

# Action for nature recovery on council owned land

## 1. Overview / Policy Statement

- 1.1 The purpose of this joint policy is to outline the process for community groups wishing to undertake nature recovery projects, including tree planting, on council owned land. This policy contains guidance for local communities who are considering undertaking projects on Council owned land and the how groups can apply (please refer to appendix 1).

## 2. Objectives

- 2.1 South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils (known as the councils') recognise the importance of our shared responsibility to protect the planet. Our Council Plans ([The way ahead council plan South](#) / [At the heart of the Vale council plan](#)) and the Joint Nature and Climate Action Plan ([South/Vale](#)) detail our aims and targets to help nature's recovery and tackle the climate emergency. We have committed to increasing the amount of council land managed for nature and wish to enable groups across the districts with their nature recovery projects by giving them the opportunity to undertake nature recovery projects on council owned land, where it is appropriate to do so. This allows local people to become engaged in nature recovery in their communities whilst also helping the councils to deliver the nature recovery targets.

## 3. Scope

- 3.1 Projects that will be considered as nature recovery projects should focus on actions that align with the [Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy \(OLNRS\)](#). The OLNRS is the coordinated strategy for nature's recovery to help wildlife to flourish, improve the quality of our air and water, and mitigate the impacts of climate change by targeting the creation of appropriate habitats in the right place, such as:

- Tree planting and caring for newly planted trees (watering and maintenance etc.)

- Shrub planting and caring for newly planted shrubs (watering and maintenance etc.)
- Creation and management of meadow areas<sup>1</sup>
- Creation and management of wildflower areas
- Installing bird, bat and bee boxes.

3.2 This policy replaces the existing policy for Planting Trees on Council Land to extend the opportunities for creating and managing meadow areas and other nature recovery projects as set out in this document. All groups considering making an application, are required to contact the council before applying to discuss their ideas and proposed location.

3.3 Following approval of the application for the project, details about potential funding which could help local community groups can be found on our websites [South/Vale](#).

#### **4. Who is eligible?**

- Town/parish councils and parish meetings
- Local 'not for profit' organisations – with a formal constitution or set of governing rules

#### **5. Who is not eligible?**

- Commercial, for-profit businesses
- Individuals

#### **6. Roles and Responsibilities for Delivery**

6.1 The relevant councils will review each application for a nature recovery scheme on land owned by that council.

6.2 The Nature Recovery working group will confirm if the site is owned by South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse District Councils and give initial guidance on the likely acceptability of the proposal.

6.3 If the ideas the applicant has outlined are acceptable in principle, then the applicant will be invited to make a formal application.

6.4 Officers may provide feedback suggesting changes to the proposal or, recommending that the applicant does not proceed with a formal application.

6.5 The council may require changes to the proposed nature recovery scheme and the applicant is to engage and work with the council to agree the final form of the nature recovery project.

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<sup>1</sup> Further details on creating meadows is located in appendix 2

- 6.6 If agreement is reached and the council has satisfied itself as to suitability of the land for the nature recovery project, a licence for the final agreed proposal would be issued subject to obtaining required internal and any external consents or approvals. Any associated costs which the Council as landlord may be incur in obtaining the required consents would need to be met by the applicant.

## **7. Relevant Policy and Procedure**

- 7.1 Our Council Plans ([The way ahead council plan South](#) / [At the heart of the Vale council plan](#)) and the Joint Nature and Climate Action Plan ([South/Vale](#)).

## **8. Alternative Formats**

- 8.1 Please do not hesitate to contact a member of the Climate Team if you would like this policy in an alternative format, via [climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk)

## **9. Policy**

- 9.1 This section provides detail for any groups wishing to apply to undertake nature recovery projects on council owned land will be assessed against the following key principles:

### **Supporting Biodiversity**

- Helps the councils to put nature recovery at the heart of our grounds' maintenance operations
- Aligns with the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy by targeting the creation of appropriate habitats in the right place.
- Helps the councils in their efforts to lead by example and will inspire other landowners and stakeholders to adopt and deliver similar approaches to how they manage their land
- Aims to create opportunities for nature recovery on council owned land, such as establishing wildlife corridors, restoring degraded habitats, and managing woodlands and trees to maximise canopy cover and carbon storage
- Aims to plant appropriate species for the local environment and ensure the proposals do not adversely impact existing species or other important habitats.

### **Caring and maintenance:**

- Promotes best practice, including sustainable methods, for planting, growing and maintenance
- Complies with all laws and regulations relating to the proposal

- Complies with any insurers requirements relating to the proposal or the land
- Includes safety precautions and measures in line with the councils' duty and legal responsibilities to maintain public safety
- Encourages the efficient use of resources to reduce carbon emissions and wider impact on the environment. This includes the reduced water usage, elimination of peat products and minimal usage of pesticide and herbicides.

