South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan 2041

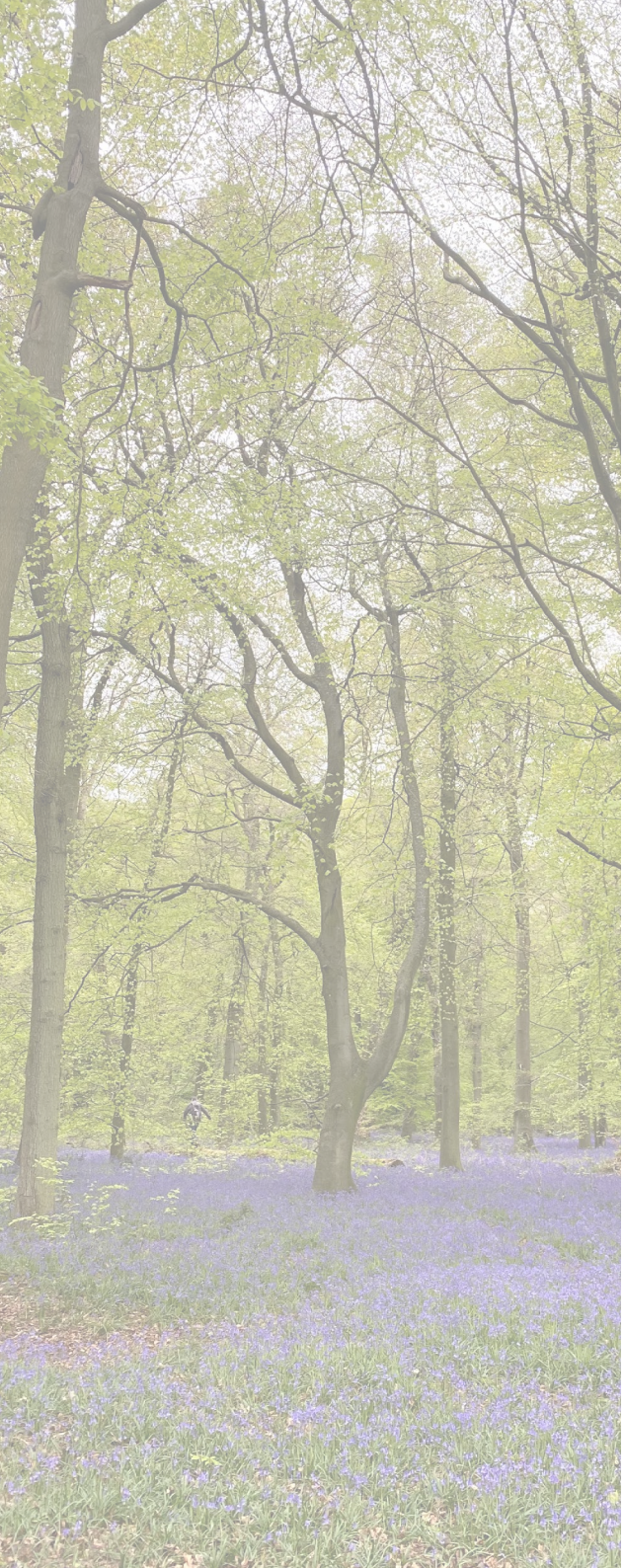
LPA112

South Oxfordshire Biodiversity Report 2026

March 2026



South Oxfordshire District Council



Contents

Introduction 4

Biodiversity in South Oxfordshire 5

Protected Sites, Habitats and Species 5

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) 6

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) 7

National Nature Reserves (NNR) 7

Local Nature Reserves (LNR) 7

Road Verge Nature Reserves (RVNR) 7

Habitats 9

Species 11

Our Plans and Policies 12

The Council Plan 12

The Nature and Climate Action Plan (NCAP) 12

The Local Plan 2035 15

Joint Local Plan 2041 15

Nature Recovery on Council Owned Land 17

An Advisory Service 20

Raising Awareness and Supporting the Community 20

Working in partnership to deliver biodiversity 22

Local Nature Recovery Strategy 22

Oxfordshire Local Wildlife Sites Project 23

National Landscapes 23

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) 24

Oxfordshire's Local Nature Partnership (LNP) 24

Ock & Thame Landscape Recovery Project 25

Grant funding 26

Biodiversity Grant Scheme 26

Community Enabling grants for nature recovery 26

Direct funding for district-wide projects 28

Planning and Biodiversity 29

Introduction 29

What we have done to meet the Biodiversity Net Gain Obligations? 30

How much BNG has been generated from development in the South Oxfordshire? 30

Biodiversity Net Gain Monitoring 31

How we will meet the BNG obligations over the next reporting period 31

Other biodiversity gains delivered through the planning system 32

Great Crested Newt District Licence Scheme 32

Neighbourhood plans and nature 33



Biodiversity Report 2026

Introduction

Public authorities who operate in England must consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity in England. This is the strengthened ‘biodiversity duty’ that the Environment Act 2021 introduced.

This means that local authorities must:

- consider what can be done to conserve and enhance biodiversity.
- agree policies and specific objectives based on this consideration.
- act to deliver the policies and achieve the objectives.
- write and publish a biodiversity report.

This report fulfils the requirement to publish a biodiversity report. The report outlines our approach to conserving and enhancing biodiversity, sets out the policies and objectives that have been agreed and provides information on how the council is delivering against these policies and objectives. This report covers the period up to 1 January 2026. The next report will need be published before 1 January 2031 by the successor authority following Local Government Reorganisation.

Biodiversity in South Oxfordshire

South Oxfordshire is home to 233km^2 (28%) of the Chilterns National Landscape. This area is celebrated for its range of nature-rich habitats, including ancient woodlands, remnant heathland, chalk downland and juniper scrub and chalk streams. Beyond lies rolling farmland, and 57km of the River Thames corridor and floodplain.

