

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET 21 January 2025**

#### **Draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy Report of Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
  - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
  - b) Agree that, once Cabinet has responded, relevant officers will continue to provide each meeting of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee with a brief written update on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations for 12 months, or until they are completed (if earlier).

### **REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND**

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

3. At its meeting on 13 November 2024, the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) which had been published for public consultation and aimed to summarise the top biodiversity priorities to people and organisations in Oxfordshire.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Dr Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment, and Future Generations, for attending to present the report. The Committee was grateful, too, to Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways, Chloe Edwards, Local Nature Recovery Strategy Project Manager, and Beccy Micklem, Team

Leader Landscape and Nature Recovery, for attending to answer the Committee's questions.

## SUMMARY

5. Following a brief overview from the Deputy Leader, the LNRS Project Manager summarised the report and explained that Local authorities were required to develop and adopt an LNRS to set local biodiversity priorities and map habitat improvements. This involved collaboration with groups such as the Local Nature Partnership. The target was for the final strategy to be published by July 2025, with particular focus on enhancing habitats for biodiversity. It would be reviewed and updated every three to ten years (with the exact timing being at the discretion of the Secretary of State.)
6. The Committee had a very wide-ranging discussion and explored budgets and funding as well as the LNRS's interplay with the Minerals and Waste Plan and with the Local Transport Connectivity Plan and the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy. Collaboration with partners including district councils, National Highways, Network Rail, and the University of Oxford was discussed as, too, was the involvement of agricultural landowners and farmers and the impact of the LNRS on Local Plans. The impact of water extraction and of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS) was considered and members explored how the LNRS would be advanced and how its success would be measured.
7. The Committee agreed 11 recommendations: three of which were about ensuring the LNRS was aligned with other activity, both Council and more widely; one was about ensuring that it is embedded across the Council; one was about the formatting of the documents within the strategy; one was about supporting flood defences. The remaining four were about biodiversity benefits.
8. The Committee also made three observations which do not require Cabinet response.

## OBSERVATIONS

9. The draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy was considered by members of the Committee to be an impressive strategy. Members regarded it as appropriately ambitious and wide-reaching. However, the Committee had reservations that, if it is not strongly integrated with place and movement strategies and with the flood risk management strategy as well as other relevant infrastructure strategies, there is a risk of good intentions coming to naught. The Council should ensure that there is strong integration of its policies with a keen awareness of the interplay between them.

***Observation 1: That the Council needs to ensure that there is strong integration of its policies with a keen awareness of the interplay between them.***

10. The Committee explored at some length the attitudes and engagement of agricultural landowners and farmers with the LNRS. With c.70% of Oxfordshire land cover being farmland<sup>1</sup>, and it being the most rural county in south east England, this is a vitally important sector with which to engage and, indeed, to mobilise for the success of the strategy. The Committee heard that there is considerable enthusiasm on the part of many farmers and/or landowners to be involved and that the team has engaged with the National Farmers Union as a representative body but also individuals.
11. Building awareness of the benefits to individuals of being engaged with the LNRS, including the possibility of receiving grants through, for example, sustainable farming incentive funding will be key. Those who have received such and who have also engaged in, for example, tree planting and reducing the tillage of soil are likely to be persuasive advocates for the strategy and the Committee simply observes that it would be useful for the Council to harness that.

***Observation 2: That the Council will need to engage hesitant farmers with the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and could successfully do that through demonstration of its benefits by early adopters.***

12. The Committee noted that beavers were on the list of priority species and were advised that they could be suitable for recovery work in Oxfordshire. The wisdom of reintroduction of beavers to the county would need careful assessment but the Committee observed that doing such would be an exciting prospect which would bring benefits. As a flagship project of the LNRS, it could garner public interest and attention and build enthusiasm for it more widely.

