

To: The Future Oxfordshire Partnership

Title of Report: Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Update

Date: 29 November 2022

Report of: Matt Whitney, Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership Manager

Status: Open

Executive Summary and Purpose:

The Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership has been established to radically enhance nature, its positive impact on the climate and the priority it is given, helping to make Oxfordshire a county where people and nature thrive. This paper provides an update on the progress of the partnership. It shines a light on the three main areas of focus for the Partnership, which are nature recovery, natural capital investment, and people and nature.

The paper makes some specific points regarding the process for developing the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and seeks support from the Future Oxfordshire Partnership for our proposed approach.

How this report contributes to the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision Outcomes:

Our proposals for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy will directly contribute towards the achievement of the first outcome (*Our nature environment will be in a better state than that in which we found it*) by acting as a spatial and theoretical framework to guide nature recovery activities.

Our natural capital investment focus will contribute towards achievement of the second Outcome (*We will already be carbon neutral and accelerating towards a carbon negative future*)

Our people and nature focus will contribute towards achievement of the third and fifth outcomes (*Our residents will be healthier and happier, and overall wellbeing will have improved and Our county will be a more equal, fair and inclusive place for everyone*).

Recommendations:

1. That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership endorses our strategic approach, including the development of a county-wide framework of natural capital investment.
2. That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership provides its endorsement for Oxfordshire County Council taking on the responsible authority role for the production of Oxfordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy
3. That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership provides its endorsement to proceed with the work of an Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy considering the information provided, under the proposed governance arrangement.

Introduction

- Public awareness of the value of our natural environment and public knowledge of our need to restore nature has never been higher. Implementation of the Environment Act 2021 will unlock new tools and funding to empower counties to put nature's recovery at the heart of their ambitions for the next decade and beyond. Oxfordshire is a thriving hub of environmental ambition with a cornucopia of NGOs, nature friendly farmers, sustainable landowners and business, AONBs, world renowned Universities and local authorities all driving forward plans to protect and enhance the natural world.
- The new Local Nature Partnership ("LNP") brings together all these partners, to utilise new tools and funding, creating an impactful partnership that is greater than the sum of its parts. The purpose of the LNP is **to radically enhance nature, its positive impact on our climate and the priority it is given, helping to make Oxfordshire a county where people and nature thrive**. The LNP will work towards its purpose by developing strategies and plans; influencing relevant local and national government policy and legislation; establishing voluntary working groups and task and finish groups as required; leveraging resources into the sector and through LNP members and others using LNP outputs to guide their work and influence others.

Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership

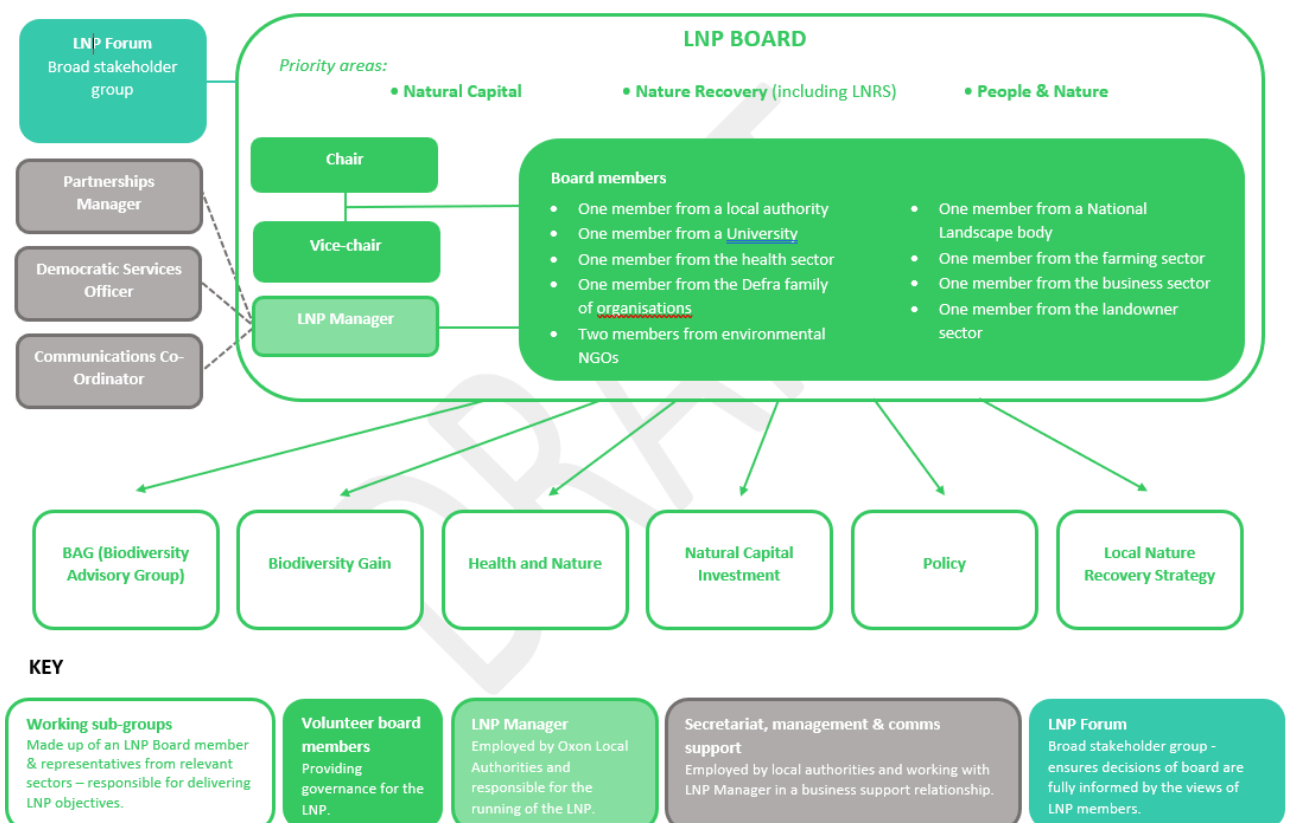


Figure 1. Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership governance structure

- The LNP has a board, which meets quarterly and is independently Chaired. Councillor David Rouane represents the local authorities on this board, in his position as Chair of the Environmental Advisory Group of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP). The board is supported by the LNP manager, who has prepared this report. The LNP is developing its strategic direction, which is

focussed around three pillars: nature recovery, natural capital investment and people and nature. The LNP also has a forum, which is a wider stakeholder group to ensure the decisions of the board are guided by the broad range of partners.

4. The forum's inaugural event in October was well attended. Consensus at the forum was strong endorsement of the proposed strategic approach, with a particular emphasis on the need for broad engagement, high ambition, and spatial planning.

Natural Capital Investment

5. The [Finance Gap for UK Nature report](#) revealed £56 billion in investment above current public sector commitments is required for the UK to meet nature-related outcomes in the next ten years. Natural capital investment seeks to leverage private finance to deliver nature recovery. This investment can be repaid in different ways. In some cases, the natural capital benefits of investment, such as flood risk relief, will be sufficient to attract investment. In other cases, investment will flow from corporate social responsibility commitments. Perhaps the greatest opportunity for investment at scale come from selling credits resulting from the nature recovery work, chiefly for Oxfordshire biodiversity net gain credits and carbon credits.
6. Oxfordshire already has a strong history in this area. A local carbon credit deal worth £1million is currently in delivery phase. And Oxfordshire has already been applying principles and policies of biodiversity net gain through the planning system, way ahead of most other counties. The LNP hopes to leverage this experience and expertise to establish Oxfordshire as a leading county in natural capital investment.
7. The LNP is mindful of the risks and opportunities in this area. Large-scale private capital can drive serious nature-recovery efforts. On the other hand, there is scope for greenwash, or even environmental damage. A high-integrity approach, based on clearly defined standards (covering carbon, nature and social aspects) is necessary to ensure that private markets genuinely contribute to environmental recovery.
8. Now is the right time to press ahead with developing a county-level framework and plan for high-integrity natural capital investment. Not only would this help to secure private money to deliver nature recovery; it may also help to smooth the transition to mandatory biodiversity net gain legislation by developing a 'pipeline of projects', whilst simultaneously providing much needed clarity on standards and promoting best practice approaches. **We are therefore seeking FOP's endorsement of the LNP developing a natural capital plan and framework for Oxfordshire.**

Preparation of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy

9. The production of an Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) provides a key opportunity to agree shared priorities for nature recovery across a wide range of stakeholders in Oxfordshire.
10. Oxfordshire County Council have informally accepted Department for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA's) nomination as provisional

responsible authority for the Oxfordshire LNRS. This is a non-binding agreement made at DEFRA Officer level on the understanding that DEFRA have yet to confirm what funding will be available and local authorities within Oxfordshire have yet to formally consider and agree which body would become the responsible authority. More recently it is understood that DEFRA intend to appoint Responsible Authorities directly. However, OCC Cabinet will need to consider the implications of agreeing to take on the role of Responsible Authority once further information on regulations and funding is available from DEFRA.

