

LOWER WINDRUSH VALLEY PROJECT

Strategic Plan
2015-2025

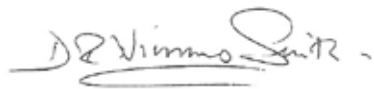


Foreword


The Lower Windrush Valley, in West Oxfordshire, is a very special and unusual place. Throughout history it has supported a wide variety of species as revealed by fossils and preserved bones including those of prehistoric mammoths and lions. Today, although the wildlife sights are much smaller in scale, they are exciting in their own way; the kingfisher flashing downstream or a field full of snake's head fritillaries bring great joy to many people.

In recent times the valley has been a valuable supplier of the sands and gravels that are essential for modern day life, resulting in enormous changes in the landscape. In recognition of these changes the Lower Windrush Valley Project (LWVP) was set up, and hosted by, Oxfordshire County Council in 2001, together with West Oxfordshire District Council. Over the years the project has successfully worked with mineral operators, landowners and the local community to deliver a wide range of improvements to the landscape, nature conservation and public access.

Oxfordshire County Council greatly values the work of the LWVP and is very pleased to support the project with its ambitions for the future.



Councillor David Nimmo-Smith
Cabinet Member for Environment

A photograph of a river scene. In the foreground, a wooden bridge with a simple railing spans across the water. The banks are lined with lush green trees and bushes. The sky is clear and blue. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

The Windrush Path created through planning consents with gravel extraction companies and landowners

The Lower Windrush Valley is no stranger to upheaval and change due to gravel extraction but there is still a strong sense of the traditional landscape and undisturbed areas where wildlife flourishes. West Oxfordshire is undergoing a period of rapid growth in towns and villages that will have a significant impact on the valley as there will be more people looking for places to visit in the countryside. So, one of the many questions for the future will be how to improve access to the Lower Windrush Valley whilst still maintaining the sense of tranquillity and remoteness that is the big attraction in this beautiful part of the world.

We have spoken with local people, businesses, community representatives and visitors and it is clear that there is a strong desire for the work of the LWVP to continue and develop. The message was that we should...

**“Be bolder....
Be more ambitious.”**

This strategy sets out a refreshed vision for the LWVP; not only to continue its well-established and valuable work, but also to create a broader remit that will expand the potential for education, build mutually beneficial links with businesses and help communities adapt to change. This will enable the LWVP to deliver the benefits that local people want for many years ahead.

Our vision for the Lower Windrush Valley

*“To be a brilliant place
for people and wildlife.”*

BENEFITS FOR THE VALLEY

High quality landscapes
and wildlife habitats

Healthy people and
active communities

New opportunities for
lifelong learning

New economic
opportunities

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Work with us to combine nature
conservation with public access

Volunteer on research and
conservation projects

Local businesses: sponsor what
we do to increase the health and
wellbeing of staff and contribute
to the local community

Help us guide and plan the
future of this bold and
ambitious project

What makes the Windrush Valley so special?

The River Windrush flows through the Lower Windrush Valley for 7 miles, from Witney to its confluence with the River Thames at Newbridge. The valley has been shaped by melt waters from successive glaciations that deposited the river terrace gravels that are now being excavated for the sand and gravel essential for modern life. Excavations have revealed prehistoric remains of mammoths and other large animals from 200,000 years ago and evidence of human occupation for at least 10,000 years. The restoration of the Devil's Quoits stone circle is a striking reminder of the importance of the area for people for more than 6,000 years.

The valley is now an area with quiet rural parishes and attractive historic villages with a strong sense of community and identification with the River Windrush. Over the last 60 years the mainly pastoral character of the valley has been transformed by intensive mineral extraction and processing with the result that considerable areas of the valley are now occupied by large lakes.

Many of the lakes support a vibrant leisure and tourism industry with fishing, watersports and camping and caravanning attracting many visitors to the area.

Research by the Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT) shows that many of the lakes and ponds in the valley are of outstanding quality with a rich diversity of aquatic plants and invertebrates.

It may feel as if most of the valley is covered in water but in reality half of the valley is grassland. Two Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) protect small areas of

rare, species-rich lowland meadow habitat. Ducklington Mead, renowned for its snake's head fritillaries, is open to the public on Fritillary Sunday once a year. The Langley's Lane SSSI protects declining lowland meadow species such as green winged orchids.

