South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse
Joint Local Plan 2041

LPA113

Vale of White Horse District Council

Biodiversity Report 2026

March 2026



Vale of White Horse District Council



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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 the 1 January 2026. The next report will need be published before 1 January 2031 by the successor authority following Local Government Reorganisation.

Biodiversity in the Vale of White Horse

The Vale is a predominantly rural area located in south-west Oxfordshire. It is bounded to the north and the east by 109km of the River Thames and to the south by 186km^2 of the gently undulating chalk slopes of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. This area is well known for chalk grassland, chalk streams, populations of farmland birds and veteran trees.

Protected Sites, Habitats and Species

The Vale 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 Vale

	DESIGNATION
International significance	2 Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)
National significance	22 Sites of Special Scientific Interest 1 National Nature Reserve
Local significance	84 Local Wildlife Sites*(1807.1 hectares) 2 Local Nature Reserves (11.2 hectares) 6 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.*





Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)

The Vale has two internationally designated Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) which fall entirely within the district, at Hackpen Hill and Cothill Fen. SACs are designated where they support internationally important habitats and/or species, and the sites receive strict legal protection.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)

There are 22 Sites (1,134 hectares) of SSSI, wholly or partly in the Vale representing approximately 0.02% of the land area. These sites are designated as important nationally for their wildlife or geology.

National Nature Reserves (NNR)

Cothill NNR, the only **National Nature Reserve** in the Vale, is one of the most species rich lowland calcareous fen systems in the UK.

Local Nature Reserves (LNR)

Tuckmill Meadows (SSSI) and Abingdon Abbey Fishponds are the only two LNRs in the Vale. These are places with wildlife or geological features that are of special interest locally but not necessarily 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).
- 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 9 designated RVNRs in the Vale, each with its own specific management plan and clearly marked with signposts. Of note, Rockley Copse RVNR is designated for a large population field scabious and dependant invertebrates, including the large scabious mining bee, brassy longhorn moth and its parasitoid wasp.



Each RVNR is clearly signposted



Large scabious mining bee

Habitats

The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 identifies 56 habitats in England that it calls habitats of principal importance for the conservation of biodiversity; Oxfordshire is home to 20 habitats of principal importance. The Vale supports 17 of these habitats covering 4672.05 hectares (Table 2). Over half of this is Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland, and 15% is floodplain grazing marsh. Notably, the Vale holds 38 of Oxfordshire's irreplaceable fen habitats, distributed across the Corallian Ridge. The 'jewel in the crown' of which is the Cothill Fen Special Area of Conservation (SAC), west of Abingdon-on-Thames.



Brassy longhorn moth at Rockley Copse RVNR

Chalk streams are a globally rare habitat, with only 224 in England, which constitutes over 85% of the total world resource. The 68.7km of chalk stream in the Vale arise from the escarpment of the North Wessex Downs and include the Letcombe Brook and Ginge Brook. The upper stretch of the Letcombe Brook supports characteristic species such as brown trout, bullhead, brook lamprey as well as the banded demoiselle and beautiful demoiselle which are dependent on clear, fast flowing water and gravel substrates. Water vole populations have been recovering in this area in the last 10 years and there has, until recently, been recordings of a native white clawed crayfish. Freshwater Habitats Trust has classified this area as an Important Freshwater Area (IFA) which are locations of regional importance for freshwater biodiversity where protection, restoration and expansion should be prioritised to stem the decline in freshwater biodiversity.

Considerable areas of unimproved chalk grassland extend along the North Wessex Downs. The deep chalk coombe of The Manger at Whitehorse Hill is a SSSI, and tracts of unimproved chalk grassland at Hackpen Warren and Gramp's Hill near Letcombe Bassett are designated as a SAC and SSSI. These sites support nationally significant populations of early gentian, autumn gentian and a large population of Chiltern gentian, together with fragrant orchid, frog orchid, horseshoe vetch, common rock-rose and dwarf thistle. Eleven species of butterfly have been recorded here, including chalk hill blue, adonis blue and small blue.

Table 2. Vale Priority Habitats Resource.

