

Oxon LNP Board Paper for Approval

Title:	Local Wildlife Sites within the Context of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy
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Summary:

Local Wildlife sites are an essential conservation activity containing the majority of priority habitat. Despite the efforts of partners investment is required for Local Wildlife Sites to play their full role in developing and delivering the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. There is a need for the frequency of monitoring and management advice visits to be increasing by nearly fourfold, and a need for more security of funding. This is seen to be one of the best ways for local authorities to partly fulfil their strengthened biodiversity duty introduced by the Environment Act 2021.

Actions for the Board:

It is recommended that:

- The LNP acts as a champion for the LWS Project and promotes the essential role LWS play in nature conservation and nature recovery initiatives.
- The LNP supports the work of the LWS Project and gives the LWS project Steering Group the status of an LNP Working Group.
- The LNP encourages and supports the relevant local authority officers to use this paper in seeking an increase in the total annual funding for LWS monitoring visits to £114,700 and an increase in the total annual funding for LWS management advice and support visits (including meeting the full employment costs) to £105,300. This should be new funding for conservation effort and not from funds redirected from existing conservation commitments.
- The LNP encourages and supports the relevant local authority officers to use this paper in seeking a financial settlement for the LWS Project of no less than 3 years and ideally up until the LNRS review in 5 to 7 years' time.
- The LNP considers the LWS Project when developing funding proposals including green financing with a view to resourcing the project to build on the core programme with proactive work.
- The LNP encourages the local authorities to consider the business-as-usual scenario compared to the fit for purpose proposal in terms of compliance with the enhanced biodiversity duty.

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1. Local Wildlife Sites

Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) are identified at a county level according to an agreed set of criteria consistent with national Defra guidance. Local sites are identified in the planning system and they receive protection through planning authorities' Local Plans, forming a key part of Oxfordshire's ecological network.

The vast majority of the area of Oxfordshire that is of importance to wildlife is found within LWS (7,872 Ha, comprised of 6,676 Ha identified LWS and 1,196 Ha proposed). A far greater area than the nationally designated Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) (4,476 Ha). SSSI's were only ever intended to be a representative sample of the very best quality habitats, they were never intended to include the bulk of wildlife rich areas.

The Oxfordshire Local Wildlife Sites Project is a partnership of landowners, conservation bodies and local authorities. Two partners deliver most of the work programme on behalf of the partnership. Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) identifies and monitors sites, maintaining the data including spatial data. It is important to remember that although essential, monitoring and data alone do not deliver conservation action. Berkshire Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) acquires landowner survey permissions and follows up on the monitoring by providing management advice and support visits which result in a written management brief.

2. Local Wildlife Sites and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)

LWS are an essential conservation activity in their own right and they support an array of national and local wildlife policies not least biodiversity policies in Local Plans and the National Environmental Improvement Plan (2023). Also contained within the Environmental Improvement Plan, the LNRS gives a new impetus to LWS work.

As the Lawton Report (Making Space for Nature, 2010) makes clear, wildlife can only recover if our existing habitats are "*more, bigger, better and joined*". If wildlife is to move across the landscape to a new climate space in response to climate change, habitat quality, area and distribution are all important. In the face of climate change, failure to deliver a nature recovery network based on these Lawton principles will lead to a mass extinction event.

As they cover the greatest area of good habitat including priority habitat, LWS are arguably the most important element of our existing conservation effort from a nature recovery perspective. They form the vast majority of the building blocks from which a nature recovery network can be developed. This has been recognised through their inclusion within the obligatory base layer of LNRS data.

So, is Oxfordshire's current LWS effort fit for the purposes of developing and delivering the LNRS? Unfortunately, it has to be concluded that it is not.

3. Demand compared to current delivery.

Ideally most LWS should be visited every 5 years although for woodland sites this interval can be increased to 10 years. These are the optimum intervals considered necessary to identify changes in management and condition in time to take corrective action. It is also a

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good interval at which to remind landowners of the wildlife value of their land and to provide encouragement and advice on how to best manage it for that wildlife.

It is possible to apply these visit intervals to the number and type of LWS to provide a rough estimate as to the scale of activity required. The detail of how to best develop the programme would of course be worked out in detail by the Steering Group.

There are 472 Identified LWS, of these 120 are mainly woodland and 352 other habitats

To visit the 120 Identified woodland LWS at a 10-year frequency requires 12 visits a year
 To visit the 352 identified other habitat LWS at a 5-year frequency requires 70 visits a year
 To visit all the currently identified LWS at the optimum frequency requires 82 visits a year.

There are additionally 78 proposed LWS that are in urgent need of visiting so where they meet the criteria they can be included within the dataset (& the formal evidence base for the LNRS). Many of these sites have been proposed for a considerable time so visiting them all irrespective of their habitat type within 3 years is a priority. This would require 26 visits a year over three years.

The total number of visits required to visit identified LWS at the optimum frequency and to catch up on the backlog of proposed LWS is 108 visits a year.

This level of visits should provide an effective LWS programme up until at least the review of the LNRS within 5 to 7 years. Once the existing back log of proposed sites has been worked through within the first three years, that capacity of 26 visits a year will be used to tackle the expected increase in proposed LWS and the larger number of identified LWS.