Rushy Common and Standlake Common Nature Reserves were created by gravel extraction and are now managed by the LWVP. There is a strong focus on habitat management for birds but these reserves also provide a wide range of habitats where animal species, from invertebrates to mammals, thrive in the hedgerows, grassland, wildflower meadows and ponds.

Tar Lakes, next door to Rushy Common Nature Reserve, was designed as a place where families with young children and people with restricted mobility can easily access the tranquil views across the lakes. For the more mobile there is an easy link into the network of footpaths and bridleways that crosses the whole of the valley.



A valley of hidden gems with glimpses of water through hedgerows and trees.

The River Windrush is an attractive and interesting river even though its course has been altered by people over many centuries. Some sections of the Windrush Path run alongside the river giving delightful views and lucky walkers may get an occasional glimpse of a kingfisher or water vole.

The valley in the 1960s



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The valley in 2015 with the LWVP boundary



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About the Project

The LWVP has a steering group of representatives from the local community and partner organisations and is managed on a day to day basis by a project manager. The LWVP coordinates action designed to generate benefit from the legacy of mineral extraction, focusing on:

- **NATURE CONSERVATION**
- **ACCESS TO THE COUNTRYSIDE**
- **LANDSCAPE IMPROVEMENTS**

Over the past 14 years the LWVP has delivered a significant number of achievements including:

Advice on habitat management to minerals operators, landowners and fisheries.

New nature reserves at Rushy Common and Standlake Common created through mineral extraction and now managed by the LWVP.

Bird hide key scheme that enables safe access to three bird hides at the nature reserves.

Improved access including two sections of a long distance footpath along the River Windrush.

Community walks, talks, events and a regular group of conservation volunteers.

Educational opportunities for schools, colleges and universities.

Research projects with environmental organisations such as the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) and Freshwater Habitats Trust (FHT).

Work in partnership with national and local environmental organisations such as RSPB and BBOWT.



Challenges Ahead

SCALING UP THE PROJECT

A broader vision requires a wider range of skills and more people to deliver it.

FUNDING FOR THE PROJECT

Traditional funding streams are under increasing pressure so new sources of funding are required.

CONTINUING GRAVEL EXTRACTION

More mineral extraction will be taking place over the next twenty years.

PRESSURE ON THE COUNTRYSIDE

Increasing numbers of people due to housing developments across Oxfordshire.

CLIMATE CHANGE

There is an uncertain future for the small, isolated fragments of valuable wildlife habitat and the water resources in the valley.

DEMAND FOR PUBLIC ACCESS

How to create more walks, especially by lakes and rivers and improve access across the valley for those with health and mobility difficulties.

LONG TERM MANAGEMENT OF KEY SITES

When long term management agreements come to an end the rights to public access and to manage the sites for nature conservation may be withdrawn by the landowners.

Some key features of the Lower Windrush Valley

1

Witney is a lovely old market town that is attracting much inward investment and development. Witney Lake and Country Park are right on the edge of town so are very easily accessible. Witney Lake is one of the oldest and most established of the lakes created by gravel extraction in the valley. With a varied wildlife interest, fishing and an easy walk round, it is a very popular attraction. In contrast the Country Park has rough paths giving wide views over open meadow land. Nearby at Cogges Manor Farm there is a thriving museum with a wide variety of activities in the summer.

2

The area from Ducklington to Rushy Common has a traditional pastoral landscape that is being transformed by gravel extraction. In addition to the fishing lakes, this has resulted in a new nature reserve and new stretches of footpath and bridleway that are greatly increasing the pleasure of walkers and cyclists in this area. Of particular note is the path round Tar Lake that is surfaced to make the delightful, wide open, lakeside views easily accessible for families with young children and people with restricted mobility. Ducklington Mead is a SSSI renowned for its display of snake's head fritillaries every spring. There are further gravel extraction operations planned for this area over the next 20 years which will result in the creation of new nature conservation habitats including a 60ha reedbed and wet woodland; together with new recreational areas and another 11km of footpaths and bridleways.





3

The Windrush Path is intended to run, off-road, for an 11km route from Witney to Newbridge of which there currently two sections completed. The northern section, from Witney to Hardwick, runs beside the western arm of the river for much of its route; kingfishers and water voles might be seen along this stretch. The southern section from Standlake to Newbridge passes close by some of the lakes and re-joins the river just before Newbridge in a delightful meadow that is largely untouched. Hopefully, we will be able to join the two sections up one day.