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	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04
Coastal & Floodplain Grazing Marsh	714.14	711.98	722.46	726.62
Eutrophic Standing Waters	240.77	350.53	350.34	348.57
Hedgerow (Priority Habitat)	2.06	2.06	2.06	2.06
Lowland Beech & Yew Woodland	2.95	2.95	2.95	2.95
Lowland Calcareous Grassland	209.32	207.96	222.86	300.72
Lowland Dry Acid Grassland	22.19	23.11	23.11	23.6
Lowland Fens	37.44	31.63	31.63	32.39
Lowland Meadows	105.62	102.40	102.40	105.14
Lowland Mixed Deciduous Woodland	998.80	991.67	998.70	2458.72
Lowland Wood Pasture & Parkland	348.71	348.62	348.62	348.85
Open Mosaic Habitats On Previously Developed Land	112.94	113.04	113.06	129.88
Reedbeds	9.21	9.15	9.15	8.65
Rivers	4.73	4.86	24.21	24.82
Traditional Orchards	98.79	98.81	98.81	103.37
Wet Woodland	46.82	51.67	55.47	57
Total	**2952.47**	**3050.48**	**3105.87**	**4672.05**



Desmoulin's whorl-snail
© P. Morton



Clubbed general soldier fly
© J. Webb

Species

168 priority species have been recorded in the last 10 years across the Vale, with notable concentrations found in the 'Cothill-Frilford Triangle', which lies astride the Midvale Ridge, west of Abingdon-on-Thames and includes the Cothill Fen SAC. For an area that covers less than 14 square kilometres, it is remarkably species-rich and contains a notable assemblage of scarce and/or declining species. The combination of porous lime-rich sands and ragstone, localised leaching and acidification and the impervious nature of the underlying Kimmeridge Clays has led to the formation of a unique geological and ecological island, supporting an exceptional complex of habitats including calcareous grassland, acid grassland, limestone heathland and fens. These habitats in turn support a remarkable hot spot of species with disjunct distributions in southern Britain. 13 species have been identified in the area for which their nearest extant colonies lie at least 50 km away; for example, the nearest population of smooth rupturewort, lies 140km away in Mildenhall, Suffolk. A recent study of the area identified 70 plant species of national priority and a further 48 species rare for Oxfordshire (19) or scarce for Oxfordshire (29) (Byfield, 2024). The area is also rich in invertebrates, including the large scabious mining bee and its kleptoparasite the armed nomad bee. Cothill Pit hosts 30 butterfly species out of the 58 on the UK list and considered to be the best butterfly site in the Vale and one of the best in Oxfordshire.

The Vale is renowned for its calcareous species-rich fens that form the largest remaining group of such habitats outside East Anglia and North Wales. Cothill Fen SAC, is the largest surviving example of alkaline fen in central England and supports the finest diversity of fenland vegetation types in central England, including the endangered black bog rush and broad-leaved cotton grass as well as invertebrates such as the nationally rare clubbed general soldier fly and the endangered southern damselfly. This is one of only two hot spots in Oxfordshire for the nationally rare Desmoulin's whorl-snail and Oxfordshire's only population of the lousewort flea beetle. A recent study (Byfield, 2024) recorded the non-flowering, carnivorous lesser bladderwort from the Ruskin Reserve (part of the Cothill Fen complex), the first confirmed record for over 135 years.

Elsewhere in the Vale the River Ock catchment is a stronghold for water voles in Oxfordshire and are the subject of a long running monitoring programme carried out by trained volunteer surveyors and coordinated by BBOWT. The last remaining population of the Duke of Burgundy butterfly is in the Vale with some records adjacent to West Berkshire. Curlew can still be seen and heard in the summer months along the Upper Thames floodplain meadows from Buscott to Wytham and the River Ock floodplain meadows around Stanford in the Vale.



Water vole



Duke of Burgundy butterfly
©.M. Batchelor



Our Plans and Policies

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

The Council Plan

The first priorities identified in the Council Plan **At the Heart of Vale 2025 – 2029** are to act on climate and nature recovery, protecting and enhancing our environment, building resilience and adapting to the effects of climate change, and leading the district to net zero.