### **Community**

- Maintains the availability of publicly accessible land for the enjoyment for all and does not conflict with other users
- Encourages partnerships with organisations who share our nature recovery ambitions to take on planting and maintenance of council owned land
- Engages with members of the local communities, involving them in creating and caring for their local environment.

9.2 We will consider projects which take action to address current and future effects of climate change and support nature's recovery, including:

- Tree planting
- Creating and managing pocket gardens
- Management of meadow areas
- Creation and management of wildflower areas
- Installing bird, bat and bee boxes

9.3 We would also like to see projects that can demonstrate:

- Increasing awareness and knowledge of the climate and ecological emergencies amongst others
- Wide support from the local community
- Opportunities to bring the community together through shared action
- Partnership working with other local groups and organisations
- A commitment to our Council Plan 2025-29 priorities: Supporting climate and nature recovery and promoting healthy, sustainable and inclusive communities.

9.4 We will not support installation of:

- Sheds or onsite storage
- Ponds or new wetland habitats
- Edible gardens
- Any change of use or feature that cannot easily be removed and land returned to its original state.

9.5 All proposals will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, depending on the suitability of proposal and individual site.

## 10. Communication and Contact Information

- 10.1 Prior to completing an application form, please contact [climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk) outlining your ideas and location of your proposed project.
- 10.2 For more information about the scheme visit our website ([South/Vale](#)), advice on a potential project or other possible funding sources, organisations are encouraged to contact [climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk)
- 10.3 The council's communications team would like to contact successful applicants (organisations not individuals) to promote the policy on our websites and social media. Following a successful application and issuing of license the council communications team will be in contact to see if they can also help with promotion around your action for nature recovery e.g. recruit volunteers.

## 11. Change Record

Change Record	
Policy title	Action for nature recovery on council owned land
Version number	1.0
Owner(s)	Climate and Biodiversity Team and Strategic Property Team
Author(s)	Roselle Chapman, Kimberley Hall and Ben Border
Approved by	Cabinet
Approved date	South Cabinet – 16 April 2026 Vale Cabinet – 17 April 2026
Effective date	20 April 2026
Renewal date	Four years following effective date

# Appendix 1

## Guidance for community groups:

For community groups who wish to apply to undertake nature recovery projects on land owned by South Oxfordshire District Council or Vale of White Horse District Council, please adhere to the following guidance:

- 1) Before developing your project, please check that the land is owned and managed by either South Oxfordshire or the Vale of White Horse District Councils. To see where we own and manage land in South Oxfordshire and Vale of the White Horse visit the councils' interactive [map](#).
- 2) Please contact the Climate and Biodiversity Team to discuss your proposals before you undertake too much work in planning your project.  
[climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk)

## Please carefully consider the following principles when developing your proposals:

- The site must remain safe and accessible to the public.
- We would like to see that you have a clear vision and a management plan for the site resulting in the site being kept in good condition through active and appropriate management.
- Applications must include a complete management plan for the site, detailing how you will maintain the site to a good standard for the duration of the agreement, including plans for extreme weather.
- If you are considering a tree planting project, we strongly recommend that you look at the councils' guidance [South/Vale](#) before submitting an idea or application.
- Any trees planted must be at least 15m from any buildings or structures, and at least 4m from hard paved surfaces and at least 3m from any service media.
- Any tree planting schemes must avoid planting trees underneath power or phone lines, or directly on top of underground utilities.
- Tree planting must be out of highway vision splays and not too close to streetlights or road signage. Distances will depend on tree species being proposed, e.g. a narrow-canopied tree could be planted closer to a street light than a broad canopied species.
- If you are considering a meadow management project, we suggest you look at [Buglife's resources](#) before submitting.
- For other projects, the council's website [South/Vale](#) has links to local organisations who offer support.
- You must supply your own tools, seeds and other inputs, and these must be stored offsite.

- All materials, plants and seeds must be locally and sustainably sourced with a documented and traceable provenance. See note below for definition of locally and sustainability meaning.
- There should be no use of powered machinery for general maintenance without prior agreement.
- Groups applying must demonstrate that they are appropriately insured and have policies or procedures in place for the duration of the project to ensure the safety of their volunteers and all users of the site.
- Risk assessments and method statements must be conducted for activities undertaken to keep your volunteers and the public safe.
- The whole decision-making process granting a licence can take a minimum of three months to complete from when the application is received, so please plan accordingly to ensure any planting and preparation is done in the appropriate season.

**Note:** Locally and sustainably means Supporting UK-based suppliers that aim to:

- reduce chemical inputs (insecticides, slug pellets and fertilisers)
- eliminate plastic packaging waste across their supply chain use
- 100% peat-free, UK-produced compost
- seeds should be UK-sourced, responsibly harvested and as local as possible
- bird and bat boxes should be made from untreated, high quality, durable FSC certified timber or other sustainable materials.