5

The River Thames floodplain around Northmoor was extensively settled in Iron Age times, indicated by the designation of a large area as a scheduled ancient monument, although there is now nothing to be seen above ground. It is now a tranquil area of meadows that feels as if it is miles away from anywhere rather than just a few miles from Witney and the city of Oxford. There will be disturbance for several years to come once gravel extraction operations start at Stonehenge Farm but, as is seen in other areas of the valley, peace and tranquillity will return once it is all completed.

4

The Devil's Quoits stone circle is a hidden gem of the valley. Located by the Dix Pit landfill site it has largely been overshadowed by the landfill operations and is not easy to access. This restored ancient monument lies next to the Dix Pit lake which is a Local Wildlife Site (LWS) designated for the numbers of gulls and waterfowl found here. As the landfill operation is now closed there is a great potential to review the management of the site to increase its value for wildlife and for people, especially those from the local villages of Stanton Harcourt and Sutton. An unusual result from the gravel extraction is the collection of remains of mammoth, lion and other animals from prehistoric times. These remains show that the area was once warmer than today and illustrate a period of time known as the 'Stanton Harcourt interglacial'.

6

Over 50 lakes with approximately 400 ha of open water provide a very unusual landscape and a wide variety of habitats. Many of the lakes are used for various types of recreational fishing and watersports, with two specifically restored as nature reserves; one at Rushy Common and one at Standlake Common.

The water quality is generally good and the lakes hold a very rich and diverse range of aquatic macro-invertebrates and plants that are regularly surveyed by The Freshwater Habitats Trust. The lakes are also well renowned for their populations of resident and visiting birds.

What you said...What we will do

"I often bring my visitors to walk round Witney Lake but it isn't very clear where else we can go to."

Improve signage across the valley to link up special places.



"There is so much to discover in the area and a lot of us are interested in helping to find out more."

Develop further research with universities and partner agencies and expand 'citizen science' projects that will help to inform future management plans.

"Working with the volunteer group on Thursdays has made me feel I am really helping to conserve local places—oh and I am getting fitter too."

Develop a wider range of volunteering opportunities in site based practical work and behind the scenes in project support.



"We really like walking along the river but we want a longer walk. When will the sections of the Windrush Path be joined up?"

Complete the Windrush Path as an off-road route between Witney and Newbridge linking to the Thames Path.

“OOOH it’s all sticky and gooey, I want to touch it.”

(pond dipping at Tar Lakes)



Develop outdoor learning opportunities, linked to the curriculum, for schools, colleges and universities.



“I helped on the dig at Dix Pit and found a mammoth tusk.”

Find ways to make the remains from archaeological and paleontological excavations more visible and accessible e.g. a local museum and web based information.



“We didn’t know that this nature reserve (Rushy Common) was here so close to our home in Witney.”

Improve information about special habitats and encourage people to become more knowledgeable about, and involved in, nature conservation.

“There are so many different places to go to, with lots of different things to see. It would be good if they were more joined up.”



Work with landowners and partner agencies to link up site management across the whole of the valley to benefit wildlife and public access.

Our Vision for The Lower Windrush Valley

COMMUNITY BENEFIT

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Relaxing views across fields, **lakes and rivers** made more accessible

Better information about walking, cycling and horse riding routes through the countryside and villages for better **physical and mental health**

Improved access to outdoor space for people with restricted mobility

Volunteering out in the field or with general project work to create a **sense of belonging**



LIFELONG LEARNING

Information available for all to gain a **better understanding** of the history, special features and natural assets of the valley

Events for all ages to enjoy and **learn together** about historic and scientific sites and features