11. In advance of formal appointment of the Responsible Authority, it would strengthen and allow progress on the LNRS, if Local Authorities confirm they are in agreement to OCC continuing in this provisional Responsible Authority role. **We are therefore seeking FOP's endorsement for Oxfordshire County Council to continue in the role of responsible authority.**
12. Whilst originally expected in Spring 2022, we still await the publication of secondary legislation and guidance on LNRS. Therefore, formal production of the strategy has not yet begun. The timetables for local plans drive a need for work on an Oxfordshire LNRS to start soon, to form part of the evidence base in this process. Having an LNRS may also smooth the roll out of mandatory biodiversity net gain in Autumn 2023 and help to ensure that investments are targeted most efficiently. Early work on an LNRS may also help give confidence for natural capital investment, guide improvements for nature in the farmed landscape, and inform work to connect people with nature in more nature-deprived areas, contributing to the delivery of the LNP's wider strategic objectives. At the LNP's forum event in October the eagerness of stakeholders to proceed with the production of an LNRS as soon as possible was apparent.
13. This must be balanced by some caution against investing time and resource into development of a strategy that may not be compliant with the awaited guidance and secondary legislation. Other than an initial £12,000 DEFRA 'seedcorn' funding received by Oxfordshire County Council, government funding for the additional burden of LNRS production has yet to be announced, so resources to invest in LNRS production are limited. We are also conscious of not pre-empting the LNRS process through development of interim nature recovery mapping work to inform local plans and recommend that this is considered as a separate process to LNRS production since it cannot be guaranteed to be compatible with future LNRS regulations and guidance.
14. Nevertheless, there are certain areas where we can start to progress (eg revising baseline data), and others where this is the best time to act (such as engagement with farmers). **We would therefore like to seek FOP's endorsement for proceeding with work on an Oxfordshire LNRS considering the above.**
15. Consideration is being given to the structure and governance for production of the Oxfordshire LNRS, and how this will relate and interact with the Local Nature Partnership. Currently, it is proposed that an LNRS steering group is formed which is a Local Nature Partnership group led by Oxfordshire County Council as provisional Responsible Authority. This approach is aligned to the governance arrangements of most of the LNRS DEFRA pilot areas. It will help ensure the LNRS is produced in a collaborative way. If the County Council is confirmed as

Responsible Authority approval of the plan will be subject to usual County Council cabinet reporting and approval processes. **FOP is asked to note and support this proposed governance arrangement.**

People and Nature

16. The Health and Nature Working Group recognises that human health and wellbeing for current and future generations is intrinsically connected to nature.

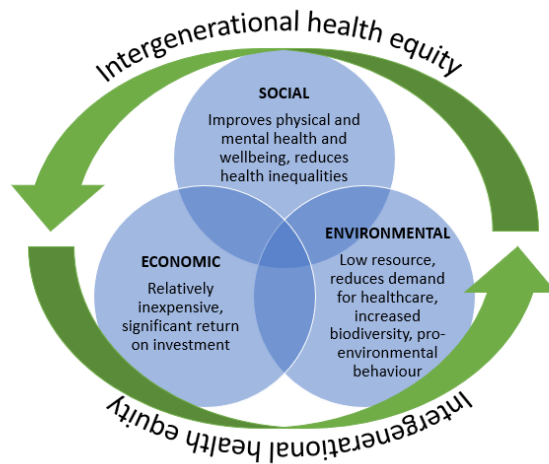


Image 1 Improving access to greenspace for social, economic and environmental sustainability

17. The purpose of the Health and Nature Working Group is to facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration to support delivery of aspects of the LNPs aims and objectives relating specifically to the relationship between nature and health and wellbeing. This includes ensuring that opportunities to engage with and value nature are equitably distributed.

Financial Implications

18. The Local Nature Partnership is funded equally by each of the local authorities. This funding has been agreed for a period of two years, which ends 31 March 2024.

Legal Implications

19. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Other Implications

20. The risk arising from this report arises from the recommendation to begin work on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy prior to the release of secondary regulations and guidance. This risk is mitigated by a) our proposal to treat the spatial work intended to guide and inform the local plans' approach to nature recovery as separate to the LNRS and b) only to begin work that is not dependent upon the guidance and is useful in its own right.
21. The LNP is clear that the risk from NOT proceeding with this work in the cautious but pro-active way outlined herein, exceeds that arising from our proposed course of action.

Conclusion

22. This paper has provided an update on the progress of the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership. It has outlined the three priority areas for action: nature recovery, natural capital investment, and people and nature. And it has sought the FOP's views on some specific aspects relating to the preparation of an Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Background Papers

23. There are none relating to this report.

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