***Observation 3: That the Council seeking to reintroduce beavers to Oxfordshire would be of interest to many.***

## RECOMMENDATIONS

13. In exploring what funding and budgets were available for the delivery of the strategy, the Committee explored how the Council was taking advantage of the Government's Natural Capital work, with HM Treasury's Green Book: Appraisal and Evaluation in Central Government<sup>2</sup> setting out at page 63 that:
14. *"Natural capital includes certain stocks of the elements of nature that have value to society, such as forests, fisheries, rivers, biodiversity, land and minerals. Natural capital includes both the living and non-living aspects of ecosystems.*

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., <https://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/action/wildlife-and-farming>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-green-book-appraisal-and-evaluation-in-central-government>

15. *Stocks of natural capital provide flows of environmental or 'ecosystem' services over time. These services, often in combination with other forms of capital (human, produced and social) produce a wide range of benefits.*
16. *These include use values that involve interaction with the resource and which can have a market value (minerals, timber, freshwater) or non-market value (such as outdoor recreation, landscape amenity).*
17. *They also include non-use values, such as the value people place on the existence of particular habitats or species."*
18. The Committee was advised that, rather than working with the national capital mapping, the Council had been working with the University of Oxford to use their mapping. The Council was seeking to make that clearer in its mapping going forwards.
19. The Committee was advised that the Council was working with the Green Prospectus project developed by OxLEP which had identified a pipeline of projects and that had fed into the LNRS. The Local Nature Partnership also had a nature finance workstream and they were developing the Oxford In Nature Conservation Investment Fund which was using the LNRS to steer where the priorities were.
20. The Committee recognised that the Council was in conversation with DEFRA about future funding for the coordination of the LNRS but there was a concern that the Council should be more proactive about seeking to make the LNRS investable and attractive to both public and private investors. The Committee was aware of the considerable work being done on climate finance and natural capital work locally, particularly through 100 Together<sup>3</sup>, and encouraged the Council to ensure that the work of the LNRS was aligned with that. The Committee also recommended that the Council should seek the advice and assistance of relevant external experts.

***Recommendation 1: That the Council should ensure the Local Nature Recovery Strategy is aligned with climate finance and natural capital work happening locally and nationally.***

21. The Committee also suggested that it would be wise to ensure that the work of the strategy is aligned to the five 'missions' of the Government, around which the Government organised its work. This may give more chance of maximising funding for the delivery of the strategy if the outcomes the Government was focused on were explicitly reflected in the Council's approach.

***Recommendation 2: That the Council should ensure that the Local Nature Recovery Strategy is aligned with the Government's five missions and their outputs.***

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.100together.org.uk/>

22. The Committee explored what interrelationship this work had with that of the Local Transport Connectivity Plan and with the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy. The LNRS team emphasised the integrating the LNRS with the Local Transport Connectivity Plan to mitigate road traffic's impact on wildlife, advocating for nature-positive infrastructure like wildlife corridors. Officers stressed alignment with the Oxford Infrastructure Strategy to support biodiversity and habitat connectivity. Collaborating with National Highways and Network Rail, they identified key areas in Oxfordshire to improve habitat connectivity in order to resolve 'points of severance' – where large areas of habitat are broken up by, for example, roads or rails. Partnering with the University of Oxford, the team used statistical analysis and mapping tools to prioritise impactful interventions for biodiversity.
23. It was suggested that the Director of Environmental Sustainability for National Highways would be a keen and valuable source of advice.

***Recommendation 3: That the Council should ensure the Local Nature Recovery Strategy is aligned with the Local Transport Connectivity Plan and the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy on the nature costs of roads and rails.***

24. Members discussed turning the LNRS into reality, highlighting the need for senior sponsorship and cross-team collaboration within the Council. Emphasis was placed on strong influence at appropriate levels and ensuring budget support for LNRS priorities.
25. The Committee was keen that the Local Nature Recovery Strategy was not simply something the Council had coordinated but that it should be something embedded across the Council. Teams within the Council should also have their work integrated and aligned with the strategy and there should be a clear delivery plan for specific actions for the Council to take across a swathe of departments.
26. The Committee was pleased to hear that there was a separate piece of work happening to develop an internal Council biodiversity policy which was about how the Council, through all its functions, can help to deliver the priorities of the LNRS. This would partly function as that delivery plan but the Committee considered it important to have such a delivery plan so that the strategy could be developed and deliver tangibles rather than simply ambitions.

***Recommendation 4: That the Council should develop a delivery plan to ensure that teams within the County Council have integrated and adopted the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.***

27. Whilst the Council is the Responsible Authority, the development of the strategy has been – and its implementation will be – a collaborative project with the district and city councils. Strong collaboration with districts but also with town and parish councils and other partners will be vital. Integrating the LNRS into local planning and capital delivery was crucial for enhancing biodiversity and for reducing flooding. The Leader told the Committee that the

Future Oxfordshire Partnership will have a significant part to play in order to advance the LNRS and is committed to doing so.

