

Review of the Lower Windrush Valley Project 2001- 2014



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CONTENTS

PART 1: OVERVIEW OF THE LOWER WINDRUSH VALLEY PROJECT	4
1. INTRODUCTION	4
1.1. Foreword	4
1.2. Where is the Lower Windrush Valley Project?	5
1.3. What is the Lower Windrush Project?.....	5
1.4. Original Aims and Objectives.....	5
2. BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT.....	6
2.1. Background and Current Challenges.....	6
2.1.1 Legacy of minerals development	6
2.1.2 Landownership and access.....	6
2.1.3 Long term funding	7
2.1.4 Community engagement and ownership.....	7
2.2. Policy Support for the Project (and for the Project Area)	7
2.2.1 National level policy	7
2.2.2 Local level policy.....	8
3. WHAT MAKES THE LOWER WINDRUSH VALLEY SPECIAL?.....	8
3.1. Landscape of the Valley	8
3.2. Ecology of the Valley	9
3.3. Socio-economics of the Valley	10
3.4. Access within the Valley.....	11
PART 2: ACTIONS TO SECURE THE FUTURE OF THE LWVP	12
4. FEEDBACK FROM CONSULTATION EVENTS	12
5. GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING	13
5.1. Future Funding Arrangements.....	13
5.2. Future Governance	13
5.3. Review of Other Relevant Projects and Organisations.....	13
6. ACTION PLAN.....	14
6.1. Themes and Objectives.....	14
6.2. Actions	15
7. REFERENCES.....	18

PART 1: OVERVIEW OF THE LOWER WINDRUSH VALLEY PROJECT

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Foreword

The Lower Windrush Valley Project (LWVP) was formed in 2001 in response to the environmental pressures and opportunities arising from mineral extraction in the Windrush valley. The original aims of the Project were based on the report entitled “Lower Windrush Valley Project” produced in 1999 on behalf of Oxfordshire County Council and Smiths of Bletchington. In 2012 it became clear that a review of the LWVP was required due to many changes in the financial arrangements and the policies since its inception. The environmental consultancy ADAS UK Ltd was commissioned to work with the Project Officer to review the original management plan and the current policies to create an up-to-date vision for the Project and a strategy that will give a succinct description of the aims and objectives for the future and the actions that will help to achieve them. Additional support has been provided by a team from Oxford Brookes University who have undertaken an analysis of other, similar projects whose management and actions could be adapted for use in developing the LWVP into the future.

A Project such as the LWVP cannot progress without input from those who live, work and spend leisure time in the Valley. Thus it was recognised that this work must be effected through consultation with as wide an audience as possible drawn from local residents, businesses and the many people who visit the valley for holiday or pursuit of hobbies and special interests. Talks have been given to the local community by two knowledgeable and respected speakers; meetings have been held with parish councils; engagement has taken place with local businesses through both a meeting and an online survey; and two days of fun nature activities have been held to engage with local families.

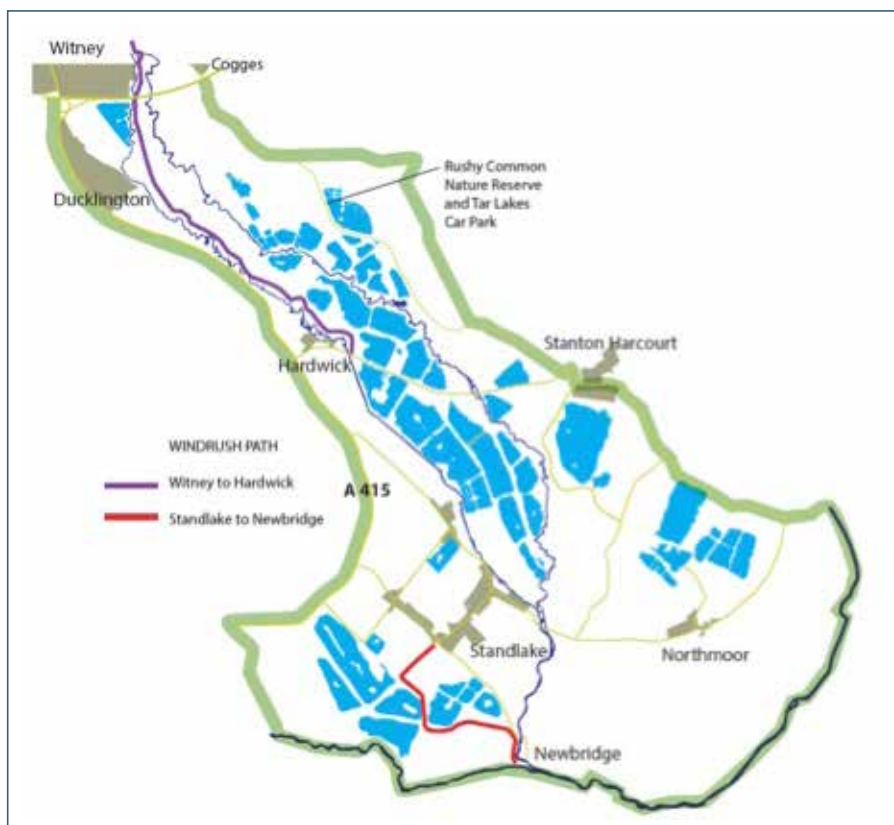


Figure 1: The area covered by the Lower Windrush Valley Project.

1.2. Where is the Lower Windrush Valley Project?

The LWVP covers 2,800 ha (28 sq. km) of West Oxfordshire incorporating the floodplain of the River Windrush from Witney to its confluence with the River Thames at Newbridge (see Figure 1). The Project area covers parts of seven parishes: Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney; Ducklington; Hardwick with Yelford; Northmoor; South Leigh; Standlake; and Stanton Harcourt.

1.3. What is the Lower Windrush Project?

The Project was set up in 2001 to work closely with landowners, mineral operators and the local community within the Lower Windrush Valley (LWV) to co-ordinate, implement and manage improvements in landscape, biodiversity and public access following extensive transformation of the area's landscape through sand and gravel extraction (operated, in recent years, by Smiths Bletchington and Hansons).

The partnership represents the community and geographical remit of the Lower Windrush Valley Project (LWVP). The LWVP is managed by one Project Officer with a steering group composed of the funders, partner agencies and parish councils, as set out below:

- Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) is the project host providing support for all matters relating to staffing, finances and ICT;
- West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC);
- Smiths Bletchington;
- Environment Agency;
- Freshwater Habitats Trust
- OCC Councillor;
- Two representatives from parish councils within the valley.

1.4. Original Aims and Objectives

The initial concept was to deal with the legacy of mineral extraction to put something back into the communities that had been or were being affected by the work. The original strategy for the future management of the Lower Windrush Valley was drawn up by Oxfordshire County Council and Smiths Bletchington in 1999. The aim for the area at this time was to safeguard, maintain and expand the key habitats, landscape features and public rights of way within the project area. Recommendations to help achieve this aim were categorised into nature conservation, landscape and public access objectives. These objectives were as follows:

Nature conservation

- Encourage restoration, maintenance and enhancement of wildlife habitat in existing sites and new restoration proposals with a particular focus on creating linkages between existing areas of good habitat.
- Encourage species diversity within the wider project area.

Landscape

- Strengthen the landscape character of the Project Area by appropriate screening of identified visual detractors and maintenance of traditional landscape management e.g. pollarding willows.

Public access

- Where possible, and without detriment to existing uses and wildlife interests, improve public access to existing lakes, in particular to secure more river and lakeside routes, and to encourage the provision of public access to new areas of sand and gravel working.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

2.1. Background and Current Challenges

2.1.1 Legacy of minerals development

Over the last 60 years the landscape character of the valley has been transformed by intensive mineral extraction and waste disposal, with large areas of the riverside pasture (approximately 40%) transformed into a mosaic of open water. Most of these water-filled gravel pits are largely hidden behind thick hedges and are unavailable to the general public as they are privately owned.

In 1990 WODC produced policy and design guidance for the after-use and associated development of former sand and gravel pits within the area known as the Stanton Harcourt Gravel Area. The key objectives of the policy framework were to: encourage and promote the area for recreational activities which complement its rural character; conserve and enhance the landscape; minimise the impact of after-use proposals; seek improved public access; and protect known sites of nature conservation and archaeological importance.

Since then landscape work has focussed on advice to gravel extraction operators in developing their plans for future extraction and improving the landscape that is the result of current workings. The transformation of the landscape is set to continue into the future as demand for sand and gravel continues; indeed Smiths Bletchington has received planning permission for further extraction at Gill Mill Quarry, to the northwest of the existing pits.

2.1.2 Landownership and access

Land ownership patterns within the valley are complex. A few large holdings control much of the land. These are traditional agricultural estates, land owned by quarrying companies often with tenant farmers, or water sports / leisure companies and clubs with significant holdings centred on lakes. Between the large blocks of land there are smaller private farms, managed by the owner or leased to a tenant. Smallholdings, pony paddocks and gardens complete the mosaic of landownership in the valley. The only countryside in the project area that is in public ownership is Witney Lake and Country Park, which at 14ha covers only 0.5% of the project area (a further 16ha extends north of the LWVP into the centre of Witney).

Landowners mostly work independently; there has been little in the way of landscape-scale coordinated management. Whilst one landowner may predominate in an area, this is rarely total and most public rights of way improvements will impact upon more than one owner. Due to the large number of independent landowners, tenants and managers in the area, public access to the river and other open areas is limited, and circular routes along public rights of way are particularly lacking. Access provision in the form of linear paths or access to sites has nevertheless been secured as a result of legally binding section 106 agreements made between the planning authority (OCC) and developers (mineral and waste companies) during the planning application process; one such s106 agreement resulted in Smiths Bletchington providing a permissive path between Witney and Hardwick which constitutes the northern section of the Windrush Path. The southern section from Standlake to Newbridge runs along existing rights of way. However, the plan to join up these two sections of path is more challenging, due to the complexity of landholdings described above.

The question of public access is a difficult one to reconcile, as recognised by many landowners. For mineral and waste companies, public safety is a major concern; the frequent movement of heavy vehicles is a key factor in limiting access to sites. For water sports and angling interests the main issue is one of maintaining exclusive member benefits. Dogs off leads worrying livestock, littering and misuse of gates and fences are the main concerns raised by farmers. Disturbance, security and trespassing are other landowner concerns.

2.1.3 Long term funding

The annual budget for the Project is in the region of £40k per year, being mostly spent on staff salary and on costs with a small operational budget. Securing long-term funding has been an issue since the beginning of the Project. Initial funding from partner agencies has disappeared and local authority contributions are being progressively cut back. Developer funding resulting from gravel extraction has provided steady base funding, but in future funding may depend on further gravel extraction or building developments which are unknown and not to be relied upon.

Over previous years considerable funding has been secured to implement large scale capital works such as the construction of bird hides and footpath improvements with a small income for the revenue budget to manage these operations. One example of such a specific project was the 2007 Strategic Access Study funded through the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund that no longer exists. Currently there are no such major projects in the pipeline and only very small amounts of income can be generated to contribute to the Project's funds.

2.1.4 Community engagement and ownership

There are various people associated with the Project who volunteer on practical conservation tasks, monitoring mink rafts and recording bird sightings, help in the office or are generally supportive of the aims of the Project. But, at this time, there is no 'Friends of..' group or other type of community group that consistently supports or contributes to the achievements of the Project; all the organisation and management of any activity is the sole responsibility of the LWVP Project Officer.

Consultation with the local communities has established that there is a high level of local awareness about the project and interest in the resources and activities provided through the project. In November 2012 an initial meeting was held with representatives of the local parish, district and county councils. Following that meeting two representatives from parish councils were recruited to the steering group and a standing invitation given to the county councillor. More information about the Project is now shared with parish councils and they receive the Project Officer's report and minutes of the steering group for consideration at their meetings. These papers are also circulated to over one hundred and fifty people on an email circulation list.

The consultation developed through two talks, one by Poul Christensen, former Chairman of Natural England and one by Dr Carolyn Jewell, manager of Nature After Minerals, that set the scene for looking to the future of the Project as a contributor to the bigger picture of nature conservation in the restoration of mineral extraction sites. Meetings with parish councils, businesses and local interest groups have also been well attended and generated lively debate.

2.2. Policy Support for the Project (and for the Project Area)

This section considers how the LWVP fits into national and local plans and policies, and specifically whether these policies adequately support what the Project is trying to deliver. In most cases these policy documents have very similar aims to that of the LWVP, especially at the local level. Indeed some local level documents specifically refer to the importance of the LWVP in terms of its contribution to enhancing BAP priority habitats, green infrastructure and human wellbeing, and seek to support it through developer contributions.

2.2.1 National level policy

The main policy document at a national level is the National Planning Policy Framework (2012) which states that local planning authorities should 'adopt proactive strategies to mitigate and adapt against climate change', and that the planning system should protect and enhance the environment through conservation of valued landscapes, recognition of the value of ecosystem services, and remediating contaminated or derelict land where possible. Other policy documents, such as the Natural Environment White Paper (2011) and Natural England's National Health and Wellbeing strategy (2009) stress the importance of Government, local communities and businesses putting the value of nature at the heart

of decision-making, whilst improving access to a good natural environment in order to improve public health. Specifically dealing with biodiversity, the UK Post 2010 Biodiversity Framework (2012) (which replaces the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and England's biodiversity strategy Biodiversity 2020 (2011) aim to mainstream biodiversity across government and society; shift towards larger scale, integrated landscape management; enhance the benefits to all from biodiversity and ecosystem services; and empower local communities to protect local environments, e.g. through volunteering programmes.

2.2.2 Local level policy

There are numerous policy documents at both county and district level that support the aims of the LWVP. Oxfordshire 2030 (2013) is the strategic planning document for the county over the next 20 years. Of relevance to the LWVP are pledges to collaborate across public, business and voluntary sectors; work with local people to achieve supportive, cohesive and resilient communities; increase people's physical activity; enhance the quality of the natural environment, address flood risk and enhance biodiversity.

The Oxfordshire Minerals and Waste Core Strategy (draft) states that climate change should be taken into account for mineral site restoration projects, and specifically recommends restoring and monitoring public access to sites, increasing flood storage capacity; contributing to the long term conservation of soils; and carrying out ecological monitoring and remediation. OCC's Local Transport Plan 2011-2030 (2012) and the Oxfordshire Rights of Way Management Plan 2014-2024 (draft) seek to increase cycling and walking for local journeys, recreation and health, whilst meeting current and future needs of communities, landowners and the natural environment.

The Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (2012) is one of the first county level BAPs to take a spatial approach, identifying 36 Conservation Target Areas (CTA). The LWVP area contains almost all of the Lower Windrush CTA and part of the Upper Thames CTA. The Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) is a locally based voluntary organisation, one of 47 Wildlife Trusts across the UK. BBOWT's Strategic Plan 2010-2015 (2010) aims to recreate functional and connected ecosystems on a landscape scale, in order to increase their resilience to climate change and other threats to wildlife. Linked to this, the Green Infrastructure Strategy for Oxfordshire (draft) will identify gaps in existing ecological networks, key assets and areas of potential investment.

At a district level, the West Oxfordshire Local Plan (draft) and the Interim West Oxfordshire Green Infrastructure Study (2011) state that the quality, character and distinctiveness of the Lower Windrush Valley will be preserved and enhanced, biodiversity will be enhanced, existing green infrastructure will be protected, and new multifunctional green space will be created. The West Oxfordshire Infrastructure Delivery Plan (draft) states that new development should support the work of the LWVP. WODC's Tourism Strategy 2009-2012 (2009) reveals that tourism is critical to the future prosperity of West Oxfordshire, currently generating £225 million a year to the local economy and supporting 4,000 jobs. Of relevance to the LWVP, WODC co-ordinates marketing activity and campaign work for the Oxfordshire Cotswolds brand which is known to have created significant interest for leisure stays.

3. WHAT MAKES THE LOWER WINDRUSH VALLEY SPECIAL?

3.1. Landscape of the Valley

The LWV lies within the Oxfordshire Regional Character Area of the Upper Thames Vale. This is a linear riverine landscape with a flat, well defined alluvial floodplain. It has a pastoral character with meadows and wet and semi-improved pasture, with remnants of older hedges along some of the parish boundaries, watercourses and roads. The valley is sparsely settled, with few roads and characteristic views across meadows with riverside willows and tree-lined ditches.

The LWV is an extraordinary and in some aspects unique landscape. The recent history of gravel extraction has reshaped

the landscape from an agricultural past to one that is dominated by waterbodies, with an associated impact on people, landscape and wildlife. The large number of new lakes are used for a variety of recreational activities and are one of the key attractions of the valley; a positive legacy of mineral extraction.

The LWV is extremely rich in cultural heritage interest from the Palaeolithic through to the post medieval period, with fascinating examples of paleontological, archaeological and geological history; animal remains and human settlements. Mammoth remains from the interglacial period have been found within the parish of Stanton Harcourt, whilst the valley also contains four Scheduled Ancient Monuments including the Bronze Age Devil's Quoits at Dix Pit south of Stanton Harcourt. Extensive excavations have provided opportunities for detailed research and some restoration activities at this site.

A study by Spiers (2013), working as an intern with the LWVP, provided an independent follow up review of the National River Authorities findings on the River Windrush in the 1990s. Findings showed that the river has a long history of flooding after heavy precipitation events; this has become a greater issue over time as more residents and businesses are now located in the floodplain. Environment Agency data shows a risk of surface water flooding in the north of the project area, particularly to the north of Rushy Common. The risk of flooding from rivers is high or medium across much of the project area, and thus it is largely covered by a flood warning area, including some residential parts of Standlake and Northmoor.

3.2. Ecology of the Valley

Oxfordshire is home to around 80 protected species with more than 200 species recognised as being a priority for conservation, whilst 4% of the land within the county (10,000 ha) retains special value for wildlife, including the Lower Windrush Valley. The Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) in Oxfordshire uses the Conservation Target Area (CTA) approach to deliver priority habitat targets and the LWVP acts as lead organisation for the Lower Windrush Valley Target Area. The LWV is an area of national importance for some rare species and habitats. There are two areas of grassland which have been designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) due to their species diversity; Ducklington Mead which is in private ownership and Langley's Lane Meadow, which is managed by the LWVP within the overall management of the Standlake Common Nature Reserve. There are three wetland areas designated as County Wildlife Sites (CWS): Dix Pit, Vicarage Pit and a disused pit north of Standlake.

Extensive records are available of some of the habitats, especially lakes, ponds and grasslands. The report by the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC) commissioned by the LWVP in 2011, shows that grassland is the predominant habitat in the LWV, representing just under half (1,384 ha) of the total project area. Of this grassland, 76% is 'improved', 9% is 'semi-improved' and 6% is semi-improved but with potential to support greater biodiversity. Less than 1% (15 ha) is currently in good enough condition to qualify as UKBAP Lowland Meadows. Restored sand and gravel pits in the LWV support a particularly diverse wetland plant assemblage compared to others in southern England, as well as being a nationally important area for Stonewort. The Pond Conservation Trust (2005) revealed a total of 122 species of wetland plant in the valley (representing 35% of the wetland plant species occurring in Britain), with 27 of these being particularly uncommon species. It also recorded a total of 191 macro-invertebrate species.

The LWVP is responsible for the management of the Standlake Common Nature Reserve which is in a Higher Level Stewardship scheme with a particular designation for wintering waders and wildfowl as well as the SSSI for lowland meadow. The Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS) shows the Lower Windrush Valley to be of national importance for certain species including Gadwall, Pochard, Tufted Duck and Coot. Reed bunting breed in the reedbed and feed on bird feeders in good numbers in the winter at Standlake Common Nature Reserve. Good numbers of lapwing and starling are recorded in the valley over the winter with occasional curlew and snipe. There are no recent records of successful breeding for the four key waders: lapwing, snipe, redshank and curlew. Marsh harrier have been recorded in the valley occasionally as winter visitors and bittern on a couple of occasions. Recording of other animals is not very comprehensive; common frog, common toad, grass snake, and great crested newt have all been recorded in the valley and there are increasing signs of otter along the river. The water vole reintroduction project run along the Windrush by Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) and Wildcru in 2005 has been very successful so far despite catastrophic population declines in other parts of the country. The LWVP supports this project in principle through promotion and dissemination of information and practically through volunteers who monitor several mink rafts

between Witney and Newbridge.

The Spiers study reported very good water quality in the area examined, but that the catchment has been impacted by gravel pits, housing developments and roads. Fish numbers are reported by some to have declined in recent years, but there is not enough evidence to support these claims at this time. Environment Agency data reveals the stretch of the River Windrush between Little Rissington and the Thames (including the LWV) to be of only moderate ecological quality, though chemical quality is good. In terms of meeting the Water Framework Directive (WFD) target of reaching good ecological quality by 2015, the River Windrush is currently predicted to do so. The Pond Conservation Trust was commissioned by the LWVP in 2004 to undertake a baseline ecological assessment of lakes and ponds, with a subsequent study in 2008 by Nicolet et al finding those in the study area to have very good water quality.

Agri-environment schemes are an important way to deliver high quality land management and there are a number of landowners in the LWV with land covered by these schemes. Environmental Stewardship Agreements in the LWV comprise 405.73 ha under Entry Level schemes and a further 260.36ha under Higher Level schemes. There is also 296.31 ha of land in the LWV under Environmentally Sensitive Area Agreements. The LWVP has additionally supported biodiversity in the project area through: habitat maintenance and supporting the landowner at Standlake Common Nature Reserve with the 2012 HLS agreement; facilitating and recording the results of bird surveys; pond creation; contribution to BAP targets and CTAs; and commissioning the Pond Conservation Trust and TVERC research projects.

The LWVP is nationally and internationally known through its work with Smiths Bletchington, the Mineral Products Association and Nature After Minerals in the restoration of the Gill Mill quarry to create the Rushy Common Nature Reserve and the Tar Lakes amenity site. The location near Oxford gives potential for close links with both Oxford University and Oxford Brookes University for extensive ecological research and project development.

3.3. Socio-economics of the Valley

West Oxfordshire is a predominantly prosperous area. With a population of about 100,000 people and an overall density of around 1.5 persons per hectare, it is one of the most rural districts in the South East. The health of residents is generally better than the England average, however there are pockets of deprivation and the district has an ageing population.

People who live in the valley are generally older and healthier than the average for West Oxfordshire district, and certainly compared to England as a whole. The seven parishes falling within the LWVP also have lower unemployment levels and greater car ownership than the district and country averages, whilst the majority of parishes are very sparsely populated. The area is predominantly white and represented by the Conservative party; the Prime Minister, David Cameron, is the MP for Witney, where WODC is based.

West Oxfordshire has a relatively diverse economy with businesses spread throughout the main towns and rural areas. As stated in WODC's Economic Study, the district's top five employer sectors are: manufacturing; retail; education; professional, scientific and technical industries; followed by health. Accommodation and food and arts, recreation and other services are also significant sectors linked to the district's strengths in tourist and visitor economy. Over 70% of businesses in West Oxfordshire employ fewer than 5 people and typically tend to be small with more home-working and self-employment.

West Oxfordshire has an ageing population with those over 75 years increasing by 24% from 2001 to 2011. The Economic Study revealed that West Oxfordshire has the second highest employment rate of all districts in the South East. The district has a reasonably well qualified workforce with 36.6% of workers qualified to degree level. The average wage for those working in the District is lower than for those living in the District, suggesting that managers and professionals tend to commute to workplaces outside of the district.

Adults in West Oxfordshire are reasonably active and less obese than the national average, however, only 27.7% achieved the target set by Sport England that all adults should achieve at least 30mins of moderate intensity exercise on 5 or more days of the week. Activity levels and obesity in children is a particular problem - in 2008, 13.9% of children measured in Oxfordshire schools at age 10-11 were overweight or obese.

3.4. Access within the Valley

In terms of access for visitors and tourists, there are only a few businesses providing accommodation – 14 in the B&B, pub, self-catering and hotel category, and 7 in the caravan and camping category. However, there is surprisingly large overnight capacity available during the peak holiday period – approximately 291 beds, 885 caravan spots plus pitches for camping, equating to total provision for up to 2,500 people per night. The LWVP has good relations with these providers and the project's leaflets are very popular with visitors.

Much of the valley is privately owned and not publicly accessible unless on a public or permissive footpath. The only places that allow unrestricted public access are Witney Lake and Country Park (owned and managed by Witney Town Council); the Devil's Quoits, and Tar Lakes. Nearly 500 people have access to the two nature reserves; Rushy Common and Standlake Common, through the purchase of a key for the bird hides on the reserves. This key system is administered by the LWVP. Many people access the lakes through private clubs for fishing, water sports, camping and caravanning and lakeside holiday homes.

A number of new or relocated (both temporary and permanent) public rights of way have been agreed with mineral companies in the LWV, totalling 8 miles (13km). The most important of these is the Windrush Path, a new route being created by the LWVP that ultimately aims to provide a path from Witney through the valley to link up with the Thames Path National Trail at Newbridge. The Windrush Path is being developed in stages as new path links are secured through planning agreements associated with mineral sites. Currently the Windrush Path comprises a 3 mile (5km) linear route between Witney and Hardwick, and a 2 mile (3km) linear route between Standlake and Newbridge. The Windrush Path is flat but uneven in places, with several gates along its length and two low stiles in the southern section. The path crosses varied terrain, which can be muddy or flooded after heavy rainfall.

Other public footpaths and bridleways exist in the LWV; the network of paths available to walkers within the project area is 40.9km, and for horse riders is 8.5km. Whilst these figures are fairly good compared to the English average, they fall short of the average provision across Oxfordshire. Crucially, there is a lack of circular routes at present, which may deter some potential users. However, the new car park created by Smiths Bletchington at the Rushy Common Nature Reserve and Tar Lakes site at the Gill Mill quarry complex has greatly improved access to this area and there will be further improvements under the new planning agreement for further gravel extraction northwards towards Witney, that will be completed over the next twenty years. The LWVP has a monitoring role and works with landowners and the County Rights of Way team to maintain a good quality network of paths and to look out for potential new routes.

A Strategic Access and Feasibility Assessment of the rights of way network was commissioned by the LWVP and carried out by Land Access Ltd in 2007. This assessment revealed many barriers that had a significant impact on connectivity. The River Thames restricts access to the area from the south and east for all users, with the River Windrush restricting east to west movement. The A415 largely defines the western boundary of the LWV area; this is a major through route carrying high volumes of traffic. The valley is further bisected by the B4449 road between Hardwick and Stanton Harcourt. Heavy vehicles, high traffic flows and high speeds reduce the utility and amenity value of this road to non-motorised users. To the north the LWVP area is bounded by the A40, an embanked dual carriageway road with high volume of fast moving traffic, however the Windrush Path makes use of an underpass that links the valley to the south with Witney Country Park to the north. In a few places stiles, steps, dilapidated gates and narrow bridges also create barriers to access along individual paths, particularly for people with mobility problems.

The 2007 assessment made a number of proposals for improvement to support the vision of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan, including creating and upgrading footpaths and bridleways, improving access, ensuring realisation of the public access benefits of existing s106 agreements, and enhancing information and signage on promoted routes. Some of these have been completed; others have complex legal, landowner and/or funding issues that may prevent their coming to fruition. Consultation with businesses undertaken as part of the assessment highlighted the importance of good countryside access to the economic welfare of this area and adds weight to arguments for directing resources to improving the access provision.

The LWVP also produces popular information leaflets about the LWV that are regularly distributed through a variety of local outlets. The LWVP additionally facilitates walks and talks for local groups, displays at local events e.g. Wychwood Project Forest Fair and runs a Forum to inform people about the work and progress of the LWVP.

PART 2: ACTIONS TO SECURE THE FUTURE OF THE LWVP

4. FEEDBACK FROM CONSULTATION EVENTS

Various studies carried out across the UK and beyond have shown that health and wellbeing can be improved through greater access to and use of the natural environment. Linked to this, the existing water-filled pits in the project area are used for a range of activities, particularly angling and intensive and low key water sports such as water skiing and sailing, but also for nature conservation and bird watching, and general recreation / leisure uses.

Ongoing feedback suggests great enthusiasm to develop opportunities for children to use the local environment for outdoor recreation and education. Some people also recognise the potential for greater engagement by improving access and developing greater community involvement in practical work or education about the environment.

Specifically in relation to the LWVP, local people have been engaged through a range of consultation events, ranging from meetings with parish councils during 2012-2014, public talks in February and March 2014, a meeting with local businesses, an online survey and family activities, all in May 2014. Suggestions arising from these consultation events include:

Funding and management models

- The LWV needs willing landowners and ready projects to benefit from funding potentially arising through biodiversity offsetting, S106 and CIL from developments across the district and county.
- Future LEADER funding (2015) could be applied for, with a specific focus on economy/employment and emphasis on projects being self-sustaining and contributing to the local economy.
- Local people and local businesses could get involved in running the LWVP, as successfully demonstrated by the Nature Improvement Area (NIA) pilot areas.
- “Friends of” groups have strong community involvement and can take over long term management (possible link with LEPs and LNPs).
- To combine nature with a long-term income generator (e.g. tourism) will bring in money for maintenance.
- Banks and big business are increasingly aware of their need to demonstrate their green credentials and are starting to talk to environmental organisations about joint endeavours.

Biodiversity and land management

- Bird hides and lakes are very popular with local bird watchers and many people are committed to the valley as an excellent resource for birds.
- Need to look at new (or old) ways of managing land to reduce flooding – new catchment partnership hosts funded by the EA may bring interested parties together to carry out joint operations along the whole of the Windrush catchment.
- The River Thames Conservation Trust was begun by landowners concerned about water quality and the lack of good quality wetland floodplain habitat. Working with Freshwater Habitats Trust, with funding from the Environment Agency Catchment Restoration Fund, this is now expanding to develop local activities and an education programme.

Public access

- A post of Access Officer (as proposed in the 2007 Strategic Access Study) could be created in the Lower Windrush Valley to develop routes across the valley to link into the wider area.
- The closure of Stanton Harcourt Road past Rushy Common would greatly benefit walkers/cyclists/horse riders for leisure and tourism, as the main roads are too narrow and dangerous.

- To address local car parking problems, a deal could be made with local pubs whereby visitors pay for parking but get their money back if they buy a drink.
- Families would like to see more way marked walks and walk leaflets.
- There is interest in the development of education projects, with families in particular interested in provision of talks about the local area, wildlife, geology and work with schools.

5. GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

5.1. Future Funding Arrangements

Currently there is a yearly budget of approximately £40k (including £16.5k from OCC, £2k from WODC and s106 funding from Smiths Bletchington) which, if income and spending levels remain the same, will continue to fund the project for another 6 years (until 2021).

Future funding will ideally be obtained from local businesses. The meeting held with local businesses on 9th May at Four Pillars Hotel in Witney revealed enthusiasm about the Project, and one business in particular was interested in supporting the LWVP to improve accessibility for future residents of a retirement village to be developed just off the A40 in Witney.

Payments for ecosystem services (PES) could also be an option. This may include initiatives such as Visitor Payback schemes, biodiversity offsetting, flood alleviation funded by those downstream, and extension of existing agri-environment schemes (the Rural Development Plan England 2014-2020 sets out the New Environmental Land Management Scheme (NELMS) which may be applicable to land owners within the project area).

Other initiatives such as the Green Places Fund, the Landfill Communities Fund (formerly the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme), the Heritage Lottery Fund, the 2015 LEADER Fund, and Charitable Trusts (e.g. through the Directory of Social Change) may be worth further investigation, along with possible Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) contributions (or additional s106 funds) arising from development occurring in West Oxfordshire District.

5.2. Future Governance

Future governance arrangements could include an active steering group that meets more often for day to day management with a more strategic executive committee that meets six monthly, depending on the level of involvement of local people and businesses. It is likely that technical scientific support will be required at various intervals, for example ecologists for undertaking surveys.

5.3. Review of Other Relevant Projects and Organisations

Oxford Brookes Consulting (Duckworth et al., 2014) have undertaken an analysis of other, similar projects whose management and actions could be adapted for use in developing the LWVP into the future. Oxford Brookes Consulting researched a variety of potential national projects before five of the most applicable and appropriate ones were selected. These projects were selected with the LWVP in mind and focused on similar landscapes and the ability to implement the activities and funding grants that will enhance the development of the project and ensure its success moving forward.

A brief summary of the five projects selected and the recommendations made for the LWVP are listed below:

Site 1 - The Nene Valley, Northamptonshire

The Nene Valley is an area of 35.2 miles of land owned by the Nene Valley Trust. The area has a range of activities that are run across the four sites that the Trust manages.

Site 2 - Brockholes, Lancashire

Brockholes is a nature reserve owned by the Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside Trust. The reserve, converted from a quarry, covers 120 acres and it has, in the last 10 years, received a series of grants and funds from environmental organisations.

Site 3 - Cotswold Water Park, Gloucestershire

The Cotswold Water Park is a 40 square mile area with 150 lakes produced as a bi-product of mineral extraction. The park is managed by a trust set up by the four local authorities to coordinate and manage access, conservation, leisure and education.

Site 4 - The River Thames Conservation Project, Buckinghamshire

This is a catchment area much like the Lower Windrush Valley however it is managed very differently. Landowners formed a partnership and have received funding from the government to gain greater expertise with the aim of improving water quality and habitats to increase the biodiversity whilst providing a benefit for the local communities and reducing flooding.

Site 5 - The Wildfowl and Wetland Trust, Carmarthenshire

The Wildfowl and Wetland Trust is an organisation which funds projects for wetland habitat construction and protection. Llanelli Nature Reserve is a previously mined location which the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust has managed and funded due to the presence of wetland and salt marshes.

Overall recommendations for the LWVP based on the review of these five sites are as follows:

- Creation of a charitable trust;
- Establishing a joint committee; and
- Increasing the amount and variety of on-site (educational) activities to attract visitors.

6. ACTION PLAN

6.1. Themes and Objectives

The following themes and objectives have been designed to take the LWVP forwards.

Theme 1 – Nature Conservation and Landscape

- To enhance biodiversity along the riparian corridor and within the River Windrush.
- To identify species for specific support programmes.
- To engage with farmers and landowners to maintain, restore and create priority habitats.
- To carry out landscape scale conservation across the Valley and beyond.
- To help achieve WFD objectives for the River Windrush.
- To engage with farmers and landowners to implement sustainable land management practices.
- To continue to work with Smiths Bletchington and Hansons on the restoration of Gill Mill and Stonehenge Farm for the benefit of people and wildlife.

Theme 2 – Connecting People and Places

- To improve recreation potential along the River Windrush, completing the Windrush Path link with the Thames Path.
- To facilitate the expansion of recreational and sporting activities open to all, including boat hire and picnic and play areas.
- To enhance awareness of the LWVP for encouraging local involvement.
- To form partnerships with specialist organisations to improve the level of understanding about the LWVP's special landscape and biodiversity.

Theme 3 – Economic Growth and Development

- To establish a brand identity for the LWVP.
- To develop joint advertising and partnership with local businesses.
- To promote the valley as a visitor destination for quiet nature based tourism in liaison with businesses catering for visitors.
- To work with WODC to integrate the LWVP in to promotions to help attract new businesses to the area.

6.2. Actions

The following table contains a list of more specific actions relevant to the re-defined objectives of the LWVP. These are classified using the terms, 'Priority', 'Medium Term', 'Aspirational' to indicate whether the action will be commencing in the near future or is a possibility for the more distant future. Partnership working will be essential to deliver these challenging aspirations and some potential delivery partners are included.

These actions may be amended based on further consultation with a wide spectrum of participants from the Valley and beyond. Based on this consultation, an overarching vision will be developed for the LWVP and a strategy document will be produced in 2015 to direct the next stage of the project.

Action	Classification	Delivery	
Theme 1 – Nature Conservation and Landscape			
1	Review Pond Conservation Trust (now Freshwater Habitats Trust) 2004/2008 surveys to inform further improvements to aquatic habitats	Priority	FHT/LWVP/landowners
2	Improve collection and utilisation of all environmental monitoring information to determine work programmes for habitat improvements	Priority	Partner agencies e.g. OOS, FHT, EA etc
3	Identify and establish research projects that will inform additional management programmes for biodiversity	Medium term	As above
4	Identify and develop programmes for targeting conservation of individual species e.g. native black poplar trees	Medium term	As above
5	Enhance links between the Upper and Lower Windrush Valley CTAs	Medium term	In consultation with partner agencies and NGOs
6	Improve management of the Dix Pit Local Wildlife Site to maximise biodiversity	Medium term	In consultation with OCC Minerals and Waste Department and landowners
7	Establishment of a clear biodiversity strategy for the area that reaches out to encourage and support engagement from private landowners wherever possible	Medium term	Consultation as above

8	Investigate the possibility of working with BBOWT to include the LWVP as part of their Living Landscape vision	Aspirational	LWVP, BBOWT
9	Create additional coastal and floodplain grazing marsh BAP priority habitat along the River Windrush	Aspirational	LWVP, Nature After Minerals, landowners
Theme 2 – Connecting People and Places			
1	Extend and improve the network of footpaths and bridleways especially the Windrush Path and circular routes	Priority	LWVP, Smiths Bletchington, landowners, local walkers
2	Improve and update all channels of communication e.g. website and leaflets, interpretation boards	Priority	LWVP, local communities
3	Continue to develop engagement with the local community	Priority	LWVP, parish councils, Age Concern etc
4	Develop volunteer input to the project on activities ranging from practical conservation work to office support and possibly a 'Friends of the LWV'	Priority	LWVP, local community and interest groups
5	Work with local schools to increase the use of Rushy Common Nature Reserve and Tar Lakes and outdoor education across the valley	Medium term	LWVP, schools, colleges, universities
6	Improve access to and walks round the Devil's Quoits, Dix Pit and Stanton Harcourt	Medium term	LWVP, landowners and operators , OCC Minerals and waste planning department
7	Set up a programme of family based events throughout the year	Medium term	LWVP
8	Increase the number of bridleways and upgrade footpaths where possible	Aspirational	OCC Planning department, Countryside Service and landowners
9	Establish a management group of local people to help run the Project	Aspirational	LWVP, local people
10	Consider raising the height of the rights of way using gravel extracted on-site or improving drainage of the paths using irrigation systems or biodiverse SuDS schemes to avoid waterlogging	Aspirational	

Theme 3 – Economic Growth and Development

1	Local environmental contractors engaged in top quality site and habitat management	Priority	LWVP, local contractors
2	Establish local business partners	Priority	LWVP
3	LWVP becomes established as a priority for CIL/s106 funding	Medium term	LWVP with WODC planners
4	The valley is actively promoted as a visitor destination for quiet nature based tourism	Medium term	WODC/LWVP/ local visitor based businesses
5	Support rural businesses e.g. pubs, campsites, B&Bs	Medium term	LWVP, Local businesses
6	To work with WODC to promote the value of the valley in attracting new businesses to the area	Aspirational	LWVP, WODC, local business support organisations
7	Build an educational research centre to attract local, regional and national students	Aspirational	LWVP, WODC, OCC and education providers
8	Promotion of valley as a centre of excellence in restoration practice by gravel extraction operators, to attract visitors, other gravel extraction companies and research students	Aspirational	LWVP with Smiths and Nature after Minerals

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