

Nature matters

Berkshire
Buckinghamshire
Oxfordshire



in Berks, Bucks & Oxon

Autumn '20

Newsletter from the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) to inform those who can affect nature's position in politics and help inspire community involvement.

Giving nature *a fighting chance*

by **Matthew Stanton**
Head of Planning, Policy and Advocacy

Welcome to this new edition of *Nature Matters*, where we highlight some issues of key importance in our local area and the steps we can all take to give nature a fighting chance.

With the Environment and Agriculture Bills going through parliament, Local Nature Recovery Strategy pilots going ahead and the government consulting on its Planning for the Future proposals, we are in a significant period of flux with massive potential for both benefits and dangers for wildlife. The good news is that we are in a strong position to influence the considerable changes that might be coming.

In this edition we set out some of our major concerns with the new planning proposals, our work in Oxfordshire to bring forward a Nature Recovery Network, the importance of insects, and the need for Local Nature Partnerships to be at the heart of plans to restore nature across our three counties.

“ We want to work with partners across our three counties to create solutions to the problems our local environment faces. ”

The covid pandemic has brought into sharp focus people's reliance on the natural world and there is huge public support for government, both local and national, to tackle the nature and climate emergency we are in. We want to work with partners across our three counties to create solutions to the problems our local environment faces and ensure that the changes that are coming, are changes that help our natural world.



The Oxfordshire Biodiversity Advisory Group partnership¹, has released a map for nature's recovery – a Nature Recovery Network (NRN). This draft was prepared to address the urgent need for a spatial environmental strategy for the county, and to feed into the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (OP2050).

The concept of Oxfordshire's NRN is simple. Existing protected sites, which represent the best areas for wildlife, form the core zone of the NRN. The recovery zone creates better habitat connectivity by linking core sites and incorporating other locally important areas such as Conservation Target Areas. Finally the wider landscape zone covers the remaining areas of the county, recognising the importance of agricultural and urban landscapes in supporting nature's recovery. The NRN is a fundamental component of the government's 25-year Environment Plan.

To achieve nature's recovery in Oxfordshire, we need large areas where wildlife is able to flourish, and where nature provides the range of ecosystem services we will need in the future. To reflect this space needed for nature, we have proposed an ambitious target to double the amount of land of high value for nature by 2050, which would cover almost 40% of the county (103,386ha; i.e. the NRN core and recovery zones).

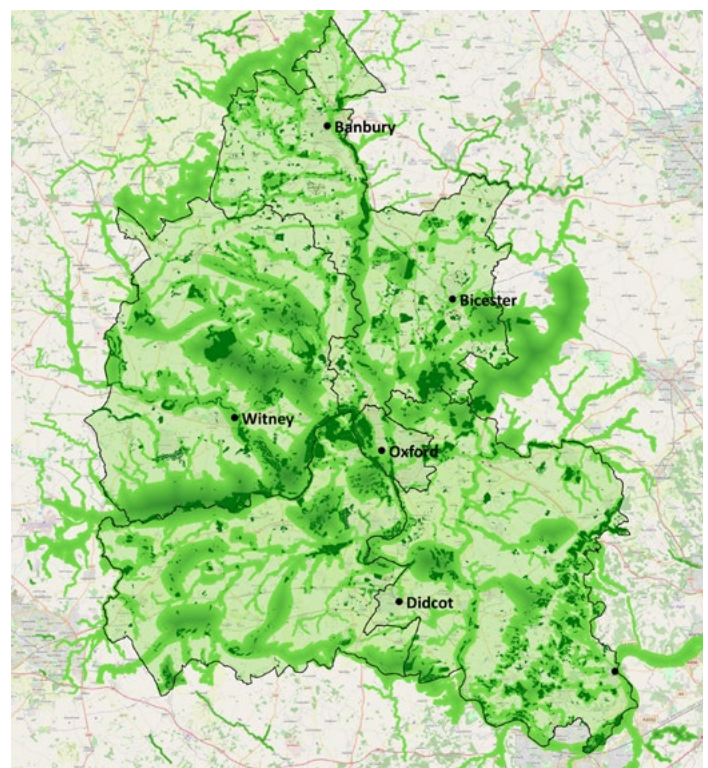
The Oxfordshire Plan 2050 provides an opportunity to use the draft NRN map and recommended associated policies to help plan for nature's recovery at a county-wide level and to set the framework for future Local Plans. The Oxfordshire Biodiversity Advisory Group partnership has proposed a number of policies for the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. These include:

- Requiring developments to positively contribute to nature's recovery. Oxfordshire's environmental organisations have a shared ambition to achieve 20% net gain across the county.
- Giving the Nature Recovery Network significant weight in planning decisions.
- Avoiding major new built development in the Recovery Zone.
- Protecting and enhancing habitats of particular importance for nature and strengthening ecological networks.
- Focusing on improving nature in the Recovery Zone, including the establishment of large nature areas of at least 5,000ha in size.
- Investing more in monitoring the change in nature so that it can be seen if the improvements are actually being achieved and action taken if not.

