

Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership

Annual Report

Executive Summary

Oxfordshire has a long history of partnership working in the natural environment sector and good relationships exist between the main environmental NGOs, the Local Authorities, and other stakeholders such as the universities. However, changes to land management practices, land-use change including from new developments, and climate change have led to continued negative impacts on Oxfordshire's habitats and wildlife.

Nationally, nature is rising up the agenda for a number of reasons:

- increased understanding of the role of nature in supporting climate resilience (both mitigation and adaptation) and a healthy economy
- changes to land use planning legislation
- changes to agricultural funding, moving away from basic payments (via the Common Agricultural Policy) to a system of public money for public goods (Environmental Land Management scheme)
- growing recognition of the positive impact nature has on human health
- growing support from the public and appreciation of nature since Covid.

In response to this, stakeholders worked together to form the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership (OLNP), with the agreed aim of radically enhancing nature, its positive impact on the climate and the priority it's given, making Oxfordshire a place where people and nature thrive. In recognition of the role this Partnership could play in supporting delivery of a number of aspects within the Strategic Vision, the Local Authorities provided funding for a Partnership Manager, for 22/23 and 23/24.

This report gives an overview of OLNP and highlights progress so far. Of note is the work done to create a framework for natural finance in the county; support provided to Local Authorities in preparing for mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain; and establishment of six focussed working groups that enable partners to support one another delivering aspects of our aim and purpose.

The report also identifies key stakeholders and assesses the effectiveness of the governance and methods utilised by the partnership. It assesses risks involved with continuing or not continuing to fund the partnership.

We conclude that the partnership is strong and valuable and has successfully leveraged additional resources from a number of sources, but that it is in need of a continued, diversified and enlarged funding settlement in order to support nature's recovery in Oxfordshire.

OLNP Purpose and Strategy

Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership exists to radically enhance nature, its positive impact on the climate and the priority it's given, helping to make Oxfordshire a county where people and nature thrive. To achieve this, OLNP has developed a concise, clear strategic approach, with three main areas of focus:

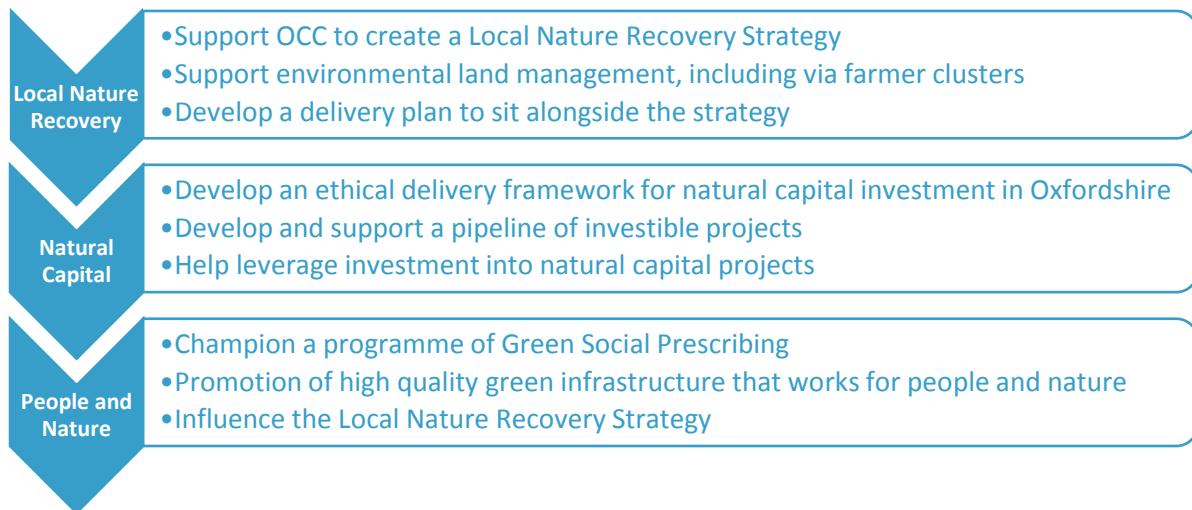


Figure 1 – Oxford Local Nature Partnership strategic approach

Achievements to date

Much of the early part of this financial year was spent structuring the governance of the partnership and developing key relationship and programmes of work. However, OLNP has delivered a number of tangible outputs. We have:

- supported development of the strategic county-wide approach to **zero carbon and climate adaptation**, ensuring multifunctional nature-based solutions are considered and prioritised for their cost effectiveness and co-benefits
- design of a project to explore the creation of a land-based carbon sequestration market (through Pathways to Zero Carbon Oxfordshire (PAZCO)), ensuring **high integrity carbon offsetting** contributes to nature recovery in Oxfordshire
- formed a policy subgroup to provide a single, positive voice in **influencing strategic policy and local plans**
- developed draft **guiding principles for biodiversity net gain (BNG)**, including supporting exceedance of minimum requirements, targeting BNG to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, and ensuring gains are delivered locally. These will help ensure this policy delivers maximum biodiversity uplift.
- developed a draft **Oxfordshire Nature Finance Strategy** which will leverage private finance and funding for environmental enhancement in Oxfordshire
- co-led preparatory work for the **LNRS**, that will establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits

- facilitated **multi-county collaboration** on LNRS, ensuring cross border alignment can support greater habitat connectivity.
- convened a meeting of the key University of Oxford colleges to review strategic opportunities for delivering nature recovery via some of the **biggest landowners** in the county
- informed project criteria, project selection and governance for the **landscape-scale nature recovery** project Reconnecting the Bernwood, Otmoor and Ray, helping make it more attractive to funders
- supported governance of other large landscape-scale nature recovery projects (the North East Cotswolds Farmer Cluster and the Windrush Catchment Partnership) ensuring operational alignment with emerging Oxfordshire priorities
- Secured meaningful **engagement from the farming sector**, crucial if we are to help nature recover, with a filled seat on the Board, and a representative on the LNRS Steering Group
- Garnered support for nature from the Chief Executives and Cabinet members of all the Local Authorities ensuring **strategic leadership support** for our work
- created draft **Natural Capital Accounts** for Oxfordshire (see Figure 2). Quantifying the value of the environmental benefits society receives from nature enables better prioritisation within policy and planning.

