

Divisions Affected - All

PLACE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

13 November 2024

The Draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy

Report by Director Environment & Highways

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - a) Note the content of the report regarding the development of the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).
 - b) Note the public consultation for the draft LNRS is currently underway and that once completed the final version of the LNRS will be considered for adoption at full council by July 2025.
 - c) Provide any comment on the content of the LNRS through the consultation period.

Executive Summary

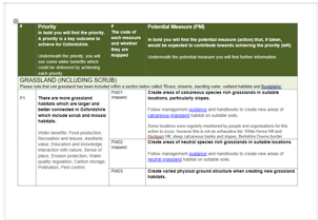
2. The Local Nature Recovery Strategy is a new and exciting statutory requirement on 48 authority areas across England as a result of the Environment Act 2021. Oxfordshire is one of these 48 authority areas and the county is currently creating its first LNRS as a partnership project.
3. The development of the strategy is led by Oxfordshire County Council who are the Responsible Authority, and is very much a collaborative project with the district councils and Natural England being designated Supporting Authorities and a strong emphasis on wide collaboration with many interested parties throughout the development of the draft.
4. The draft strategy can be found on the [consultation page](#) and following a review of the feedback a final version of the strategy will be approved and adopted before 31 July 2025 in line with legislative requirements.

The draft strategy


5. The core documents which, together, create the overall draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy are summarised below. These draft documents and the draft map have been created through extensive engagement work with over 1,100 people and organisations across the county in addition to those who will engage during this consultation period. The documents have been drafted in line with legislation and guidance produced by Defra.
6. The written documents ('1-3' below) are designed to help people choose priorities to achieve through taking actions that support habitats and species in Oxfordshire.
7. The Local Habitat Map ('4' below) is an interactive map which identifies 35% of the county for nature recovery and which allows viewers to click on areas of the county where the LNRS has prioritised the creation or improvements of habitats so that they can see which actions are recommended for different locations.
8. Defra expects that these mapped locations will draw greater local and national funding opportunities to those locations to incentivise nature recovery actions. Defra have advised that there is no requirement on any landowner to have to take these recommended actions in the mapped areas and that the LNRS would not prevent other actions happening in those locations. However, public authorities are required to have regard to the LNRS under the strengthened biodiversity duty introduced by the Environment Act 2021. In particular, the government intends for LNRS to inform the local planning process and further guidance on this from Defra is expected by the end of 2024.

What are the LNRS consultation draft documents?


1 Draft Statement of Biodiversity Priorities



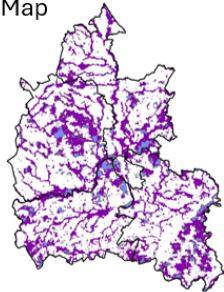
2 Draft Species Priorities List



3 Draft Description of Strategy Area



4 Draft Local Habitat Map



3 written documents

A map tool

Background

9. **“Biodiversity”** is a term that refers to the variety of all life, including plants, animals, fungi, and micro-organisms. A stable and healthy variety of species 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.
10. Authorities across England have been appointed by government to create Local Nature Recovery Strategies and government expect that these will create a set of strategies which, together will help to join up national efforts to reverse the decline of biodiversity. ([Defra 2023](#))
11. Priorities, actions, and locations recommended within LNRSs are designed to achieve the top priorities of local people and organisations by attracting funding, and playing a role in local planning. Some of these actions (where they could significantly help biodiversity) have been mapped to specific locations in the county, but many actions from the draft statement of biodiversity priorities should be taken widely across the county and so not all are mapped out.
12. The LNRS documents and map aim to help people and organisations in Oxfordshire to decide how, and possibly where, to create, restore, or improve habitats that can particularly help biodiversity. The actions and priorities all focus on improving biodiversity and by achieving them, those actions also offer important wider benefits to people and the environment. For example, improving soil health is a priority that can help animals, plants, fungi and microorganisms in the soil. Whilst the priority focuses on improving biodiversity, the results of achieving this could also improve things like food production in those places, carbon capture (something that healthy soils can do well), and could help reduce flooding.
13. The consultation window offers people and organisations across Oxfordshire an opportunity to develop and improve upon these drafted documents and map to create a final version of a shared vision of actions to achieve across the county in the coming 3-10 years.
14. In the future it will be a statutory requirement of the Environment Act 2021 for all authority areas across England (including Oxfordshire) to monitor, review, and republish these strategies every 3-10 years (the exact timing being at the discretion of the Secretary of State).

