expect to be applied during the application of Biodiversity Metrics, including the use of CTAs as 'Areas of Strategic Significance' (ahead of publication of the LNRS) and publish this as publicly available guidance.
- Develop detailed guidance on biodiversity in minerals and waste sites
- Following an update of the National Validation Requirements, review the need to update our Local Validation Requirements in relation to BNG and provide training to planning officers on validation accordingly.
- Produce design guidelines for infrastructure and schools projects to ensure good design of BNG
- Collect and report on data relating to BNG secured through the planning process (statutory requirement)
- Seek to increase our capacity to assess biodiversity implications of planning applications through increasing our in-house ecology staff

Statutory Consultee Role

- Update the 'Biodiversity and Planning in Oxfordshire' document and other information relating to biodiversity and planning on our website to reflect new requirements under the Environment Act.
- Refer others to the updated Biodiversity and Planning Oxfordshire document when responding to District Planning applications and Neighbourhood Plans
- Work with the Local Nature Partnership to ensure biodiversity guidance is available to those producing Neighbourhood Plans and reference this when responding to Neighbourhood Plan consultations.
- When updating the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy (LFRMS) seek to include opportunities to provide biodiversity and surface water run-off water quality enhancements through statutory planning consultations on drainage, and through SuDS Approval Body approvals.

- Ensure advice on SUDs design continues to support delivery of surface water management that maximises environmental gain through review of the Local Standards and Guidance for Surface Water Drainage on Major Development in Oxfordshire

A Natural Capital Approach to Delivering OCC Services

Lead Local Flood Authority

The LFRMS sets out an objective to take a collaborative approach to reducing flood risks, using all available resources and funds in an integrated way and in so doing derive enhanced overall benefit. Within this there is scope for us to support partners, particularly Catchment Partnerships, to bring forward Natural Flood Management schemes which reduce flood risk whilst also enhancing biodiversity.

We have supported NFM bids with the Thame Conservation Trust in Chalgrove, and with the District Council in Littleworth.

Future Actions for consideration

- Support partners to gain funding for, and deliver, Natural Flood Management schemes
- Ensure OCC's flood risk data and knowledge informs development of the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy to ensure wider environmental benefits are realised through nature recovery actions.

Public Health

The Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2030 which has recently gone through public consultation, aims for more equitable access to greenspace, more shade and natural carbon capture, and protection of biodiversity.

OCC takes a lead role in the Local Nature Partnership Health and Nature Working group, working to promote green social prescribing, high quality green infrastructure that works for people and nature, and inputting into the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) to advocate for the provision of wildlife-rich spaces especially in deprived and urban environments. This has included supporting work by the University of Oxford to assess inequalities in access to greenspace and identify areas of highest need for greenspace interventions.

The Air Quality strategy, published in 2023, aims to improve air quality, and recognises the impact of poor air quality on nature. The Air Quality toolkit for OCC colleagues includes information on how Green Infrastructure and tree planting can improve air quality.

Work is underway with the Community Action Groups (CAGs) to increase access to land for community growing, including supporting bids for grant funding focussing on areas with low access to greenspace and high deprivation. A community gardening playbook is being commissioned to increase and support inclusivity in community gardening initiatives, whilst addressing biodiversity and climate change

- Ensure data on air quality informs the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and work with partners (Oxford University) on natural capital opportunity mapping to identify where nature recovery actions can help address air quality.
- Continue to work with the LNP to reduce barriers to access to nature for improved health and wellbeing, including through collaboration across health and environment sectors to support participation in nature-based activities for those with the greatest needs
- Develop a Green Infrastructure Strategy for the County
- Continue to support CAGs in actions that deliver for biodiversity and climate change.

Climate adaptation

Climate adaptation is a significant priority for Oxfordshire County Council. Over the past 6 months, OCC has been working with partners across Oxfordshire to develop a climate vulnerability assessment for Oxfordshire to identify priority areas where Oxfordshire should build long-term resilience to the impacts of climate change – heatwaves, flooding, drought, storms, cold snaps.

Future Actions

- The vulnerability assessment will inform the development of an Oxfordshire Climate Adaptation and Resilience Strategy, which will be co-developed with key Oxfordshire stakeholders. It is intended that the strategy will take a nature-based approach where possible, enabling both the recovery of Oxfordshire's natural environment and building long-term climate resilience. The Strategy will seek to identify and justify nature-based solutions to a range of Oxfordshire's climate vulnerabilities across the 4 key thematic areas – critical infrastructure, Health, Communities and Built Environment, Natural Environment and Business and Industry.
- A biodiversity climate impact assessment will also be developed, which will provide a further evidence base for the adaptation strategy.
- Ensure OCC's data on climate vulnerability and adaptation feeds into development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Appendix 1: Results of lunch and learn and staff internal survey