

Background briefing: Ecological emergency / Biodiversity

What is happening in Oxfordshire now

All species on Planet Earth are the life support for all others. Greens have long warned of the threat posed by the loss of species – a threat parallel and connected with climate change. The climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis are inextricably linked and must be addressed in tandem. They are linked in the Climate and Ecological Emergency Bill, which Green MP Caroline Lucas introduced in Parliament and is currently going through its stages there. The importance of trees and plant life generally in absorbing carbon emissions is now widely acknowledged, as well as their importance to human wellbeing, in ways ranging from flood mitigation to physical and mental health.

Recently, in the context of the global pandemic, the interest in biodiversity has soared, with the recognition that pandemics are set to increase both in frequency and severity, unless biodiversity loss is addressed. UNESCO has recently welcomed an international report (by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, October 2020), establishing the links between biodiversity loss and the increase in pandemic risk factors.

In Oxfordshire, as countrywide, biodiversity is suffering because the government has made large cuts to funding for the Environment Agency and Natural England, so there are now fewer checks on pollution, SSSIs are neglected etc.

Oxfordshire Growth Board talks about developing a Strategic Vision that includes “increasing natural capital across the County” (<https://www.oxfordshireopenthought.org/strategic-vision>). Oxfordshire County and District Councils must be held to this, and there would be a great deal of support for this from residents of Oxfordshire, as is clear from the replies to the Oxfordshire Open Thought consultation held in 2020 (<https://www.oxfordshiregrowthboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Oxfordshire-Open-Thought-Phase-I-Summary-Report.pdf>).

However, at the same time the county is also committed to economic growth (involving a large amount of commercial development) and a massive house-building programme. There is therefore a large area of conflict in policy between this and enhancing biodiversity. Much green space is currently threatened by overdevelopment, especially for the Oxford–Cambridge Arc, as landowners cash in on the current high price of land and sell to developers for new business parks and housing, little of which will be affordable. Housing developments are now expected to show a “biodiversity net gain”, but the way this is calculated is often considered by ecologists as greenwash; it can rely, for example, on temporary measures such as bat boxes, which can easily be removed, or seeding lawns with wildflowers which home-owners are then likely to use weedkiller on.

Following a public campaign, in late 2020 the County Council committed to greatly increasing tree cover in the county by 2045 (the suggested target was doubling, by planting 40 million new trees). This would be a big gain for nature, as only about 9% of Oxfordshire’s land is currently covered by trees, well below the UK average of 16%, and even further below the European national average of 35%. Oxfordshire Trees for the Future is mapping where trees might be planted: <https://www.oxtrees.uk/>.

The charity Wild Oxfordshire currently functions as a Local Nature Partnership, providing a co-ordinated approach to conservation in Oxfordshire, providing support and encouraging many different environmental organisations and volunteers to work together for the benefit of wildlife: <https://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/>.

What the Green Party needs to do

Nationally Greens need to campaign to restore funding to the Environment Agency and Natural England. And we need to oppose the overdevelopment of South East England.

It is vital that councils restrict building on greenfield sites and flood plains; important wildlife sites are already under threat from development. Planning decisions should prevent developments from impacting on the green spaces around them through pollution, increased risk of flooding, etc. And they should not allow existing wildlife corridors to be cut off. New developments should have more rigorous biodiversity assessments; and should include trees and green spaces, and use permeable surfaces rather than tarmac or paving wherever possible. Or newbuilds can also include 'swift bricks' to provide swifts with nesting sites.

There is much that local councils can be pressed to do to improve conditions for wildlife to thrive. They can do this both directly and by working with wildlife organisations, groups of landowners, community groups, etc. They can protect and enhance the diversity of species within Oxfordshire via habitat protection and other measures in both rural and urban areas – meadows, woodland, rivers, lakes, fenland, as well as parks and other green spaces in towns. As well as protecting and expanding existing habitats, it is important to link habitats together by green corridors to allow wildlife to move around.

Councils can implement more tree planting and tree preservation orders, and encourage green infrastructure in urban and commercial areas – planting in pedestrian areas, raised planters as traffic calming measures, roof gardens. More trees and planting (of suitable kinds!) will create biodiversity havens, supporting bees and other pollinators in the city; and residents can be encouraged to look after them. The Greater London Authority is using the Green Space Factor tool, for example; see <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Planning+for+green+infrastructure+%E2%80%93+the+green+space+factor+and+learning+from+Europe>.

We will press councils to:

- Develop community gardens and enhance allotments.
- Support community groups, businesses, schools etc in developing growing schemes and wildlife projects, in restoring species-rich verges, rewilding patches of unused land, looking after waterways, etc, and building an environment that is designed by communities in their interests, to the benefit of both people and wildlife.
- Draw up lists of species to be planted and of plant and seed sources. Provide access to expert groups and funding to encourage growing and rewilding projects.
- Adopt the Plantlife guidance on management of verges and green spaces (e.g. by cutting and collecting regimes that allow insect-friendly wildflowers to flourish).
- Consider planting native wildflowers rather than bedding plants and leave islands of long grass in parks, and replace hard surfaced paths by grass, bark or gravel, which are more permeable.
- Join with wildlife and conservation groups to run 'greening your garden' campaigns, encouraging home-owners to use permeable driveways, create hedgehog gaps in boundaries, let grass grow long, put small ponds, and plant for pollinators.

We will also urge councils to eliminate or reduce the use of pesticides and the herbicide Glyphosate. They should:

- Audit their use.

- Investigate and trial alternatives.
- Inform the public as to where and when they are being applied (so that vulnerable groups can avoid sprayed areas).
- Join national and international networks of pesticide-free towns and cities, such as <https://www.pan-uk.org/pesticide-free-towns-success-stories/>.

Note on farming

Very importantly, methods of farming need to be addressed, with an emphasis on non-intensive food production. Through farming organisations and big landowners, farmers must be encouraged to manage their land in harmony with nature, adopting more agroecological (sustainable, regenerative, mainly organic) methods.

As a result of the intensive farming that has become mainstream since the 1950s, much agricultural land has lost its natural fertility and been compacted by heavy farm machinery to the point where the soil is virtually dead. Here the worms, microbes and other organisms that make up healthy soil, support plant growth and form the basis of the food chain have been lost, and commercial crops can only be grown by using artificial fertilisers. Carbon cannot be sequestered, and water cannot be retained, leading to increased flooding following heavy rainfall. However, with appropriate management soil can recover, and the key point is to work towards soil health in 'regenerative' agriculture. This means:

- avoiding the use of pesticides and herbicides wherever possible, both on the land and in the waterways which they pollute;
- avoiding the use of artificial fertilisers and restoring soil health by organic farming methods such as crop rotation;
- moving away from growing monoculture crops to a range of different crops which allow a diversity of insects, birds and small mammals to flourish and thereby keep each other healthy through natural pest control.

Farmers and landowners also need to be encouraged to protect and create features such as hedgerows, ponds, woodland, meadows and marshes, and routes for wildlife from one area to another. They are in fact being steered towards this by the Environmental Land Management Scheme (contained in the Agriculture Act 2020), which aims to implement "public money for public goods" in agriculture to replace the EU subsidies which farmers previously claimed.