¹ Partnership organisations: Wild Oxfordshire, Thames Valley Environmental Record Centre, BBOWT, RSPB, Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, the Environment Agency, Natural England, AONBs, and Oxfordshire LPAs.

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Oxfordshire's Nature Recovery Network



Key

- Core Zone
- Recovery Zone
- Wider Landscape Zone

Boundaries

- District Boundaries

Map produced by Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre in 2020
Contains TVERC data
Contains OS data (c) Licence number: 100023343
Contains OpenStreetMap data
Contains Environment Agency information (c) Environment Agency and/or database right

What you can do

- Ensure your local authority creates an NRN, integrated into a Local Nature Recovery Strategy.
- Find out more about NRN's nationally at bbowt.org.uk/NRNs
- Find out more about Oxfordshire's NRN at <https://bit.ly/2FKqvbs>

The value of

Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs)

by **Sam Cartwright**
Head of Wider Countryside Conservation

In 2011 the government's Natural Environment White Paper¹ *The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature* created Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) as influential forums for driving landscape-scale change in the natural environment. LNPs are equivalent in status to Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), have a formalised constitution and structure, and work closely with the LEPs, local authorities, and Health and Wellbeing Boards, plus relevant organisations, businesses and individuals. LNPs have the tripartite aim of providing strategic solutions that benefit nature, communities and the economy.

There are 47 LNPs in England, mainly operating at county level. In our area we have the Berkshire Local Nature Partnership² and the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership³. In areas without a County Council, LNPs working across unitary authorities provide the only structure for such cross-border collaboration on natural environment strategy.

Each LNP has its own priorities depending on local requirements, capacity, and funding, but core functions include: coordinated responses to strategic planning consultations; administrating and promoting Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (Conservation Target Areas in Oxfordshire); and producing the county biodiversity strategy and evidence base. Going forwards, LNPs need to ensure the collaborative and inclusive development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

Some LNPs reach even further. Buckinghamshire NEP has produced the county's green infrastructure opportunity mapping and is devising a locally specific biodiversity accounting method and strategy for biodiversity offsetting. Further afield we are seeing forward thinking LNPs develop natural capital investment strategies to help ready counties to take full advantage of new environmental finance opportunities such as biodiversity and carbon offsetting, and investment in nature-based solutions like natural flood management.

But many LNPs are critically short on funds. No government funding is available to sustain them and while some have local authority and private funding arrangements, others lack this investment which limits the resources available for effective proactive work, engagement with partners and achieving solutions to local priorities.

Funding for LNPs is crucial to ensure there is a step-change in decision-making affecting the natural environment throughout the county. LNPs offer value for money as most technical expertise and time is donated by individuals and their respective organisations. Defra provides non-financial support and national coordination.

Few other opportunities exist to bring together technical experts and decision makers from local authorities, government agencies, corporates and other organisations to collectively devise natural environment strategy that will benefit the economy and address the dual pressures of the climate and ecological emergency. By supporting the LNP, local authorities can be part of integrated natural environment planning that achieves the best outcome for nature, people and the economy.

BBOWT sits on the Board of the Buckinghamshire NEP, has recently taken on the Chair of Berkshire LNP, and through its position on the Oxfordshire Environment Board is helping establish an LNP in Oxfordshire.

¹assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228842/8082.pdf

²www.berkshirelnp.org

³bucksmknep.co.uk

What you can do

- Ask your local authority to resource your LNP.
- Ensure your local authority is represented on its LNP.
- Work collaboratively with other local authorities in the county through the LNP.



Action for

insects

by **Nicky Warden**
Political Research Officer

Insects are a critical part of our ecosystem, but 41% of species in England face extinction. Populations have been decimated by habitat loss, impacted by pesticides and other pollutants, and affected by climate change. However, reversing the ongoing decline of insects – and all life that depends on them – is possible. The Wildlife Trusts launched its *Reversing the Decline of Insects* report in July. It calls on MPs, local authorities, parish councils, community groups and individuals to help bring insects back.

Under the Environment Bill, local authorities are legally required to contribute to nature's recovery and insects must be a key part as they support a huge range of plants, animals and ecosystems. Healthy, diverse ecosystems support climate change mitigation and adaptation, including regulating drought and flooding. This can support local authorities that have declared an Environment and Climate Emergency.