### **Who is eligible?**

- Town/parish councils and parish meetings
- Local 'not for profit' organisations – with a formal constitution or set of governing rules

### **Who is not eligible?**

- Commercial, for-profit businesses
- Individuals

### **What kind of projects are we looking for?**

We will consider projects which take action to address current and future effects of climate change and support nature's recovery, including:

- Tree planting
- Creating and managing pocket gardens
- Management of meadow areas
- Creation and management of wildflower areas
- Installing bird, bat and bee boxes

We would also like to see projects that can demonstrate:

- Increasing awareness and knowledge of the climate and ecological emergencies amongst others
- Wide support from the local community
- Opportunities to bring the community together through shared action
- Partnership working with other local groups and organisations
- A commitment to our Council Plan 2025-29 priorities: Supporting climate and nature recovery and promoting healthy, sustainable and inclusive communities.

### **What we will not agree to:**

- Sheds or onsite storage
- Ponds or new wetland habitats
- Edible gardens
- Any change of use or feature that cannot easily be removed and land returned to its original state.

All proposals will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, depending on the suitability of proposal and individual site.

### **Application and decision-making process**

1. Prior to completing an application form, please contact [climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk) outlining your ideas and location of your proposed project.
2. Officers will confirm if the site is owned by South Oxfordshire or Vale of White Horse District Councils and give initial guidance on the likely acceptability of the proposal.
  - a. If the ideas you have outlined are acceptable in principle, then you will be invited to make a formal [application](#).
  - b. Officers may provide feedback suggesting changes to the proposal or, recommending that you don't proceed with a formal application.
3. Once your application is received, a formal decision and granting of a licence can take a minimum of three months from the application submission. We will approve or reject your application based on availability and suitability of land, and adherence to the principles set out in this policy.
4. Your application will be considered by specialist officers within the council, led by the Strategic Property Team. We may need to speak to you with follow-up questions and will contact you in due course.

5. Once internal consultation has been completed, a recommendation is made to the Director of Development and Corporate Landlord for the final decision.
6. Should your licence application be successful, our communications team would be happy to discuss publicity for your group, however in the meantime, please do not share any publicity until the licence has been agreed and issued.

### **Standard licence conditions include:**

- A planting and maintenance schedule will be agreed and will be included as part of the licence, setting out a description and location for each plant, group of plants and features.
- Any trees planted will be at least 15m from any buildings or structures, and at least 4m from hard paved surfaces and at least 3m from any service media. Avoid planting trees underneath power or phone lines, or directly on top of underground utilities and out of highway vision splays and not too close to streetlights or road signage.
- All consents, licences and authorisations will be already in place.
- A comprehensive risk assessment and method statement will be included as part of the licence to minimise hazards and risks to volunteers and the public.
- Ensure that any soil improver introduced is 100% sustainable, plastic and chemical contaminant-free and peat-free.
- Ensure plants, soil or mulch etc brought onto the land has no harmful or hazardous substances or contaminants in it, and injurious weeds as controlled by legislation such as common ragwort and creeping thistle, or non-native or invasive plants shall be removed and closely managed for elimination.
- Any seed introduced to the site must come from a traceable, verified native stock.
- No use of powered machinery without prior agreement.

### **Monitoring the sites**

- Initial licences are granted for up to five years. The councils will carry out routine inspections during the licence period to monitor the planting area is in a healthy and maintained condition as agreed in the licence planting and maintenance schedule.
- Officers will liaise with the local community group to notify them of any remedial work required and agree a suitable timeframe to undertake the necessary works.

### **Contact Details**

For more information about the scheme, advice on a potential project or other possible funding sources, organisations are encouraged to contact [climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk)

## Appendix 2

### Meadow creation guidance

- If you are creating and managing a wildflower meadow, we need to see a diversity of wildflowers and grasses. The seed mix should contain a minimum of four grass species and 10 wildflower species. The grass component should not exceed 80 percent of the total seed mix by weight. No individual flower species should exceed 25 percent of the total wildflower species component by weight.
- To establish a wildflower meadow we recommend that you:
  - sow the seed mix in early September
  - sow at a minimum seed rate of 4g per square metre
  - Do NOT apply fertilizer
  - in the first 12 months after sowing, cut the area regularly to help the sown species to establish
  - cuttings should be removed to prevent weed ingress and patches of dead material developing.
- When the wildflowers are established (typically from the second spring after sowing) you should manage as follows:
  - cut in the spring (before April) if necessary to prevent grasses dominating the flowering species
  - cut up to 90 percent of meadow area each year between 15 August and 31 October to leave a plant height of between 10 centimetres (cm) and 20cm. Leave at least 10 percent of the area uncut.
- Whilst we acknowledge that some 'weeds' can have high value for nature, an excess of docks, nettles, ragwort and thistles can outcompete native wildflowers, reducing plant diversity and making the habitat less suitable for pollinators and other wildlife. Assertive weeds like thistles, nettles and docks can be kept in check (<5 percent area cover) with good management and controlled by hand-weeding.