

To: Cabinet
Date: 15 March 2023
Report of: Head of Corporate Strategy
Title of Report: Development of a Biodiversity Strategy for Oxford

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Cabinet with a proposed approach to the development of a Biodiversity Strategy for the City of Oxford.
Key decision:	Yes
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Anna Railton, Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford and Climate Justice
Corporate Priority:	Pursue a zero carbon Oxford
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24

Recommendation: That Cabinet resolves to:

1. **Note** the report and the proposed establishment of steering group in connection with the preparation of the Biodiversity Strategy.

Appendices

None.

Introduction and background

1. On 3rd October 2022, the Council adopted a motion addressing the ecological emergency. The Council resolved to:

“Request that the Head of Corporate Strategy submits a report to Cabinet setting out options to develop and agree on an evidence-based strategy and action plan to tackle the ecological emergency and report on the progress made...”

2. Previously, Oxford City Council produced the Biodiversity Action Plan 2015-2020, which set objectives focused on the Council’s roles as landowner, regulator, and facilitator. However, to address the ecological emergency any biodiversity strategy

needs to consider a citywide approach, rather than just actions the Council can take itself. It will need to look more widely at any contributing factors to the ecological emergency, understand the current state of nature, and identify actions across all sectors to help address the issues.

3. At present, multiple teams within Oxford City Council and across organisations inside and outside the city undertake work related to conserving and enhancing ecology at the organisation, city, and county levels. A dedicated strategy and action plan would need to coordinate and support this work in pursuit of a defined set of shared objectives.
4. The City Council itself convenes groups that work to conserve and enhance nature, such as the Green and Blue Spaces Network, while also being a member of countywide partnerships including the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership.
5. The Environment Act 2021 requires that a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) will be produced for Oxfordshire as whole, for which Oxfordshire County Council will likely be the responsible authority. Any city-focused strategy needs to be mindful of the fact that nature operates across district and county boundaries, and should seek to work effectively alongside the LNRS.
6. In order to formulate a Biodiversity Strategy we first need to identify the specific problems it should aim to solve – the key objectives and targets. This should be followed by work with key stakeholders to identify ways to meet the objectives and finally agreement through an action plan of how the objectives will be pursued.
7. It is recommended that a Steering Group is set up to help develop the work, including stakeholder representing those engaged in or with the influence to enhance and conserve nature. It is expected that the steering group will include representatives from the Local Nature Partnership, health, universities, businesses, wildlife groups, planning and community groups. The City Council would expect to chair the steering group and lead the development of the strategy with input from all sectors. Below is an overview of the recommended steps a steering group could take to develop a strategy.

Baseline Exercise

8. The first task in formulating the strategy is to identify the specific problems it should aim to solve. This should begin with an exercise to pull together the various disparate sources of data and information related to biodiversity to generate a baseline understanding of the state of nature in Oxford.
9. This would include compiling and analysing data from the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) and Natural England, the Green Infrastructure Study and Urban Forest Strategy commissioned by the Oxford City Council, as well as work undertaken in support of the Conservation Target Areas and draft Nature Recovery Network, among other sources.
10. A Steering Group would then need to evaluate the baseline and identify what the most pressing issues in the areas of ecology and biodiversity are, what solutions may exist to address these, and – crucially – what is in the scope of the partners to influence through the production of a Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan.

Key Areas of Focus

11. There are a number of areas of focus a Biodiversity Strategy could cover. Some of these are outlined below to provide an overview of what a future strategy might contain:
 - Ensuring the numerous designated sites in Oxford are appropriately managed while exploring the potential to make them bigger, better and more joined up.
 - Maximising the ecological and biodiversity value of land under the control of the Oxford City Council wherever possible and ensuring it contributes to the wider nature recovery network. Ensuring land is managed in a sustainable manner considering the appropriateness of the use of pesticides including glyphosates.
 - Supporting other organisations and individuals to maximise the ecological and biodiversity value of their land within Oxford by promoting best practice and knowledge sharing.
 - Promoting urban greening within Oxford City as a means of maintaining and increasing its permeability to nature and connectivity between the most ecologically valuable areas.
 - Improving public access to nature, potentially through greening public rights of way and creating wilder and more natural public spaces.
12. However, any decision on where to focus work should be informed by the Steering Group and by the state of nature assessment.

