

Notes

OF A MEETING OF THE



Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Board

HELD ON WEDNESDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 2023 AT 10.00 AM
VIRTUAL MEETING VIA MS TEAMS

Present:

Members: Richard Benwell (Chair), Dr Prue Addison, Ian Boll, Camilla Burrow, Tim Coates, Tom Curtis, Michelle Leek, Professor David Macdonald, James Price, David Rouane, Rosie Rowe and Simon Smith

Officers: Chloe Edwards, (Local Nature Recovery Strategy Policy Manager, Oxfordshire County Council), Susan Harbour, (Strategic Partnerships Manager, South and Vale Councils), Kevin Jacob, (Future Oxfordshire Partnership Democratic Services Officer) and Matt Whitney, (Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Manager).

1 Apologies, conflicts of interest, Chair's announcements and welcome to guests

Apologies for absence were submitted by Gillian Aitken, (Landowner representative).

Prue Addison declared an interest in Item 7: Local Wildlife Sites on the basis that the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust was a partner in the Local Wildlife Site project.

The Chair referred to HM Government's acceptance of a change in the law around Local Nature Recovery Strategies which required Local Planning authorities to take LNRS into account in the development of Local Plans which it was hoped gave cause for greater optimism that the LNRSs would lead to a real positive difference to nature.

2 Notes of the previous meeting

The notes of the Board meeting held on 14 June 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

3 Local Nature Recovery Strategy progress and ambitions

The Chair welcomed Chloe Edwards, Local Nature Recovery Strategy Policy Manager, Oxfordshire County Council, to the meeting in order to provide an update on the progress and plans of the LNRS project, including any emerging themes and issues.

Chloe indicated that since taking up her post in August she had been seeking to collate the different stakeholder perspectives of what the LNRS should contain and achieve at the start of its development, so that as much as possible the final document would reflect those views. The consensus position amongst the views expressed to date was that the LNRS should be ambitious and be designed around function and deliverability if it was to be considered to be a success. It was felt that there should be cohesive targets and objectives within the strategy and it was likely that the target of seeking to restore 30% of the county's land for nature by 2030 would feature, but the Board was encouraged to suggest other local or national nature recovery policy objectives.

A project plan was being developed for consideration by the Steering Group which would include governance arrangements. Working groups reporting into the steering group had been created including ones around the themes of evidence, stakeholder engagement and communications. In addition to working with Matt Whitney as the LNP Manager, Chloe indicated she was working with various members of the Board on the project and was also liaising and networking with colleagues in neighbouring areas so as to ensure a joined up approach.

In the discussion that followed, members of the Board commented on the importance of the LNRS Policy Manager role in providing a central point of focus and co-ordination in the development of the LNRS and warmly welcomed Chloe to the role.

It was suggested that early contact should be made as part of stakeholder engagement with the Planning Advisory Group of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, particularly in light of the issues arising around the impact of consideration of biodiversity net gain within the planning and Local Plan process.

In response to a question on anticipated timescales for the completion of drafts that views might be sort on, Chloe informed the Board that the programme was not yet set, but that looking at what other similar responsible authorities were doing this could involve the submission of a strategy around the end of 2024, early 2025 to HM Government. It was necessary to work back from that date to factor in stages such as consultation and a final review process. In addition, the decision making processes of the County Council as the responsible authority had to be taken account of. It was currently expected that priority engagement with farmers and owners of agricultural business about what they wanted from the LNRS would take place during autumn/winter of 2023.

Action: The Chair asked that when it was ready the expected timelines and programme be shared with the Board and it would be helpful if this could include any points in the process whereby engagement with the LNP Board would be most useful.

Prue Addison commented that there were four members of the LNP Board on the LNRS working group which was meeting on a monthly basis and therefore there was a good opportunity for information exchange between the two. Matt Whitney spoke to the expected engagement of all the LNP Board subgroups in the LNRS development process and commented that a methodology for considering and ranking suggested LNRS priorities was also being put together, taking into account and making clear any trade-offs.

The Chair asked for the Board's reaction to the headline ambition of 30% of land to be connected and protected for nature's recovery by 2030, otherwise known as '30 by 30'. A wide range of views were expressed, which are summarised below:

- 30 by 30 was a good high level aspirational target, but it would also be necessary to think beyond the headline information to more specific data as the situation was complex.
- There was a need for target habitat extents within the LNRS.
- The real ecological network would need to be significantly larger than 30% because a large proportion of that land would not meet the criteria for 30 by 30 designation.
- The LNRS should set out what quantum of change was required to guide action by specifying how much protected priority habitats were going to be increased and within specified timescales.
- It was recognised that 2030 was only seven years into the future and there was a need to plan over a much longer term horizon given that the LNRS would not be published for another two years. 30 by 30 was a valid initial aspiration by stakeholders should be asked to think far beyond 2030.
- 2030 by 2030 was an overall national target – it needed to be worked out what the impact of such a target would be locally in Oxfordshire and local decision makers should not be constrained that they could not go above 30%.
- The LNRS should embed the principles of a science first, science based approach.
- Whilst not an alternative to 30 by 30, a suggestion from the LNP Forum had been around setting a percentage target, (perhaps around 90%) related to regenerative farming and the wider landscape. The initiative for all households to be within 15 minutes of green space or water, ('Green and 15'), was another potential source of a target measure linked to health and nature which also would also align with the development of green infrastructure framework and standards from Natural England.
- Nationally, one study had estimated between 5-8% of land and water was current connected and protected for nature, (some were lower), which demonstrated the scale of the challenge to move this to 30% by 2030.
- New management plan guidance was to be published by DEFRA which would contain targets for all the protected landscapes, including a habitat extent target which would include a mechanism for applying the national target to individual AONBs.

The Chair commented on the apparent importance of getting the outputs from the LNRS process into local government decision making processes, particularly in relation to the development of Local Plans and that conversations around this should have already started.

Councillor David Rouane clarified that although Oxfordshire County Council had responsibility for the development of the LNRS, the District and City Councils were the local planning authorities. The Districts and City Councils were all at different stages of their next Local Plan processes, but the process was largely a continuous one. It was also important to be cognitive of the reality that decision making on Local Plans whilst informed by a scientific evidence base it was a democratic process and therefore a political one.

Ian Boll spoke to the delicate role of the role of the Planning Inspectorate in considering Local Plans and also highlighted the impact of Local Plan development on the resources of the councils and that it would be a busy period with pressure on capacity.

Chloe Edwards thanked the various members of the Board for their contributions and commented that she would be speaking to colleagues within each of the councils around

how to engage with each of their council's Local Plan processes and their respective decision making processes including when they might expect to receive LNRS documentation for consultation.

She commented that from the discussion the general principle of 30 by 30 was ambition that was supported, but that the reality of the situation was that it was a more complicated picture.

The Chair thanked Chloe for her appearance and commented that a further update in the future would be welcomed.

4 Oxfordshire's current affairs update

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

Prue Addison, spoke to the project by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust to reconnect the Bernwood, Otmoor and Ray landscapes which after 18 months was coming to a close and encouraged members of the Board to [peruse a report on the project which had covered some 300km² of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire](#). The next steps were to take forward the additional project ideas suggested by stakeholders and linked grant applications were being worked on.

Rosie Rowe highlighted that consultation was about to begin as part of the process of creating and updating a new Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Oxfordshire. This a strategic level document that covered not just the health and social care sectors but also a wide range of partners over a five year period. It was relevant to master planning and Local Plan processes in order that developers responded to the health priorities and challenges within in it when submitting development proposals.

Feedback from public consultation already had demonstrated the importance of mental health and the connection between access to nature and good mental health and it was likely that this would form a major priority within the new strategy as it progress. It was expected that the document would be considered by the Health and Wellbeing Board in January 20224 and it would also be brought to a meeting of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership for information.

Councillor David Rouane informed the Board that the Future Oxfordshire Partnership was holding a focus and delivery workshop on 26 September to consider its future purpose and work programme in light of the coming to the end of Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal which had shaped its original remit and scope. The Board was also updated on HM Government's decision to transfer the functions of local enterprise partnerships including OxLEP to upper tier local authorities such as Oxfordshire County Council from 2024 and that a transition plan was being developed between OxLEP and the County Council.

Councillor Rouane referred to the preparation by OxLEP of an updated draft of Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan which was due to consider by the Future Oxfordshire Partnership at its next meeting. A number of public workshops had been which members of the Board may have attended, but feedback he had received on the latest draft of the Plan following these events was that is unclear how the comments made by those at the workshops had been addressed and pertinent to LNP's role, agriculture as a form of economic activity was

felt to have not been recognised. In addition, it had appeared in this draft that only three of the nine priorities of the Oxfordshire Strategic Plan had been addressed.

Action: That the link to the Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan be circulated to the Board for information when available.

It was noted that HM Government had still yet to publish the National Planning Policy Framework, (NPPF).

Michelle Leek updated the Board that Natural England had recently been undertaking an exercise to identify priority places where the agency could focus its efforts and resources to maximum effect in securing nature recovery. She was pleased to confirm that one of these areas would be within Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire to be known as the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Vale, broadly mirroring the geography of this part of the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Arc. Engagement with partners would take place with the possibility of funding being available.

