

Oxfordshire County Council's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)

Oxfordshire County Council

Friday 23 January 2026

Summary

Learn how Oxfordshire County Council prepared and published their Local Nature Recovery Strategy with a key focus on building their process of engagement with local people and organisations and developing a partnership approach to strategy preparation.

The strategy is an excellent new tool that offers evidence-based recommendations to improve biodiversity in addition to contributing towards multiple local co-benefits, from flood protection and healthier communities to sustainable food production and carbon sequestration.

Local authorities may be interested in selecting elements to replicate for their own Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

"Oxfordshire's LNRS collects a huge amount of local knowledge and evidence from partnership and people across the county. It promotes meaningful recommendations in a targeted manner and we know that delivering the Local Nature Recovery Strategy is not just an aspiration—it's essential for the wellbeing of our communities, our environment, and future generations. By continuing to work together across sectors, we can transform the LNRS vision into a lived reality, ensuring Oxfordshire leads by example to build a resilient, thriving natural network offering societal and economic benefits for us all. Authorities cannot afford to let their LNRS sit on the shelf – we shall absolutely embed ours into decision making to help make it happen." - Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council.

The problem

The truth is: the natural world is changing. And we are totally dependent on that world. It provides our food, water and air. It is the most precious thing we have and we need to defend it - Sir David Attenborough.

Countries across the world only have an average of 75% of their biodiversity remaining since recording began. Unfortunately, the UK ranks in the bottom 10% meaning that we are among the world's most nature depleted countries.

According to the **State of Nature 2023** report, nearly one in six of the UK's species are at risk of extinction and since 1970, the UK has experienced a 19% decline in the abundance of species. This decline in biodiversity is primarily due to habitat loss and fragmentation resulting from human land use competing with nature including intensive agriculture and development. The report recognises the need for a different approach, one that enables

people and nature to live well together. Enter Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS).

LNRS are a system of spatial strategies that map out important locations to take action for nature to achieve environmental improvement. As a result of the Environment Act 2021, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs appointed 48 authorities in England to lead the production of Local Nature Recovery Strategies (herein referred to as LNRS) - including Oxfordshire County Council.

Each strategy must:

- Agree priorities for nature's recovery.
- Map the most valuable existing areas for nature.
- Map specific proposals for creating or improving habitat for nature and wider environmental goals.

Together, the strategies will cover the whole of England with no gaps and no overlaps.

The main purpose of the strategies is to identify locations to create or improve habitat most likely to provide the greatest benefit for nature and the wider environment, whilst also engaging a broad range of stakeholders, producing an actionable plan that supports both biodiversity and community wellbeing. The strategies do not force the owners and managers of the land identified to make any changes. Instead, the government is encouraging action through, for example, opportunities for funding and investment ([Local nature recovery strategy statutory guidance](#)).

The solution

The strategies act as an important tool to respond to the climate and biodiversity crises. In Oxfordshire, the vision for our LNRS is to achieve “a well-connected, biodiversity-rich, network of nature that is resilient into the future, restored for the health and wellbeing of future generations, and for nature's own sake.”

To make that happen we created the Strategy in the following eight steps.

Engagement plan: Early engagement focused on asking communities, land managers, businesses, schools and young people what they wanted the strategy to prioritise before any drafting began, and establishing a communications and engagement working group consisting of these partners. A draft LNRS was then developed around these priorities and taken back out for consultation, ensuring local views shaped the final outcome rather than responding to a fixed proposal. During the consultation we hosted 14 workshops in partnership with community organisations and at all times of the day and week, a schools sustainability network, and set up an online survey so that local residents and organisations had as many opportunities to input as possible.

Feedback webinar: We prioritised a clear feedback loop, adding a webinar between early engagement and publication of the draft LNRS to share key findings and explain how responses would shape the strategy. This included identifying top priorities for nature recovery and holding a panel discussion to answer key questions from partners. An interactive mapping tool enabled organisations and communities to identify where action was already underway or planned, and allowed us to collect information to guide our spatial planning, building on existing momentum to support local nature recovery.

Draft strategy: We used information from the workshops, surveys, and interactive mapping tool that we had launched publicly to develop the draft strategy, alongside pre-existing nature policies within the council.

Our draft LNRS comprised of a local habitat map, designed using the Systematic Conservation Planning methodology, description of strategy area, statement of biodiversity priorities, and a separate species priorities list. We launched a draft map tool that allowed people to add pins to the map with comments that gave spatial responses to our mapping. This was particularly popular.

Public consultation: Published the draft online and invited local residents and organisations to respond. We promoted this opportunity at 50 different meetings and local events, where we met with over 700 local people and organisations. The detailed and lengthy engagement process we used cultivated a sense of local ownership in the development of the LNRS, and ensured the strategy reflects local priorities.

Consultation responses: We received a national record of 2,100 responses, with participants using an interactive map to highlight things they like as well as suggested changes. We knew this would add significant time to the process because of the level of detail and whilst this process was valuable, it is important to factor in a significant period of time to manually review and adjust areas based on the comments.

Analysis & revision: Procured a team from the Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery to analyse feedback, identifying key themes, and incorporating changes into the strategy as far as possible. You can find a [report on our webpage](#). We also went through each and all the responses to directly make changes to the strategy where possible. Future LNRS processes will need sufficient resourcing if wide engagement is to be incentivised.

Cross-boundary alignment: Mapping was shared with neighbouring local authorities to ensure they were aware of progress and mapping. For example, we commissioned our local environmental records centre to create a methodology for bridging gaps at the border. Where there were small gaps we ensured we automatically added these to our mapping to facilitate connectivity across borders. We also identified areas in neighbouring strategies where we would recommend additional mapping to be added and sent these requests to neighbouring local authorities.

Authority approval and launch: Finally, early agreement on approval processes and timescales across all local authorities ensured a smooth route to adoption. It was established early on that they would each need 3 months to review and approve the strategy through their various approval processes. With partners involved throughout, approvals were secured without objection. The strategy was published in November 2025 and launched with partners and communities, marking the transition from strategy-making to collaborative delivery. To celebrate and thank the many partners and people who have been involved we hosted around 160 people at the University of Oxford Natural History Museum in Oxford.

Timeline

The preparation, approval processes, and publication took just slightly over two years, beginning in June 2023, when Oxfordshire County Council was appointed as the Responsible Authority to prepare the LNRS for Oxfordshire, supported by funding from Defra (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs), to publication in November 2025.

Early engagement began in February 2024, with a draft strategy out for consultation by June 2024. The strategy was then reviewed and updated, approved by Council and launched in November 2025.

Stakeholders

In 2023 we set up a steering group made up of a range of organisations across Oxfordshire and national and regional organisations, embedded within the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership in 2023. Having a varied group oversee the decisions, processes, and development of the strategy since the start has greatly strengthened our end result and it was essential to avoid duplication, build on existing good work, and work through existing networks.

It will be critical to continue a partnership approach for the delivery of the Strategy in Oxfordshire and we will continue working with and through the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership and their many members to ensure a collaborative delivery process.

This list acknowledges the organisations who have made a continued and significant contribution to the LNRS throughout the duration of the project from 2023 until publication in 2025. They have dedicated their time, resources, and knowledge towards making the LNRS map, species list, priorities, and description of Oxfordshire as good as it can be. Thank you to the project partners:

Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust

Cherwell District Council

Chilterns National Landscape

Community Action Groups (CAG) Oxfordshire

Cotswolds National Landscape

Country Land and Business Association (CLA)

Environment Agency (EA)

Forestry Commission (FC)

National Farmers Union (NFU)

Natural England (NE)

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership (OLNP)

Oxford City Council

Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP)

South Oxfordshire District Council

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)

University of Oxford, departments and institutes included the Oxford Martin School, the Agile initiative, the Environmental Change Institute, and the Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery.

Vale of the White Horse District Council

West Oxfordshire District Council

Wild Oxfordshire

Impact

As the LNRS was launched in November 2025, much of the impact is yet to be realised, but we know the delivery of the LNRS opens up opportunities for a great range of wider benefits for people, nature and the climate. Of particular focus for impact in Oxfordshire is delivering:

- More resilience against flooding for homes, infrastructure and businesses including farmland
- Improved water quality of rivers and lakes
- Improved recreation and interaction with nature
- Cleaner air
- Carbon storage

On carbon storage specifically, according to a [new report](#) by the University of Oxford, Oxfordshire's LNRS network covers around 40% of the county, yet it accounts for approximately 51% of total existing carbon storage. Crucially, it has the potential to deliver a disproportionate share of future benefits: of the estimated 102,904 tonnes of carbon that could be sequestered annually across Oxfordshire, the LNRS network could capture around 81%. This demonstrates the LNRS network's value as a powerful, place-based tool for maximising carbon sequestration and delivering high-impact climate outcomes. The same report highlights that once habitats created by the LNRS reach maturity, 6 million tonnes of carbon could potentially be stored.

Lessons Learned

- **Partnership is key to delivery:** Our steering group and partnerships were vital to the success of the LNRS, all of whom offered expert advice and guidance to shape our strategy and set it up for success.

