



**Berkshire
Buckinghamshire
& Oxfordshire**
Wildlife Trust

Reconnecting Bernwood, Otmoor and the Ray

A call to action

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Executive Summary

The Bernwood, Otmoor and Ray (BOR) region is one of the best remaining ecologically important but fragmented landscapes in southern England. Sitting across the border of Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, this 300km² area is critical for biodiversity, with a strong farming heritage.

Every corner of the landscape turns up gems. It is nationally important for rare habitats and species, such as wildflower and floodplain meadows, wading birds, hairstreak butterflies, bats and ancient woodland. Yet the landscape – stretching between Buckingham, Bicester, Aylesbury and Oxford – is located within a region which is seen as ‘vital’ to the UK’s growth aspirations and faces unrelenting pressure from development for housing, transport and related infrastructure.

This has resulted in many important habitats being fragmented and isolated, inhibiting the ability of key species to move through the landscape and making it vulnerable to threats from climate change and disease. Historic agricultural intensification, drainage and poor water quality have also had profound impacts on the ecology and hydrology of the River Ray and the surrounding floodplain. Furthermore, the lack of a legislative framework and a coordinated approach to nature recovery has meant the majority of efforts have been relatively small, short-term and isolated.

A range of organisations are united in recognising the value and importance of this region and have highlighted its importance in response to numerous damaging developments. Helpfully, the BOR landscape is likely to form an integral part of the forthcoming statutory Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) of Buckinghamshire Council

and Oxfordshire County Council. These strategies, together with the UK Environment Act 2021, and a range of local plans, policies and strategies, create an enabling framework for managing the UK’s natural resources collaboratively and at scale.

There is now a significant opportunity to restore and rediscover this fascinating rural area a world away from the busy towns of Oxford and Bicester.

In 2022 Buckinghamshire Council funded a feasibility study which BBOWT has been leading, in partnership with others, to draw out the most immediate priorities and opportunities for nature and people in this region, which could be initiated within five years. Through this work, stakeholders have agreed on a core set of six priority project concepts. Together these will form the basis of a new landscape-scale initiative, to ensure vitally important BOR sites are protected, restored, extended and connected up at scale.

Significant investment over multiple years is now needed to unlock the full potential of this landscape – not only for the wonderful and diverse wildlife, but also for the benefit of the growing human population living within and close by.

Background

to the Reconnecting the Bernwood, Otmoor and the Ray feasibility study

Introduction to the landscape

Bernwood, Otmoor, Ray (BOR) is an ecologically rich but threatened landscape. A mosaic of different wetland, woodland and grassland habitats, the present landscape includes fragments of rare and ancient habitats which are nationally important wildlife sites. Predominantly a rural, mixed farming landscape, dispersed, tranquil settlements are dotted throughout the area and a strong farming heritage defines the region. Because of the relatively heavy soils in this area, many farms are mixed, with arable on the more productive soils and pasture on the lower-lying, heavier soils. The demographics of the BOR are a complex mix of more affluent areas alongside areas of relatively higher deprivation.

History of conservation action

The BOR landscape encompasses BBOWT's Bernwood Forest and Ray Valley Living Landscape, and an impressive number of nature reserves and protected sites. This includes 24 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and 83 Local Wildlife Sites. There are also a number of [Conservation Target Areas](#) (CTA) (Oxfordshire) and [Biodiversity Opportunity Areas](#) (BOA) (Buckinghamshire).¹

These have been identified by partners as the most important areas for biodiversity in the two counties in which to focus nature conservation effort. In particular they call for actions to manage and restore important habitats, such as floodplain grazing marsh, lowland deciduous woodland, meadows and dry acid grasslands, as well as features such as hedgerows and ponds.

BOR is a landscape which has long been recognised as having outstanding natural value by local organisations and statutory bodies, due to significant concentrations of nationally important species and diverse habitats. For example:



- Since 1981 **BBOWT** has been buying and restoring species-rich floodplain meadows and areas of woodland, as well as working with neighbouring farmers to create sympathetic habitats, particularly for wading birds, in the Upper Ray. BBOWT's 12 nature reserves in the BOR contribute to both the core protected areas and form stepping stones between them.
- **RSPB** owns and manages the iconic Otmoor reserve, a nationally important site for waders and wildfowl that was created in 1997. It is now one of the largest inland wetland complexes in the country.
- **Freshwater Habitats Trust** and **Newt Conservation Partnership** have driven the creation of habitats for great crested newts, in compensation for development through the District Licensing scheme, as well as supporting private landowners with small-scale wetland and pond creation at several estates and farms.
- **Wild Oxfordshire** has over 30 years of experience in helping communities within Oxfordshire to take action for nature in their patch.