Designated Sites

13. There are eight Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) selected for their nature conservation value within the city. The largest is the Port Meadow with Wolvercote Common & Green SSSI at 167.14ha, which forms part of the internationally important Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation. The smallest is the Lye Valley SSSI at 2.34ha, which supports nationally rare and threatened calcareous valley fen, making it the jewel in the crown of Oxford's wetland habitats.
14. The SSSIs are actively managed and Natural England considers much of the land to be in favourable condition. An audit could be undertaken to better understand how favourable condition can be retained/achieved across these sites, in addition to exploring the potential to make them bigger, better and more joined up.
15. Oxford also includes 66 sites protected by various local designations (e.g. Local Wildlife Sites). Many of these are under private ownership and little is known about their current condition. The Council has commissioned the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) to undertake a data review to establish the existing knowledge base for these sites, which could form the basis for additional work to assess, protect and improve their ecological value.

Land owned by Oxford City Council

16. The City Council manages and owns large areas of land in the city and has a long record of delivering biodiversity improvements. It will be essential to ensure that any land which the City Council has direct control over maximises its benefits for nature.
17. Ensuring that land managed by the City Council has plans in place for effective habitat management could be a key feature of a strategy. This would require a baseline understanding of the current state of the land and management practices, including the use of pesticides.
18. The strategy could also help ensure all service areas within the Council consider ecology and biodiversity within their work, including project planning and procurement decisions.

Land owned by other individuals and organisations

19. It is essential that the strategy engages landowners across Oxford and actions supporting landowners to enhance biodiversity must be included. This may entail the provision of advice or resources regarding best practice for nature conservation, or by connecting landowners with other organisations with the relevant expertise and interests. The first step would be to establish what the opportunities may be and what the needs of those landowners are.

Urban greening and connectivity

20. Valuable work has been undertaken mapping green spaces in Oxford, including in the Urban Forest Strategy and the Green Infrastructure (GI) Study¹. The study concluded that: *“A key issue for the city is reducing fragmentation and improving habitat connectivity to improve ecological resilience”*.
21. The existing mapping work could be built on to develop a better understanding of how the main areas of ecological value are linked and how certain faunal groups (e.g. birds, bats and invertebrates) move through the city. This would entail relating the mapping undertaken to knowledge of where protected species are most prevalent, informed by the baseline exercise described above.
22. The concept of green corridors could be formalised and the scope for enhancing them explored. This could aim to achieve beneficial management of a range of urban features (roadside verges, hedgerows, private gardens, etc.). The concept of green corridors already forms part of planning policies and recent work has been undertaken to develop a Nature Recovery Network for Oxfordshire which covers Oxford as well, which seeks to link up areas of value for nature.

¹ Oxford City Council Green Infrastructure Study, available at: https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/8112/occ_green_infrastructure_study_2022

Public access to nature

23. The GI Study found there is “generally good access” to natural green spaces within 15 minutes’ walking time for most of the City but with some gaps – for example in the Cowley/Temple Cowley area. In addition, most public open spaces were evaluated as being of excellent or good quality (84%) but issues including low biodiversity value were identified in others.
24. The Biodiversity Strategy could contribute to efforts to improve both access and open space quality. Potential areas of investigation include the greening of public rights of way and increasing habitat diversity in public spaces. Initially, the findings of the GI Study could be used as the foundation for further assessment of the specific challenges and prioritisation of potential actions.

Financial implications

25. Until the full scope of the strategy is decided with stakeholders it is not possible to estimate costs. The Council holds £10,000 awarded by DEFRA, some of which can be utilised in the development of the strategy.

Legal issues

26. Under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (as amended by the Environment Act 2021), Oxford City Council has a duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity. Section 40(1) of the 2006 Act now states:

“A public authority which has any functions exercisable in relation to England must from time to time consider what action the authority can properly take, consistently with the proper exercise of its functions, to further the general biodiversity objective”.

This initial consideration must be completed by the authority within one year of the amended subsection taking effect which will be by 1 January 2024.

27. Oxford City Council needs to meet the additional reporting requirements under the Act, relating both to actions taken in relation to the enhanced biodiversity duty, and actions taken in relation to biodiversity net gain.

Level of risk

28. A full risk assessment will be developed as part of the Strategy Development.

Equalities impact

29. Access to nature is expected to be a key theme of the Biodiversity Strategy. The improved environmental quality that the Biodiversity Strategy will aim to deliver can lead to better physical and mental health amongst all our citizens, thus helping

to tackle some of the inequalities in the city. Further equalities impacts will be considered as part of strategy development.

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

30. The purpose of the development of the Biodiversity Strategy is to enhance and improve nature. This proposed strategy will comply with Oxford City Council's policies and commitments relating to carbon reduction and safeguarding the environment.

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Background Papers: None