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

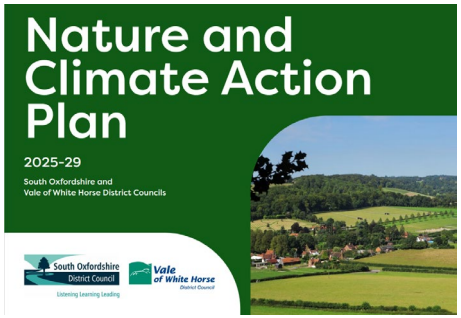


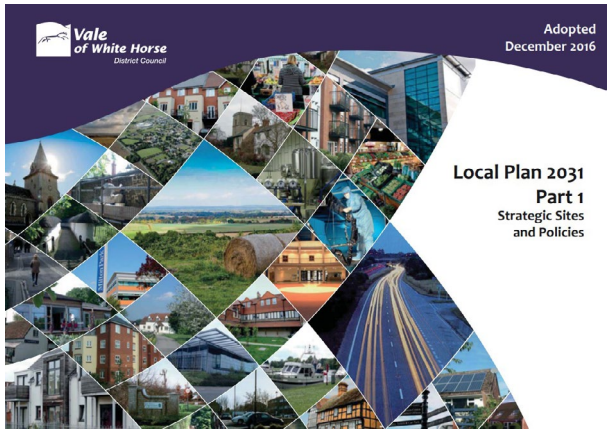
Table 3. Key actions defined in the NCAP that the council will take over the coming years to deliver nature recovery

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 2031

The Vale of White Horse District's Local Plan is divided into two parts: Local Plan 2031 Part 1 was adopted at Full Council in December 2016; and Local Plan 2031 Part 2 was adopted by Full Council on Wednesday 9 October 2019.



Local Plan 2031: Part One - Strategic Sites and Policies

The Local Plan 2031: Part One - Strategic Sites and Policies sets out a vision for how the Vale should develop and grow until the year 2031. One of four thematic areas is to maintain and improve the natural environment including Green Infrastructure and waterways. It contains two relevant Core Policies:

Core Policy 45: Green Infrastructure

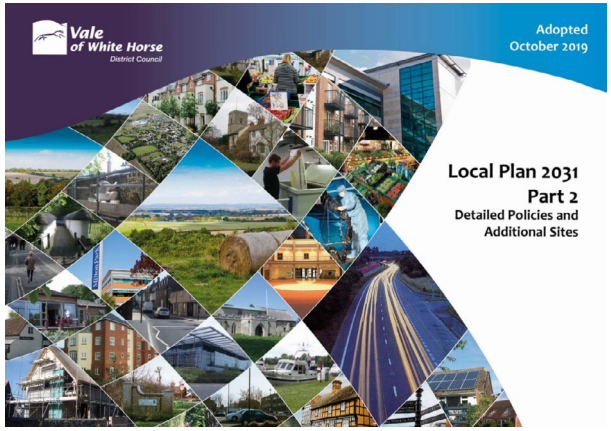
- Requires development to deliver a net gain in Green Infrastructure and biodiversity, either on-site or through off-site contributions.
- Does not support the loss of Green Infrastructure. All developments must align with the Green Infrastructure Strategy, and major applications must include a statement showing how existing Green Infrastructure will be protected and enhanced.
- Requires development to contribute to creating or improving Green Infrastructure, including Conservation Target Areas, in line with the strategy's standards and the Habitats Regulations Assessment.

Core Policy 46: Conservation and Improvement of Biodiversity.

This policy works alongside Core Policy 45 to protect and improve the district's natural environment. Its objective is to ensure that development protects and enhances local biodiversity. Key requirements include:

- The protection of designated wildlife sites and the consideration of impacts on protected species and habitats.
- The increase in biodiversity through biodiversity net gain (BNG), requiring developers to leave the environment in a measurably better state after a project than before.
- Developers to mitigate any adverse impacts their projects may have on protected habitat species.

Local Plan 2031: Part Two – Detailed Policies and Additional Sites



The Local Plan 2031: Part 2: Detailed Policies and Additional Sites sets out detailed development management policies in addition to the strategic policies set out in the Part 1, including a detailed policy designed to protect and enhance the Vale's watercourses: Development Plan 30 Watercourses: seeks to protect and enhance watercourses and associated riparian habitats when development takes place nearby. Its key elements include a requirement to safeguard a 10m buffer zone on both sides of the watercourse and to avoid culverting.