1. Oxfordshire: Bernwood, Brill and Muswell Hill, Otmoor, Oxford Heights East, Shotover, Ray.
Buckinghamshire: Bernwood, Brill and Muswell Hill, Upper Ray



- **Conservation groups** at the Ministry of Defence's land in Arncott, part of Bicester Garrison, look after a mosaic of habitats that provide for an extraordinarily diverse array of flora and fauna, including one of the most diverse assemblages of butterflies in the region.
- Most recently, **Natural England** has been reviewing the SSSI designations in the Bernwood area with a view to protect and link up ancient woodland and associated habitats utilised by the rare Bechstein's bats and the black hairstreak butterfly.

However, in spite of these valuable efforts with impressive results on individual sites, many important habitats, including species-rich grasslands, lack adequate protection and the BOR landscape as a whole is not recognised or designated in the planning system. Furthermore, there has been a progressive erosion of habitats to successive developments over the past 50 years, which are continuing to accelerate due to Government development and investment plans across the Oxfordshire to Cambridgeshire region.

Nature cannot thrive in small and isolated areas if the wider landscape is not managed sympathetically to provide food, breeding grounds and other resources.

Introducing the Reconnecting Bernwood, Otmoor and the Ray (RBOR) feasibility study

Born out of the concern for the issues that the Oxford to Cambridge region faces, the BOR landscape was one of 35 priority strategic-scale landscapes identified by the [Doubling Nature Environmental Opportunities Mapping project](#) led by the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership (the "NEP").

To further develop this environmental opportunities work, in 2022 Buckinghamshire Council funded a feasibility study to bring together stakeholders to address threats and respond to opportunities for nature and people in the BOR landscape.

BBOWT led this work, with the support of Chris Bowden Consulting and Logika Consultants Ltd, and carried out extensive consultation and engagement. The majority of consultation work focused on stakeholders, which covered a wide

In total, 28 landowners and farmers, 60 people from community groups and 132 individuals from 44 organisations took part in over 70 hours of consultation workshops and events.