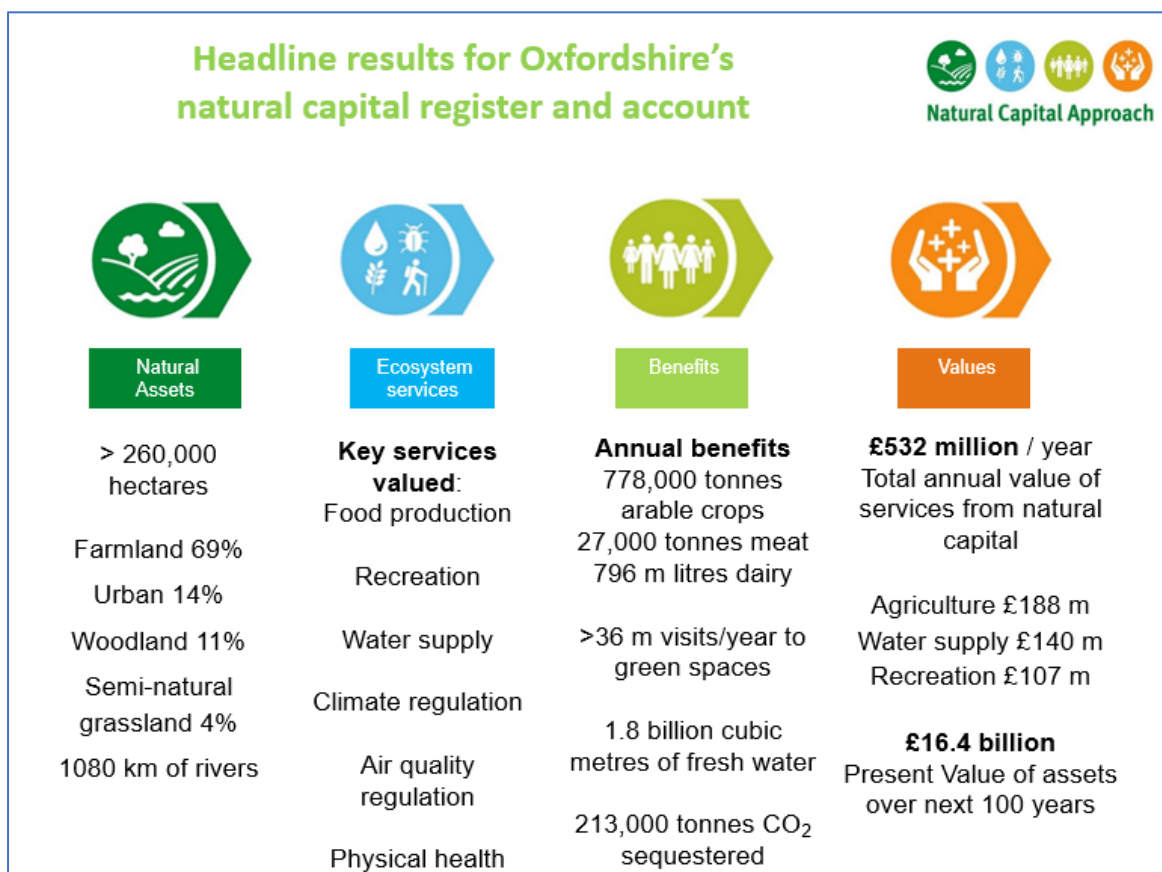


Figure 2 – Extract from the Natural Capital Register and Account Tool as completed for Oxfordshire by Alison Smith from Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford, on behalf of OLNP.

Resources

Local authority funding was provided to the Strategic Partnerships team to employ a Partnership Manager and part-cover the cost of communications and democratic services support colleagues. A total budget of £13,000 was made available to the LNP Manager to cover event costs and expenses for April 2022 – March 2024.

It is clear that financial support from the local authorities has been the key factor in OLNP's success in 22/23, and this report shows that the same progress and impact is expected for 23/24. The report highlights the importance of continuing to fund the LNP at the same level at least up until March 2027.

Internally, the support received from the Strategic Partnership support team DSO officers and communications coordinator has been incredibly valuable, allowing the LNP Manager to focus on delivery. The support team has provided secretariat, event management, social media, internal and external communications, all of which have enhanced the partnership's profile, engagement, progress and impact.

OLNP is working hard to diversify its funding. OLNP Manager is exploring a national approach to DEFRA and DHLUC to seek a level of central funding for all LNPs nationally.

OLNP has hugely benefited from significant support and in-kind contributions from most of the organisations in Figure 6. Meetings are chaired and attended voluntarily by wildlife NGO employees, council colleagues, farming sector, university and statutory agency representatives. The non-Local Authority contribution to this is conservatively estimated at over 1,000 hours, equivalent to more than 4FTE or c.£200,000. Many are committed to working in partnership and OLNP facilitates this in a strategic, coordinated and proactive manner.

OLNP benefits from direct research support provided by University of Oxford. Research projects supported by the University (at a value of c.£20,000) on behalf of the LNP include:

- The potential for private funding of nature recovery ambitions in Oxfordshire through Biodiversity Net Gain offsets
- Equitable distribution of nature-rich accessible greenspace: an Oxfordshire case study

This relationship with University of Oxford, especially following a meeting with the Vice Chancellor, is expected to continue to flourish, as indicated by the willingness of the Registrar (equivalent to the Chief Operating Officer of the University) to sit on the Board of the LNP as landowner representative).

Recently, OLNP has successfully secured additional funding from Oxfordshire County Council to accelerate the Nature and Health workstream, totalling £75,000.

OLNP has also secured £100,000 funding via PAZCO and the Housing and Growth Deal, to deliver a project to enable investment into nature-based carbon sequestration. This work shows the multifunctional approach OLNP takes, where the climate and ecological emergencies can be combatted hand-in-hand, cost-effectively delivering multiple benefits for wildlife, people, and the economy.

Funding organisation	Purpose of funding	Amount
University of Oxford	Biodiversity net gain market analysis	£15,000
University of Oxford	Accessible greenspace analysis	£13,500
University of Oxford	Natural Capital Register & Accounts	£2,500
Oxfordshire County Council	Health and Nature project manager	£75,000
Housing and Growth Deal	Nature-based carbon sequestration	£100,000
Non-local authority - in-kind	All partnership work	£200,000
Total		£406,000

Furthermore, it is hoped that our broader work on nature finance, such as with Trust for Oxfordshire’s Environment, BBOWT’s habitat banking and the North-East Cotswold’s Farmer Cluster will see increasing flows of private capital into Oxfordshire to be targeted on nature recovery and natural capital enhancement according to the priorities of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (see figure 3).