Professor David Macdonald commented that he had received a significant amount of correspondence in relation to the launch of the latest badger cull. The cull was in his view extremely controversial and based on an evidence base that was at best highly disputed. Irrespective of the welfare implications of a cull, from a biodiversity point of view, the removal of such a large number of apex predators would have a significant effect on ecosystems.

The Chair commented he felt that the LNP should not shy away from considering and potentially taking a position on the wider ecosystem impacts of a cull and that Professor Macdonald's knowledge, experience, and recommendations on what was a very difficult issue would be very welcome.

Camilla Burrow informed the Board that Wild Oxfordshire was working in partnership with Community First Oxfordshire to offer a service around community led stewardship for new developments whereby residents would be encouraged and supported to look after their own green spaces and improve them for nature. The initiative was to be launched at an event on 15 September and represented an opportunity to demonstrate how communities could take more control of their nature assets.

Wild Oxfordshire was also working with the Earth Trust and a number of the other nature conservation and environmental charities within Oxfordshire to raise awareness around the [Wildlife and Countryside Link Nature 2030](#) campaign which urged the public to encourage local politicians to consider nature properly within policy making.

With regard to the Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan, she commented that she felt that it had been a missed opportunity for OxLEP to not to have taken a co-design approach to the Plan with the LNP given the breadth of knowledge available on environmental issues.

5 Oxfordshire Nature Fund

The Board considered a report which presented one potential method of operationalising the Oxfordshire Nature Finance Strategy by establishing a revolving fund for nature, or an Oxfordshire Nature Fund. The Board was asked to discuss the proposal and any alternative ways of addressing the issue, suggest potential third parties that might wish to

be involved in the exploration of the concept, suggest potential third parties who might be willing to capitalise such a fund and to support the further exploration of the concept.

Matt Whitney, Local Nature Partnership Manager introduced the report and answered questions from the Board. He commented that following the endorsement of the Nature Finance Strategy by the Board and the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, an online launch of the strategy was planned as soon as the LNP's website was ready and it would also be launched at the Oxfordshire Green Finance Conference scheduled for 11 January 2024.

The Strategy needed to be operationalised and the report referred to a number of supply side barriers to the delivery projects. The proposed Oxfordshire Nature Fund was a way to address these. This was in the wider context of increasing demand for such products from all sectors of the economy including private corporations and local authorities. A lack of supply of BNG units could lead to significant delays in housing delivery.

The proposal included the provision of loan or grant options to farmers and landowners who wished to explore entering the carbon credit and biodiversity credit markets to cover feasibility work including ecological baseline assessments to establish what they could provide which could then potentially be repaid when any final credit units were sold.

In discussion, members of the Board supported further exploration of the concept as set out within the report with a number of comments made.

- There were potential risks and a need for caution around repayable finance when there was significant uncertainty around the actual size of the market and number of potential paying customers.
- There were technical challenges around farmers generating revenue from carbon and biodiversity services which remained uncertain despite the number of entrants wishing to enter and offer products in the repayable finance space.
- There was a need to support farmers and landowners to work together so that they could collectively bargain and navigate the market. Capacity to navigate and negotiate had been key factors for early entrants to the market to date. The Board was informed that the need for the encouragement of collaboration by the LNP was fully recognised.
- There was a need for collaboration and to avoid duplication within the space. Consideration of successful Landscape Recovery proposals to DEFRA and the green financing of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty could be useful in order to learn any transferable financing lessons.
- It would be necessary for any fund scheme to set clear parameters and to not drift into too many other natural capital markets and initiatives.
- 'Patient lending' could be a solution, but this underlined the importance of scale and coming together at a county level to the administrative challenge of supporting and managing the fund.
- It was important to be able to communicate the proposals in a way that was clear and understandable to all.
- There were signs that following the recent modest decline in house prices that developers were beginning to raise more viability challenges.

Action: The Board supported the further exploration of the Oxfordshire Nature Fund concept as set out in the report.

6 Spotlight on Biodiversity Net Gain

The Board considered a report which outlined the biodiversity net gain policy and implementation environment and which recommended to the Board that the Local Nature Partnership should ask local planning authorities to adopt a level of at least 20% Biodiversity Net Gain developer contributions, (BNG) within their individual biodiversity net gain policies.

Matt Whitney, Local Nature Partnership Manager introduced the paper. He highlighted that biodiversity net gain was a national policy due to be introduced in November 2023 which would require housing and infrastructure developers to leave natural environment in a better state than pre-commencement of their activities.

The Chair commented that although the national minimum for BNG had been set at 10%, the evidence base locally and precedents supported adoption of at least 20% given that the level of nature of need within Oxfordshire for nature would not be satisfied by a 10% target. It was felt that this level of contribution was both affordable and viable for developers. It was noted that a recent report drafted by the University of Oxford had indicated the importance of setting the percentage of BNG as high as possible to maximise chances of the policy being successful. The Board was also informed that approximately 25 local planning authorities including a number within the South-East had already adopted requirements for 20% BNG.