Good sites for **outdoor education** for schools, colleges and universities

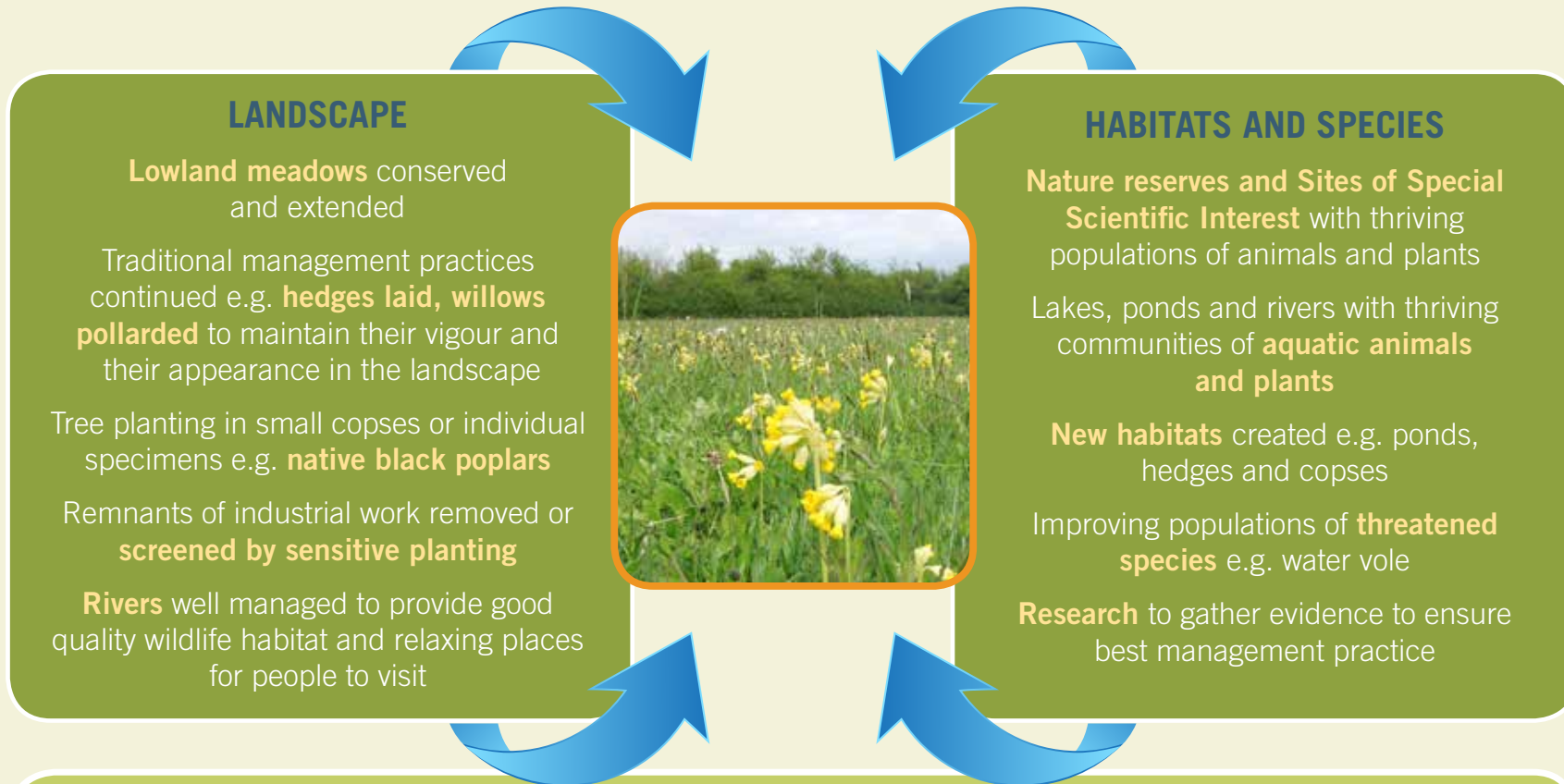
Learn new skills through volunteering

Themes for Action

***Community engagement • Lifelong learning
Public access • Communications***

Our Vision for The Lower Windrush Valley

LANDSCAPE AND NATURE CONSERVATION



Themes for Action

Land management • Information and research
Working in partnership • Conservation programmes

Our Vision for The Lower Windrush Valley

ECONOMIC BENEFIT

BENEFITS TO BUSINESSES

Promotion of this unusual and attractive area that will help to attract **top quality staff** and **more customers**

Good information about the **natural assets** of the valley that will encourage businesses to locate and grow here

Develop **projects mutually beneficial** to the LWVP and businesses
e.g. tree planting or creation of publicity resources

Positive image of collaboration with a **successful environmental organisation** to promote to customers



BENEFITS TO THE VALLEY

Improved footpath and bridleway network centred on **pubs and shops** for local people and to encourage more visitors

Access to **grants** and other **funds** for specific projects

Employee volunteering schemes delivering additional **practical conservation work**

More projects that will bring benefits to **local people, wildlife and the landscape**

Themes for Action

Communications • Joint initiatives with business partners
Engagement with funders • Development of visitor attractions

Future LWVP actions

COMMUNITY

Community Engagement

Develop opportunities for community involvement and creating partnerships across the whole range of project activities.
Create and promote a variety of events throughout the year that contribute to and publicise the work of the project.