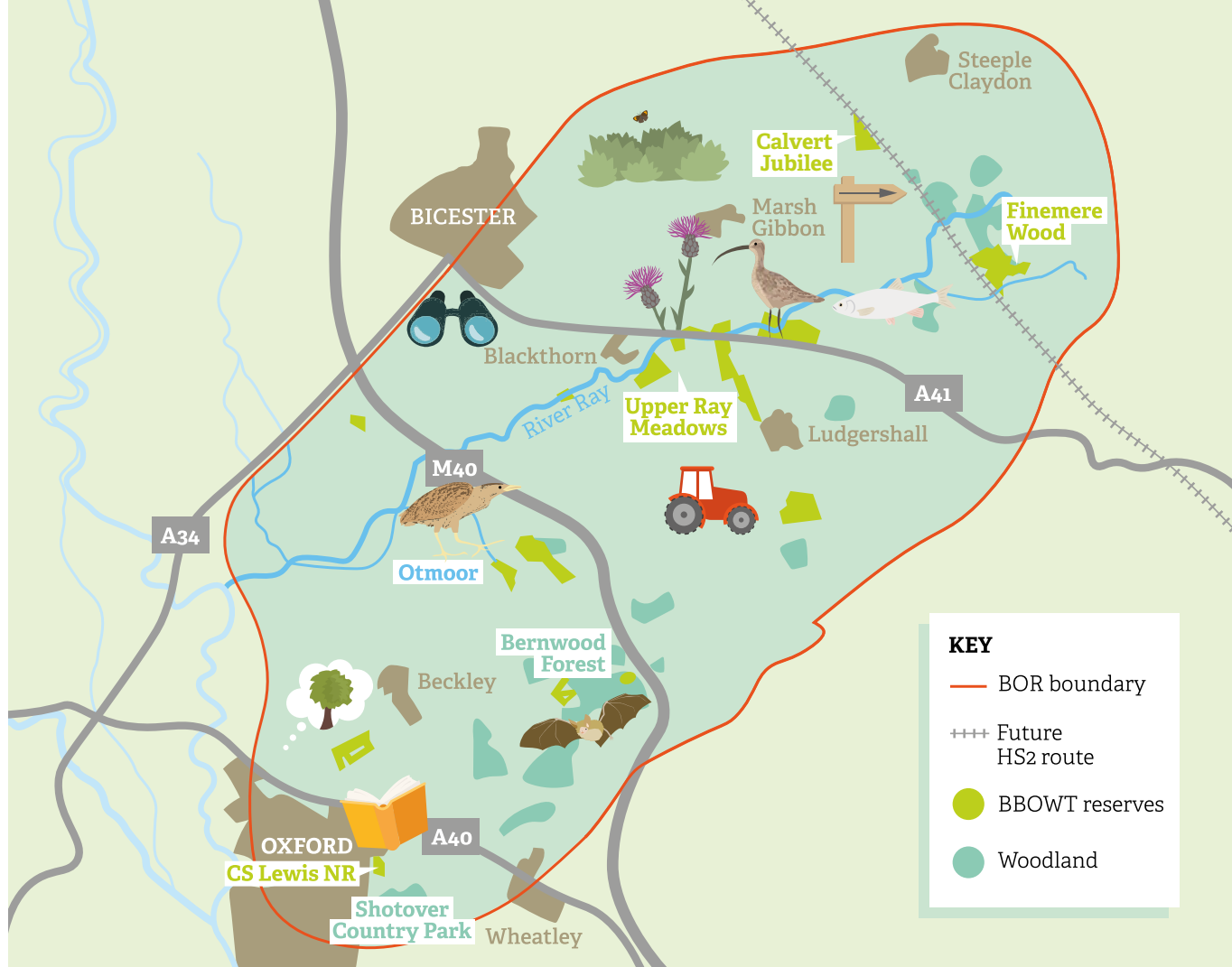


range of people and organisations from the public, private and third sectors with an interest in nature, farming, the environment and land management, as well as County and District Councils and statutory agencies. Wild Oxfordshire led on consultation with communities within the Oxfordshire area using additional funds from Natural England.

The consultation centred around projects that could be initiated within five years and that stakeholders would be happy to be involved with delivering. This report shares a high-level summary of this work, sharing the biggest and most immediate opportunities for nature and people and a plan to take these ideas forward.

Ecologically important areas in the BOR and current threats

A series of workshops invited stakeholders to discuss what they value about the current landscape as well as threats and opportunities for landscape recovery in the BOR. The following maps show these and provide a foundation to start building the more detailed projects that could form the basis of a future landscape-scale initiative.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PRESENT BOR LANDSCAPE



Farmland

A strong farming heritage defines much of the present landscape character.



The River Ray

An ecological corridor throughout the landscape.



Floodplain meadows

Flower-rich and important for nationally-scarce wading birds.



Bernwood Forest

Once a medieval royal hunting forest. Includes ancient woodland and supports vulnerable species such as Bechstein's bats.



Curlews

Charismatic, ground-nesting birds. Ray Valley and Otmoor Basin are important for inland curlew conservation.



Ancient bushy hedgerows

Criss-crossing the landscape, they are a stronghold for rare black and brown hairstreak butterflies.



Otmoor

Lowland wet grassland, reedbed, blackthorn hedges and species-rich hay meadows. Wildfowl and waders thrive here.



Culture

Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* is said to have been inspired by 'chessboard-like' field patterns of Otmoor.



Heritage

People's memories of the landscape describe loss but also provide hope for what could be returned in future years.



Placenames

Providing clues to a rich natural and social heritage that is waiting to be unlocked – e.g. Blackthorn, Kingswood, and Marsh Gibbon.



Community action

Local community groups are active in volunteering, surveying wildlife, campaigning and looking after their greenspaces.



THREATS



Development

Allocations exceed 550ha with potential for habitat loss, fragmentation and loss of connectivity.



High Speed Two (HS2)

Fragmenting woodland and other fragile habitats.



Inappropriate land management

Damaging and fragmenting habitat for threatened species such as curlew.



Deer

Over-population is preventing natural regeneration of woodland areas.



Poor water quality in the Ray

Diffuse pollution threatens key habitats such as floodplain meadows.



Modifications to the River Ray

Major implications for riparian habitats, river ecology and farmland birds.



Human impact

Lack of accessible greenspace is driving recreation pressure and impacts on wildlife.



Limited access

Exploration limited by public transport, parking facilities, busy roads and narrow lanes.



Climate change

Vulnerability to extreme weather events, pests and diseases, and pressure on key water resources.

OPPORTUNITIES



Biodiversity Net Gain

Could unlock up to £30m to compensate for development and support nature recovery.



Nature-friendly farming

A new farmer cluster is driving nature recovery in the wider landscape.



Hay meadows

Restoration possible using seed harvested from local nature reserves.



Venison market

Specific deer management around a local venison market to reduce browsing pressure.



Greenspaces

A network of accessible greenspaces would support wellbeing of diverse communities.



Local Nature Recovery Strategies

Coordinating action for nature at scale.



Catchment partnership

Investing in river and floodplain restoration throughout the Ray catchment.



Freshwater habitat creation

Supporting curlew and other wading birds with new ponds and reedbeds.



Floodplain restoration

To benefit wildlife, reduce flooding and attract investment.

Long-term vision and projects

These are challenging times and the landscape faces many threats but it is also time to seize new opportunities.

The number one priority in the BOR landscape for stakeholders we consulted was to take advantage of a new regulatory framework and associated resources to achieve a bigger, better and more joined up mosaic of good quality habitats at landscape scale. The regulatory opportunities are summarised below.

