

CONSERVATION TARGET AREAS: GOVERNANCE

Background, governance & process for CTA creation and review

Background

The wildlife of important habitats such as that found on SSSI and LWS cannot survive indefinitely in isolation, but need to be part of a wider network of habitats connected at a landscape scale. This allows populations to move, adapt to changing conditions locally and maintain genetic diversity. The Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS) (Blackwell & Nikolakaki, 2004) which investigated the landscape character and biodiversity resource of the county was a precursor to the development of Oxfordshire's Conservation Target Areas (CTAs). In 2006 Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) were funded by Oxfordshire County Council to identify the best areas of biodiversity and Priority Habitat¹ across Oxfordshire, mapping areas that became known as Conservation Target Areas (CTAs). CTAs identify the most important areas for wildlife where targeted conservation action will have the greatest benefit. Their aim is to create focus areas for actions to restore biodiversity at a landscape-scale through the maintenance, restoration and creation of priority habitats. The CTAs mapped in 2006 covered just over 20 % of the county by area (526.2 km²), contained 95% of the SSSI land area in Oxfordshire and 74% of the Local Wildlife Sites. Each CTA supports one or more of the 20 priority habitats found in Oxfordshire. They provide a means for coordinated delivery of biodiversity work, agri-environment schemes and biodiversity enhancements through the planning system. The methods and criteria used for the original selection of the CTAs in 2006 can be found in the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) full report of that time.

Since their inception Wild Oxfordshire, previously known as Oxfordshire Nature Conservation Forum (ONCF) has been the custodian of the CTA process and coordinator of the Biodiversity Advisory Group (BAG)². The CTA approach is supported by '[Biodiversity 2020: A strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services](#)³', which sets out the Government's ambition to halt overall loss of England's biodiversity by 2020, support healthy well-functioning ecosystems and establish coherent ecological networks, with more and better places for wildlife and people.' Local conservation projects are explicitly recognised as an important tool in delivering the national strategy.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (section 11 paras 109-125) 'Conserving and enhancing the natural environment' includes reference to providing net gains for biodiversity where possible, protection and enhancement of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure, promoting priority

¹ Habitats or Species listed under Section 41 of the NERC Act as of Principal Importance for the Purpose of Conserving Biodiversity (previously referred to as UK BAP Priority Habitats or Species)

² The Biodiversity Advisory Group is hosted by Wild Oxfordshire and currently chaired by the Conservation Technical Specialist, West Thames Region from the Environment Agency. BAG includes representatives from BBOWT, RSPB, local planning authorities, NE, FC, TVERC and local AONBs.

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/225300/pb14009-biodiversity2020-progress-guide-20130730.pdf

habitats and species and the importance of ecosystem services and soils.’ This is reflected in Local Plans drawn up by Oxfordshire’s local authorities.

Document Aims

This document sets out the process and evidence required for approval of proposed minor CTA boundary modifications, new extensions to existing CTAs and identification of new CTAs and provides a framework which can be applied to future proposed amendments. It sets out the required criteria, consultation and approval process for review, confirmation, proposed boundary modifications and extensions to existing CTAs and the identification of new CTAs, as agreed by the conservation community (through the Biodiversity Advisory Group) coordinated by Wild Oxfordshire.

BAG CTA Review aims

- To produce updated maps and enhanced accompanying statements for all CTAs.
- To provide guidance on how CTA maps and statements should be used.
- To identify and cost (in broad terms) potential projects that contribute to the conservation and enhancement (of habitats and species) within each CTA and deliver net gains for biodiversity. These projects to be maintained on a central spreadsheet, updated annually and available to all, to promote delivery through development and planning contributions.
- To promote information and knowledge about CTAs within Local Authority Members, Managers and Planning officers; business developers and conservation organisations.

Procedure for Selection, Modification and Additions to Oxfordshire’s Conservation Target Areas (CTAs)

Selection Factors

The following factors were agreed as being the key criteria to be met for identifying areas as CTAs. A **majority** should be present in any area under consideration either as a new CTA or extension to existing CTA.

- Concentrations of priority habitat⁴ (previously known as UKBAP habitat).
- Important areas for protected and notable species⁵. These areas largely coincide with areas with concentrations of priority habitat.
- The presence of important geological features
- The presence of notable hydrological features and/or floodplain connectivity.

⁴ Habitats listed under Section 41 of the NERC Act as of Principal Importance for the Purpose of Conserving Biodiversity (previously referred to as UK BAP Priority Habitats)

⁵ Some species of wildlife are protected by UK and also sometimes European legislation because of their rarity or historical persecution. These species are called ‘protected species’. Species with conservation designations, but no legal protection are called ‘notable species’. See <http://www.tverc.org/cms/content/species> for more information.

- Potential for habitat restoration: land with good potential to restore the main target habitats (of the Oxfordshire Biodiversity Priority Habitats Targets).
- Potential to link areas of existing priority habitat. Factors to be taken into account when considering potential are topography (most chalk and limestone grasslands, for instance, occur on steep slopes where the soils are thinner and thus steeper sloping land has greater potential); geology and areas with existing habitat restoration schemes.

Additional information to be included in CTA descriptive statements:

- Archaeology – areas with concentrations of archaeological features, including landscape archaeology such as ridge and furrow.
- Public access.
- Cultural significance – areas with landscape features of social, historical or artistic importance.

Proposals process

Proposals should be provided to Wild Oxfordshire with the following forms of evidence at least 6 weeks before the next scheduled BAG meeting. This will allow proposals to be properly considered by BAG and for descriptions to be updated if proposals are approved.

1. An A3 or A4 jpeg map at an appropriate scale with 1:25 000 Ordnance Survey base maps. If available, selection features and boundaries should be mapped to OS polygons and clearly marked and GIS layers provided (.tab or .shp files).
2. A report describing how the area meets the criteria, using the template provided by Wild Oxon. The report should include:
 - How the area meets each of the relevant criteria.
 - Main Priority Habitats and Species present
 - Opportunities to enhance/extend the CTA (for extensions and new CTAs).
 - Characterization of the CTA (for new CTAs)
3. Brief description of the nominator's qualifications and experience. Nominations should be made (or sponsored) by a BAG member or professional ecologist.
4. Any other background or supporting information e.g. species lists, habitats surveys.

Assessment process

Oxfordshire's BAG meets quarterly. All members of the BAG will be expected to respond to submissions, in person at the meeting, by proxy representation or email if unable to attend. Responses will be recorded and kept on file as evidence of consultation.

A majority agreement is required to determine decisions.

If additional information is required in order to reach a decision this will be requested for assessment at the next planned BAG meeting.

Wild Oxfordshire will report back to nominators after the BAG meeting.



* Not required for minor modifications.

Notification process

Following any approved changes to an existing CTA or acceptance of a new CTA, the relevant CTA maps and descriptions will be updated. The new CTA descriptions will be updated by Wild Oxfordshire and uploaded onto the Wild Oxfordshire website⁶. New GIS datasets will be commissioned from TVERC and sent to existing funding partners as part of their annual agreements, and available to other organisations on request from TVERC⁷.

Minor modifications to existing CTAs resulting from anomalies and errors:

Minor boundary modifications may occur to correct mapping errors (e.g. part of a Local Wildlife Site was originally omitted) or where updated or improved data has become available (e.g. habitats survey carried out on Local Wildlife Site) or to align boundaries with Biodiversity Opportunity Areas in neighbouring counties where considered appropriate.

Extensions to existing CTAs and New CTAs:

Extensions to existing CTAs where, for example, land adjacent to an existing CTA has been purchased and brought into conservation management with the target of delivering a new area of Priority Habitat. Alternatively entirely new CTAs or an extension to an existing may be proposed when new and/or improved habitat mapping brings new knowledge of sites meeting the key criteria listed above.

Proposals can be made by any member of the BAG and should follow the 'Proposals Process' as set out on page 2 of this document.

⁶ <http://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/biodiversity/conservation-target-areas/>

⁷ <http://www.tverc.org/cms/content/gis-data-licencing>