Protected Sites, Habitats and Species

South Oxfordshire is home to a rich variety of habitats and species, many of which are identified as being of not just local significance but of national or international importance as well:

Table 1 – Protected sites in the South Oxfordshire

	DESIGNATION
International significance	4 Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)
National significance	38 National Nature Reserve 1 National Nature Reserve
Local significance	126 Local Wildlife Sites*(1807.1 hectares) 4 Local Nature Reserves (11.2 hectares) 5 Local Geological Sites (69.25 hectares)

**A current list of Local Wildlife Sites 'living list' is available on the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre website. The list is updated periodically so should be referred to for the most up to date list of conservation sites. BBOWT annually reports on LWS directly to SDL 60.*



Military orchid
© Ian Saunders

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)

Four internationally designated Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) fall partly or entirely within the district. SACs are designated where they support internationally important habitats and/or species, and receive strict legal protection:

- **Aston Rowant SAC** is one of the finest remaining examples in the UK of lowland juniper scrub on chalk. The surrounding chalk grasslands are of national importance and are home to the Chiltern gentian and the silver spotted skipper butterfly.
- **Chilterns Beechwoods SAC** lies on the chalk escarpment between Chinnor and the M40 and is designated primarily for being an extensive Asperulo-Fagetum beech forest and part of an important grassland-scrub-woodland mosaic. Species of note include the stag beetle, bird's-nest orchid and yellow bird's nest orchid.
- **Hartslock Wood SAC** is renowned for its yew woodland and chalk grassland with a particularly fine assemblage of orchids, including one of only three UK populations of monkey orchid, a nationally rare species.
- **Little Wittenham SAC** supports one of the largest known breeding populations of great crested newt in the UK. The site also supports an outstanding assemblage of breeding amphibians, which includes smooth newt, common frog and common toad.

Juniper is one of the UK's three native conifers. It provides great cover and winter food for wildlife, sheltering birds and inverte-brates. Juniper is one of Oxfordshire's LNRS 'Priority Species' that are most likely to benefit from specific, targeted actions as well as species for which the local area is a national stronghold. Chilterns National Landscape in South Oxfordshire is a stronghold for the species and a target of co-ordinated management and regeneration work.



Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)

There are 38 Sites covering 1,550 hectares of SSSI, wholly or partly in South Oxfordshire representing approximately 0.02% of the district's land area. These sites are designated as important nationally for their wildlife or geology.

National Nature Reserves (NNR)

Aston Rowant NNR, the only National Nature Reserve in South Oxfordshire, is renowned for its flower-rich chalk grassland, beech woodland and juniper scrub.

Local Nature Reserves (LNR)

There are four Local Nature Reserves in South Oxfordshire: Cuttle Brook, Ewelme Watercress Beds, Mowbray Fields, Watlington Chalk Pits. They are places with wildlife or geological features that are of special interest locally but not necessarily of national importance.

Road Verge Nature Reserves (RVNR)

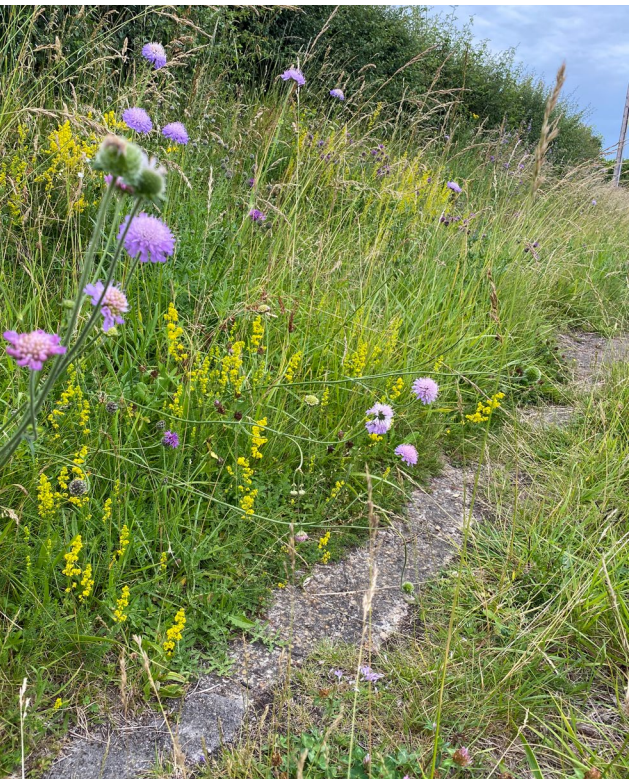
There are 52 designated RVNRs in Oxfordshire, overseen by Oxfordshire County Council in collaboration with the district councils Road Verge Nature Reserves in Oxfordshire.

RVNRs are designated following an ecological survey and consideration of other factors, such as road safety. A RVNR should meet one or more of the following selection criteria:

- Supports a species which is classified as critically endangered, endangered, vulnerable, near threatened or Nationally scarce in the National or County Red Data Book or very rare, rare, very scarce or scarce (Day 2001).



Each RVNR is clearly signposted



Shillingford Road Verge Nature Reserve

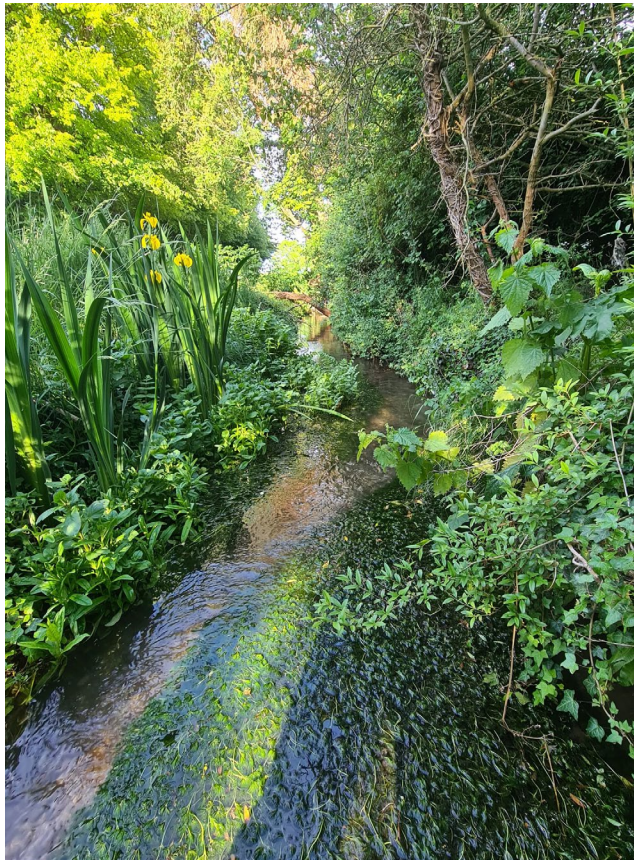
- It supports a good example of a plant community that represents a habitat characteristic of Oxfordshire or is a Habitat of Principal Importance (listed under Section 41 of the NERC Act 2006)
- It supports any animal species protected under legislation or supports a rare animal species or rich community of animals in the context of the county's fauna.

There are currently nine designated RVNRs in South Oxfordshire, each with its own specific management plan and clearly marked with signposts. These verges support valuable remnants of chalk grassland in Chilterns National Landscape and neutral grassland nearer the River Thames and provide connectivity, helping maintain and restore a habitat network through which wildlife can move. Of note is the Shillingford RVNR which comprises a diverse range of characteristic neutral grassland. On the northern side of the road the verge is grassy and banked. Species include greater knapweed, field scabious, wild onion and wild basil. Multiple patches of wild clary are present.

Habitats

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 identifies 56 types of habitat in England that it calls habitats of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity; Oxfordshire is home to 20 habitats of principal importance. South Oxfordshire supports 19 of these habitats covering 8190.68 hectares (Table 2). Almost half of this is Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland and 22% is Lowland Beech and Yew Woodland. The Chilterns supports important concentrations of species rich grassland including chalk, neutral and acid grassland. Notably, South Oxfordshire holds 13 areas of Oxfordshire's irreplaceable fen habitat, including Spartum Fen which consists predominantly of calcareous fen and carr vegetation, open water habitats and damp, oak woodland. The invertebrate fauna of the site is of considerable interest, with many nationally rare species associated with the fen, carr, open water and deadwood habitats.

Chalk streams are a globally rare habitat, with only 224 in England which constitutes over 85% of the total world resource (TVERC). 70.5km of mineral-rich chalk stream in South Oxfordshire rise from the chalk of the Chiltern's escarpment with low water temperatures, stable flows and groundwater-fed gravel beds. The Chalgrove Brook, Lewknor Brook, Chinnor and Sydenham Brook, and Cuttle Brook, are home to a diverse fauna, including bullhead, brook lamprey, stone loach, fine-lined pea mussel, and a small population of brown trout; water voles are also present. The Ewelme Brook is a small chalk stream that rises from the spring line at the foot of the chalk escarpment at King's Pool in Ewelme and flows for 3.8km to its confluence with the River Thames at Benson. Despite many pressures, including extensive culverting, the Ewelme Brook supports a small population of brown trout and otter are regularly seen along its banks.



Chalgrove Brook

Table 2. Area in hectares of Priority Habitats in South Oxfordshire 2022 - 2025.

Changes in area largely represent improved understanding of the habitat resource, rather than the creation or loss of habitat. For example, in 2025 the mapping of woodlands was improved and updated using new data sources, including the Natural England Priority Habitat Inventory and the National Forestry Inventory layer, resulting in a significant increase in woodlands which are categorised as S41 habitats.

S41 HABITAT	2022	2023	2024	2025
Arable Field Margins	0.00	5.64	5.64	6.4
Coastal & Floodplain Grazing Marsh	486.01	487.20	524.75	528.69
Eutrophic Standing Waters	276.28	375.23	374.55	377.71
Hedgerow (Priority Habitat)	2.46	2.46	2.46	2.46
Lowland Beech & Yew Woodland	1154.38	1069.95	1817.76	1833.54
Lowland Calcareous Grassland	289.08	296.23	301.41	421.26
Lowland Dry Acid Grassland	12.44	14.95	16.96	17.31
Lowland Fens	46.43	39.06	39.05	39.12
Lowland Heathland	4.18	4.22	4.22	4.22
Lowland Meadows	86.24	87.35	87.38	87.61
Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland	1154.38	1069.95	1118.25	4032.49
Lowland Wood Pasture & Parkland	682.61	682.60	683.13	683.55
Open Mosaic Habitats On Previously Developed Land	29.59	19.51	19.51	26.86
Ponds	0.00	0.05	0.05	1.07
Purple Moor-Grass And Rush Pastures	2.37	2.37	2.37	2.37
Reedbeds	2.23	2.37	2.37	2.37
Rivers	2.84	2.84	14.77	24.21
Traditional Orchards	75.46	75.59	75.59	82.54
Wet Woodland	21.63	27.40	27.99	25.58
Total	**4909.45**	**4996.48**	**5118.21**	**8190.68**

Species

171 priority species have been recorded in South Oxfordshire in the last 10 years. The district's chalk grassland is an internationally rare, fragile, wildlife-rich habitat which has developed over centuries of grazing on nutrient-poor chalk soils. It is home to populations of chalk specialist species, including candytuft, pasque flower, Chiltern gentian, dwarf thistle, dropwort and clustered bellflower. In turn, this grassland supports a wide range of insects, including some national rarities. Nationally vulnerable species of butterfly including the dark green fritillary, chalkhill blue and brown argus thrive here. The silver spotted skipper population of Aston Rowant to Watlington and a population in the Swyncombe Downs are the most northerly in the UK. Oxfordshire's only populations of the nationally rare gentian beetle can be found at Aston Rowant and Hartslock.

Whilst bluebells are widespread in Oxfordshire woodlands, particularly the Chilterns, they are under threat globally. Other species characteristic of the Chilterns woodlands include the violet helleborine, wood barley and the white letter hairstreak and white admiral butterflies.

Elsewhere in South Oxfordshire curlew can still be seen and heard along the River Thame floodplain meadows at Waterstock. The Withymead Nature Reserve near Streatley is one of only two spots in Oxfordshire for the nationally rare Desmoulin's whorl-snail and breeding populations of black and brown hairstreak butterflies can be seen in the Otmoor area and the Oxford Heights respectively.



Desmoulin's whorl-snail
© P. Morton



Silver spotted skipper
© Mark Batchelor



Our Plans and Policies

Nature in the South Oxfordshire is under pressure from development, climate change, and habitat fragmentation. The council plays an active role in helping to protect and restore its rich natural heritage. South Oxfordshire's policies are set out in the following documents:

The Council Plan

The first priorities identified in the South Oxfordshire Council Plan 2025 – 2029 are to fight climate change and restore nature to the district.

The Nature and Climate Action Plan (NCAP)

The NCAP provides further information on how the council will deliver the priorities identified in the Council Plan. The NCAP contains nine key actions that the council will take over the coming years to deliver nature recovery. Table 3 below shows the key actions that have been identified together with the measures against which progress will be measured. The NCAP will be updated annually, and new measures added where appropriate.

You can read the full NCAP here

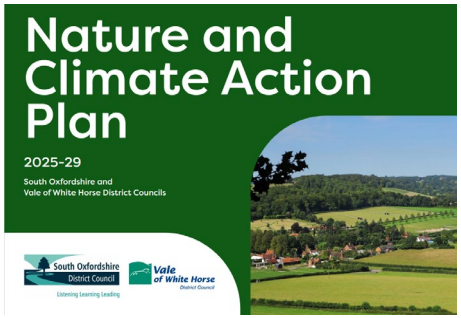
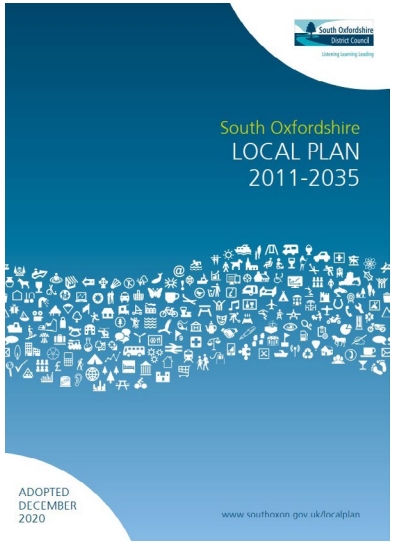


Table 3. Key actions defined in the NCAP that the council will take over the coming years to deliver nature recovery

NCAP Action	Measures
Provide resources, funding, advice and expertise to Town and Parish Councils, landowners, community and nature groups, to support nature recovery projects and delivery of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.	1) Council website resources updated and maintained, measured by unique visits and downloads 2) Narrative update on organisations supported, including case studies and/or learning and networking opportunities 3) Number and value of council grants awarded for nature recovery projects
Promote the development of Habitat Banks in appropriate locations in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse as a key mechanism to drive nature recovery	1) Number of habitat banks approved by South Oxfordshire/Vale of White Horse through Section 106 agreements 2) Number of biodiversity units secured through council agreed habitat banks located in South Oxfordshire/Vale of White Horse
Seek opportunities to increase support for, and the profile of the Local Wildlife Sites Project as a key mechanism to help deliver nature recovery.	1) Number of local wildlife sites surveyed 2) Number of local wildlife sites where management advice is provided
Drive improvements to the ecological health of our river systems for people and wildlife. In part, delivered through support for and active engagement in the catchment partnerships	1) Narrative report on projects and initiatives supported which aim to drive improvements in the ecological health of our river systems 2) Activity to influence Thames Water, the Environment Agency and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to improve the ecological health of rivers and waterways in South and Vale

NCAP Action	Measures
A) Aim to eliminate the use of peat in grounds maintenance on our land by the end of 2025/26. B) Reduce the use of harmful herbicides.	1) Amount of peat used in grounds maintenance and supply chains 2) Amount of herbicides used in grounds maintenance operations
Review the use of annual bedding plants in grounds maintenance operations in favour of locally grown, sustainable alternatives	1) Establish a baseline for current bedding plant usage by end of Q1 2025/26. 2) Percentage reduction in use of annual bedding plants
Undertake biodiversity audit of corporate land and develop proposals to put nature recovery at the heart of our grounds' maintenance operations.	1) Complete biodiversity audits of South Oxfordshire/Vale of White Horse corporate land. 2) Develop options for nature recovery on council owned land and seek approval for implementation. 3) Percentage of council owned land managed for nature recovery. 4) Produce a report outlining options for nature-based carbon sequestration schemes on council owned land.
Support the development of land-based carbon sequestration offsetting model for the districts, by: Working with the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership and other Oxfordshire local authorities, deliver Innovate UK Net Zero Living 'Enabling nature-based carbon offsetting in Oxfordshire' project to develop new markets in Oxfordshire for nature-based offsetting.	Delivery of Innovate UK Net-Zero Living project final report by Q2 2025/26
Work with partners to produce an Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy and identify actions for South and Vale councils to deliver following adoption of the Strategy	1) Adoption of the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy by Q3 2025/26 2) Develop action plan for South and Vale and incorporate actions into annual review of NCAP by Q3 2025/26

The Local Plan 2035



In addition to the Nature Recovery Policies and measures identified in the Council Plan and the Nature and Climate Action Plan the South Oxfordshire District Council Local Plan 2035 contains four specific biodiversity policies ENV1 – ENV4 which are designed to protect existing biodiversity and deliver a net gains in biodiversity:

- **Policy ENV1:** Landscape and Countryside – ensures that the countryside is safeguarded from harmful development and requires new proposals to respect, conserve and enhance the district's unique landscape and scenic qualities.

- **Policy ENV2:** Biodiversity – mandates the protection of designated wildlife sites and ensures that development avoids damage to biodiversity and irreplaceable habitats.

- **Policy ENV3:** Biodiversity – ensures that every development considers wildlife and habitats, preventing harm and aims for measurable biodiversity net gain.

- **Policy ENV4:** Watercourses – seeks to protect and enhance watercourses and riparian habitats when development takes place nearby. The creation of 10m buffers zones on both sides of the watercourse and likely refusal of culverting safeguards a watercourse from the negative impacts of development.

Joint Local Plan 2041

South Oxfordshire and The Vale of White Horse district councils are now working together on a Joint Local Plan 2041 which is currently (as of December 2025) at examination. The Joint Local Plan contains emerging new and updated biodiversity policies; there are four policies related to biodiversity and nature recovery:

- **Policy NH1** - Biodiversity designations: This policy is designed to protect the districts' most important habitats and species, applying a hierarchy so that the level of protection and mitigation in planning decisions is commensurate to their status and importance. This includes both their individual importance and importance as part of a wider network.

- **Policy NH2 - Nature recovery:** There are three main parts to this policy:
  i. The policy requires relevant development to deliver at least 20 percent **Biodiversity Net Gain** (BNG) and sets a sequential test designed to ensure that BNG generated in the South Oxfordshire creates new habitats where they will have the maximum benefit.
  ii. The policy seeks to ensure that development in the South Oxfordshire promotes habitat connectivity and contributes to the development of **ecological networks** such as the areas identified in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the Conservation Target Areas. The policy also seeks to avoid significant harm to ecological networks from development proposals.
  iii. The policy seeks to ensure that wildlife features, such as bird or bat boxes and garden ponds are incorporated into new developments

- **Policy NH3 Trees and hedgerows in the landscape:**
  This policy is designed to ensure that new development positively contributes to protecting existing trees and hedgerows and delivers net gains in canopy cover. This policy recognises the important role that mature trees and hedgerows play making human settlements more porous to wildlife and the benefits that this has for human health.

- **Policy HP10 Watercourses:**
  This policy aims to ensure that watercourses are positively integrated in the design of new development from the outset and that the ecological importance of the watercourse is not compromised.

  By considering watercourses from the start of the design process, it is possible to make the most of attractive riverside settings and form natural areas of green infrastructure that are useful for informal, safe recreation and enhanced biodiversity and other ecosystem services.

Nature Recovery on Council Owned Land

The council owns 159 hectares of land and buildings; of the land we manage directly, approximately 81 hectares have public access. During 2024 and 2025 the council conducted a biodiversity audit of its landholdings. The purpose of the audit was to record the habitats and species present on the land and to identify opportunities for biodiversity enhancement. Within the publicly accessible land the following sites are managed specifically for nature recovery:

28 hectares across three Countryside Sites which are actively managed for nature on the council's behalf by the Earth Trust.

- **Riverside Meadows** – Covering 9.25 hectares, this site adjacent to the River Thames supports floodplain grassland, ditches, trees and hedgerows. Six species of bat have been recorded using the site. These include the common and soprano pipistrelles, Daubenton, brown long-eared, serotine and the noctule. The site is currently managed for nature within a Countryside Stewardship agreement by Earth Trust and local volunteers on behalf of South Oxfordshire District Council according to the prescriptions set out in the Management Plan.

- **Wallingford Castle Meadows** (Green Flag Award) – Covering 16.6 hectares, this site comprises semi-natural, semi-improved and improved grassland, ditches, ponds, wooded spinneys and Victorian Parkland. The ditches and pond support two small clumps of Loddon lily and a small population of snake's-head fritillary. The site is currently managed for nature within a Countryside Stewardship agreement by Earth Trust and local volunteers on behalf of South Oxfordshire District Council following prescriptions set out in the site Management Plan.



Kingfisher
© Pete Morton



Riverside Meadows



Wallingford Castle Meadows

- **Mowbray Fields** (Local Nature Reserve) – This 1.88-hectare site comprises habitats including wet grassland, marsh and wet woodland. It is well surveyed and supports an impressive assemblage of invertebrates, including the long-winged conehead bush-cricket, red bartsia bee and the silver colonel soldier fly, which is listed as vulnerable (RDB2) in the British Red Data Book (Shirt, 1987). A further forty-nine locally rare species have been recorded and twelve species are listed as Nationally Scarce. The site is currently managed for by Earth Trust and local volunteers on behalf of South Oxfordshire District Council, following the prescriptions set out in the site Management Plan

- An additional 3.4 hectares of woodland and scrub are managed with a light touch and minimal disturbance, allowing nature the space it needs to thrive.

The remainder of the publicly accessible land is managed primarily for amenity purposes. Historically much of this land was subject to a regular mowing regime and consequently has limited biodiversity interest; it is these spaces that offer significant opportunities for nature recovery. Simple changes, such as adjusting mowing regimes or planting trees and shrubs in areas of low canopy cover can improve biodiversity and support community well-being. Informed by the biodiversity audit, the council has been actively changing how it manages its amenity land to enhance its biodiversity value, as a result of these changes the council now manages 4.4 hectares of amenity grassland which is managed for nature by allowing it to grow long throughout the months of May - September.

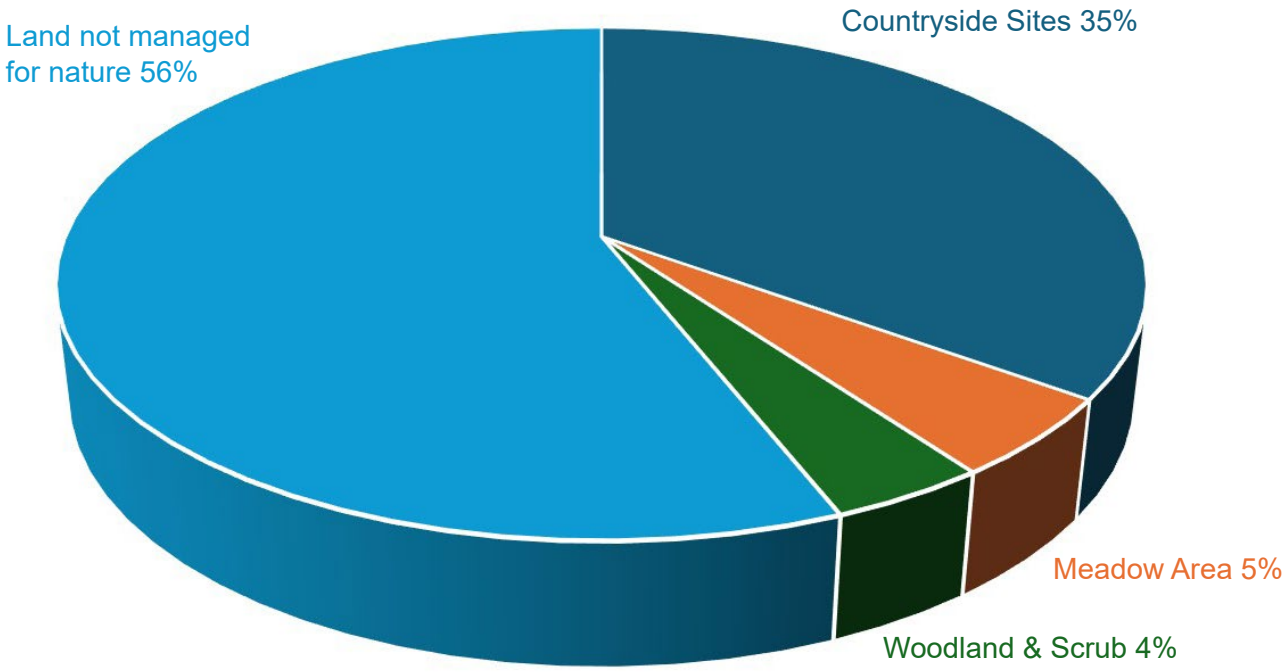


Figure 1. In 2025, approximately 35.8 hectares or 44 per cent of publicly accessible greenspace owned and managed by South Oxfordshire is managed for the benefit of nature.



Mowbray Fields Meadow



A meadow and community orchard in Woodcote



An Advisory Service

One of the key commitments the council has made in the Nature and Climate Action Plan is to provide resources, funding, advice and expertise to Town and Parish Councils, landowners, community and nature groups, to support nature recovery projects and delivery of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Raising Awareness and Supporting the Community

There are approximately 40 Town Councils, Parish Councils and community groups taking action for nature recovery on their patch. When requested, we provide bespoke advice on biological recording, habitat management and creation, engagement with nature recovery, sources of funding, and signposting to further guidance. Participation in various partnership working groups and grant panels enables council officers to maintain an up to date, district-wide knowledge of nature recovery efforts and examples of best practice and make beneficial introductions and connections.

We use a variety of methods to engage with the public on biodiversity matters:

- We have developed a series of localised nature and biodiversity leaflets which are distributed by our ‘Active Communities’ team to those residents who take part in the weekly community walks organised by the team across the district. These are illustrated and give information about the plants and wildlife living at each individual site. The project aims to raise awareness of the importance of nature recovery generally as well as the council’s meadow management initiative.
- We run regular campaigns via press releases and our website about our work to increase biodiversity and encourage nature recovery on land we manage or own.
- We use social media to spotlight how we manage land for nature and biodiversity, including information for residents on how they can do the same.
- We offer an annual guided nature walk for colleagues, using internal communications and through collaborative cross-team work streams.



A leaflet for community walks



Guided nature walk for colleagues



Working in partnership to deliver biodiversity

Much of the land in the South Oxfordshire is privately owned. To deliver nature recovery at scale the council works in partnership with a wide variety of organisations who share a common goal to restore nature across the county.

Some of the partnerships we work in have developed because of legislative requirements, such as the work on the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and the Chilterns National Landscape. Others the council chooses to work with as a way of delivering its objectives around nature recovery. There are a mixture of partnerships directly funded by the council and others where the council's input is in-kind.

The Council supports the following partnerships:

Local Nature Recovery Strategy

South Oxfordshire District Council is a Supporting Authority in the Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). The council was actively involved in developing the LNRS as a member of the project steering group, council officers also chaired the Supporting Authorities working group, were members of the Prioritisation working group and took responsibility for drafting several of the LNRS User Guides. The Oxfordshire LNRS was published on 12 November 2025 and the council will continue to play an active role in developing and implementing the delivery process.

Oxfordshire Local Wildlife Sites Project

The Local Wildlife Sites (LWS) project is a partnership between the Oxfordshire local authorities, the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) and the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre. The project is funded by the partners, and it provides the following services to the South:

- Identifying and mapping local wildlife sites. The data on LWS helps the council to fulfil its planning functions and protect LWS from damage and destruction arising from inappropriate development.
- The BBOWT element of the project engages with the owners of LWS to provide them with support and advice on the management of their sites, encouraging them to manage them better for wildlife and to extend that management into other parts of their landholdings. The LWS are seen as a key building block of the Oxfordshire LNRS providing an opportunity to 'build-out' from existing areas of good habitat.



National Landscapes

The Chilterns National Landscape extends along the southern and eastern edge of South Oxfordshire. The Chilterns Conservation Board was created by Parliamentary Order in July 2004, with 27 members drawn from local communities, including an SODC local authority Councillor. The board's primary purposes include conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area and increasing public enjoyment of its special qualities.

The North Wessex Downs National Landscape extends into the south-eastern parts South Oxfordshire, extending up to the Sinodun Hills which include the iconic Wittenham Clumps. South Oxfordshire, along with the 9 other constituent local authorities within the National Landscape set up and fund the North Wessex Downs Council of Partners. The local authority partners working with the core National Landscape Team undertake South Oxfordshire's statutory responsibilities within the North Wessex Downs.

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)

South Oxfordshire is one of the core funding partners of TVERC and its officers have chaired the TVERC steering group for the last 10 years. TVERC supplies the council with high quality, up to date habitat, species and site data. TVERC's service involves intensive mapping work to assess habitat condition and species numbers. TVERC provides reports on the condition and extent of a suite of indicators that provide a picture of the health of the nature in South Oxfordshire. The information provided by TVERC underpins our planning functions, providing data that informs the decisions on planning applications as well as at a more strategic level, the development of local plan documents.

Oxfordshire's Local Nature Partnership (LNP)

South Oxfordshire supports the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership (LNP). The LNP's aim is 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. A recent project funded by Innovate UK and delivered in partnership between West Oxfordshire, Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse District Councils explores how Oxfordshire's landscapes can lock away carbon while driving nature recovery and supporting the 30 by 30 target. It highlights practical ways for landowners to benefit from carbon markets, reviews emerging standards, and addresses challenges for smaller projects. By connecting carbon storage with climate resilience and community benefits, the report Enabling nature-based carbon sequestration in Oxfordshire sets out a roadmap for a greener, more sustainable county.

River Thame Catchment Partnership

The council is one of a group of local organisations and individuals working together with the River Thame Conservation Trust (RTCT) using the Catchment Based Approach to plan and deliver activities and projects in the Thame to:

- Improve water quality of the River Thame and its tributaries.
- Increase biodiversity by creating, restoring and enhancing freshwater habitats.
- Reduce flood risks using Natural Flood Management
- Protect water resources and promote sustainable use.

The RTCT have developed a strategy (2022-2026) for the four scarp chalk stream tributaries in the River Thame catchment in South Oxfordshire to help address Water Framework Directive challenges. This sets out in-stream, riparian and floodplain initiatives to improve habitats, connectivity and river health, with the ultimate objective of reintroducing chalk stream species (e.g. brown trout and water vole) to tributaries where they no longer exist. The work ranges from small scale volunteer events, building natural habitat structures, natural flood management, data gathering (eDNA, water quality, flow), engagement with polluters, regulators and abstractors to promote large scale fish passage and constructed wetland construction. The Stadhampton Mill Bypass (left) was created to allow the passage of fish, which was blocked by a concrete weir. This is part of RTCT's work towards removing all barriers to fish movement in the Thame catchment and opened up 3.25 km of chalk stream habitat, to which 12 brown trout were translocated, and riparian and aquatic plants were introduced. The RTCT have trained volunteers to use Riverfly surveys as a method to monitor the success of this scheme and to see how the new habitat and other stretches of river are improving in quality over time.



Chalgrove Brook

Ock & Thame Landscape Recovery Project

The council sits on the steering group of this Landscape Recovery Project led by the Freshwater Habitats Trust. This project is working with farmers and land managers to deliver landscape recovery and habitat creation and restoration projects across the catchment.



Grant funding

In addition to the projects and partnerships that South Oxfordshire supports, it also uses grant funding as a way of encouraging and supporting local action on nature recovery.

Biodiversity Grant Scheme

The council's Biodiversity Grant Scheme is run in partnership with the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment. In September 2023 the council set up a new partnership with the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE), to give £50,000 as grants through TOE's Local Environment Fund to help boost local nature recovery efforts and reduce the impacts of climate change. The fund uses money from Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) paid by developer contributions. To date, £85,624 has been awarded in grants to 13 projects. Subject to annual agreement, the £50,000 fund will be made available for the next 2 years, up to and including 2028.

Community Enabling grants for nature recovery

The council see community action as essential to the achievement of our commitments and are wholly supportive of community action for nature recovery. At a parish level, staff and committees rarely have the knowledge in-house to confidently deliver biodiversity projects on their land and seek advice from the council. Similarly, community led volunteer groups often seek advice from the council regarding nature recovery activities. In addition to the advice the council provides, we also provide funding for three well established local charities who are also able to provide advice to communities delivering nature recovery at the town and parish scale:

- Between 2022 - 2025 Wild Oxfordshire was funded £19,552 (£6.5K per year for 3 years) to engage with community action groups and town and parish councils through their community ecology programme. We require them to inspire and empower local communities to connect with their nature spaces, foster local understanding of biodiversity, and train volunteers on how to protect and enhance their green and blue infrastructure for future generations. Their ecologists give tailored, expert advice and support on habitat management and creation, engagement with nature recovery, sources of funding, and signposting to further guidance. This arrangement will continue until at least 2027.

- Between 2022 - 2025 the River Thame Conservation Trust was funded £21, 940 (£7.3K per year for 3 years) to coordinate the collaboration between researchers and citizen scientists to understand pollution in the River Thame and its tributaries. This arrangement will continue until at least 2027.

- Between 2022 - 2025 the Earth Trust have been funded £27,499 (£9.1K per year for 3 years) for the delivery, management and diversification of their volunteer network; engaging hundreds of residents in and around their communities to access and take part in nature recovery related activities.





The fund has given money to help Rycote Meadow footpath in Thame and pond creation in Wheatley.



The fund has given money to help orchard planting in Cuddesdon and Denton

Direct funding for district-wide projects

- Each South Oxfordshire district councillor has a budget of up to £7,500 to award annually to projects or services that offer community benefits in their ward area. We are particularly keen to fund projects of greatest impact for residents, such as activities that protect and restore our natural world, promote action on the climate emergency and improve economic and community well-being. Since 2022 £48,000 has been awarded to 29 activities to protect and restore our natural world. Funded projects include hedge planting, hedge rejuvenation, orchard creation and ecological surveys.

- Acknowledging the health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering for nature recovery activities, a further £2,480 has been granted to three communities through our 'Everyone Active' grant scheme.



Volunteers learning how to lay a hedge in Watlington

Planning and Biodiversity

Introduction

The council works to protect and enhance biodiversity through the land use planning system to help ensure our local environment is better protected for future generations. We have outlined all of biodiversity policies from our existing Local Plan 2035 and from our new Joint Local Plan 2041, which is currently at examination.

The council pioneered the development of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) in Oxfordshire by introducing the first successful biodiversity offsetting agreement (now BNG) in 2013 at a development site in Shrivenham in the neighbouring Vale of the White Horse. The compensatory offset was secured via a S106 planning obligation at a receptor site near Little Wittenham in South Oxfordshire.

South Oxfordshire has worked with the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment to develop and implement a 'pre-mandatory' biodiversity offsetting brokering service, connecting developers who needed to compensate for the impacts of their developments with willing landowners who were prepared to use part of their land to develop new wildlife habitats in return for payments over a 25-year period.