The regulatory framework

Driven by global commitments and the UK's exit from the European Union, there has been huge change in the regulatory framework for nature conservation in the last few years. The Environment Act 2021 established legally binding targets to halt the decline in species by 2030 and require new developments to improve or create habitats for nature. Complementing this, the government's Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 established a commitment to protect 30% of the UK's land and sea for nature through the Nature Recovery Network and other policies by 2030.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies

To develop and deliver the Nature Recovery Network, Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) will be drawn up by Responsible Authorities to focus and coordinate action for the restoration of nature at scale across a variety of priority areas. Buckinghamshire was one of five areas in England that piloted LNRS from August 2020 to May 2021. Their work highlighted restoration

and enhancement of the Ray Valley and Bernwood Forest as priority outcomes. Plans to create the statutory Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire LNRS are now in motion and we will be working to ensure that the BOR landscape and associated CTAs and BOAs are a key part of these.

Emerging environmental markets

Innovative environmental markets are beginning to emerge but are at different states of readiness (e.g., for biodiversity, nutrients, and carbon). The mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) system, also established by the Environment Act 2021, should become a key additional source of funds for nature conservation in the future. Many authorities including in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire are already applying a net gain policy to new developments. From November 2023, it will become a mandatory requirement for developers to provide a minimum of 10% Biodiversity Net Gain in order to gain planning consent.

Whilst the first port of call will always be to defend against any further loss or degradation of biodiversity, it is clear from looking at existing development allocations in the various Local Plans within the region that there should also be sizeable funds available to create, enhance and manage habitats over a 30-year period. It is difficult to accurately predict the potential scale of funding and opportunity this represents at present due to the varying practices and



limited examples of BNG projects on the ground. However, a preliminary analysis by Chris Bowden Consulting and Logika Consultants Ltd suggests that the size of the BNG market in the BOR landscape over the next 14 years could be anywhere between £15 million and £30 million.²

For maximum benefit the large majority of offsite BNG should be delivered in priority landscapes, like the BOR. By helping to coordinate offsets and link developers with sites, there is potential to create new and enhance existing high value nature areas for wildlife as well as to create corridors and connectivity between them, contributing to a more resilient network of habitats at a landscape-scale. To maximise the gains for nature at scale it will be crucial to work with Local Planning Authorities to ensure Local Plans reflect strategic priorities for connectivity of habitats and green infrastructure.



Agriculture policy

The Agriculture Act 2020 marks the start of a transition period towards implementing the principle of “public money for public goods”. The Act has established the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMs) which is to become the main policy to replace the European Common Agricultural Policy and basic payments to farmers. It has been heralded as a world-leading policy to support farmers to provide public goods such as biodiversity, clean air, water and soils, alongside the production of food, fuel and other marketable goods. To date, there have

been considerable delays with roll-out, roll-backs and ongoing uncertainty over the financing and delivery of some key elements. However, these are now set to be fully rolled out by 2027 which is the end of the transitional period.



These are likely to be the key regional strategies to drive nature's recovery locally. Together, they create an enabling framework for managing the UK's natural resources more sustainably, collaboratively and at scale, working beyond the boundaries of designated and protected sites.

Moving forward, it is now vital that interested partners and individuals work alongside Responsible Authorities, Local Planning Authorities, the Bucks and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership and Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership to develop, deliver, fund and monitor the outcomes. Doing so will help these strategies derive maximum benefit for wildlife and people locally.

2. This analysis has taken the housing allocations from all relevant Local Plans in the BOR region, and has used expert judgement to estimate the biodiversity loss that could result from these using the Defra 3.1 metric. It applies an assumption that approximately 50% of the provision of biodiversity units will occur offsite (based on Eftic (2021) market analysis for Defra). The resulting estimate is that there will be between 600 to 1,200 biodiversity units that need to be delivered offsite in the BOR region to support developers in achieving 10% BNG. The final assumption made is that the unit price will be £25,000. These estimates are a best guess based on understanding of the BNG market as of December 2022, and we appreciate may change rapidly as we approach November 2023 when 10% BNG will become mandatory.

Long-term vision for BOR

Landscape restoration at scale is a long-term engagement and many of the more ambitious opportunities from the project concepts will take many years to achieve. Based on the outcomes of consultation, the following overarching vision will guide future work for the longer-term:



Land in BOR is well managed for nature, yet remains productive and local agricultural businesses are thriving. This iconic landscape, its key habitats and species are being protected, restored, and enhanced as a result of harnessing a range of new innovative funding mechanisms and sustainable income streams based upon the ecosystem services that this region can provide for people, communities and the environment.

Priority project concepts

The development of project concepts took place over several months, and produced in total 39 project ideas, which were refined over a number of workshops. These ideas were then collated and thematically grouped to produce six priority focuses. Thirty-nine individuals from 31 organisations took part in workshops to develop the project concepts.