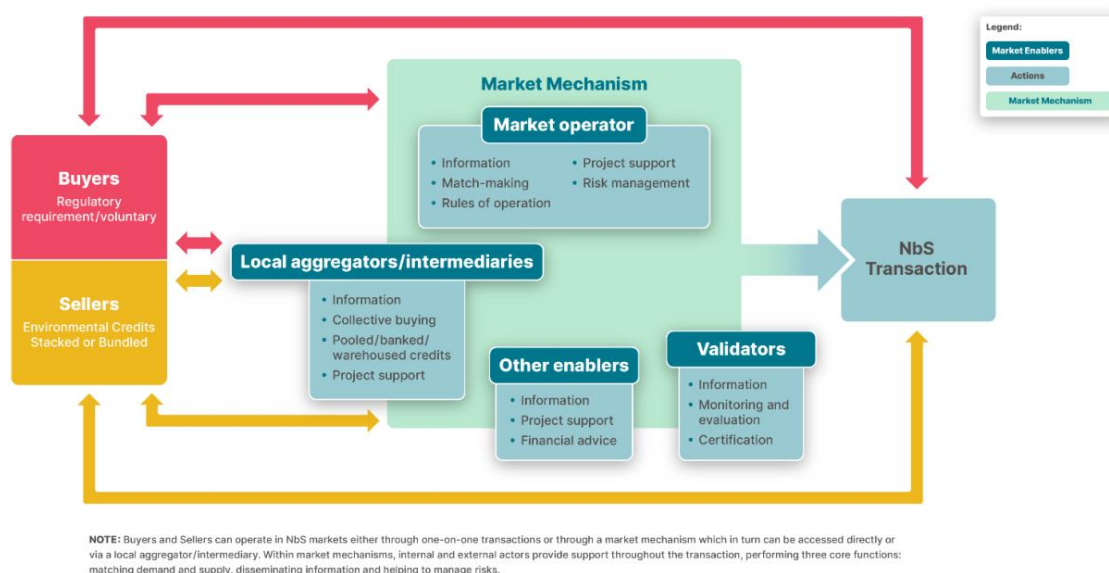


Figure 3 – diagram from the Draft Oxfordshire NCI strategy showing our proposed framework for the nature finance market

Plans for 23/24

We anticipate one of the largest tasks for the coming year will be supporting OCC as the responsible authority to work with partners and stakeholders to create the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. This key environmental strategy will hopefully be incorporated into the planning system to guide decisions on spatial prioritisation. OLNP will continue to host the steering group for this project. We will also lead on ensuring cross border alignment (ie with neighbouring counties), and enable engagement with key sectors like business and farming.

Having drafted a Nature Finance Strategy for Oxfordshire, the LNP’s Nature Finance group will develop a framework for biodiversity and carbon offsetting that supports a mix of habitats and land management practices, in alignment with the Local Nature Recovery

Strategy. We will support delivery of at least one demonstrator project, with an ambition to raise £1,000,000 to support development of a project pipeline and leverage financial support for the coordinators/facilitators of landscape-scale delivery partnerships (eg Catchment Partnerships, Farmer Clusters, and community groups). One potential outcome of this work could be the creation of an Oxfordshire Environment Fund.

More work is needed to develop relationships with the business sector, aiming to conduct a full assessment of business demand for ecosystem services in the county, secure meaningful business input into the LNRS, and supporting businesses to become 'nature positive'.

The Biodiversity Advisory Group anticipates changes to the draft nature recovery network map to make it more fit for the planning system and more representative of the areas of land which are nature rich, currently known as Conservation Target Areas. It will also serve as the key technical advisor for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy creation.

The People and Nature group will create two resources: a detailed, accessible map of nature activities which also shows the gaps and under-utilised green spaces and an updated county-wide accessible greenspace map (showing the gaps in accessibility). These two pieces of work will steer where we need to increase interventions to reduce inequity in access to nature, which we can then address with our newly funded additional resource.