South Oxfordshire introduced its first formal 'biodiversity offsetting' policy into its Local Plan in 2020 and prior to the introduction of mandatory BNG, between 2013 and Feb 2024 it had raised a total of £817,550 from biodiversity gain requirements, to deliver 58 BNG Units. South Oxfordshire continues to innovate in this area, formalising the establishment of its first Habitat Bank at a 6.6-hectare site in Towersey in 2025. The Towersey site was formalised in a S106 planning obligation which over time will transform intensively farmed arable land to a biodiverse mosaic of grassland, scrub, and woodland habitats.







Towersey Habitat Bank near Thame will transform16.5 hectares of former farmland to species-rich wildflower grassland, small areas of remaining grassland habitat will be enhanced and buffered. Areas of scrub will establish and existing wet woodland along the Cuttle Brook will be enhanced.

What we have done to meet the Biodiversity Net Gain Obligations?

Since the introduction of mandatory BNG in February 2024 the council has continued to develop and refine its approach to ensure that we were in full compliance with the new statutory framework. To date, the South Oxfordshire DC has not used any of its own land to deliver statutory BNG units, relying instead on a good local supply of BNG units from the Habitat Banks that have been established locally.

How much BNG has been generated from development in the South Oxfordshire?

In the reporting period (from February 2024 up to 19/12/2025) South Oxfordshire District Council received **205** planning applications which were subject to mandatory BNG. During this period, **71** developments subject to BNG have received planning approval, others have either been refused, withdrawn or are awaiting determination.

Of the 71 developments that were approved, **nine** developments have had the Biodiversity Gain Plan approved and these are detailed in Table 4 below.

The approved Biodiversity Gain Plans have secured:

- **11.84%** increase in area habitat units (e.g. grassland, woodland)
- **27.08%** increase in hedgerow habitat units (e.g. native hedgerows, tree lines)
- **100%** of all offsite units allocated to the approved developments have been sourced from within South Oxfordshire.

During the reporting period there was no use of statutory credits, and no watercourse impacts have been agreed through devel-opments liable to mandatory BNG

Table 4 – Developments where a Biodiversity Gain Plan has been approved

South				Baseline			Proposed											
				On-Site			On-Site			Off-Site (allocated)						Statutory Credits		
Planning Reference	Date Approved	Metric Used	S106	AU	HU	WU	AU	HU	WU	AU	Within District?	HU	Within District?	WU	Within District?	AU	HU	WU
P25/SO233/DIS	06/03/2025	Full	No	0.18			0.2											
P25/S1 626/DIS	23/06/2025	Full	Yes	2.19	0.55		2.5	0.93										
P25/S1796/DIS	22/07/2025	Full	No	1.19			1.34	0.25										
P25/S1 755/DIS	29/07/2025	Full	No	0.78						0.88	Yes							
P25/S2173/DIS	15/08/2025	Full	No	0	0.01					0.01	Yes	0.02	Yes					
P25/S2229/DIS	28/10/2025	Full	No	0.28			0.35											
P25/S3430/DIS	03/12/2025	Full	No	0.06			0.08											
P25/S3635/DIS	15/12/2025	Full	No	1.71			1.89											
P25/S1 694/DIS	05/08/2025	Full	Yes	5.43	3.65		5.97	4.15										

key for acronyms

AU= Area Units, HU= Hedgerow Units, WU= Watercourse units

Biodiversity Net Gain Monitoring

In the reporting period, no BNG monitoring intervals occurred – either for significant onsite enhancements as part of approved developments, or through registered offsite biodiversity gain secured in Habitat Banks.

How we will meet the BNG obligations over the next reporting period

During the next reporting period the process of Local Government Reorganisation will take effect and on the current timetable, a new shadow authority, with a wider geography will come into being in 2027. Up until the new authority comes into being the South Oxfordshire will continue to meet its statutory obligations to deliver 10% BNG on all relevant planning applications. South Oxfordshire will also continue to actively seek opportunities to secure new habitat banks through S106 planning obligations.



Other biodiversity gains delivered through the planning system

Great Crested Newt District Licence Scheme

South Oxfordshire District Council was one of the first Local Authorities in the UK to enter the Great Crested Newt District Licence Scheme and have held a NatureSpace District Licence since 2018. The scheme shifts the emphasis from the protection of individual newts to conservation at a population level. This in turn allows the council to authorise developments which may impact great crested newts. Benefits of the scheme include:

- Funds for the creation of quality ponds and terrestrial habitats, benefitting the district's great crested newt population
- It removes the requirement for surveys of great crested newts, avoiding lengthy delays to planning applications which saves time and money
- The council can give authorisation to start work under this licence at the same time as giving planning permission, simplifying the process.

Since the scheme's adoption **61** development projects have been authorised to use South Oxfordshire District Council's District Licence. By July 2025:

- NatureSpace and the Newt Conservation Partnership have spent more than £116,417 on newt conservation in South Oxfordshire.
- 19 ponds have been created or restored
- 33.7 hectares of terrestrial habitat has been created for great crested newts, providing net gain not only for great crested newts but also a wide range of other biodiversity.

Neighbourhood plans and nature

Neighbourhood plans offer an opportunity for communities to improve their local environment for wildlife and people. Having nature protection and enhancement as an integral part of a neighbourhood plan can also help to manage environmental risk and improve resilience to climate change. The council offers communities neighbourhood planning resources, including examples of policies on biodiversity and nature recovery in other neighbourhood plans, that can help. Nature Recovery and Biodiversity Policy Guidance was developed and published to help users/communities develop effective nature recovery and biodiversity policies within their neighbourhood development plans, also referred to as neighbourhood plans.



The Great Crested Newt District Licence Scheme funds the creation of excellent quality habitats across the landscape, providing net gain not only for great crested newts but also a wide range of other biodiversity.

Alternative formats of this publication are available on request. These include large print, Braille, audio, email, easy read and alternative languages.

If you would like to discuss nature recovery with a member of the team, please email us at climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk

South Oxfordshire District Council