Joint Local Plan 2041

The Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire 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.

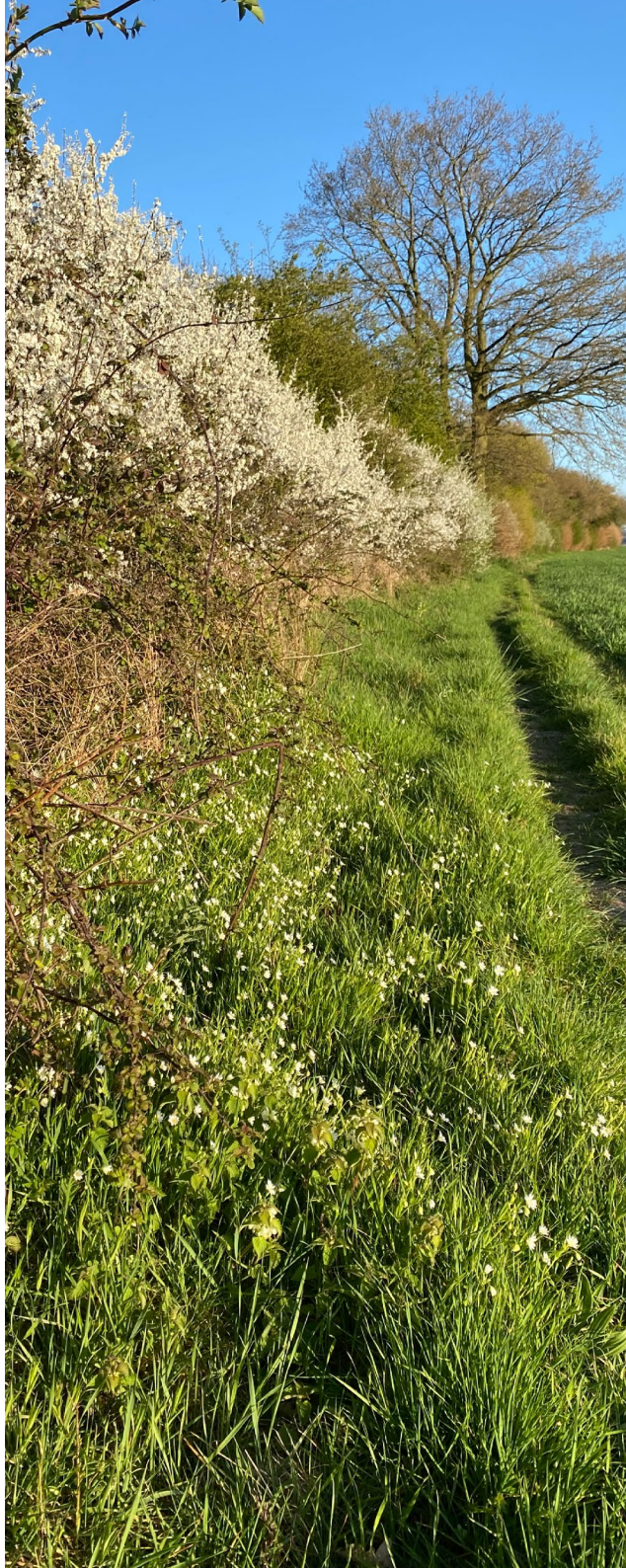
- **Policy NH2 - Nature recovery:**
  i. The policy requires relevant development to deliver at least 20 percent Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and sets a sequential test designed to ensure that BNG generated in the Vale creates new habitats where they will have the maximum benefit.
  ii. The policy seeks to ensure that development in the Vale 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.





Conservation grazing herd at Tuckmill SSSI



A pond and wet woodland at Besselsleigh Wood

Nature Recovery on Council Owned Land

The council owns 331 hectares of land and buildings; of the land we manage directly, approximately 203 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 totalling 26 hectares are managed specifically for nature recovery:

- **Tuckmill Meadows (Site of Special Scientific Interest)** a 5.51-hectare mosaic of wetland, grassland, scrub and woodland. It is notified for its fen habitat along the valley of the Pennyhooks Brook and a tributary valley to the south. Tufa springs and peat are present on site. Four plant species of conservation concern were recorded from a recent survey, marsh valerian, ragged-robin, field scabious and hoary plantain (Morris, 2025). The site is currently managed as a nature reserve by Earth Trust, and local volunteers on behalf of Vale of White Horse council. Management Plan 2025-2030

- **Besselsleigh Common Wood (Local Wildlife Site)** is 10 hectares of ancient woodland with areas of wet woodland. The ground flora is varied with abundant bluebell, wood anemone, wood sorrel and dog's mercury. A scarce Lichen for Oxfordshire has been recorded here. The site is currently managed as a nature reserve by Earth Trust and local volunteers on behalf of Vale of White Horse council. Management Plan in preparation.

- **Abbey Fishponds (Local Nature Reserve and Local Wildlife Site)**. This 7-hectare wetland site supports 1.24 hectares of fen priority habitat. The site's strong-flowing, tufa-forming spring mound with its population of brown mosses is potentially a unique feature among Oxfordshire's fens. Five nationally or regionally rare or threatened plants were recorded during a recent survey; lesser calamint, ragged-robin, common valerian, wild strawberry and fringed water-lily (Morris, 2025). The site is currently managed as a nature reserve by Earth Trust and local volunteers on behalf of Vale of White Horse council. Management Plan 2021-2026.

- **Willow Walk** is a 3.5-hectare urban nature reserve in the heart of Wantage. The most important habitat on the site is the Letcombe Brook, which is a chalk stream, along with areas of wet grassland, sedge beds, wet woodland and veteran willow pollards. The site is owned and managed directly by the Vale of White Horse District council. The Council is currently reviewing the management plan and developing plans to enhance the key habitats in this well used urban site.

- **Barton Fields Local Wildlife Site** in Abingdon is owned by Vale of the White Horse District Council and cared for by Green Team Volunteers who are part of Abingdon Naturalist Society. The central wetland area is good habitat for water rail (winter), sedge warbler, reed warbler, whitethroat & reed bunting (summer). Harvest mice nests, grass snakes and slow worms are frequently found. Every year the council pays for cornfield annual wildflower seeds which are sown by volunteers in patches for the benefits of pollinators in the summer and birds and mammals in the winter.



Volunteers spreading marsh lousewort seeds at Abbey Fishponds LNR



Barton Fields

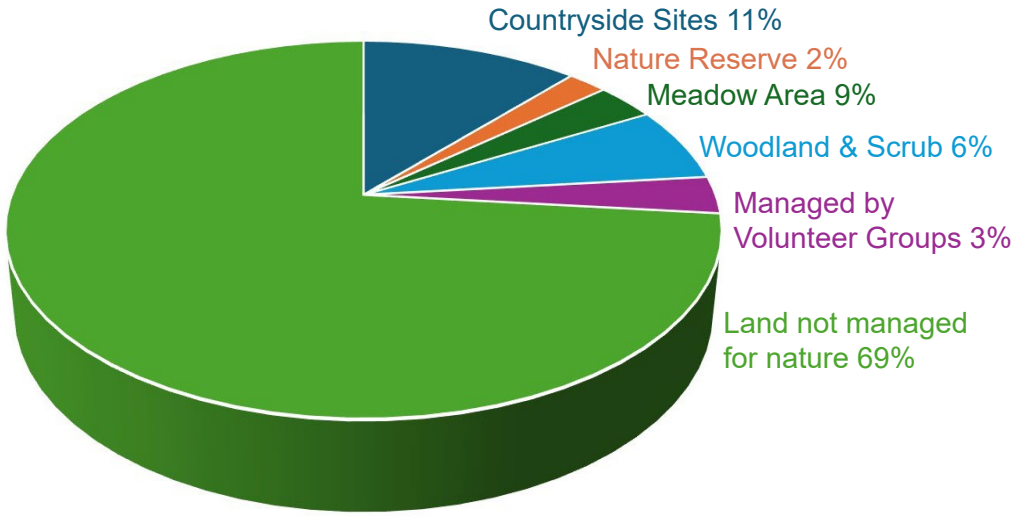
- Additionally, 13 hectares of woodland and scrub areas are managed with a light touch and minimal disturbance, allowing nature the space it needs to thrive.

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, because of these changes the council now manages:

- Eighteen hectares of amenity grassland managed for nature by allowing it to grow long throughout the months of May - September.

- Seven hectares of woodland, wetland and grassland managed for nature by volunteer groups

In total in 2025, approximately 64 hectares or 31 per cent of publicly accessible greenspace owned and managed by the Vale is managed for the benefit of nature.



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.

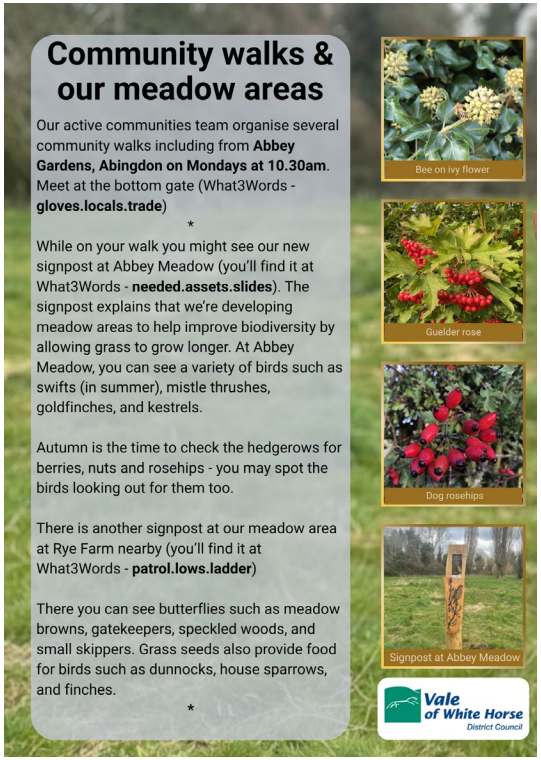
Raising Awareness and Educating the Community

There are approximately 14 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:

- Since 2025, visitors to meadow areas across the district will be better informed thanks to a series of tailor-made signposts installed at the council's green spaces. The council secured a UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) grant from the government to purchase and install hand-carved bespoke signposts made from sustainably grown chestnut timber. These are inset with panels giving 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.





A leaflet for community walks

- 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.
- 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 work with colleagues to include nature recovery in decision making.





Guided nature walk for colleagues and new signpost at Marlborough Gardens

Working in partnership to deliver biodiversity

Over seventy-five per cent of the land in the Vale of White Horse 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 North Wessex Downs 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

The Vale of the White Horse 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 12th 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 Vale:

- 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 North Wessex Downs National Landscape (NWDNL) extends along the southern edge of the Vale of White Horse. The Vale, along with the nine 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 the Vale's statutory responsibilities within the NWD.

Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC)

The Vale 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 the Vale. 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)

The Vale 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.

Letcombe Brook Project

Set up in April 2003 to enhance and protect the natural function of the Letcombe Brook, which is one of the best examples of a chalk stream left in the Vale. The project provides management advice and practical help to the landowners along the Letcombe brook corridor. The project relies on grant funding from the Vale of White Horse District Council and other local authorities, to support its work.





The Letcombe Brook Project coordinates volunteers to clear litter from the brook and manage in-stream features



River Ock Catchment Partnership

The Vale is one of a group of local organisations and individuals working together using the Catchment Based Approach to plan and deliver activities and projects in the Ock. The partnership aims to:

- Improve water quality of the River Ock 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.

Ock & Thame Landscape Recovery Project

The Vale sits on the steering group of this Landscape Recovery Project lead 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 the Vale supports, it also uses grant funding as a way of encouraging and supporting local action on nature recovery. Our Climate Action Fund (CAF) offers direct funding to town and parish councils and local community groups for climate and biodiversity projects, with a minimum grant of £250 and a maximum of £10,000 per project. Since 2022, the CAF has supported 79 different projects. The CAF has proved to be a key tool for inspiring and enabling action on climate and nature recovery in local communities in the Vale and an excellent way for the council to engage with the local community groups.