“ 41% of insect species face extinction in England. ”

More and better-quality wild spaces for insects will also benefit people. Ensuring equal access to high quality greenspace has proven positive social and economic impacts including food security, physical and mental health, educational outcomes, workplace productivity and crime reduction. These benefits will be especially important as communities begin to recover from the impacts of Covid-19.

The good news is that swift but simple actions can help many insects recover relatively quickly so we hope to see significant, visible and measurable success as a result of these actions.

If insects are to thrive and help support healthy ecosystems, then they need a connected network of insect-friendly habitats stretching the length and breadth of our country. For this bold vision to become reality, we need top quality planning, so it is clear which places need protecting, where new green spaces should be created and where the green corridors connecting them will be. We also need informed and sensitive management across all types of land - from rivers and peatlands, to roadside verges, parks and farmland. Insects do not recognise man-made boundaries and need to be able to thrive everywhere. And we need to remove the threat to insects from pesticides. To support farmers in finding ways to minimise pesticide use, to work with nature, and to develop truly sustainable farming methods which maintain comparable yields while sustaining a rich ecosystem and healthy soils.

It is political will, mobilised communities and individual action that will achieve this. We need to change the ways we manage gardens and urban greenspaces so that they are rich in flowers, free from pesticides, and with plentiful places for insects to nest and shelter. We must clean up our rivers and wetlands, protecting them from pollution with chemicals and soil run-off, so that they once again teem with insect life.

What you can do

- Read the report *Reversing the decline of insects* at <https://bit.ly/3cqdoZi> and join the action for insects campaign wildlifetrusts.org/take-action-insects.
- Encourage residents to take individual and community actions to help insects. You can use our handy guide <https://bit.ly/3iWHS02> to help you.
- Contact your MP to ask the Government to set an ambitious pesticide reduction target of at least 50% by 2030.



Planning

for the future **by Matthew Stanton**
Head of Planning, Policy and Advocacy

The government's *Planning for the Future* consultation proposes dramatic changes to our planning system. Whilst proposals for all new streets to be tree lined, an acknowledgment of the importance of local wildlife sites, and the recognition that all local authorities need dedicated ecologists are to be welcomed, there is much in the consultation to be concerned about. It is clear that at the heart of the government's plans are houses, not nature. The proposals, which launched in August, would create three new zones; growth, renewal and protection. The use of permission in principle would be greatly increased in the first two zones, whilst the protection zone (comprising special areas such as AONBs, local wildlife sites, etc.) would be subject to the existing system with no significant actual new protections.

The government proposes to front-load the planning system by using zonal planning and data driven approaches to massively increase the number of developments that would have permission in principle. The aim appears to be that the proper scrutiny that currently occurs at the planning permission stage would instead happen when local plans are being developed.

Front loading surveys and assessments means less scrutiny later down the line, even though 10 years might have passed between surveys for local plans and actual development proposals coming forward, by which time habitats and sites might have changed. Nature is not included in the growth or renewal zones, and the procedure undermines the democratic process, providing little opportunity for local

people to influence individual development proposals. A one size fits all approach to development control early in the process risks ignoring the unique qualities of some sites, and the data on habitats that the consultation assumes exists, is not necessarily available or up to date.

A further concern is that the proposal to replace section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy funds with a single 'infrastructure levy' could be hugely damaging if an appropriate proportion of the funds are not ring fenced for nature. The pressures on local authorities to deliver affordable housing, transport infrastructure and other community assets could mean nature is left with only scraps if a firm commitment to the environment is not made.

The government also proposes to lose the Duty to Cooperate which would sever the need for local planning authorities to consult with Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs, as highlighted on page 3) when developing local plans. At a time when Nature Recovery Strategies are coming to the fore in local authorities' efforts to restore nature, and LNPs play a central role in their development, it is important that LNPs are resourced and empowered rather than undermined. It appears that the government's proposals for spatial planning under this consultation have been developed entirely separately from the spatial planning being undertaken for Local Nature Recovery Strategies. With the proposals as they are, and the respective weight attached by government to both, there is a real risk that houses will continue to trump nature.

What you can do

- Respond to the consultation by the end date of 29 October, contact your MP or the minister to let them know your concerns <https://bit.ly/33hQ9xz>

Contact us



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Estelle leads the team of Directors who are delivering the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust's *Strategic Plan 2016 -2021: Be part of nature's recovery*.



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Matthew leads on BBOWT's planning work and legal and political engagement. If you would like more information on BBOWT's advocacy work or our detailed positions please get in touch.



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Prue leads BBOWT's conservation efforts in the wider countryside, working with planners, developers and private landowners to address the challenges facing wildlife in our three counties.



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To arrange a presentation on BBOWT's work, or on the topics covered here, please contact Nicky. We'd welcome feedback on this newsletter, or let us know if you wish to be removed from the list.

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