Public Access

Complete the Windrush Path as a safe off-road footpath from Witney to Newbridge.
Extend the length of footpath and bridleway available to people with restricted mobility and improve facilities to make access more appealing for all.

Lifelong learning

Develop partnerships with education providers and other specialists to create resources and learning opportunities.
Develop informal learning events for people of all ages e.g. U3A and local interest groups.

Communications

Create a lively and effective communications strategy that will include web based resources and printed documents to be available through local outlets e.g. pubs.

NATURE

Land management

Ensure our conservation work, at Standlake Common and Rushy Common nature reserves, follows best practice guidelines.
Work with partners e.g. the Windrush Catchment Partnership where joint projects at a larger scale will be more cost effective and beneficial to the environment.

Working in partnership

Work with landowners, partner agencies and special interest groups to protect the landscape, natural habitats and species in the valley.
Secure new funding to implement development and improvement projects.

Information and research

Review and monitor biodiversity and landscape character and develop plans to make the valley more biologically diverse and of higher landscape value.
Identify new areas for research and seek partner funding to enhance knowledge of this unique area for a wider audience.

Conservation programmes

Extend local priority habitats e.g. lowland meadow and protect threatened species e.g. water vole and native black poplar.

ECONOMY

Communications

Create a communications strategy specifically for developing links with businesses for mutual benefit.

Engagement with funders

Seek active involvement with local businesses to secure additional revenue for specific projects that will benefit people and wildlife.
Demonstrate that the LWVP delivers top quality results for funding partners.

Joint initiatives with business partners

Develop an understanding of the needs and interests of local businesses and what the LWVP can do to assist their development.
Demonstrate that the LWVP is a valuable asset to the economic development of the area.

Work with mineral companies to gain maximum environmental and conservation value from on-going or future operations.

Development of visitor attractions

Help to plan for and develop visitor attractions that showcase the natural and historical assets of the valley with improved provision of facilities for visitors and better use of existing resources from, for example, parking at pubs to more ambitious projects such as a paleo-history museum.

How we will develop the Lower Windrush Valley Project in a sustainable way in partnership with local people





NEXT YEAR	NEXT 5 YEARS	BEYOND
Continue to manage our nature reserve assets and work with local landowners to increase their value for wildlife and enhance the landscape.	Identify more areas that have the potential to add value for wildlife and landscape and design schemes that will deliver greater benefits in collaboration with landowners and partner organisations.	Work with landowners and partner agencies to deliver conservation gains of regional and national importance.
Continue to improve public access with a focus on circular routes.	Upgrade access to key locations for people with restricted mobility.	A comprehensive action plan in place to ensure continuing improvements for public access.
Review all information and data currently available in the LWVP about the natural environment and the history of the valley.	Establish joint work with universities, colleges and schools to improve information about the valley and available resources and to deliver locally based education opportunities for all age groups.	Create an education centre displaying the mammoth remains; together with the history of changes in the landscape and the special features of the valley today.
Continue our programme of volunteering and events for all ages	Develop a comprehensive programme of events that will increasingly be run by the community with support from the LWVP.	Events and volunteering programme in place run by the community with technical support from the LWVP.
Develop new, small scale, projects sourcing external funding as required.	Identify a programme of more ambitious projects that will be ready to put into action as new funding becomes available.	The LWVP is well-resourced and able to take on larger scale projects as opportunities arise.
Draw on existing finite resources to fund staff.	Identify and develop sustainable sources of funding to enable the staff team and scope of the LWVP to grow.	The LWVP is not reliant on minerals operators or public sector funding.
Continue to develop links with the local community.	Work in partnership with the local community to expand opportunities for involvement in all aspects of the running of the LWVP.	The LWVP to provide a source of knowledge and expertise to underpin and promote the community led work.
Review existing channels of communication.	Establish a comprehensive information gathering and communications strategy.	A vibrant communications strategy making best use of modern technology as it evolves.



IN CONCLUSION

THE LOWER WINDRUSH VALLEY HAS..

an amazing landscape, rich in wildlife and human heritage which offers significant opportunities to deliver wider benefits for biodiversity, public access and environmental services, such as water management, in the future. Within this area of farmland, rivers and a mosaic of lakes and wetlands the potential to work together to conserve and develop this special area is an exciting challenge for the years ahead.

WHO WILL HELP TO DELIVER THIS VISION?

- Local people
- Landowners
- Businesses
- Parish, district and county councils
- Volunteers
- Environmental agencies
- Education providers

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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