

Notes

OF A MEETING OF THE



Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Board

HELD ON WEDNESDAY 14 JUNE 2023 AT 10.00 AM
VIS MS TEAMS

Present:

Members: Richard Benwell (Chair), Dr Prue Addison, Tim Field, Michelle Leek, Professor David Macdonald, James Price, Councillor David Rouane, Rosie Rowe and Simon Smith

Officers: Becky Chesshrye, (Strategic Partnerships Communications Manager), Susan Harbour, (Strategic Partnership Manager, South and Vales Councils), Kevin Jacob, (Future Oxfordshire Partnership Democratic Services Officer), Matt Whitney, (Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Manager)

Guests: Tom Curtis

30 Apologies, conflicts of interest, Chair's announcements, welcome guests

Apologies for absence were received from Gill Aitken, (Landowner representative), Ian Boll, (Local Authority Officer representative), Camilla Burrow, (Environmental NGO representative), and Tim Coates, (Landscape scale delivery representative), substituted by Tim Field.

There were no declarations of interest.

The Chair welcomed all those present to the meeting.

31 Notes of the previous meeting

The notes of the Board Meeting held on 8 March 2023 were approved.

32 Oxfordshire's current affairs updates

The Chair invited members of the Board to raise any matters of note, interest or concern at a local level or national level which might impact upon Oxfordshire's natural environment or the Local Nature Partnership.

Prue Addison referred to the culminative impact on flood plain meadows arising from the some of the major developments taking place within the county and suggested that the recurring, non-application specific issues arising should be looked at by the Nature Policy Group. This had been raised as a subject at the recent LNP annual forum.

The Chair responded that it might be useful to also consider whether there were implications for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, (LNRS) work as part of the later agenda item although the time scales involved in the LNRS were very different. It was also practical to consider potential risks to locations with particularly rich habitats such flood plain meadows and the potential use of compensatory approaches given that it was estimated that only around 20% of flood plain restoration projects succeeded.

The Chair queried whether there was a need to highlight and convey the cumulative impact of development on flood plain meadows to local planners over and above existing channels. Prue responded that the cumulative impact of solar applications was key issue, but it was possible that the issues arising were wider than those related to solar alone.

ACTION: It was agreed to refer the issue to the Nature Policy Group.

Councillor David Rouane updated the meeting on the recent local election results from May 2023. It was noted that Matt Whitney as LNP Manager was seeking to give briefings to each of the councils on the work of the LNP now that the election period had completed as an action. The Chair suggested other representatives of organisations on the Board from the natural environment space could potentially also be invited to attend.

ACTION: Matt Whitney to offer LNP briefings to all of the Oxfordshire principal local authorities.

33 Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Manager's update

The Board considered a report as set out in the Agenda which gave an outline of the some of the key activity undertaken by the LNP Manager and colleagues between Board meetings. In presenting the report, Matt Whitney encouraged board members to highlight any areas of co-dependencies or work they were involved in or areas of duplication or potential conflict. Ideas around possible additional support were also welcomed.

A number of areas were highlighted to the Board including work to support land based carbon sequestration which formed one the of the Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan, (NZRMAP) priorities.

Tom Field referred to work relating to land based carbon sequestration and also research into a hydrology based sequestration solution as part of the Thames Valley Flood Scheme. He suggested that there might be potential to marry up elements of the two workstreams.

Reference was also made to the Evenlode Flood Management Strategy and a map which set out different flood management interventions which could potentially come in at a lower cost than other forms of flood defence on the edge of Oxford.

In response to a question regarding the future of the Oxfordshire Treescapes Project, Matt Whitney commented that the project had come to the end of its existing funding and he had been supporting them to come to decision on whether or not to seek to continue. His understanding was that it was hoped to continue with the community engagement and advice side of the project through the Community Action Network and secondly discussions were ongoing around how to ensure that interactive spatial mapping data from the project remained accessible to landowners and others taking decisions about land use. In his view, such a tool would be significant to the delivery of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Prue Addison queried 1) whether data collected as part of the project had been subject to independent evaluation and 2) whether that there had been any analysis of how reports generated from the data had been used together with how relevant and effective the reports had been to those using them. This was important in terms of understanding if improvements were required through the LNRS workstream.

Action: Matt Whitney to investigate further.

Simon Smith in referring to the points within the report relating to cross boundary working with the Southeast Nature Partnership commented that it was also important to remain aware that Oxfordshire also bordered the Southwest and West Midlands regions in terms of cross border working and in ensuring the Oxfordshire LNRS lined up with other nearby strategies without duplicating existing structures and arrangements. Matt Whitney commented that he also engages with Warwickshire, the Southeast Midlands LEP group of LNPs, Gloucestershire LNP Manager and is supporting Wiltshire to establish a new LNP.

Finally, Matt Whitney drew the Partnership's attention to the submission of a joint letter on behalf of approximately 25 LNP Chairs to The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Levelling Up Communities and the Regions which called for greater consideration of local nature recovery strategies within the local development planning process. This was because of concern that current wording that local authorities 'to have regard for' LNRS was not strong enough to ensure that LNRSs had real influence and impact on local planning decisions. It was considered that the letter had been well received and he and the Chair had had a positive meeting with Rachel Maclean MP and civil servants on the 13 June where it was clear they at least understood the issues.

Rosie Rowe commented that initiatives such as this demonstrated the value added of the LNP and suggested that this should form part of stakeholder communications.

Action: It was agreed to share a link of the letter to board members the accessible shared Teams drive.

34 Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Forum 6 June

The Chair and Matt Whitney provide a verbal report updating the Board on the LNP Forum which this year had taken place on 6 June. The focus of this year's event had on been on local nature recovery strategies and to create an initial frame of reference and ambition for

the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy by exploring positive and negative scenarios for different habitat types. The event was considered to have gone very smoothly on the day and the Future Oxfordshire Partnerships team were thanked for their roles in supporting in planning and delivering.

Matt Whitney gave a short presentation setting out an initial overview of priorities emerging from discussions on the day.

Trees and woodland habitats

- Restore heathy treescape.
- Education and engagement.
- All woodland in good condition or active management
- Raise profile of trees in development

Urban habitats

- Engagement and education
- Retrofit more nature into places without it being very hard/expensive.
- Community-level urban gardening projects (25% of all urban green space).
- Design nature into new developments better (GI standards, BNG, neighbourhood plans)

Arable habitats

- 90% of farmland to be managed regeneratively.
 - Link to Oxfordshire Food Strategy
 - Oxfordshire regenerative food branding?
- Landscape biodiversity
 - Landscape Recovery schemes in Environmental Land Management, (ELM).
 - How to prioritise ELM options locally.

Grassland habitats

- Bigger, better, more joined up grasslands as advocated by Professor Sir John Lawton.
- Enhance reputation and importance of grasslands on people's hearts and minds, (currently undervalued).

River and wetland habitats

- Landscape-scale restoration (link with Catchment Based Approach, (CaBA).
- Enhance water quality, (engagement with Thames Water)
- Physical restoration (removal of barriers, riparian habitats, tree planting/thinning, re-wiggling).

Overall key themes from the Forum

- Measurement, monitoring, recording and data management.
- Condition data, habitat quality lacking
- Funding – establish an Oxfordshire Environmental Fund?
- How to manage access

- Facilitation, (of communities, landowners, farmers etc)
- How to deal with climate change uncertainty?
- People's changing attitudes.

Note: In discussion, a number of points were made which related or crossed over with the following agenda item and so the Chair decided that the items be merged. The following comments relate to the discussion of the organisation and delivery of the Forum event only and other comments made which related to the development of the LNRS are addressed in the next item:

- Various board members commented the Forum had been a great day and very well organised.
- There was a need to seek to define what the success of such an event might look like – for instance was success about the good conversations, networking and engagement with others leading to information exchange etc that took place?
- Had the excellent points made by various expert delegates during the day really affected the understanding or changed officers' perspectives?
- Evaluation of who had attended and what groups they had represented and whether it was felt that certain groups were not being as represented as well as they could be. The perception was that certain groups such as the farming community and business groups were still underrepresented.

In respect of the objectives of the day, Matt Whitney responded that there had been two main objectives for the Forum event. Firstly, to update everyone and establish a common understanding of the current LNRS position and the future tasks to be completed. It was felt that this had been achieved. Secondly, to help inform the development of the LNRS as a LNP in terms of a defining a long list of priorities for the next stages of engagement, whilst maintaining an awareness that the LNRS was a document ultimately owned and to be produced by Oxfordshire County Council as the responsible authority. It was felt that this had also been largely achieved and what was needed now was further prioritisation and creative thinking.

The Chair added that the discussions had also indicated ways in which it might be possible for Oxfordshire to go above the baseline and to raise awareness of this with local decision makers.

The update was noted.

35 Local Nature Recovery Strategy progress update and ambitions.

The Board considered a report which highlighted suggested ambitions for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, (LNRS) to add value to the LNRS process.

The Board was asked comment on the ambitions presented and to endorse the consideration of this approach to the Local Nature Policy group and the LNRS Steering Group.

A detailed discussion followed. A summary of the main points raised by Board members and the response of officers is as follows:

- It was positive to see the recognition of the importance of the inclusion of arable habitats. The Regeneration of Agriculture was an important subject with significant

potential to benefit wildlife, but it was important to be cognitive that this was not always the same as nature recovery and this needed to be understood in the context of the development of the LNRS and where the two overlap and where they did not. Performance measures needed to be developed for both specialisms.

- Caution was needed in thinking about and applying distinctions around the breakdown of wildlife into habitats as in reality, the habitat of a particular species over its life cycle might feature in a number of what were often regarded to be distinct habitats.
- It was important to consider the links to higher level political policy in the context of discussions around specific habitats. For example, in the case of grasslands there been discussions at the Forum about developers putting in low quality grass areas on sites under the pretext of BG40 bio-diversity net gain which actually contributed almost nothing to biodiversity. This suggested that the policy for biodiversity net gain itself was flawed and that the juxtaposition of the policy framework and reality on the ground needed to be considered.
- Confusion existed around the term Regen Agriculture as it was possible for it to mean all things to all people so as the LNRS progressed it was important to become more specific.
- Reference to food production was necessary and it was important to understand that it was possible to do all the landscape recovery possible over thousands of less favourable areas of land and still not make an appreciable impact on wildlife in terms of species. There was a need to address these issue on a holistic, whole farm scale.
- The food system within Oxfordshire, nationally and internationally needed to change to a system that rewarded best practice, high environmental and welfare standards, Procurement, particularly public procurement had a role to play in achieving this change. The challenge was around how this changes might be assisted through the LNRS.
- It was felt that this might be outside of the scope of the LNRS, but potential ideas that the LNP Board might consider in the context of supporting farmer that achieved high environmental standards.
- The ambitions as set out in the Board paper were supported but it was felt there did need to be reference to agriculture over and above the environmental aspects of farming.
- Alignment of ambitions around accessibility to natural green space within 15 minutes with Natural England's criteria as where possible it was sensible to align with nationally set standards.
- The LNRS should set out how its measures linked to and where compatible with HMG's 25 Year Environment Plan and the Environment Improvement Plan. This would need quantitative targets which would require monitoring and evaluation.
- It was important to set ambitious goals for the LNRS and to develop a finance plan in order to deliver it.
- The interface between rural and urban habitats. The urban fringe and peri urban landscapes were incredibly rich in terms of access and also nature dividend potential. The contribution of those areas also interfaced with the role Green Belt.
- Whilst it was valid that Regeneration Agriculture was not a direct proxy for good habitats, it was known that the manner of farming was a key part of the diagnosis that nature was in decline. Bringing back nature into farming systems would be highly significant in transforming nature outcomes.
- There were opportunities to use nature finance through the agriculture space to mobilise nature recovery.
- There was a need to put in place clear definitions for the priorities and ambitions, for instance what was meant by 'nature rich'? This task could potentially be undertaken by