Corporate Policies and Priorities

15. At the heart of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy is an understanding that global biodiversity sits on a tipping point and that changing weather patterns are expected to challenge nature and biodiversity (beyond repair for many species). Impacts of climate change on biodiversity are already apparent and as weather

patterns continue to change and increase in severity, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy offers practical opportunities to invest in nature to increase the resilience of Oxfordshire's environment to protect both people and nature from climate change. The restoration of natural habitats is also one of the most powerful opportunities to store carbon and contribute towards a Net Zero Oxfordshire as well as being a primary mechanism for climate adaptation by reducing the impacts and costs of flood events, droughts, and heatwaves on Oxfordshire's people, homes, and infrastructure.

16. The Local Nature Recovery Strategy has set out a route to achieving habitat creation and habitat improvement across Oxfordshire in a focused manner. If these actions were delivered, Oxfordshire would be able to offer significantly greater amounts of areas which support biodiversity (both in urban and rural environments). The existing areas of Oxfordshire which qualify as 'areas of particular importance to biodiversity' cover 6.5% of Oxfordshire's area. The LNRS proposes a way to create a connected and resilient network of nature throughout Oxfordshire which could raise this to 35% both in and around urban environments. This could greatly contribute towards bringing the benefits of nature closer to people all around Oxfordshire.

Financial Implications

17. As a 'Responsible Authority' (appointed as responsible by Defra to create an LNRS), Oxfordshire County Council are expected by the Environment Act 2021 to prepare and publish the LNRS as a statutory requirement. For this first LNRS for Oxfordshire, the Council has received a section 31 grant from Defra of £238,000 over two years to fund work on the LNRS. This is in addition to £48,500 already received from Defra as seed funding. No further funding is yet promised beyond that point to support Responsible Authorities to produce, monitor, or deliver LNRSs. If the project takes more than 2 years to complete then the costs fall to the Responsible Authority to cover. The current funding is sufficient to produce the strategy however we are waiting to hear from Defra about funding for delivery and local authority role in delivery. There is a risk that Defra will mandate delivery without funding and this will have to be dealt with through the MTFP.
18. Future funding for LNRSs may be subject to change based on government decisions around new burdens associated with statutory requirements. LNRSs will come with additional future responsibilities for all authorities in England to review and republish their Local Nature Recovery Strategies every 3-10 years at the discretion of the secretary of state (with the next review due between 2028 – 2035) in accordance with The Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023.

Conversations with Defra over the role of Responsible Authorities in the delivery of Local Nature Recovery Strategies are ongoing, and any future funding associated with this will be considered as part of Defra's Corporate Spending

Review. As Responsible Authority, the Council's future role could include co-ordination of partnerships involved in delivery, development of a project pipeline and investment opportunities, as well as monitoring and reporting on delivery.

Comments checked by: Filipp Skiffins – 30/10/2024

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Legal Implications

19. As a Responsible Authority, Oxfordshire County Council is required to ensure that the LNRS is compliant with the requirements of the Environment Act 2021 and The Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023 as well as the Local Nature Recovery Statutory Guidance, Defra 2023.
20. The Environment Act 2021 indicates that the responsible authority is to prepare and publish the LNRS, and that the strategy is to be reviewed and republished from time to time (every 3-10 years at the discretion of the secretary of state, for the foreseeable future).
21. The Environment (Local Nature Recovery Strategies) (Procedure) Regulations 2023 sets out procedure to be followed in the preparation, publication, review and republication of LNRS which Oxfordshire's strategy must follow.
22. Under Section 40A of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 the Council must have regard to the LNRS in considering action it can take with regard its duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity. This will be of greatest relevance to planners in particular.

