

Update July 2025: Please note that the Oxfordshire Treescape Project has transitioned to become the Oxfordshire Nature Project, run by CAG Oxfordshire.

For queries related to community nature recovery please contact naturerecovery@cagoxfordshire.org.uk

Resources that previously on the OTP website are now here: <https://naturerecovery.ox.ac.uk/projects/oxfordshire-treescape-project/>

OXFORDSHIRE TREESCAPE PROJECT



GETTING STARTED WITH PARISH NATURE RECOVERY

A guide for parish councils and community groups

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This guide has been created by the Oxfordshire Treescape Project based on our experiences of supporting a large number of parishes in Oxfordshire with getting started on nature recovery projects. It is intended as a guide only, rather than prescriptive instructions.

If you have any queries about this document or would like further help or support, please contact naturerecovery@cagoxfordshire.org.uk

THE OXFORDSHIRE TREESCAPES PROJECT

UPDATES TO THE GUIDE

This guide is periodically updated to reflect changes in policy, new case studies and our growing experience. These changes are recorded in the table below.

Date	Section	Edit
24/5/2023	Case Study 1	Details of which parishes are working together was corrected.

WHAT IS NATURE RECOVERY?

The [2010 Lawton review](#) recommended that **our ecological networks should be more, bigger, better and joined** (see **Box 3: Make spaces for nature bigger, better, more and joined up**). Nature recovery is the process of fulfilling those four succinct aims, thus protecting, restoring, enhancing and creating spaces for nature, moving towards more resilient natural habitats that provide homes for wildlife, spaces for recreation and wellbeing and the wealth of ecosystem services such as clean air and water and food provision, on which humanity relies.

Nature recovery can happen everywhere from private gardens and school grounds to farms and national parks – every space and community has a valuable role to play.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is intended to support the early stages of planning for nature recovery at the parish scale; this will often be led by the parish or town council, but the guide should also be valuable to a community group, formal or informal, working alongside the parish council. We use the term “parish” or “parish council” to include parish or town councils or parish meetings, accepting that there will be differences in terms of how these entities operate, the resources available, etc.

The guide should be helpful for any level of ambition, from planning a one-off project such as establishing a hedgerow along a playing field to considering a parish-scale nature recovery plan (see **Box 1: What is a parish nature recovery plan?**).

We do not assume any prior knowledge of ecology or nature recovery; the guide aims to show how to get started with nature recovery, a large part of which is about community engagement, signposting when and where to bring in external expertise. Nature recovery aims may vary from individual projects in specific locations to ambitions to develop a formal parish-wide plan for nature recovery.

WHY PLAN FOR NATURE RECOVERY?

Parish groups have a key role to play in nature recovery

There are a great many organisations and bodies involved in nature recovery at different scales. Parish councils are in a unique position to support the nature recovery process: they are the most local democratic bodies, have longevity and often know local communities and environment well. They understand all the constraints and priorities that need to be respected locally. Parish councils thus have a hugely important role to play, being well positioned to bring stakeholders together to develop collaborative plans for both managing existing natural assets and creating new ones.

Box 1: What is a parish nature recovery plan?

A parish nature recovery plan is a document which sets out how a parish wants to protect, manage and improve nature within the parish, for both people and nature itself. It could form part of a Neighbourhood plan or sit alongside it or other documents, describing a vision for the parish, putting nature on par with planning for housing and infrastructure development. Parish-scale nature recovery plans may also feed into [county-level Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#), which as of April 2023 will need to be developed nationwide.

A nature recovery plan should be inclusive and celebrate assets that the parish already holds, such as productive agricultural land, high-value nature sites and so on (see

PHASE 2: EXPLORING YOUR PARISH'S ASSETS: PLACES AND PEOPLE, set out ambitions for nature within the parish and give some indication of resources, cost and timescales involved. Examples of such plans are listed at the end of the document.

The time is right: new government policies support nature recovery

There is now universal recognition of how vital and urgent it is for us to address nature recovery. Encouragingly, government policies are beginning to recognise this and support action.

The [2021 Environment Act](#) has made nature recovery a central plank of government policy. Nature recovery should also be a central component of any large-scale climate action plan as it helps to capture carbon, reduce flooding and increase the biodiversity on which all of our natural systems depend. It also helps farming systems to become more resilient and better adapted to climate change.

The new subsidy scheme for agriculture, the [Environmental Land Management Scheme](#) or ELMS, rewards nature-friendly farming and will also require evidence of community engagement for larger grants. It should then be to the advantage of farmers and landowners, who are the decision makers for large swathes of our countryside, to engage with local nature recovery efforts.

[The government is now proposing targets](#) covering water, air quality, tree cover and the diversity of our wildlife, which parish-level nature recovery actions can support.

Parish level local nature recovery plans can also be fed into, or brought into alignment with, county-wide [Local Nature Recovery Strategies](#) as a nation-wide requirement under the 2021 Environment Act. Recent [guidance](#) (April 2023) from Defra now gives more detail on what these will cover.

At the most local level, **Neighbourhood Plan guidance** includes [a section on habitats and biodiversity](#), encouraging Plans to identify, map and safeguard wildlife sites and ecological networks, among other environmental considerations.

There is also increasing interest from the general public, as evidenced by the popularity of programmes such as Wild Isles and the recently published People's Plan for Nature (see **Box 2: People's Plan for Nature**).

It's an exciting time to be involved in nature recovery!

Box 2: People's Plan for Nature

Published in April 2023, the [People's Plan for Nature](#) sets out a vision for a nature-centric UK, developed by a people's assembly representing diverse communities from across the country. It includes actions that should be taken by local and national government, businesses, charities, farmers and individuals to protect and fundamentally change how we value nature.

It has been developed by WWF, RSPB and the National Trust, representing a joined-up effort to bring people and nature together for positive action. It is hoped that this will provide a rallying call for individuals, businesses and organisations interested in nature, providing impetus to put their proposed plans into action. You can register your support on the website above.

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

This document is intended as a rough guide to the steps that you might follow to get started with nature recovery at the parish level. The suggestions and resources take you through the phases of first thoughts, mapping the parish's assets and starting to think about planning projects, including suggestions of where to get specialist support and knowledge.

We feel that simply getting started can be the biggest hurdle to overcome so have concentrated on these early phases.

PHASE	STEPS
First thoughts	Form a working group
Parish assets: people and places	Explore and map your parish assets including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- natural assets to be protected and managed;- landscape character and culture;- people, groups businesses and organisations that use and could support your local environment.
Planning projects	Consider what you want to achieve and how to make that happen. Create a project plan.
Action	Put your plan into action. Schedule regular reviews of your plan and aims.

PHASE 1: FIRST THOUGHTS

1. Form a working group

We suggest creating a small team of 4-6 people, i.e., a working group, to lead the nature recovery work. This group could be tasked by your Parish Council to explore options and recommend solutions, as in **Case study 1**. A working group allows skills and resources to be pooled, and provides support for its members.

When setting up a working group we suggest, if possible, you carefully consider its composition so that you have a broad representation of key demographics (especially landowners and farmers, but also representatives of any local environmental groups), how much time potential members have available and what skills are required within the working group.

From this point on, “you” refers to the working group, rather than an individual person.

Case study 1: A working group across parishes

The parishes of Charlbury, Finstock and Fawler work collaboratively on nature recovery. This is led by the Land and Nature Group, an advisory working group of Charlbury Town Council, with responsibility for advising the Town Council about community owned land and, in collaboration with the surrounding parishes of Fawler and Finstock, developing a nature recovery plan. They have representatives from all three parishes, ensuring an even spread of knowledge and activity across the combined area. Members of the Land and Nature Group are working on different aspects of nature recovery including community outreach events, collaboration with local farmers and laying the foundations for a Nature Recovery Plan through investigating and mapping existing assets.

They consider their greatest assets to be a supportive town council, a National Nature Reserve on their doorstep and a highly motivated and active volunteer group.

It’s worth noting that two of the three reasons listed for their success are about people rather than places, showing how important it is to focus on community involvement.

The group are making great progress, but have ongoing challenges such as connecting with local landowners and the difficulties in accessing information on species present in their parishes to help them prioritise nature recovery activities.

PHASE 2: EXPLORING YOUR PARISH'S ASSETS: PLACES AND PEOPLE

To make some headway with nature recovery you need to understand the context that you're working in (the "place") and involve the people who live, work and spend leisure time in the parish – who have important local knowledge, may be able to support nature recovery efforts and probably have opinions on how they want the area to look and feel.

We suggest that mapping physical aspects of the parish is a good place to start, which can then lead on to mapping people, or stakeholders, thus creating a baseline understanding of what is already in your parish, and who should be involved in order to develop and implement plans for nature recovery.

A cross-cutting aspect of a parish's assets are its cultural characteristics and heritage, including landscape character; if your parish has a Neighbourhood Plan then a statement of such characteristics may already exist. If not, it may be useful to [consider creating one](#).

The section: **WHERE YOU CAN GET SUPPORT** should provide useful links to organisations and resources that can help in this phase.

2. Mapping

We suggest using the [Land App](#), free online mapping software, to map and record your parish's assets. You could consider creating lists of features in the categories below as a starting point or alternative. If you choose not to use the Land App, we suggest looking at maps to help identify existing natural assets, supported by your knowledge of your local area.

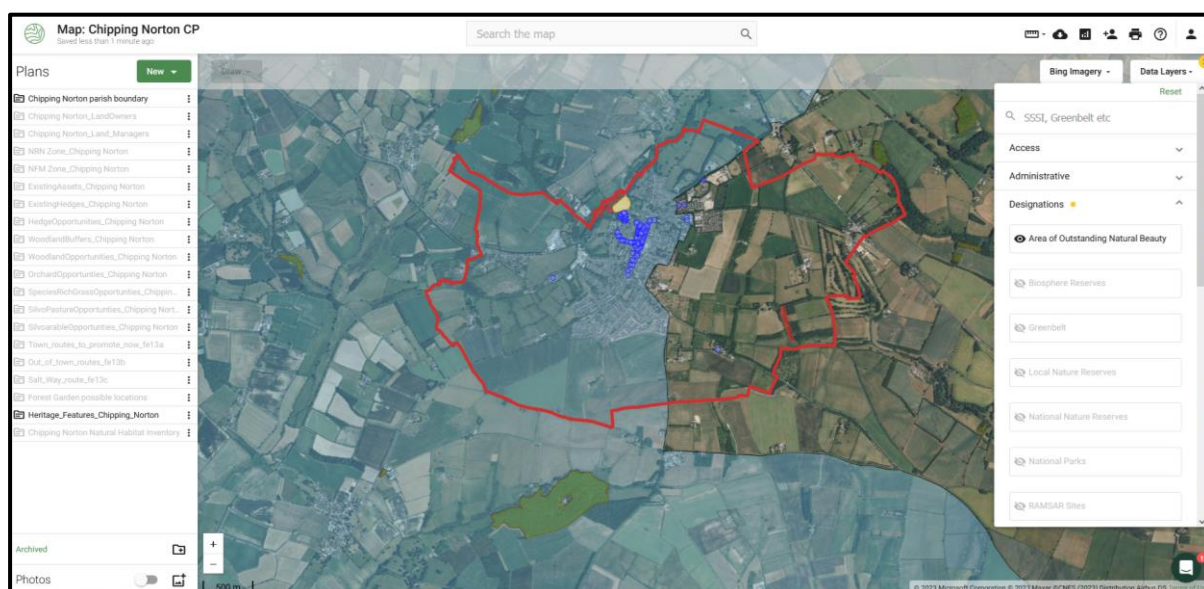


Figure 1: Example parish LandApp map. "Plans" on the lefthand side have been created by the map owner, e.g., the heritage features in this parish shown as blue dots. Layers on the right are built-in to the LandApp, e.g., Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is selected to be displayed in this map.

Other useful resources include [Magic Maps](#), providing a host of geographic information on the natural environment from across the UK government and your [local environmental records centre](#) (see [WHERE YOU CAN GET SUPPORT](#)).

Mapping at the parish scale has the advantage of helping you to see the distribution of natural assets – are there key assets such as a water course? Are there areas of the parish that are lacking in green space? Are there opportunities to create wildlife corridors, e.g., by putting a hedge between existing woodlands? Whether or not your initial aim is to create a plan for nature recovery across the parish, it's useful to see how any nature recovery projects sit in the wider landscape.

Box 3: Make spaces for nature bigger, better, more and joined up

“[Making space for nature](#)” or the Lawton Review was published in 2010 and [remains a landmark in UK ecology and nature recovery](#). The report runs to over 100 pages, but the headline finding, that spaces for nature should be “bigger, better, more and joined up” is the take-home message.

In practise this means that we need spaces for nature to be (*italics refer to Figure 2*):

- **Bigger**: larger spaces allow the many plants, animals, fungi and natural processes that need larger areas to thrive / function (*buffer zone*);
- **Better**: we need to improve the quality of spaces for nature, for example controlling invasive weed species that dominate habitats so that other species cannot thrive (*restoration area*);
- **More**: we need more spaces for nature created and protected;
- **Joined-up**: most of our natural spaces are surrounded by space that many animals, plants and fungi cannot thrive in or travel through such as urban areas, roads or agricultural fields. Joining up existing sites, for example by establishing hedgerow between existing woodland areas, provides corridors for nature to access more of the landscape (*landscape corridor, linear corridor, stepping stone corridor*).

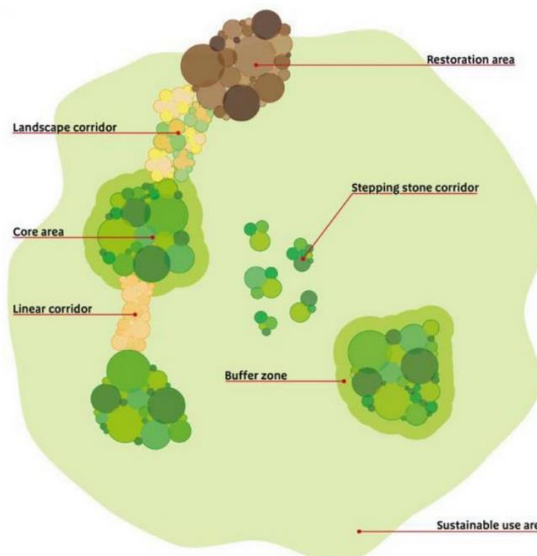


Figure 2: Landscape scale thinking. Reproduced from [ialeUK](#).

Landscape-scale thinking

Together, these four concepts show the importance of considering not just an individual site, but the landscape around it – Where in your area is there scope to make existing sites **bigger**? Are there examples of **better** sites in your area that can provide a vision for management of other sites? Where in your area is there the possibility of creating **more** space for nature? How can a site be **joined up** to others? However these principles don't just apply to large sites -- they can also be applied at small scale too.

A. People and history of your parish, plus landscape character – playing to existing strengths.

You should map, or consider, parish priorities (which will be detailed in a Neighbourhood Plan, if your parish has one), such as landscape character and whether your parish is within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, planned development, high grade agricultural land, and so on.



Figure 3: Elements of your parish that you may not have considered mapping

B. Gardens and community spaces

Gardens and community spaces are areas in which the general public have greatest decision-making powers and provide opportunities for connecting large numbers of people with nature recovery.

Gardens are often overlooked as potential for nature recovery, but even small spaces can provide valuable habitat. We do not propose that individual gardens across the parish are mapped, but an appreciation of the extent of gardens within the parish may be useful; especially when considered together, gardens can be valuable spaces for nature, contributing to the 'bigger, better, more, joined up' principles of nature recovery (see [UPDATES TO THE GUIDE](#)

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WHAT IS NATURE RECOVERY? and **Box 3**).

Community spaces, such as playing fields, village halls and schools often have the potential for nature recovery projects, while still performing their main function. For example, a species-rich hedge around a playing field or a patch of wildflower meadow to the side of a village hall.

C. High value nature sites

High Value Nature Sites are areas that have been designated for wildlife / nature at the local or national level, or other areas managed primarily for nature. This includes local and national nature reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, RSPB reserves, and so on.

We suggest visiting high value nature sites in person to get an understanding for their current condition, usage, and so on. You can then map and record details of key habitats within the Land App. If you can, find out who is already managing these assets and talk to them about their plans.

D. Nature-friendly farming

70% of the land in England is farmed, so land managers have a crucial role and it is important to recognise the value of what they are already doing to support nature.

Ask to meet local farmers and landowners and explain that the parish is hoping to support nature recovery across the parish.

You might start with farmers with whom you already have some personal connection, or you know are interested in nature. This could be those who have signed up to agri-environment schemes (Countryside Stewardship, or the new Sustainable Farming Incentive scheme). Tip: you can use [Magic Maps](#) to identify land in agri-environment schemes, including the land manager / organisation with whom the agreement has been made. Try to understand their aims and objectives as food production businesses and ask what they are doing on their land already to support nature and how this might work alongside their food production objectives.

Explain you are not asking them to do anything now, but that you would like to understand better what they are already doing, for example agri-environment schemes, whether they are already doing anything to support wildlife on their land already, or what plans they may have for adapting to our changing climate.

All or any of the above could be valuable elements in a parish nature recovery plan, and so they should be viewed as foundations to build on, just as much as woodland, grassland or wetland assets.

Box 4: Further resources on working with farmers and land managers

A slide deck on things to consider before approaching land managers is available [here](#).

Find out how a farm in West Oxfordshire is farming with nature [here](#).

Contact naturerecovery@cagoxfordshire.org.uk to for an update on how parishes across Oxfordshire are collaborating with landowners. At the time of writing parishes are working with landowners on hedge surveys, wildlife surveys, hedge planting, tree planting and developing a system of QR codes along public footpaths to explain local farming practises. These activities support both land manager and local communities.

E. Other spaces within your parish

There are other spaces within a parish that have potential for nature recovery, such as roadside verges and large roundabouts, street trees and planters, derelict land or sites owned by utility companies. Try to think creatively about space for nature in your parish (see **Figure 3**). These places could be small stepping-stones or corridors for wildlife or enhance spaces for local communities.

F. Neighbouring parishes

You will almost certainly discover during this stage that natural assets or land holdings straddle parish boundaries, e.g., a water course forming the parish boundary. Consider whether it would make sense to engage with neighbouring parishes, perhaps joining forces to work together on nature recovery - there may be opportunities to collaborate on specific nature recovery projects, share volunteer effort or run events together. As well as the benefits of pooling resources, this will also help to find ways to deliver outcomes across the landscape irrespective of boundaries which is a key element of national nature recovery policy and planning.

3. IDENTIFYING STAKEHOLDERS: WHO USES THESE SPACES?

Stakeholders are any people, groups or organisations that have an interest or influence in a place and any decisions made about that place. In the context of parish nature recovery, this especially includes the people who live, work and spend leisure time in the area. It is important to engage stakeholders in nature recovery plans and projects – nobody likes to have changes imposed upon them, and your efforts will have greater success when you

have a wider pool of people to feed into your projects and support and help you, creating long-term community support for nature recovery projects. Stakeholders may have particular skills, knowledge or assets that can help nature recovery projects, for example a land manager may be able to offer space for training (e.g., invertebrate ID skills or hedge-laying), or may consider altering some aspect of their operations; a keen ornithologist may be willing to conduct surveys in different areas of the parish.

To **identify your stakeholders**, return to your map or list of natural assets and think about which people, or groups of people, use those sites. For example, a local playing field may be used by dog walkers, a football club and families; a nature reserve may include some of the same, but perhaps also a volunteer group and the organisation that is responsible for the site; a golf course could include the course owners, club members and, if there was a footpath across it, members of the public (are they parish visitors? Residents using a popular shortcut?). In this way, you build up a picture of who is using what spaces in the parish and can start to think about how to engage the different individuals, groups or organisations.

It would be hard to do this for every natural asset in a parish. If you are thinking about creating a nature recovery plan for the whole parish you may wish to think about types of assets, e.g., the categories above, and the type of people who use them; for a specific project, you could consider use of that particular site.

Once you have a list of stakeholders, you can think about **how to engage them** in decisions about nature recovery in areas that are important to them, and how to gain their support in making things happen.

PHASE 3: PLANNING PROJECTS

4. CONSIDER NEXT STEPS

By the time you've mapped natural assets and considered who your stakeholders are, you're ready to start thinking about what nature recovery plans or projects you want to take on. Or it may be that you already have some ideas in place, in which case you're now ready to start putting flesh on its bones.

Things to consider as you get started:

- What do you want to achieve at this stage: a nature recovery plan for the whole parish, or an individual project? See **Case study 2** for an example project.
- Which stakeholders do you need to engage to achieve this, and how will you engage them?
- What does success look like? Make sure that you consult stakeholders and include their opinions in this.
- Where can you get support and advice to help plan and implement your project? This may include local individuals or organisations or those from further afield.
- How much time will it take?
- What resources will you need?

- Where might funding come from?
- How will you measure success?

Case study 2: Establishing a community-based tree planting programme

In Autumn 2019 Lucy Staveley set herself the challenge of planting 2,020 trees by December 2020. By March 2020 there were almost 2,500 trees in the ground, including over 2,000 planted for hedging. Lucy has built a sustainable project which by the end of the 2022-23 planting season has delivered over 9,000 trees. It's not just a numbers game: along the way Lucy has shared ideas of nature recovery within the local community, developed some strong relationships with landowners, supported the creation of local assets in the form of two community orchards, provided a hub for others interested in nature and trees in the local area and learned valuable lessons that she's keen to share with other community groups.



Lucy used word of mouth to find local landowners willing to have trees planted on their land and built a strong community of volunteers using adverts in local papers, Facebook, and simply buttonholing people in the street. Planning events on both weekdays and weekends helped to bring in a variety of volunteers, as has partnering with local organisations such as the Wychwood Forest Trust and Cotswold Wardens, and local Duke of Edinburgh volunteers; she now has a core team of regular volunteers who continue to support nature recovery as a community.

We recommend keeping records of your thought processes and actions as you go along, so that you can reflect and learn from them, and share your learnings with others.

For those considering a formal parish nature recovery plan, we have included resources for this at the end of the document.

WHERE YOU CAN GET SUPPORT

Successful nature recovery projects can benefit from many types of support for example running volunteer groups, ecological expertise, integrating nature recovery into a Neighbourhood Plan, fundraising, accounting and reporting, formal agreements on land use or partnering.

The following may be useful sources of support and may feature as assets in your mapping (see

PHASE 2: EXPLORING YOUR PARISH'S ASSETS: PLACES AND PEOPLE).

Your stakeholder identification exercise may have thrown up additional potential sources of support, for example a Trust in charge of a local nature reserve may be keen to support nearby nature recovery projects with knowledge, tools, volunteers, or there may be local farmers or schools with a small patch of land that they're happy to use for nature recovery.

We have not attempted to list web resources for ecological guidance or knowledge as these are myriad, but would refer you to advice from organisations below and their websites.

Within Oxfordshire

We would recommend starting with the following organisations:

- [CAG Oxfordshire](#) can help with most aspects of setting up and running a group. They can also connect you with valuable [peer support and learning networks](#). *If you're outside Oxfordshire then we'd suggest searching for a local community action group network;*
- [Wild Oxfordshire](#) support community groups and parishes with nature recovery action across the county. Their [directory](#) of relevant groups of organisations active in Oxfordshire is an excellent resource for finding further local support.

Nationwide

The following organisations may be able to support your projects with advice or resources or provide information about their activities in your local area.

The list is intended to be a suggestion of where to get started, rather than an exhaustive list.

- Your local Wildlife Trust (search for it [here](#)) may be able to offer locally-relevant advice or support, are responsible for local nature reserves and often run community events;
- Your Local Environmental Records Centre (search for it [here](#)) can supply habitat and species data and support with biological recording;
- Catchment Partnerships support a [catchment based approach](#) to landscape management and will be well-connected to local farmers, land managers and environmental charities (find your local Catchment Partnership [here](#));
- [Farmer clusters](#) are groups of farmers working together to deliver greater benefits for soil, water and wildlife at a landscape scale (search for your local farmer cluster [here](#));
- Forestry Commission: your local officer may be able to offer location-specific advice on tree or woodland management (search for them [here](#));
- The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) bring people together to create, improve and care for green spaces (find out if they're locally active near you [here](#)); GoodGym also offer similar services (details [here](#));
- Your [Local Nature Partnership](#) may be able to help identify relevant local organisations in your county (find your LNP [here](#));
- Your District or County Council or Unitary Authority may have a biodiversity officer or similar role who can advise on local ecological issues.

- Place-based charities or groups responsible for running a particular area, e.g., a community farm or nature reserve;
- Other local organisations or charities, e.g., funding bodies for local projects.

Other resources

Local data

These sources can help you with identifying and mapping the assets already in your parish:

- [Magic maps](#) – geographical information on natural environment;
- [Land App](#) – free online mapping software, widely used by farmers;
- [NBN Gateway](#), [iNaturalist](#), [iRecord](#) – free crowd-sourced species occurrence data and biological recording software.

Creating a parish nature recovery plan

Should you wish to create a nature recovery plan for your parish, these resources should be a good place to start:

- [John Claire Countryside Vision guide](#): guidance on creating a parish nature recovery plan;
- Example nature recovery plans: [Benson Nature Group's People & Nature Strategy](#); [Bainton & Ashton PC's nature recovery plan](#).
- We have created a template for a nature recovery plan, which you may wish to use.