the Nature Policy Group and it was logical that this be informed by any nationally available definitions.

At this point, the Chair suggested that in addition to the LNRS suggested principles and early objectives set out in the report his sense from the discussion to that point was that there was a body of opinion within the Board for some kind of numerical objective around the wider farmed environment. This needed to be expressed in a way that was meaningful and could be added to the LNRS ambition. For example, could this be through an objective around regenerative agriculture, perhaps 90%, or was a more exact metric needed?

A range of views were expressed with some members supportive, whilst others, also supportive of the aspiration behind it, expressed concern that a cautious approach would be needed because there was risk a KPI approach could sometimes not cover the nuance involved.

Other points raised by various Board members on the LNRS priorities and ambitions set out in the paper and additional suggestions, were in summary:

- Was it important to recognise that there could be differences of opinion between the OLNP as a collective of nature and land management voluntary experts and the accountable body around the priorities and ambition for the LNRS that went beyond baselines required by Defra? This could be a potential matter for further discussion within the steering group, but it was felt to be the role of OLNP to seek to be as ambitious as possible and make the case for this.
- With regard to proposed high level targets and target that 30% of land be managed for nature by 2030 there was a risk that because of the rigid criteria that applied, 30% would not be enough as an overall habitat extent target and Oxfordshire would fail to deliver 30% by 2030 as defined by Defra. If a nature recovery framework was to be delivered a target of 30%-40% would be needed.
- An overall target would only be effective if it was supported by a breakdown of specific habitat targets as well.
- Whilst the principle of proposed priority 4) Landscape scale projects was supported; a view was expressed that the proposed wording set out in the report around nominating specific flagship landscape delivery projects created the impression of a hierarchy when all landscape were of the same priority. A possible replacement priority was around local wildlife sites in light of the significant role of these sites in building the recover of nature. It was agreed to include both in the same point.
- In considering what priorities and ambitions to follow, it would be necessary to engage with the public in order to secure their understanding and support of the measures as there remained a level of misunderstanding and resistance to wildlife initiatives such as reduced verge cutting, particularly in urban and semi-rural locations. This is in agreement with the discussions and outputs of the LNP Forum.
- The process of suggesting LNRS priorities was about the challenge of making clear definitions and being able to demonstrate what had been achieved and delivered. Specifically with regard to the 90% regeneration target, data could be obtained from governmental bodies around the amount attributable to ELMs. The challenge was around this data was presented and it was possible to be creative with data to substantiate delivery whilst retaining confidence that targets were making a real difference.
- ELMs was a structure that easier to follow than to seek to define regenerative agriculture and which lent itself to target setting. There were also links to fundraising and private finance top up.

- More support and advisers were needed to support farmers in wildlife recovery.

A conclusion of the discussion, the Chair proposed that in light of the wide range of views expressed and number of suggestions for LNRS priorities and ambitions made it would be necessary to undertake further consideration and an updated menu of potential options drawn up and. It was possible that it might be necessary to return to the more difficult issues before final decisions were taken.

36 Strategic overview of the workstreams

The Board considered a written report setting out a strategic overview of the progress of the three core workstreams of the OLNP, Nature and Health Nature Finance and Nature Recovery and representatives of the workstreams also provided a verbal update.