The People and Nature group also plans to design and deliver training to share best practice in reaching groups who do not usually access nature. This will be supported by the inclusion of nature activities on the Livewell website (a social prescribers' directory), as well as engagement with the NHS, to maximise uptake of nature based activities and to influence 'greening' of the NHS estate.

Further, we will ensure that our strategic framework addresses the needs of people and nature, by ensuring the LNRS fully considers the needs of people and the importance of human connectivity with nature.

The Biodiversity Net Gain group will continue its work in supporting the LPAs in readiness for mandatory biodiversity net gain. We will support LPAs to require more than the mandatory 10% gain and establish a mechanism for aligning offsite delivery with the emergency Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

About Local Nature Partnerships

Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) were conceived by DEFRA in the early 2010s with the aim to:

"Drive positive change in the local natural environment, taking a strategic view of the challenges and opportunities involved and identifying ways to manage it as a system for the benefit of nature, people and the economy."

In effect, LNPs act to position nature as an enabler rather than a blocker; an asset to be nurtured and enhanced rather than a liability or risk to be managed. LNPs enable consideration of nature within different policy spheres, demonstrating the positive role of the natural environment for planning and development, economic growth, climate resilience and health & wellbeing. They often do this by taking a 'natural capital' approach, which values

nature for its benefits not only to wildlife, but also for flood risk reduction, carbon sequestration, recreation, air pollutant removal and more.

Some small amount of seed funding was provided by central government to help establish LNPs but this quickly ran out in 2013. As such, there is now a patchy network across the country. Some counties have strong LNPs, fully funded and established for nearly a decade, whereas others have no LNP or a voluntary one managed entirely from within one partner organisation with no dedicated resource. In 2016 partners established an LNP in Oxfordshire but it was short lived. We consider this failure to be a result of a lack of support and backing from Local Authorities and an absence of strategic prioritisation.

Oxfordshire LNP establishment and governance

In 2020 partners began work in earnest to re-establish an LNP and, following much stakeholder engagement, funding was secured for 22/23 and 23/24 from the Local Authorities. In July 2022 Matt Whitney was appointed as LNP Manager and Richard Benwell as voluntary chair of the LNP board.

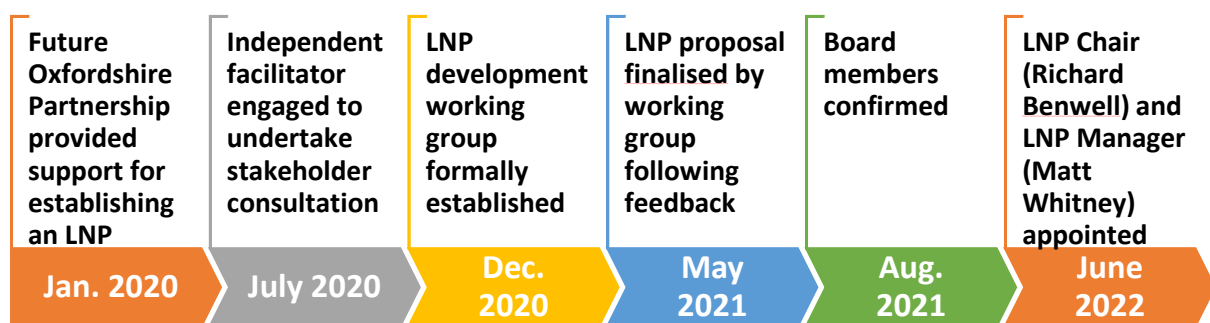


Figure 1 – Timeline to establishment of Oxford Local Nature Partnership

OLNP exists to radically enhance nature, its positive impact on the climate and the priority its given, making Oxfordshire a place where people and nature thrive. It is not constituted - its informal governance structure can be seen in Figure 2. Hosting the OLNP Manager within the Strategic Partnerships Team at South and Vale District Council enables good partnership working between and amongst the Local Authorities, as well as with the non-council partners. Whilst OLNP doesn't formally report into the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP), good two-way communication has been establishing meaning FOP keeps abreast of OLNP activities, and OLNP can support FOP activities. The OLNP manager is supported by a comms colleague and a democratic services colleague both of whom also support the FOP Manager and OIEP Manager.

Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership

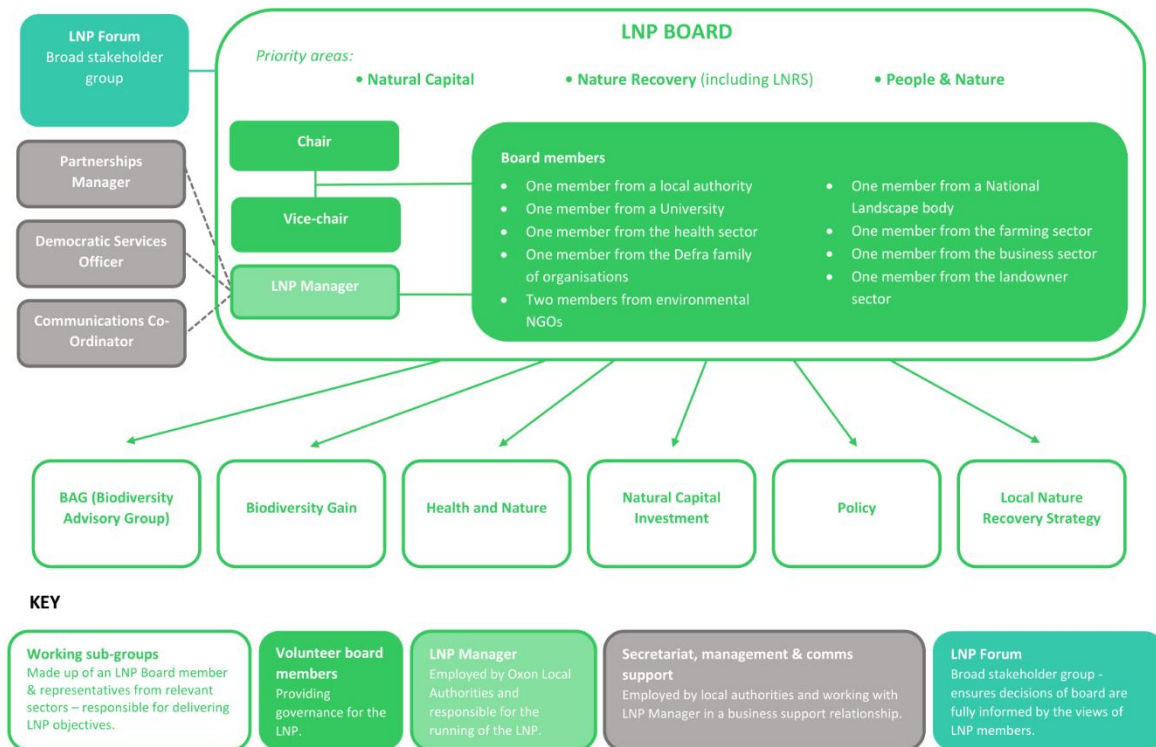


Figure 5 – Oxford Local Nature Partnership governance structure

Stakeholders

OLNP aims to be as inclusive as possible. The natural environment sector has previously been accused of being too inward looking and exclusive. By engaging broadly and working across society and the different sectors of the economy, we hope to

- engage more people in nature recovery
- ensure nature is considered earlier in decision-making
- ensure that it is prioritised within all work, from farming to housebuilding, from private enterprise to local communities.

The Board of OLNP is deliberately representative, to ensure those voices are heard in our decision-making, so that we can engage appropriately and design policy, strategy and advocacy in the most effective way. Board members are listed below:

Richard Benwell	Chair
Dr Prue Addison	Environmental NGO representative
Camilla Burrow	Environmental NGO representative
Michelle Leek	DEFRA family of organisations
Professor David Macdonald CBE	University representative
James Price,	Farming representative
Councillor David Rouane	Local Authority representative
Ian Boll	Local Authority representative
Dr Rosie Rowe	Health representative

Simon Smith
Tom Curtis
Gill Aitken

National landscape body representative
Business representative
Landowner representative

Oxfordshire has a strong history of partnership working. Organisations like Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, the Earth Trust, and Wild Oxfordshire have been working closely with each other, local communities, farmers, landowners and local authorities for many years. OLN has been mindful to complement rather than compete with existing relationships and to not duplicate effort but focus on where we can enhance existing efforts or fill any gaps.



Figure 6 - Some of the key partners of Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership