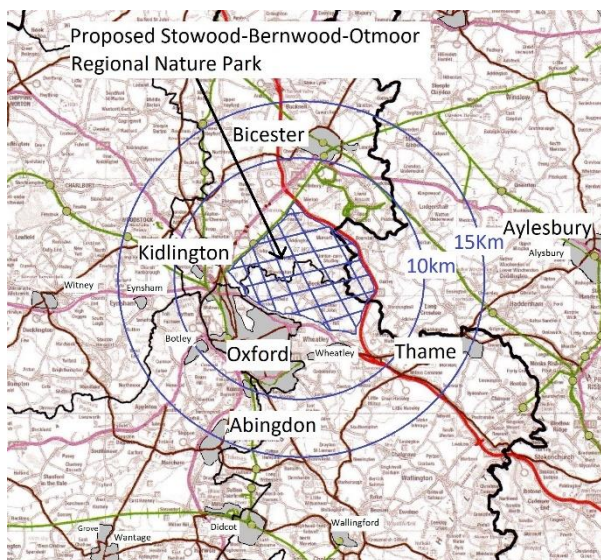


Regional Nature Park for Oxfordshire in the 'Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor' Area

New vision: a strategic Countryside Leisure and Wildlife Area

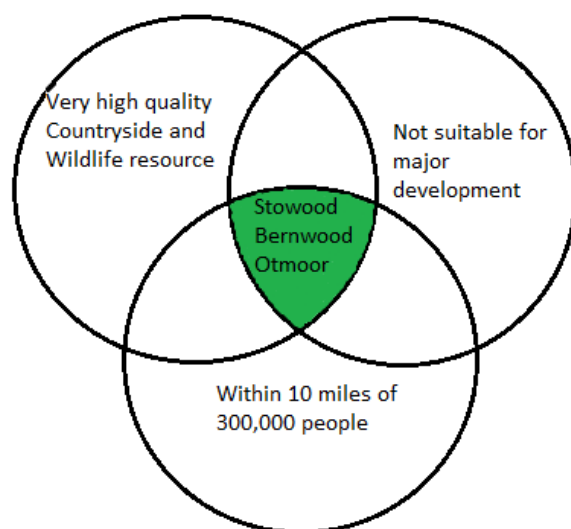


The proposal is for the area roughly bounded by the M40, A40 and the Oxford-Bicester railway to be recognised as a Nature Park in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire's Statutory Development Plans starting with the Oxfordshire Plan 2050.

It would be implemented by a cross-boundary (District and County) **Area Action Plan** and co-ordination with other public organisations.

The Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor Area is uniquely suitable for a role as a Regional Biodabundance Park because it is:

- a high quality countryside leisure and wildlife resource, deeply rural, low population density, attractive to visitors and with potential to significantly benefit wildlife
- able to contribute to climate change CO2 targets because the Area is
 - well located to provide sustainable transport access to high-quality Countryside Leisure- the best placed in the County.
 - able to deliver land management changes that increase carbon capture of the soil
- unsuitable for other strategic land uses, i.e. major housing, transport or employment. Developing it for Countryside Leisure and Wildlife uses an otherwise under-used resource
- accessible to those usually excluded by poverty, and to those with high potential to derive mental health benefits, through proximity to deprived wards



Unique opportunity to deliver significant social, environmental and economic benefits to Oxfordshire:

<p>Social benefits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Better mental health through improved access to tranquil countryside, fulfil ‘activity’ Doctors’ prescriptions• More equitable access to landscape and countryside since the Leisure and Wildlife Area is close to population centres, and with improved sustainable transport.• Increased percentage of population benefiting from countryside recreation• Benefits of Countryside Leisure available to people in three of Oxford’s most deprived wards: Barton, Northway and Cutteslowe
<p>Environmental benefits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Significant contribution to CO2 Climate Change target<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Impact on reducing transport derived carbon dioxide by providing countryside recreation closer to population centres; and reducing NOX○ Opportunities for carbon capture through woodland and wetland and permanent meadow creation• Significantly better delivery of biodiversity protection and increase through<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ minimizing development impact○ managing public access to sensitive habitats○ more effective habitat restoration and creation in ideal conditions with easy invertebrate colonisation through location by existing habitats○ linking existing habitats to create larger species populations more resilient to climate change.○ controlling light pollution and therefore protecting large bat population• Conserved and improved landscape and views
<p>Economic benefits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attracting businesses and skilled workers to Oxfordshire because it is a more desirable place to live because of easy access to high quality countryside• More holiday and travel expenditure by Oxfordshire residents staying in Oxfordshire through providing nearby Countryside accessible by sustainable transport• New jobs and investment in tourism businesses as Countryside recreation increases• New employments away from centre of Oxford• More viable rural businesses including farms through diversifying and increasing turnover
<p>Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Changing transport infrastructure<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ making roads more cycle and pedestrian friendly, cycle friendly traffic calming, safer junctions for cycles, implementing ‘Quiet’ Lanes○ securing bridleway extensions to improve access to the Leisure and Wildlife Area and linking to Oxford Parkway rail station○ provision of new bus services and links with rail and Oxford bus hubs○ limiting peak-time rat-runs through the Regional Nature Park• Securing buy-in by landowners for Water Park and habitat creation and restoration

The Area Action Plan delivers through policies, funding and co-ordination

It does this by:

- protective and restrictive policies
- policies to support development of sustainable tourism businesses and habitat restoration
- releasing from development elsewhere in the County via s106 and CIL mechanisms for:
 - countryside infrastructure, sustainable transport, and landscape improvements
 - access agreements
 - biodiversity projects
 - Land for public projects- many Oxfordshire developers own land in the Area
- co-ordinate Transport and Land Use Planning to support, for example:
 - the development of sustainable transport links (for example week-end and holiday bus services, rail and bus co-ordination at Islip, improved speed humps and junctions for cyclists etc),
 - new tourism business (Cycle hire, refreshments, over-night stays, wildlife safari) ,
 - restoration and creation of habitats (including as part of riverside tourism),
 - protection of dark skies through lighting policies for roads and tourism development,
 - new cycle-friendly bridleways and footpaths giving direct access to high-quality quiet countryside (for example from Kidlington and North Oxford via Sparsey Bridge).
 - Creation of Cherwell riverside Tourism area

The area also needs protecting

Without the protection of an Area Action Plan or similar planning policies, the resource of Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor will be degraded by inappropriate development and tourism. The biggest risks come from new roads and housing within the area that degrade its deep rural nature, make the roads unsuitable for cycling and walking and mar the views within and out of the area. Likely rising general traffic levels and 'rat-running' would further reduce the quality of visitor experience and increase NOX damage to vulnerable habitats.

Without steps to manage recreational use traffic, parking and nuisance problems will increase. This is likely to lead to restriction of public access to RSPB Otmoor and other reserves. All the Priority habitats are particularly susceptible to trampling resulting from unregulated access.

Both the quietness and darkness is likely to be lost, impacting susceptible protected species such as bats. Habitats would be broken up into smaller less viable units. Soil water levels would be changed, damaging rare wet meadow, fen and wet woodland habitats.

Using a high quality Countryside Leisure and Wildlife resource

The Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor is highly attractive for day and short-stay visitors because of its:

- diverse and historic landscapes in a compact area 10km square
- deep rural-ness, with a low population density, and no major roads
- stunning views
- wooded landscape helping it to absorb higher numbers of visitors
- Historic unspoilt villages
- Existing tourism businesses

Great landscape variety

Visitors find a great deal of landscape variety in a small area, making any day visit particularly enjoyable:

Otmoor with 'big sky' views, marsh, reed beds and open water, grazed by cattle and sheep, and with a sense of deep rural-ness, and rare bird watching opportunities such as the Starlings 'murmuration' and Turtle Doves. Historically Otmoor was common grazing land surrounded by ancient woodland and small enclosure pasture fields.



Otmoor-cattle on RSPB reserve



Otmoor from Beckley Park

Bernwood- with its large woodlands, wet meadows and late enclosure hedges and green lanes, and sense of remoteness Bernwood is the remnant of a Saxon Royal Hunting Forest.



Green-wing orchids in the Bernwood meadow of a BBOWT reserve.



Green Lane public right of way with Bernwood Forest in background

Stowood – with hills over 90m contour, extensive views in all directions including to the Chilterns, with ancient woodlands and 18th century small enclosure fields, providing an experience of reveal as views open up and close along any journey.



Woodeaton valley glimpsed between woods, typical Stowood internal view



View over Bernwood to the Chilterns and Brill, one of many views out to surrounding hills

- **Cherwell floodplain**- with riverside views against the backdrop of the Stowood hills. Historically with was permanent water meadows, cut for hay with follow-on grazing



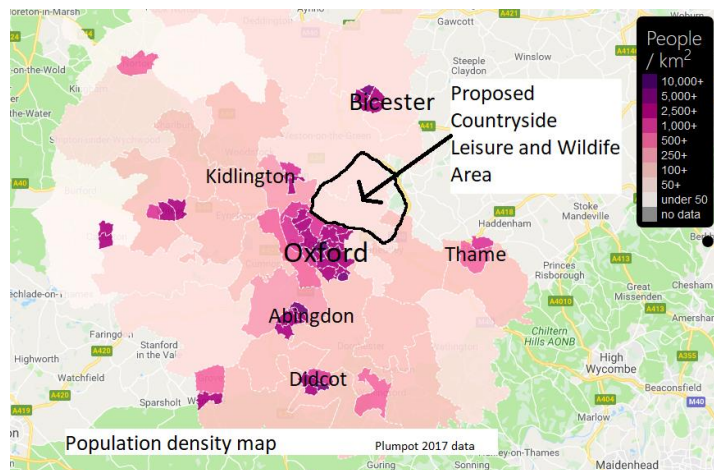
River Cherwell and willow lined ditches



Footpath to Woodeaton with Stowood hills in the distance

Deep rural-ness, with low population density and lack of A-roads

The sense of deep rural-ness is greatly enhanced by the low population density, the lowest adjacent to Oxford.



The map understates how rural the Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor area is because the census medium output area used includes large villages outside the Area- Horspath and Middleton Stoney. The low population density is significantly less than most of Oxfordshire, and is as low as the more remote parts of the Chilterns and Cotswolds AONBs.

A major contributor to the visitor's experience of deep rural-ness is the lack of trunk or A-roads, and with only 2 stretches of B-roads. This makes the Area much more attractive to walkers and cyclists because of the lack of major roads to cross- a barrier to movement shown by research. The lack of traffic (outside rush hour) makes the roads suitable for other road users; electric bikes, cycles and pedestrians. The Area is already very popular with road cyclists including for competitions and sponsored rides. **The area is host to thousands of cycling trips a year.**



Road cycle competition in the Area



Solo road cyclist on the area's quiet roads

Stunning views at every turn

Stunning views are all over the Area because of the steep hills and high ground and the unspoilt countryside. See earlier in the report for examples. The view of international importance is that of the historic core of Oxford in its historic context of agricultural fields framed by woodland, from Elsfield:



Here is a small selection of views from the area



Capacity for more visitors delivered by sustainable transport

The Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor Area is well-wooded unlike much of Oxfordshire (which has only 4% cover of woodland compared to lowland England's 8%). Not only is this a very attractive contrast to much of Oxfordshire, it means that the landscape has capacity to absorb walking and cycling visitors without feeling too crowded.

The villages are attractive, with ancient churches (for example Woodeaton with wall paintings) and old cottages; all have limited or no post 1950 development and have appealing historic cores, many with shops and pubs.