In discussion, various members of the Board agreed that the district and city councils should be requested to seek contributions of at least 20% as it was felt to be the minimum of what was necessary within Oxfordshire to achieve actual net gain based on the ecological evidence available, although it was acknowledged that local planning authorities had to consider a wide range of factors. This should be communicated to the councils and published where possible and it was noted that a workshop with planning officers on BNG had been suggested by which point a statement of the LNPs position should be finalised.

Other points were in summary that:

- With regard to principle 12, that there should be further discussion around the wording of the approach to Open Mosaic Habitat to ensure the continued promotion of grass land scrub and tree mosaic habitat via BNG funding.
- They should be contact with the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Planning Advisory Group and the officers supporting it to test the views of strategic planners on BNG and any evidence as their Local Plans progressed. Whilst the objective of 20% was a good one any increase above 10% might lead to increases in viability challenges from developers. Many schemes were already facing such challenges and it was important to avoid a situation where developers appealed and won against levels of contributions because local planning authorities lost their ability to negotiate and defend their core policy values at that point.
- Each local planning authority followed a process whereby its Local Plan had to be approved by the Planning Inspectorate. It was good to be ambitious, but it was also necessary to be mindful of this.
- Principle seven set out a minimum BNG level of 10% and yet the paper was advocating a level of 20%.

Matt Whitney responded that he had recently attended a meeting of the officer group supporting the Planning Advisory Group for an introductory discussion of the issues around Section 106 agreements and that a further briefing was planned. It was also noted

that the Planning Advisory Group was considering general challenges around the viability of developer contributions.

The Chair commented that every effort should be made to support councils in terms of sharing the evidence base for 20% BNG.

Action:

1. Agreed that based on the Board's discussions, the BNG principles set out in the report be revised and a proposal developed as to where they would best be located.
2. That the LNP Board endorse asking local planning authorities to adopt a BNG level of at least 20%.

7 Local Wildlife Sites within the Context of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The Board considered a report which set out proposals to increase investment in Local Wildlife Sites to ensure these sites could play a full role in the emerging Local Nature and Recovery Strategy. Simon Smith presented the report and highlighted that:

- From the perspective of nature recovery, locally designated wildlife sites held probably the most important designation but could be considered to have been traditionally under recognised.
- Although Sites of Special Scientific Interest, (SSSI) were of high quality they did not represent the largest volume of wildlife habitat within Oxfordshire.
- Wildlife sites were increasing in prominence due to their importance to the baselining and delivery of Local Nature Recovery Strategies, (LNRS).
- Local authorities were statutorily responsible for local wildlife sites and such sites had material planning status, for instance within Local Plans. However, it was considered that the processes supporting local wildlife sites were not as robust as they needed to be in order to deliver LNRS objectives. This included work around calculating feasibility and making evidence based cases for funding in the context of the significant constraints on local authority generally.
- The proposals represented a judgement of what was needed from a LNP perspective and were designed to inform and support local authority officers in their roles.
- The proposals had been developed alongside Edward Church from the Local Wildlife Site Project Steering Group, BBOWT and officers from a number of local authorities to ensure that an operational perspective was considered.
- It was proposed within the recommendations to bring the Local Wildlife Site Project Steering Group within the LNP structure.

Camilla Burrow commented that she fully supported the proposals which echoed those which she had previously been involved in. It was suggested that exploration of match funding to help supplement local authority contributions was an area that could be looked at moving forward, but this did not affect the current proposals.

The Chair commented that he recognised that Board members might welcome additional opportunity to consider the report in light of the limited time available for discussion in the meeting and suggested that Board members be asked to confirm their agreement to the recommendations by email. This was supported.

Action: That Board members be asked to formally indicate whether they supported the recommendations via email.

8 Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Manager Update

Matt Whitney, Local Nature Partnership Manager presented a verbal update. The Board was informed that:

- A Nature and Health Project Manager had been recruited who would be starting in early November.
- There had been authorisation of the proposal to recruit a Nature Finance Project Manager who would primarily lead on enabling a nature based carbon sequestration project. Board members were asked to help raise awareness of the post.

The Chair also referred to his and Matt Whitney's visit to Westminster regarding Local Nature Recovery Strategies and thanked Matt for the letter he had written to HM Government on behalf of LNPs on the strengthened legal duties of LNRSs. The Chair also thanked all the members of the working groups for their valued contributions to the work of the LNP.

9 Any other business

No other business was raised.

10 Dates of future meetings

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

The meeting closed at 12.00 pm