Nature and Health

Michelle Leek and Rosie Rowe highlighted:

- The most recent meeting of the group had received a presentation on Live Well Oxfordshire IT platform. This was partnership between Oxfordshire County Council and Age UK Oxfordshire to provide a directory to bring together information about groups and organisations offering services for adults with a variety of needs in one place.
- Research to support the work of the group, (and wider partnership) was shortly to commence looking at the priorities for the provision of nature rich green spaces within Oxfordshire. This would build on a number of existing data sets, seeking to consolidate the available information and produce an opportunity map setting out access to green spaces.
- The advertisement for the LNP Health and Nature Project Officer post.
- Good progress had been made towards the data mapping evidence piece objective for the group.
- Green social prescribing awareness was increasing and it was hoped to influence the green social prescribing policy. Although this was taking its time to finalise, discussions about leveraging resources in support were continuing.
- The Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board Strategy was shortly to be refreshed, looking at health and wellbeing properties for the whole system and as part of the review process the connectivity with nature would be made.

Nature Finance Update

Prue Addison and Matt Whitney highlighted:

- Key progress made had been in finalising the draft Nature Finance Strategy as set out in the agenda papers. In developing this it had been important to collate sufficient evidence in order to be able to put a proposition to local planning authorities and business in order to start to have conversations about private investment in nature's recovery within Oxfordshire.
- The assistance of Oxford University through Isabelle Hawkins who interned to support the project in examining the size of the biodiversity net gain market was much appreciated.
- The draft Nature Finance Strategy did not explicitly make reference to the creation of an Oxfordshire Environmental Fund, but that was a potential next step it was thought to be appropriate to do so.

Nature Recovery

Simon Smith highlighted:

- Oxfordshire County Council had not as of the date of the meeting been formally appointed as the LNRS responsible authority but was expected by late June. An initial induction had been given regarding the grant budget for the production of the Strategy.
- A LNRS Project Manager had been recruited and it was expected this person would be representing the County Council on the steering group and there would a role to help guide them.
- The district and city councils would be asked whether they wished to be represented collectively or via individual representatives.
- There had been revaluation of the different groups supporting the LNRS steering group to avoid duplication and it was felt that would be a future need to liaise with the Nature and Health group more.

37 Nature Finance Strategy

The Board considered a proposed draft strategic plan to catalyse a framework of natural capital investment in Oxfordshire.

Matt Whitney in response to a question confirmed that in drafting the strategy, the Nature Finance Group had considered the next steps required to put the strategy into practice and secure the strategy's ambition for funding.

A query was raised regarding the intended audience for the strategy and what actions were expected. Matt Whitney responded that the strategy was a front facing document that it was also hoped that businesses would be able to understand and engage with, but in particular it was hoped that local authorities would consider endorsing it. It was intended to set out a strategic direction for all main stakeholders that had been involved in its development as a way forward and it would also need to be promoted. Consideration would be given as to the most effective way to do this.

The Chair commented that the conclusion within the strategy around the scale of the need provided a potential summary for communications.

It was also suggested that in communicating the strategy to business and seeking the participation of business it would be necessary to understand and focus on demand side issues as there was a risk of overly focussing on supply side considerations. Understanding of the market was important as was an offer across a broad range of marketplaces to be more resilient and hedge risk.

The Chair commented that the points made were really useful in informing the next steps, particularly in illustrating the demand side and the types of products the strategy related to through a menu of options. He also suggested a tighter definition of what was meant by 'high integrity markets' so as to be clear that only investments consistent with high ethical values would be supported.

Action: The Nature Finance Strategy was endorsed by the Board taking into account the points for further action raised during discussion.

38 Appointment to the Local Nature Partnership Board

Action: That Tom Curtis be appointed to the OLNP Board as a representative of the business sector.

39 Any other business

Action: That slides relating to the Evenlode Project be circulated outside of the meeting.

40 Dates of future meetings

The dates of future meetings were noted as set out in the agenda.

The meeting closed at 11.57 am