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Staff Implications

23. In July 2023, recruitment was completed for a Local Nature Recovery Strategy Project Manager (Grade 12, fixed term for 2 years) who is leading on the production of the LNRS, this post is fully funded from the Defra Section 31 grant.
24. The Project Manager is funded through the Defra grant to complete the online publication of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy by 31 July 2025. After this point there is no known incoming funding to appoint a staff member to co-ordinate and monitor the delivery of the LNRS with people and organisations across the county. Defra are yet to confirm where the responsibility for delivery

and monitoring of the strategies will sit but if it is with local authorities the expectation would be that this is subject to new burden funding.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

25. In December 2023 whilst preparing for the start of the LNRS's engagement process, the LNRS prepared an Equalities impact assessment (EIA).
26. It is understood that younger voices are often more seldom-heard in decision-making processes. There could therefore be a negative impact if we are unable to accurately capture their priorities for nature recovery. Alongside this, priorities being set to recover nature are also considered to be a positive impact for all ages. Promoting our resident surveys through channels that reach young people will be a key method of reaching 29% of the Oxfordshire population aged 0 – 24 allowing them to input priorities for nature that help shape the future direction of nature recovery actions.
27. It is understood that the environment sector is one of the [least ethnically diverse](#) sectors in the UK, being made up by predominantly by people who identified on the 2021 Census as 'white'. Since the LNRS will collect priorities from workshops and engagement activities with people who are heavily involved in nature conservation, it is likely that our list of LNRS priorities could miss voices from people from non 'white-British' backgrounds. In Oxfordshire, the latest Census figures show us that 23.2% of [Oxfordshire](#) identified as ethnic groups other than 'White British'. If our engagement figures show that we are not representative of the population of Oxfordshire then we may be negatively impacting on the characteristic of Race by not building representative voices and priorities into the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. Within our Communications and Engagement working group for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, we are in conversation about groups who may be 'seldom-heard voices' and strategies for reaching these groups to enable them to shape the priorities which will influence decision-making during the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Sustainability Implications

28. The restoration of natural habitats is one of the most powerful opportunities to store carbon and contribute towards a Net Zero Oxfordshire as well as being a primary mechanism for climate adaptation by reducing the impacts and costs of flood events, droughts, and heatwaves on Oxfordshire's people, homes, and infrastructure. In addition, there are likely to be air quality benefits from habitat creation / enhancement in more urban areas of the County.
29. Throughout the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, members of the Climate team have attended the LNRS Project Board meetings and other project meetings to oversee the creation of this work and to feed in opportunities to work together and share data and resources. The Climate team helped to inform the Description of the Strategy Area and the LNRS has made the climate

team aware of the upcoming consultation to invite any further opportunities for improvement and alignment with climate ambitions.

Risk Management

30. A risk register for this project has been maintained.

Consultations

31. The Local Nature Recovery Strategy began a process of engagement in 2024 where local people and organisations were invited to shape the priorities, actions, and locations that would appear within the strategy.
32. The draft was approved to go to consultation by the Steering Group, each and all of the District and City Councils, Natural England, and Oxfordshire County Council. The consultation was launched from the 18th October until 1st December 2024.
33. So far, this draft has been well-received and the LNRS is inviting local people and organisations to respond to the consultation. It has been explained that we expect to make changes in response to what we hear from this consultation.

Paul Fermer Director of Environment & Highways

Other Documents: The documents which are of key relevance to the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy for the consultation can be found here: <https://letstalk.oxfordshire.gov.uk/lnrs-phase3-consultation>

To see a quick introduction to the LNRS consultation and map tool, please watch this video: [Introduction to the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy](#)

Further supporting documents can be found on Oxfordshire County Council's LNRS webpage: [Oxfordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy \(LNRS\) | Oxfordshire County Council](#)

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