28. With a variety of different stakeholders, at different tiers of government, as well as other partners, the Committee considered that it would be beneficial to all stakeholders for the implications and actions for districts, parishes, towns, and other key partners to be made explicit in an annex to the documentation.

***Recommendation 5: That the Council should make explicit in an annex to the documentation the implications of the strategy for district councils, town and parish councils, neighbourhood groups, and other key partners as well as the actions expected of them.***

29. The Committee noted that, within appendix 1 to the LNRS's draft Statement of Biodiversity Priorities, in table A1, there were 'wider benefits' associated with each priority. Whilst health and wellbeing benefits were mentioned in the wider narrative, the Committee considered it slightly surprising that health was not considered one of the 18 primary benefits. The co-benefits of nature recovery for both physical and mental health are incontestable and the Committee considered it would be useful to set out in more detail such benefits.

***Recommendation 6: That the Council should strengthen the explanations within the strategy of the benefits to health and wellbeing of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.***

30. Increasing public awareness of biodiversity successes was suggested as something the Council should consider. The specific example raised in Committee was that of a growth in the number of otters within the county: whilst they were almost entirely absent from the county following extensive national decline up to the 1990s, the draft Description of the Strategy Area sets out that they are now widespread across the county in both urban and rural areas. Members of the public are likely to find this interesting but, without publicity, they are unlikely to learn it.

***Recommendation 7: That the Council should consider how best it can publicise positive elements of nature recovery that are already happening.***

31. The Committee considered that, as the Responsible Authority, the Council should also be an exemplar in its maintenance of its own land. Parts of the Thames Path in the county were mentioned as being particularly poorly-maintained. Whilst the Council does not have sole responsibility for it, it would be advantageous for it to be able to set an example that it is working for nature recovery and caring for biodiversity on the Thames Path and on other land for which it is responsible.

***Recommendation 8: That the Council should ensure it sets an example maintaining its own land for nature recovery and biodiversity gain, as the Responsible Authority for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.***

32. Schools were provided as locations which, in the main, were ideally suited to promoting nature recovery, whether in the corners of playing fields or next to cycle racks. This would also have specific educational benefits in learning about both geography and biology as well the creative arts and other subjects. The Committee suggested that the Council should approach schools to offer support and guidance to them in order to manage parts of their land in a way that would create or improve habits for wildlife. This would also engage and educate the local community about the importance and benefits of nature.

***Recommendation 9: That the Council should work with schools to support them to promote biodiversity and nature recovery in their grounds.***

33. There was a discussion in Committee about the benefits or otherwise for wild flowers and invertebrates of removing grass cuttings after mowing on Council land or of piling them up. Both of these provided biodiversity benefits but, inevitably, both of also cost more in time and in money than leaving the clippings behind.
34. The Committee was keen to understand the costs to the Council were it to invest in machines that could easily both cut and collect grass and how many would be feasible for the Council to acquire or use.

***Recommendation 10: That the Council should investigate the costs of collecting and/or piling mown grass to enhance wildflower growth and other biodiversity benefits.***

35. The Committee discussed flooding and retrofitting Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS). The example was given of a number of London boroughs implementing rain gardens and SUDS being retrofitted onto highways and questions were raised as to whether – given that there would also be biodiversity benefits of such work – this could be considered as part of the work arising from the LNRS.
36. It was explained that, whilst the priority action points focused on habitat creation and/or improvement opportunities and thus natural flood management opportunities were not mapped, rain gardens, swales, filter strips and the like would help with biodiversity. Whilst the urban sections of the draft strategy tended to focus on people's access to and contact with nature, there was an acceptance that it would be worth reviewing the text to consider if drainage would be appropriate to set out.
37. The Committee was keen to ensure, that where there were different strategies that overlapped and covered some similar areas (including, amongst others, the LNRS and movement strategies, the LTCP, or the Flood Risk Management Strategy), the Council was cognisant of that and ensured that they aligned with each other.

***Recommendation 11: That the Council should explore the possibilities of supporting flood defences through biodiversity means, including swales, sustainable drainage systems, and rain gardens.***

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

38. The Committee does not intend to consider the Local Nature Recovery Strategy again during this municipal year, although it does intend to consider verge and vegetation management in April.

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

39. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
40. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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