

# Benson's Strategy for People & Nature



## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. This strategy sets out an ambitious approach that Benson is putting in place to safeguard and enhance the value of its green infrastructure. It proposes a range of actions within the built settlements and across the wider countryside by the community and a variety of partners. The main objective is to celebrate and enhance Benson's 'ecological network' such that it provides multiple benefits for people and wildlife. We have identified a number of themes as focal points that reflect what is special about Benson in the context of its wider setting. Some of the actions envisaged will be taken forward as development is undertaken in Benson in accordance with the village's Neighbourhood Plan. The strategy considers the funding challenge - green infrastructure maintenance does not come free - and it recognises the need for a strong communications and engagement strategy to support the achievement of its objectives. It also identifies gaps in our knowledge; addressing these will be taken forward as part of our implementation plan.

## 2. Audience

- 2.1. This document sets out to make the case for the work we propose to do, explaining the rationale and the policy context, and defining actions and measures of success. In the first instance, it is intended to be read by organisations, specialist and non-specialist, statutory, commercial, and voluntary, whose endorsement and support will be valuable as we establish projects to deliver the strategy. It also underpins the green infrastructure components of the Neighbourhood Plan. The document is being made freely available to all who wish to read it, but materials aimed at a non-specialist audience will need to be developed as part of the work we propose to build community engagement and buy-in.

## 3. Why does Benson need a Strategy for People & Nature, and why now?

- 3.1. Benson is facing a period of significant change in the coming years, which will bring opportunity and challenge in equal measure. As a 'larger village' in South Oxfordshire, the village is playing a positive part in helping the district meet the government's housing targets for the area by allocating sites for development of new housing. The village has developed a strategic vision for the future and a set of objectives designed to help it grow whilst retaining the characteristics that have

drawn so many people to settle here - those of a thriving community with great services, in a rural setting with a rich heritage and natural environment. Good green infrastructure can play a pivotal role in creating social cohesion as the community grows.

- 3.2. The village and the wider parish has much to cherish in its green spaces and wildlife interest, and we want to safeguard and manage those for the benefits they provide for our community. But there is a real opportunity to achieve much more than simply preserving existing green assets. We want to take proactive steps to create new green spaces for Benson's 'Ecological Network', making the most of opportunities to enable people to experience nature and reap the multiple benefits of high quality green space. The purpose of producing this strategy now is to ensure that we capitalise on the investment that will come with development, and use it as a springboard to inspire and create energy around our efforts to enable nature to thrive here. **Ultimately, this is about ensuring that Benson remains a great place to live.**

## 4. Biodiversity

- 4.1. Biodiversity is continuing to decline in the UK (State of Nature Report, 2016), and it has long been recognised that focusing solely on protected sites (the most special places for wildlife) will not be enough to address it (e.g. Making Space for Nature, 2010 - Independent Review by Prof Sir John Lawton; The Natural Choice - Securing the Value of Nature, 2011 HM Govt). Halting and reversing this decline requires us to:
- recognise the contribution of all green spaces and wildlife sites, both urban and rural, whether formally protected or not, and take steps to enhance their value;
  - improve connections between sites to address the problems caused by habitat fragmentation;
  - create new places for wildlife with habitats that reflect local priorities.
- 4.2. Action in places like Benson plays a vital role in addressing this, and there is a good base here on which to build. This strategy identifies and promotes local actions that fit with regional and national priorities for the natural environment, as described in the Biodiversity Action Plan for Oxfordshire (2014).  
<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/oxfordshires-biodiversity-action-plan>.

## 5. The Importance of People

- 5.1. Nature's chances of surviving and thriving are greatly improved if people understand and value it sufficiently to want to safeguard it. To do so, they need good opportunities to experience it, and our work needs to take into account the way that people make use of green spaces. So, in addition to specific actions aimed at creating, managing and enhancing habitats for wildlife, this strategy recognises the importance of access and recreation as a means experiencing and enjoying the benefits of green space. Also, in making choices about the particular biodiversity enhancements to focus on, we have opted for those that are more likely to resonate with residents of a built settlement and facilitate and encourage them in becoming involved. There is a strong engagement and education driver to our strategy.

## 6. **What is Green Infrastructure and why is it important?**

6.1. Green infrastructure is the natural physical environment that lies both within and between built areas. It takes the form of a network of multifunctional green spaces, providing a wide array of benefits to society, wildlife and the economy. The monetary and non-monetary value of green infrastructure is increasingly well understood and reflected in government policy:

- it provides space for nature and 'ecological networks' that act as nature's highways, connecting up habitats to allow species to move more readily through the landscape, helping to meet government objectives for reversing the decline in biodiversity;
- It contributes to both physical and mental well-being in the community through both its intrinsic value and aesthetic appeal; it helps meet our needs for physical exercise and recreation, and it creates an opportunity for open spaces and interaction with wildlife to work its magic on people's mental health.
- It is good for social cohesion by bringing the community together for team sports and other activities to relax together;
- It provides an opportunity for children to learn about the world around them; and
- a healthy natural environment provides an array of essential services to society. These include provision of space to grow food and flood capacity, the latter a key consideration for a village lying low in a river valley and surrounded by watercourses, especially as adverse weather events become more frequent as our climate changes.

6.2. This is not solely about open countryside - government policy recognises that, in built areas, green infrastructure like private gardens, public green spaces, watercourses, hedgerows & trees, paths and bridleways and verges can all help wildlife and nature to survive and thrive. **Green infrastructure is important in all of our lives, and paying attention to it helps to create sustainable and beautiful places in which people want to live for the long-term.**

### **Links to the Neighbourhood Plan**

Benson has developed a neighbourhood plan, taking advantage of the opportunity for the community to influence where and how development is undertaken in the parish. In meeting the requirements of the *National Planning Policy Framework* and local strategies, the plan has a '**green infrastructure**' theme. It sets locally-specific policies aimed at ensuring that development is undertaken in a way that delivers gain for our ecological network. Our policies require developers to: build biodiversity enhancements into their developments so that wildlife can be a feature of people's lives and move around more easily; to design footpaths so they also perform as wildlife corridors; and to create new multifunctional green spaces meeting biodiversity and access/recreation needs. Locally relevant planting guidelines are provided.

This strategy has a scope beyond the Neighbourhood Plan's remit, considering the wider context for our actions, identifying what we have, driving management and enhancement actions, and engaging people.

## **7. Benson Nature Group**

- 7.1. This strategy is not starting from scratch. Benson Nature Group (BNG), and its predecessor Benson Environmental Survey Team (BEST), has been active for many years and has played an important role in recognising the nature conservation assets in the area. It produced a comprehensive Conservation Plan for the parish in 2000, and has instigated effective management and engagement activities at a number of key sites. This strategy builds on BNG's work, learning from successes they have had over the years, for example creating and managing a village nature reserve at Millbrook Mead.
- 7.2. BNG will play a critical role in delivering our strategy, but we will need to invest effort in growing it to put it on a sustainable footing to take on the scale of work this strategy proposes. Enabling this is a matter we will consider as part of the engagement strand of this strategy.

## **8. Scope**

- 8.1. This Strategy has a whole-parish focus, including RAF Benson, and will work towards a landscape-scale view when identifying opportunities and challenges. Wildlife and people are not constrained by administrative boundaries in how they use the landscape, so taking a wider view is essential in considering their needs. Taking our strategy forward may involve collaboration with neighbouring parishes (particularly Shillingford & Warborough, Ewelme, Berrick and Roke, and Brightwell-cum-Sotwell) to understand what we have and how its value can be maximised by enhancing and connecting up green assets.
- 8.2. The strategy also considers the agricultural environment - Benson is a rural parish and agriculture plays a significant part in how land here is used. There is a strong link between how agriculture is operated and the achievement of good environmental outcomes. A number of local farmers are already taking steps under government funded agri-environment agreements, notably to meet the needs of farmland birds and pollinators, and to engage local communities. Benson's Strategy for People and Nature will consider opportunities to further its aims by working closely with local farmers as custodians of much of our landscape.
- 8.3. This is a long term strategy, with delivery expected to stretch over 10-15 years. Pace in implementation will be influenced by our success in securing funds to support delivery.

## **9. Our aims and what we need to do to achieve them**

- 9.1. Our strategy aims to recognise Benson's green assets and steer habitat creation, management and enhancement actions that reflect the importance of the place in the wider landscape. It sets out to increase the value of the network both in its own right and for the connections it provides to other important places. As part of the baseline work to inform our Neighbourhood Plan, we assessed what we have in the parish (See Appendix K of Benson Neighbourhood Plan (Green Infrastructure & Biodiversity Audit) for a summary of assets), noting gaps in our knowledge and identifying actions we need to take to meet the overall aim of our strategy. At a high level, they include the following:

- i. We need to build connections between green spaces such that pedestrian/cyclist access around the village is promoted and wildlife is supported in moving around the village too;
- ii. We need to find appealing and community-supported ways of enhancing the wildlife value of all of our green spaces, including amenity green spaces, choosing approaches that avoid compromising their primary use.
- iii. We need to collaborate with developers as they build new houses, ensuring that as the village expands, our green infrastructure network does too. We need new green spaces to meet the needs of our growing population.
- iv. Our community values the fact that wildlife is a feature of life in Benson, so we aim to secure built settlements are as 'permeable' as possible for wildlife, 'greening' them with biodiversity enhancements and maximising the chances for nature to thrive and move around.
- v. We want to work with local farmers and other land managers, understanding how enhancements within the built settlements can align with the work that they do to meet the needs of wildlife in the wider countryside.
- vi. We need to recognise the more unusual places that wildlife relies upon; for example, some of the road verges in the parish are refuges for flowering plants (and the pollinators that rely on them) as some agricultural land has become more intensively farmed;
- vii. We need to take steps to fill gaps in our knowledge. For example, initial surveys show that the grasslands surrounding the runways on RAF Benson are of significant local conservation interest. In partnership with MoD, we want to consolidate our understanding of how other species groups use the airfield. We may commission specialist/expert help to inform decisions aimed at improving the management of other sites in the parish whose purpose is nature conservation.
- viii. Over the longer term, we will consider how our green infrastructure can help Benson adapt as our climate changes, particularly given the surface water management challenges facing the village (see Annex A).
- ix. We need to develop a communications, engagement and education strategy, designed to build local awareness and support people including children in becoming involved, whether as citizen scientists helping to build our knowledge of what is here or in simply tending their own gardens or allotments in a way that helps wildlife flourish if they wish.
- x. And we need to identify resources to support this work in the long term.

9.2. In progressing these actions, we will take account of the guidance provided for our local area in the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study<sup>1</sup> (OWLS) published in 2004 by OCC, Natural England and the Earth Trust. (See Annex A). The main recommendations for Benson are:

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<sup>1</sup><http://owls.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wps/wcm/connect/occ/OWLS/Home/Oxfordshire+Landscape+Types/Terrace+Farmland/Terrace+Farmland+Information/#k>

- 9.2.1. Ensure that all surviving priority habitats are safeguarded, in favourable condition and management, and enhanced to satisfy the actions and targets identified within the relevant habitat and species action plans.
- 9.2.2. Safeguard, maintain and enhance all locally important habitats in a way that is appropriate to the landscape character of the area.
- 9.2.3. Promote agri-environment schemes which will benefit biodiversity in general and protected species and farmland birds in particular.
- 9.2.4. Strengthen and enhance the pattern of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and tree-lined watercourses.

## **10. Our priority themes:**

- 10.1. In developing our plans, we have chosen three specific themes to give our strategy some tangible, locally relevant focal points. These reflect what we already understand to be special about the parish and surrounding areas, and are aspects that we consider will be successful in engaging the biggest number of people in the communities. Action in support of other wildlife that lies outside these main themes will of course also be pursued as required, reflecting the specific needs and value of each site. We know that many members of our community take joy from their daily contact with wildlife, with everyone having their favourite whether hedgehogs, bats, butterflies or the populations of farmland birds in the open countryside around us.

### **10.2. Spotlight on Benson Brook**

- 10.2.1. Benson Brook (also known as Ewelme Stream) is a chalk stream, a globally endangered habitat, running through the middle of the village. It is one of Benson's most important natural assets for multiple reasons: for its biodiversity value; for the connection it provides between the River Thames and surrounding countryside; and as a feature of cultural significance, bringing a spine of natural beauty right into the village. Locally, it also provides informal recreation for children. The brook is a magnet for wildlife, with herons and kingfishers seen in the heart of the village, and in the recent past, its upper reaches have been host to a population of Water voles. It is also very likely to be important for foraging bats.
- 10.2.2. Some of the channel has been modified over the years and there is room for improvement in the Brook's status when measured against government objectives for the health of watercourses. We want to take a fresh look at enhancement ideas to bolster both its aesthetic and wildlife value.

### **10.3. Action for Butterflies and Bees**

- 10.3.1. Our work will focus on habitat management, creation and enhancement targeted to encourage butterflies, moths and bees. This has been chosen for a number of reasons:

- 10.3.1.1. There is a strong national policy framework<sup>2</sup> (National Pollinator Strategy) in place to underpin this focus - pollination is a vital ecosystem service;
- 10.3.1.2. The theme is relevant locally because of the importance of wildflower meadows on the chalk grasslands in the southern part of the parish. A number of farmers locally are already taking action of this sort under agri-environment schemes, and we can seek to align with that, reinforcing the impact of our activities.
- 10.3.1.3. The visual appeal created by wildflower margins means that enhancements we propose around existing green spaces (including urban ones) are likely to be visible and potentially popular;
- 10.3.1.4. Planting to encourage pollinators is an action that can be readily adopted by all members of the community in private gardens and allotments, which may help engender buy-in and support;
- 10.3.1.5. Our local nature group benefits from expertise in this area, so we have good records of the butterfly and moth species occurring here on which to base our work. We have already had some advice from Butterfly Conservation on priority species to encourage through our work.
- 10.3.2. We aim to provide a diversity of habitats, including the addition of nectar sources for specific species, through the creation of wildflower margins and other habitat in suitable places, some of them brand new nature reserves created on the back of development. In considering the detail of habitat creation and planting schemes, we will particularly consider the needs of countryside species that decline as their habitats are replaced by gardens or intensive agriculture. We will use sources of national and local advice such as provided on the Bees Needs and Wild Oxfordshire websites<sup>3</sup>. Butterfly Conservation advice on Priority butterflies and moths to encourage in the parish (both on and off the chalk) will be taken account of in suitable places. (see Appendix K of Benson Neighbourhood Plan)
- 10.3.3. Our emerging vision is of a **wildflower highway around the parish**. This may also create a vehicle on which to build a common sense of purpose between communities at RAF Benson, Ewelme and Benson, contributing to social cohesion objectives.

## 10.4. Access

**10.4.1.** This is a supporting theme, which recognises the importance of enabling people to use green spaces and the connections between them for recreation and the simple enjoyment derived from being outdoors. The creation of new nature reserves may help reduce visitor pressure on honey-pot sites such as Wittenham Clumps by improving the amount of high quality natural green space on Benson's

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-pollinator-strategy-for-bees-and-other-pollinators-in-england>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/communities/resources/> and [Bees' Needs Website](#)

doorstep and ensuring it connects up with the rest of our network. We will derive strong secondary benefits by thinking proactively about education and engagement opportunities on the back of this, particularly in partnership with local schools.

## **11. Success Measures**

11.1. To drive our delivery, we will set targets and measure our success against them. These will be developed more fully when we launch the project, but will focus on quantifying the amount of new and enhanced habitat we create, and the scale of increased engagement by the community.

## **12. Communications and Engagement**

12.1. This strand is critically important and will be as much about listening as communicating. Nature often does better in messy places, and whilst pollinator margins have the potential to be beautiful at certain times of year, we will need to consider how to manage calls from some quarters to 'tidy up' the appearance of those parts of green spaces being managed for their wildlife interest. The key to tackling this is a strong focus on communications from the outset, listening to understand the full range of views in the community, and bringing the community on board with the project right from the outset, and encouraging participation. Working with the children attending the two schools in the parish will be really important.

12.2. This strand will also involve providing interpretative materials on site and elsewhere that set out why the project is important and the part that each asset plays in the big picture. There is scope for art projects aimed at all ages to help secure the buy-in and understanding the project will rely on to be successful. Picking up one of our priority themes, for example on Action for Butterflies and bees, there is scope to develop an engagement campaign to encourage community buy-in (Buzzing Benson?).

## **13. Governance**

13.1. This aspect remains to be developed in consultation with Benson Nature Group and the Parish Council, particularly the Recreation and Lands sub-group of the latter which is likely to play an important role in the long-term management of new green spaces. There is likely to be a need for both a steering group structure to take a strategic overview, and a group focused on delivery planning and implementation.

## **14. Funding**

14.1. Whilst some of the work proposed here will be pursued with volunteer help, some will require funding. Some will come from development, with developers required to incorporate enhancements and invest in creation of green spaces as part of their developments. They will also be required through the Neighbourhood Plan policies to establish funds to support the management of the green infrastructure they create for a defined period.

14.2. The scope for bids to other local and national funding sources will be explored as part of the implementation planning of this strategy once a series of priorities have been agreed with the Steering Group.

## **15. Partners**

15.1. This project will need to work in partnership with a range of bodies, both non-governmental and statutory including Berkshire, Buckinghamshire & Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, the Earth Trust, the Environment Agency, Natural England, and various teams in South Oxfordshire District Council and Oxfordshire County Council. We will look to build relationships with:

- 15.1.1. Local farmers, aiming to build community awareness of the valuable contribution that landowners make as stewards of much of our natural environment;
- 15.1.2. Local businesses, exploring opportunities for progressing management and enhancement works through partnerships and volunteering under companies' Corporate Social Responsibility Schemes;
- 15.1.3. Surrounding parishes, seeking to deliver a contribution to a landscape scale approach to achieving objectives;
- 15.1.4. Local schools, aiming to build a local nature theme to enrich the science curriculum and generate interest through participation.

## **16. Next Steps**

16.1. As our Neighbourhood Plan goes through the final statutory processes over the coming months, we will begin to establish the governance arrangements we need and commence delivery planning.

**END**

## **Annex A – Relevant Supporting Documents**

### **1. Extract from Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study**

<http://owls.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wps/wcm/connect/occ/OWLS/Home/Oxfordshire+Landscape+Types/Terrace+Farmland/Terrace+Farmland+Information/#k>

### **Benson (WH/3) Predominately Terrace Farmlands around Benson, with strip of river meadowlands**

**Landscape strategy - Strengthen and enhance the pattern of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and tree-lined watercourses.**

#### **Guidelines**

- Strengthen the field pattern by planting up new and gappy hedges, particularly along roadsides, using locally characteristic species such as hawthorn, and hedgerow trees such as crack willow, oak and ash.
- Promote environmentally-sensitive maintenance of hedgerows, including coppicing and layering when necessary, to maintain a height and width appropriate to the landscape type.
- Enhance and strengthen the character of tree-lined watercourses by planting willows and ash and, where appropriate, pollarding willows.
- Promote small-scale planting of deciduous woodland blocks using locally characteristic species such as crack willow, oak and ash.
- Safeguard, maintain and enhance the characteristic landscape features of existing parklands including mature trees, avenues of trees, lakes, woods and walls.
- Minimise the visual impact of intrusive land uses at the fringes of towns and villages with the judicious planting of tree and shrub species characteristic of the area. This will help to screen the development and integrate it more successfully with its surrounding countryside.
- Local building materials should be used, including brick and clay tiles in the Vale of White Horse, flintstone and brick or red and blue brick and clay tiles in the Chilterns, and stone with clay tiles in the Upper Thames area.

#### **Biodiversity Strategy**

- **Ensure that all surviving priority habitats are safeguarded, in favourable condition and management, and enhanced to satisfy the actions and targets identified within the relevant habitat and species action plans.**
- **Safeguard, maintain and enhance all locally important habitats in a way that is appropriate to the landscape character of the area.**
- **Promote agri-environment schemes which will benefit biodiversity in general and protected species and farmland birds in particular.**

#### **Guidelines**

- Priority habitats in this landscape type are relatively small and isolated. They include some neutral grassland and species-rich hedgerows.
- The neutral grassland site at Dorchester Meadows is in favourable management.
- Species-rich hedgerows with trees are distributed throughout different parts of the landscape type. Priority should be given to safeguarding, maintaining and expanding this resource, particularly in those local character areas where they remain a significant feature.
- Tree-lined watercourses are a feature throughout the landscape type. They should be safeguarded and enhanced by planting species such as ash and willows, pollarding willows where appropriate, and establishing buffer strips/field margins to potentially benefit small mammals,

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invertebrates and birds.

- Opportunities for the establishment of other locally important habitats, such as semi-improved grassland and small deciduous woodlands, should be promoted in a way to strengthen wildlife corridors and enhance the local landscape character.
- Promote the use of agri-environment schemes such as conservation headlands, over-wintered stubbles, and winter-sown crops to benefit farmland birds such as skylarks and yellowhammers.
- The flooded gravel pits near Dorchester are still of ornithological interest and any water-based recreation should be zoned both spatially and seasonally to reduce their potential impact on bird populations, particularly overwintering wildfowl.

## **2. Benson Drainage Strategy (Thames Water)**

<http://www.thameswater.co.uk/tw/common/downloads/literature-company-information/Benson-stage-1.pdf>

Thames Water's Benson Drainage Strategy (2013, and updated for 2015-2020) indicates that Benson has a significant problem with the foul sewerage system being overloaded by both surface water and groundwater infiltration. The Strategy states that both urban creep (more building and loss of permeable surfaces) and climate change (which is predicted to increase the number of adverse weather events) are expected to exacerbate the problem. Safeguarding flood capacity (as an ecosystem service) is likely to be of growing importance.