Beckley's Community owned pub and restaurant



Woodeaton church - medieval wall paintings

There are existing tourism and recreation businesses including

- Pubs at Islip, Charton, Stanton St'John, Forest Hill, fine dining at The Nut Tree, Murcott, and a Community Pub Abingdon arms in Beckley
- horse riding from various stables
- two very large nature reserves with significant visitor use, car parks, public access and events- RSPB Otmoor and Forestry Commission Bernwood.
- A retreat centre (Stanton House)
- Farm shop and Pick Your Own Rectory Farm Stanton St.John
- Farm Shop Pegtop Farm, Woodeaton
- Village shop in Stanton St. John ,and Community shop and Cafe in Islip



Historic village street with Otmoor in the distance



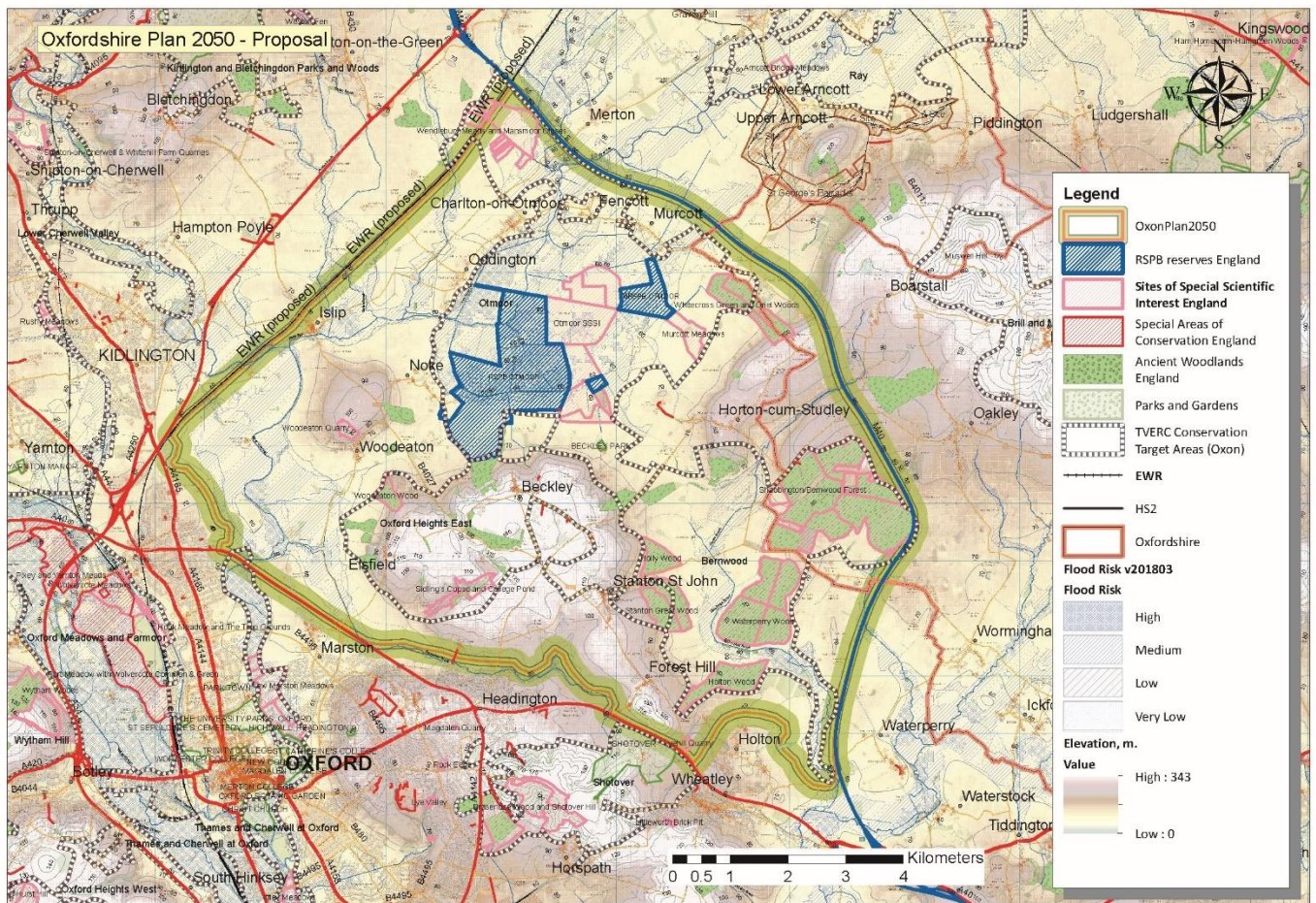
Farm Sales at Pegtop Farm, near Woodeaton