- **Strong community engagement:** When the government asks authorities to review strategies and update them in 3-10 years' time, the first thing we would repeat is our dedication to building a process of engagement with local people and organisations. We focused heavily on our process of engagement, dedicating a significant proportion of our budget and time to workshops, surveys, and events to ensure that people and organisations could be involved in the creation of the strategy. Being able to directly incorporate information from local people has strengthened the strategy significantly and will enable us to work together during the delivery phase.
- **User-friendly map tools are critical:** If people can quickly navigate the plan and see mapped recommendations, the strategy is easier to understand and use. Whether using an internal GIS team or external support, the impact of this tool for delivery cannot be overstated and is invaluable for effective delivery.

Now that we are moving into delivery, if this LNRS could wave a magic wand, it would ask for three things:

1. Support people who deliver.

Treat nature as part of the county's critical infrastructure and resource it accordingly. The sector needs a system of long-term, dedicated funding and resources that enables local areas to deliver their LNRSs in partnership with groups, organisations and individuals across the local area. Nature recovery work has relied far too much on good-will and volunteer time to deliver critical work.

2. Offer incentives to help farm businesses protect nature

More consistent support for farms allowing them to deliver public benefits through nature recovery, alongside farming. This could include securing more people, advice, resources, data searches, and/or administrative support to secure permissions and write applications to deliver nature recovery work across farmland. Since 70% of England is farmed land, the potential scale of benefits for people and wildlife is significant.

3. Reliable funding for Environmental Records Centre

Financially support local environment records centres (LERCs) across England, so that we can gather data to understand the effectiveness of LNRS delivery, habitat conditions, and species trends. This would also allow LERCs to offer more data and services to nature recovery projects at no cost, helping break down barriers to project development.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- **Partnership is key to delivery: Our steering group and partnerships were vital to the success of the LNRS, all of whom offered expert advice and guidance to shape our strategy and set it up for success.**
- **Strong community engagement: When the government asks authorities to review strategies and update them in 3-10 years' time, the first thing we would repeat is our dedication to building a process of engagement with local people and organisations. We focused heavily on our process of engagement, dedicating a significant proportion of our budget and time to workshops, surveys, and events to ensure that people and organisations**

could be involved in the creation of the strategy. Being able to directly incorporate information from local people has strengthened the strategy significantly and will enable us to work together during the delivery phase.

- **User-friendly map tools are critical: If people can quickly navigate the plan and see mapped recommendations, the strategy is easier to understand and use. Whether using an internal GIS team or external support, the impact of this tool for delivery cannot be overstated and is invaluable for effective delivery.**

Now that we are moving into delivery, if this LNRS could wave a magic wand, it would ask for three things:

1. Support people who deliver.

Treat nature as part of the county's critical infrastructure and resource it accordingly. The sector needs a system of long-term, dedicated funding and resources that enables local areas to deliver their LNRSs in partnership with groups, organisations and individuals across the local area. Nature recovery work has relied far too much on good-will and volunteer time to deliver critical work.

2. Offer incentives to help farm businesses protect nature

More consistent support for farms allowing them to deliver public benefits through nature recovery, alongside farming. This could include securing more people, advice, resources, data searches, and/or administrative support to secure permissions and write applications to deliver nature recovery work across farmland. Since 70% of England is farmed land, the potential scale of benefits for people and wildlife is significant.

3. Reliable funding for Environmental Records Centre

Financially support local environment records centres (LERCs) across England, so that we can gather data to understand the effectiveness of LNRS delivery, habitat conditions, and species trends. This would also allow LERCs to offer more data and services to nature recovery projects at no cost, helping break down barriers to project development.

A grant from Defra was awarded to all 48 authorities across England to create LNRSs. Oxfordshire County Council was awarded £270,000 to set up the LNRS, recruit staff, and run the project for 2 years to prepare and publish a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. In Oxfordshire we reserved a significant amount of the budget for consultation and engagement activities to ensure the strategy was locally-informed, as well as a dedicated member of staff.

Recently, authorities across England have received additional funding of around £130,000 for the next 12-months to begin to move into delivery work to help realise these strategies.

Next steps

Natural England and Defra are currently preparing guidance to outline their expectations of what LNRS delivery should look like.

Authorities such as ourselves, are aware of four main functions that we are asked to deliver in the coming months and years within the constraints of the funding provided. It is important to deliver these in partnership with local organisations and Local Nature Partnerships and we have begun preparations to deliver on all these functions:

1. **To lead and convene a partnership** of organisations to support and enable local nature recovery.
2. **To embed the LNRS into local decision-making processes.** All public bodies are required to 'have regard' to the LNRS. The intention is to help strengthen the voice of nature in local decision-making, including Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans.

3. **To identify and facilitate strategic project development and delivery**, that have great potential to benefit nature and provide wider benefits for people.

Monitor and report the delivery of nature recovery actions by developing a recording tool to show who has taken which nature recovery actions in which locations.

Links, contacts, and credits

Links, contacts, and credits