These six concepts represent the consensus over priorities among the environmental stakeholders and provide a solid foundation on which to build – they are not a definitive list but a starting place. Successful delivery will need buy-in and participation from a wide pool of partners and individuals. Potential partners include all of the organisations which have been involved in the RBOR initiative to date, but it is also expected that more will join to add depth of knowledge, fill gaps and diversify the audience base for the projects.



Concept 1:

Farmer cluster



A farmer-led initiative to support and advise farmers and landowners to carry out environmental improvements and maximise business opportunities through available and future finance.

Over 70% of land in the region is farmed. Positive landscape-scale change will require the collaboration of farmers, landowners and stakeholders outside of sites already identified as protected for nature to meet the aspirations of the [Lawton review](#) for more, bigger, better and more joined up areas for nature. A new BOR farmer cluster has now been initiated (further details at the end). The new group has been clear that it should be farmer-led but will seek support from a variety of sources and organisations.

Amongst farmers there is increasing support and understanding of the need to provide public goods alongside marketable goods such as food and fuels, but a key finding from the consultation was that farmers are sometimes put off by:

- the lack of clarity over payments and different policies which creates a lot of confusion, not only about how individual schemes function, but also about the rules governing how they can be stacked and combined;
- the numerous and sometimes uncoordinated efforts by organisations currently involved in nature conservation;
- the short-term and complicated nature of funding.

With this in mind, in terms of resources required to continue support for this emerging cluster, ideally there should be a trusted advisor. This would help coordinate activities, develop opportunities, provide training and guidance, and facilitate the delivery of projects across the landscape. This has been crucial for the success of other clusters in the region.



Support for the nascent farmer cluster could include working with them on the creation of good quality habitat mosaics providing connected habitats and wildlife corridors across the entire BOR landscape, addressing the current fragmentation and allowing for movement of species.

This could be achieved in part through improving the uptake of land management schemes and innovative finance opportunities, but also through group-wide learning, knowledge-sharing and delivery.

Farmer clusters have the potential to be a very important delivery mechanism for most of the project concepts proposed within this report, so there will be strong links with the other RBOR projects.

CONCEPT 2:

River restoration



An ambitious river restoration, habitat creation, landowner and community engagement project which aims over the long-term to secure the Ray river valley as a nationally important wetland complex.

Several stakeholders have highlighted the significant potential for wetland expansion in the BOR. Previous modelling work by the Environment Agency has shown that the hydrological functioning of the Upper River Ray catchment has not been impacted irreversibly by the modifications to the watercourse.

This suggests that an extensive restoration of watercourses is achievable in the Upper River Ray area between Otmoor, MOD Arncott, the Upper Ray Meadows and the Marsh Gibbon/Claydon Brook area. It would aim to link freshwater, wetland and meadow habitats with the River Ray and its associated floodplain and create a larger and more resilient network of species-rich wildflower meadows. Such a project allows for the restoration of sustainable, self-regulating floodplain grazing marshes and all associated species, from fish to wading birds. This would be a truly bold vision and would create one of the largest inland wetland complexes between the Great Fen Project and the Somerset Levels.

The creation of scrapes, channels and ponds would help support wading birds and wildfowl by provision of feeding, roosting and nesting opportunities, with other general benefits to invertebrate and floral communities. Longer-term, re-naturalising the River Ray and tributaries would help support in-channel diversity including fish. Predator control measures may need to accompany any such measures to ensure breeding success and will need to be discussed upfront.

The measures that could be taken to improve biodiversity in the area should also provide secondary benefits including:

- flood risk reduction downstream through the storage of water and slowing of flows;
- enhancement of water quality by reducing farm run-off;
- providing recreational opportunities for the general public through improving the existing Public Rights of Way network, (locations to be considered carefully to avoid disturbing breeding waders).

Since the river gradient is very low and there is a complex network of ditches and under-drainage, the effect of restoration schemes could extend quite far upstream. Locations and measures for river enhancement would need to be determined following a survey of relevant reaches of the River Ray, as well as discussions and hydrological modelling work in partnership with the Environment Agency, which is supportive of the concept. Crucially, this will require consent from a number of landowners or buying large contiguous patches of land.

The most important constraint is likely to be the existing concerns within the local community about flooding issues and impacts on both arable and grassland farming land.

Given the sensitivities, early engagement with landowners and community groups will be essential to develop options that have the backing of a wide range of partners and stakeholders.

CONCEPT 3:

Bernwood Forest



A woodland project which would restore and develop existing and proposed ancient woodland SSSIs, develop new habitat mosaics and increase connectivity between key sites.

The Bernwood Forest area supports a range of woodlands listed on the ancient woodland inventory, alongside good quality semi-improved grassland.

A number of locations are already under active management for nature conservation but could be better linked, particularly following recent construction works associated with the delivery of HS2.

The project could focus on key sites initially, in line with aspirations to link Sheephouse Wood SSSI, Finemere Wood SSSI and Grendon and Doddershall Wood SSSI. This will be supported by the proposed Bernwood SSSI designation aimed at including black hairstreaks and Bechstein's bats as interest features of existing SSSIs and the consideration of including additional woodland and supporting habitat to create a landscape scale SSSI.

There is also an opportunity to link woodland habitats across Graven Hill Wood, Arncott

Woodlands, Bernwood Forest and Shotover Hill. The woodlands in the area are extensive but are fragmented by transport infrastructure (primarily the M40), various conurbations and intensively managed farmland. Waddesdon Manor and Claydon House (both National Trust properties) could also be included as linking areas.

The opportunities within the area include:

- the creation of new areas of woodland;
- the restoration of a mosaic of habitats including meadows, ponds, wetlands, scrub and headlands in between the woodland;
- restructuring and enhancing existing woodlands that are of plantation origin.

These activities provide opportunities for a range of flora and fauna to expand ranges and therefore become more resilient. There are also aspirations for an integrated deer management plan for the whole region, to be agreed and delivered through a partnership of Environmental NGOs, farmers, landowners and farmer clusters. This could work alongside a proposed local venison market.



CONCEPT 4:

Access to nature



A habitat mosaic, creation and connectivity project with a strong emphasis on community engagement and access to nature for people in Oxford.

While universally acknowledged that there is a strong need for such a project, this concept requires considerable scoping, mapping and visioning work at an early stage, to design a project that meets the needs and aspirations of a diverse range of potential audiences.

This project is envisaged to have two key emphases – habitat creation and connectivity and public engagement; though the latter may be addressed through concept 6, which focuses on accessible greenspace.

Activity under the habitat creation and connectivity workstream would focus on restoring, creating and connecting a mosaic of high-quality habitats (woodland, hedgerows, ponds, scrub, dry grasslands and traditional hay meadows) which are permeable to nature – linking Oxford to the forests and wetlands.

There is a corridor of woodland sites starting with Brasenose Wood and Shotover Hill SSSI, moving north-east over the A40 to Holton Wood SSSI, Waterperry Wood SSSI and the Shabbington Woods Complex SSSI. These areas are separated largely by agricultural land, with some amenity grassland and meadows. There are opportunities to improve connectivity and create a mosaic of habitats between these existing woodland parcels.

For this to be successful, there is a need to engage with private landowners to identify opportunities for habitat works and increased connectivity. Links with the BOR farmer cluster could be very important for this. Talks could also be held with the University of Oxford and Oxford Colleges.

The second area of focus would be increasing people's access to, and connections with, nature –



Ideally, the projects that would result from this engagement would be co-created with community partners and will be worked up in stages.

both physically and emotionally – spreading outwards from Oxford.

There is housing proposed to the north-east of Oxford (Thornhill) and north of Oxford (north of Bayswater Brook). This will increase the demand for access to natural spaces, including in places that are currently relatively isolated (i.e. Barton). This would be spreading out from Risinghurst and Shotover towards Bernwood, and from Marston/Barton towards Sydlings Copse.

In addition, the development north of Bayswater Brook will be large (around 1,400 houses) and could potentially sever links to nature from Oxford or create new ones. With these new communities come new pressures and opportunities that need to be considered if the incoming people are to benefit and contribute to the surrounding landscape.

CONCEPT 5:

Hedges and edges



A BOR-wide project focussing on restoring and developing linear ecosystems such as hedgerows and road verges

This project would look to create and enhance significant amounts of wildlife-friendly linear habitats (verges and hedgerows) to support a wide range of animal and plant species, including the rare Bechstein's bat and hairstreak butterflies. Wildflower verges provide food for pollinators whilst hedge planting in priority areas throughout the river catchment will reduce erosion run off, improving water quality and providing natural flood management (avoiding some areas of the Ray floodplain where there are breeding waders).

This project will build upon the successes of the previous BBOWT Hedgerow Havens and Wild Oxfordshire Hedgerow Heroes projects, but is proposed to cover a much wider geographic area throughout the BOR landscape, as these are critical 'nature highways'. This project would also include verges and other linear habitats, so will aim to influence and advise local highway authorities and parish town councils, particularly as there are no Road Verge Nature Reserves in the BOR landscape.



Key activities include:

- the restoration and creation of linear features to connect existing high nature value habitats;
- training of farmers, landowners, volunteers, and parish communities in survey techniques and traditional methods of restoration of key habitats;
- raising awareness about the importance of hedge and edge habitats as nature highways and stepping stones;
- exploring the heritage value and 'ecosystem service' value of these habitats in order to increase appreciation and appropriate management in future.

There is lots of potential for this project to overlap and complement the other projects, not only by linking key habitats but also as a tool for public engagement and enjoyment of nature through volunteering.



There is also the potential for archaeological work using old maps and LiDAR data which give insight into the area's history and agricultural heritage.

CONCEPT 6:

Health and wellbeing



A project to enhance high-quality accessible natural greenspace to meet the health and wellbeing needs of people living in and near to the BOR landscape.

This project is at quite an early stage of thinking and development but was universally seen as important.

The health and wellbeing benefits of spending time in nature are well understood and are a stated aim of all District Council local plans as well as the pilot Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Buckinghamshire.

This could be achieved not just through the creation of new greenspaces or reserves but also by making improvements to current ones, enhancing Public Rights of Way and through other forms of events and engagement. Given the current lack of a large-scale nature site with visitor facilities in the BOR and the level of population growth in the four largest settlements, this project could also look into the feasibility of a new visitor centre and associated infrastructure. Enhancing greenspace and local access generally could also increase the justification for funding of large-scale nature reserves and habitat restoration in the other project concepts by successfully combining the needs of wildlife and local people.

This project could help both Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire come closer towards meeting the [Natural England Accessible Natural Green Space Standards](#) (ANGSt). There is currently an

acute lack of natural greenspace close to residences throughout Oxfordshire. Buckinghamshire also falls short of the criteria for many households with only 2% of households meeting all the ANGSt criteria.

Many stakeholders have also supported the idea for a project on green social prescribing to improve people's health and wellbeing, as part of the management of specified health conditions. There is a lot of learning on this from other successful projects as a starting place.

A lot more consultation and discussions are now required to reach a consensus over the best way forward to manage the existing and future pressures and avoid detrimentally impacting on current conservation efforts.

To help develop this project, the creation of a visitor and destination management plan for the BOR landscape could set out how increased access and facilities could be balanced against the potential increase in disturbance to sensitive sites and nature reserves. Such a plan would look at the needs of local communities, how the landscape is currently used for a range of outdoor leisure and recreation activities, the potential for the creation of additional facilities and visitor experiences which are sympathetic to the nature and heritage of the area, as well as the marketing proposition to support this. This would require significant financial resources but would ensure that any new plans are based on sound, up-to-date research and a business case, linking closely with local plans and supportive policies.

What next?

The RBOR feasibility study is just the first step towards working with partners and communities to see a real transformation in action on the ground that supports nature's recovery over the coming decades.



The stakeholder consultation that underpins this report has revealed the very high regard in which the BOR heritage, habitats and species is held by local people and stakeholders. With the right balance of environmental, social and economic opportunities pursued over the long-term, the BOR could become a nature-rich “green lung” between Oxford, Bicester, Aylesbury and Milton Keynes.

The BOR landscape now needs to be actively managed to conserve its important and special heritage and increase the landscape's resilience to external and long-term pressures.

Creation of an enduring RBOR partnership

The partners who have come together in an informal RBOR partnership around this feasibility study have agreed that as a first step, this should continue short-term. This would maintain the significant engagement and momentum generated and ensure that future projects deliver for nature and people within this landscape.

Beyond this, BBOWT is offering to lead a new landscape-scale partnership and programme of projects built around a long-term and co-created vision with communities, businesses and partners. This will bring together the collective expertise of a diverse range of people, to raise the profile of the BOR landscape with planners, funders, investors and decision-makers. It will also enable a greater degree of planning, coordination and delivery of nature recovery projects throughout the landscape, by working together on a shared pipeline of priority projects.

Doing so would allow the partnership to allocate bits of work to those organisations with the most relevant expertise and to join up that work,

ensuring that every project is maximising its potential to do the most for nature and people's enjoyment of nature. Ultimately, unlocking far greater amounts of funding than could be attracted as individual organisations for nature recovery.

Funding

There are several funding options which could support the overall RBOR initiative and programme of work and ensure the crucial long-term, sustainable financing and legacy of this project.



Short term

In the short term, funding is required across the project concepts. For this BBOWT recommends that the area is worthy of multi-million pound, multi-year investment and will be exploring multiple governmental and non-governmental funding pots, including Lottery sources and the ELMs. Options include developing a programme with multiple strands, as well as looking at breaking some of the projects down to enable applications to smaller funds.

Medium to long-term

Grant funding or philanthropy are more likely to be achievable in the early stages, but corporate investment could become a major income source once projects, income streams and returns on investment are well established. BNG offers a significant opportunity in the BOR landscape, so habitat banking projects should be prioritised over the next few years.

In the medium term, ecosystem service markets may become a valuable and sustainable income



stream for the RBOR initiative. Currently, the carbon market is in a state of flux, but it may soon stabilise and then a BOR woodland carbon market could become a very viable option – to be followed by soil, meadow and hedgerow carbon codes in a few years' time.

A strategic role for Local Nature Partnerships

The two key strategic organisations already working to coordinate action for nature in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire are the Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership (NEP) and the recently formed Local Nature Partnership (LNP) in Oxfordshire – both organisations are supportive of the creation of a delivery-focused partnership in the BOR and both have offered to provide strategic support through their existing working groups. The future partnership will work with the LNP and NEP to provide adequate governance whilst avoiding duplication of effort.

A key policy, and an important element of the Environment Act, will be the development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) which will be led by Responsible Authorities but with a strategic input from LNPs. For the RBOR initiative to be a success it will need to address key issues within the LNRS and deliver core outcomes and outputs. Furthermore, for a partnership to appeal to a wide range of partners, and in particular Local

Authorities and statutory agencies, it is vital to ensure that outcomes help partners deliver on current or emerging policies and legislation. In addition to the LNRSs, these include Local Plans, Green and Blue infrastructure strategies, Health and Wellbeing plans and Biodiversity Action Plans.

Additional partners

Alongside continued work with the organisations and individuals who have helped inform this study, BBOWT is particularly interested in exploring and strengthening links with more landowners, diverse community groups and organisations involved in cultural, historic and archaeological heritage of the area.

The Cherwell and Ray Catchment Partnership, which BBOWT co-hosts alongside Thames 21, has been identified as an excellent forum to bring together different stakeholders in the Ray catchment in particular. The Catchment partnership is currently starting to plan several citizen science projects that will collect valuable data on river health, as well as building a strong network of community volunteers to support future projects.

Project development

The project concepts created through this project are in a differing state of project readiness. Work across them will be phased to maximise opportunities for action on the ground in the short term, alongside achieving the long-term vision.



Initial focus will be on securing funding to support the development of the partnership and to carry out further scoping, modelling and engagement activities as well as a hedges and edges project, identified in concept 4, which is ready to be led by BBOWT and Wild Oxfordshire. Alongside this, BBOWT will be focused on the development of a programme with multiple strands to attract multi-million pound, multi-year investment.

It is often the case that an injection of funding around a focused area of work creates momentum and leads to spin-off projects and this has certainly been the case with the feasibility funding provided by Buckinghamshire Council.

BOR Farmer Cluster

A new BOR farmer cluster identified in project concept 1, has been developed by several of those landowners who attended the feasibility study workshops, supported by Natural England's Catchment Sensitive Farming Officer and BBOWT.

This is an important and exciting development because farmer clusters are a key delivery vehicle to coordinate and drive landscape recovery in rural areas, with some very successful local examples in the north-east Cotswolds and Chilterns landscapes notably. The new Ray farmer cluster already has over 40 farmers interested and has met several times in late 2022– early 2023.

To support the group's development, BBOWT has been successful in securing seed funding from Bucks and Milton Keynes NEP for hospitality costs. In addition, funding has also been provided by Natural England to support the cluster to undertake its first project: supplementary feeding for farmland birds at 28 local farms. A key idea behind the project was to bring together a like-minded group of farmers around a simple project deliverable on all farms, which would act as the catalyst for further collaboration and action across the network of cluster farms in the future. Case studies from other clusters have shown that it is important to get projects up and running quickly, to motivate and enthuse farmers with some quick wins.

We will now work with this group to understand specific links to the remaining project concepts and their landholdings, as well as helping them to take advantage of funding opportunities.



Community engagement

The RBOR feasibility study identified further work with community groups was needed throughout the region. Based on the significant potential for the RBOR initiative to strengthen community links with local nature recovery and unlock associated health and wellbeing benefits, BBOWT and Wild Oxfordshire have recently completed a Natural England-funded community engagement project exploring the values placed on local nature by community groups. This has provided important data on the breadth and activity area of community activism within the BOR landscape, as well as some of the challenges to community-led nature recovery which future projects could try to dismantle.

Through consultation with local community groups and residents, we know that the drive of local people wanting to take action for the wildlife in the landscape is strong. Local communities are leading activities for the benefit of wildlife. Challenges faced are not unique to the area, for example understanding what activity is best, having the skills and knowledge to lead confidently and having volunteers to help coordinate activity as well as take part. The insight we've learned from the groups has enabled us to come up with

solutions to support the activities in the short term and which will feed into any further projects.

Widespread community consultation over such a large geographic area requires a huge investment of resources. An important priority to tackle next is researching the values placed on nature and green spaces by the diverse communities of the area. BBOWT is committed to developing relationships with new partners and trusted intermediaries to build a picture of the contribution that a nature recovery project on their doorstep can make to their lives.

BBOWT would like to heartily thank all those who contributed energy, ideas and time to develop and shape the vision and opportunities explored in this feasibility study. We now look forward to working with partners, old and new, to bring the long-term vision and projects to fruition for the benefit of wildlife and people in the BOR.





**Berkshire
Buckinghamshire
& Oxfordshire
Wildlife Trust**



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This report summarises a year-long consultation with participation from the following organisations:

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