Additionally, some proposed sites need specialist species surveys to provide the data to lead to LWS status, this work is currently outside of the project's capacity. Experience to date indicates that around 60% of proposed sites are LWS standard and the remaining 40% could be with management support. This means that there are sites out there with willing landowners that could be improved for wildlife that are not currently receiving timely support.

52% of LWS are in positive management according to the latest SDL 160 (Single Data List) report provided annually to Defra. This demonstrates the urgent need to bring sites into conservation management, in many cases requiring additional effort outside of the project's capacity.

Currently around 35 sites a year are being visited for monitoring by TVERC and 28 a year to provide management advice by BBOWT. The current visiting regime is 73 visits short a year for monitoring and 80 for management advice. There is a great deal of catching up to do to meet this standard. Currently 35% of sites have not been visited within the last 10 years.

Bringing the current number of visits up to match the needed scale would require a threefold (x3.1) increase in the number of monitoring visits and a fourfold (x3.9) increase in the number of management advice and support visits.

4. Predicted increase in demand

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Our knowledge of the true extent of good habitat is far from complete with new potential sites being discovered all the time. Additionally, there are already known sites that although suitable do not currently have LWS or potential LWS status as the landowner doesn't wish to bring them forward.

The LNRS itself and wider changes in the funding of land management (and in particular a shift away from basic payments towards funding conservation management or ecosystem services) will make having land identified as LWS increasingly attractive. This will further increase the demand on the project.

In time the LNRS and the funding sources it will help direct will create more good habitat of LWS standard. This is after all the point of an LNRS. This will also further increase the demand on the LWS project

5. The need

If LWS are to play their role in the LNRS there is an urgent need to develop the LWS project to the point where it can work through the current backlog of proposed sites and be ready to handle existing and new ones in a timely manner.

The current level of activity is supported by local authorities contributing £37,000 to TVERC and £19,000 to BBOWT. This level of funding does not fully cover the costs of the current programme. For the permissions and management advice element, BBOWT contributes a further £8,000 (from a restricted fund expected to run out in 2025/26) to cover £27,000 of employment costs and additionally covers the hosting costs. For the monitoring element, TVERC supplements the contributions received with income from data searches and licences to the value of £7,400. This reflects income derived from using the data.

This funding is negotiated on an annual basis which does not permit forward planning or a strategic approach.

The current position as we embark on developing the LNRS is one of a project that is working effectively within the resources available and making a significant contribution to Oxfordshire's conservation effort. It is also however, struggling with uncertain and insufficient resources to adequately support the scale of existing sites and tackle a backlog of proposed sites. Consequently, confidence in the LWS data within the LNRS is not as high as it should be.

We should aim for a position at LNRS review where there are many more LWS forming the backbone of the nature recovery network and they are monitored and provided with management advice at an appropriate interval. Consequently, confidence in LWS data will be high and targeting of nature recovery priority areas (which is based on buffering existing data) within the LNRS will improve. We will also have better information on sites that are working towards LWS status which can further improve the targeting of nature recovery priority areas.

The need is for a LWS project that is fit for purpose to:

Support the development of the LNRS

- Strengthen the quality and quantity of LWS data within the LNRS including by proactively seeking new sites.

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- Monitoring the condition of LWS every 5 years (10 years for woodlands).
- Catch up on the current backlog of proposed sites and handle a predicted increase in new sites coming forward in a timely manner
- Demonstrate evidenced and mappable progress for LNRS review & inform a refinement of nature recovery priority areas.

Support the delivery of the LNRS

- Move sites into positive management through advisory visits every 5 years (10 years for woodlands).
- Allow existing and new proposed sites to receive management advice in a timely manner.
- Allow proposed sites close to LWS status to achieve it through improvement.

Based on the estimated increase in visits required this can be achieved by a threefold (x3.1) increase in the total funding for monitoring visits and a fourfold (x3.9) increase in the total funding for gaining permissions, management advice and support visits (after meeting the full employment costs). The delivery partners would still be contributing additional funds and covering hosting costs. This would be sufficient to support a core programme that is fit for purpose and would result in the following funding package;

Monitoring, £37,000 x 3.1 = £114,700

Management, £19,000 made up to £27,000 x 3.9 = £105,300

Building on this core programme, further funding from new sources could be sought for additional proactive work such as specialist surveys and proactive management support.

6. Strengthened Biodiversity Duty

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 introduced. This means that public authorities must:

- Consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- Agree policies and specific objectives based on these considerations.
- Act to deliver policies and achieve these objectives.

Supporting the LWS Project to the extent that it is fit for purpose to support LNRS development and delivery is one of the key ways that local authorities can demonstrate they are fulfilling this duty.

7. Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- The LNP acts as a champion for the LWS Project and promotes the essential role LWS play in nature conservation and nature recovery initiatives.
- The LNP supports the work of the LWS Project and gives the LWS project Steering Group the status of an LNP Working Group.
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Simon Smith, LNP Board Member.

This paper is written for the LNP Board by a Board Member. Any errors or omissions are the authors. Written in consultation with selected members of the LWS Project Steering Group.