The planting of trees to create woodland in Blewbury and the hedge planting at Radley Lakes



The building of a boardwalk at Hinksey Nature Reserve



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 2031 and from our new Joint Local Plan 2041, which is currently at examination.

The Vale of White Horse District Council pioneered the development of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) in Oxfordshire and the UK. In 2013 The Vale was the first local authority in the country to agree a biodiversity offsetting scheme (now BNG) at a development site in Shrivenham. The compensatory offset was secured via a S106 planning obligation at a receptor site near Little Wittenham, in neighbouring South Oxfordshire.

The Vale 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.

The Vale introduced its first formal 'biodiversity offsetting' policy into its Local Plan in 2016 and prior to the introduction of mandatory BNG, between 2013 and Feb 2024 it had raised a total of £1,771,806 from biodiversity gain requirements, to deliver 133 BNG Units.

The Vale continues to innovate in this area, formalising the establishment of its first Habitat Bank in 2024. Habitat Banks are areas of land where the creation or enhancement of habitat is secured by legal agreement. The uplift in biodiversity units can be sold and allocated to developers once the habitat bank is recorded on the Biodiversity Gain Site Register. The VWHDC worked with Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) to establish Oxfordshire's first habitat bank. The 45 hectare site at Duxford was secured through a section 106 legal agreement. To date the Vale has used S106 obligations to secure two habitat banks.

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

Since the introduction of mandatory BNG in February 2024 the Vale has continued to develop and refine its approach to ensure that we were in full compliance with the new statutory framework. To date, the Vale 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.



Kilman Down habitat bank sits proudly on the chalk escarpment of the Ridgeway; the site presents the perfect opportunity to deliver high-quality chalk grassland restoration, at scale, while facilitating sustainable development in the region



Willow Warbler
© Pete Morton

How much BNG has been generated from development in the Vale of White Horse?

In the reporting period (from 01/02/ 2024 up to 19/12/2025) Vale of White Horse District Council received **134** planning applications which were subject to mandatory BNG. During this period, **62** developments subject to BNG have received planning approval, others have either been refused, withdrawn or are awaiting determination.

Of the 62 developments that were approved, **eight** developments have had the Biodiversity Gain Plan approved and these are detailed in table 4 below.

The approved Biodiversity Gain Plans have secured:

- **19.67%** increase in area habitat units (e.g. grassland, woodland)
- **16.67%** 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 Vale of White Horse district.

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

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

Vale				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
P24/V2001/DIS	11/10/2024	Full	No	0.31	0.54		0.34	0.62										
P24/V2386/DIS	20/01/2025	Full	No	0.18			0.21											
P24/V2582/DIS	29/01/2025	Full	No	3.77	0.24		3	0.29		1.2	Yes							
P25/V1813/DIS	21/10/2025	Full	No	0.47						0.6	Yes							
P25/V1360/DIS	01/09/2025	Full	No	0.09			0.16											
P25/V1393/DIS	18/08/2025	Full	No	0.46			0.51											
P25/V2236/DIS	16/12/2025	Full	Yes	24.6			30.13											
P25/V2157/DIS	09/12/2025	Full	No	3.87			3.85			0.39	Yes							

key for acronyms

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

Biodiversity Net Gain Monitoring

During the current reporting period, one BNG monitoring interval has occurred:

Site Name	Gain Sites Register ref:	Monitoring date	Outcome
Duxford Old River Habitat Bank	BGS-020524001	21 June 2024	Satisfactory – no enforcement action needed

There were no other significant onsite enhancements that have been approved as part of approved developments that required monitoring during this reporting period.



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 Vale will continue to meet its statutory obligations to deliver 10% BNG on all relevant planning applications. The Vale 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

Vale of the White Horse 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, **59** development projects have been authorised to use Vale of the White Horse District Council's District Licence.

By July 2025:

- NatureSpace and the Newt Conservation Partnership have spent more than £228,813 on newt conservation in the Vale of White Horse
- 13 ponds have been created or restored
- 56 hectares of terrestrial habitat has been created for great crested newts



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

Vale of White Horse District Council