Unusually high concentration of wildlife

The wildlife value of the proposed Regional Nature Park is very high, and no other part of Oxfordshire (away from the National Nature Reserves and European designated sites) has such a high hectareage of designated sites (SSSIs and Local wildlife sites), irreplaceable habitats (ancient woodlands and plantations on former ancient woodland), priority habitats (oak woodland, wetland, acid grassland, calcareous grassland, heath) and priority species (including rare butterflies and bats) and nature reserves. English Nature, in the 1990s, declared the area a regional biodiversity hotspot.

The lack of major settlements and roads further raises the wildlife value as they act as a barrier to wildlife and are a source of disturbance through light, noise and illegal dumping.

In recognition of this high concentration of wildlife 65% of the Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor is designated as Area Conservation Target Areas (CTA), the largest contiguous area outside the Cotswolds. CTAs are protected under the National Planning Policy Framework as part of an ecological network.

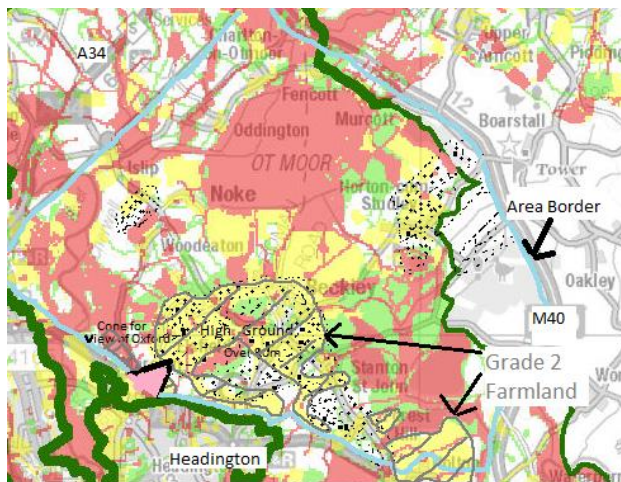


Unsuitable for major housing, transport or employment development

The Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor area, because of its high environmental value, flooding risk and poor road access, is not suitable for any other strategic development apart from Countryside Leisure and biodiversity.

Environmental concerns limit development

Environmental concerns exclude over 90% of the area from development. Land Use Consultants, in their Scoping Report for the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Sustainability Appraisal, identified 80% of the proposed Regional Nature Park as environmentally sensitive. Half of the remaining 'insensitive' land is above 90m and too prominent to be suitable for major development. Add in the view cone to protect the view of the Historic core of Oxford in its rural agricultural surrounding, and there are no stretches of land suitable for 500 or more houses. The LUC approach did not include a buffer zone around wildlife sites and ecological networks.



Map from the Draft SA scoping report 2019. Red is high, Yellow is Medium, Green is low.

Land over 90m is stippled, and the vital resource of Grade 2 farmland is highlighted. Protection of Grade 1 and 2 land is vital for an uncertain future where we will need to feed ourselves. It is the 'best, most versatile land' and only covers 17% of farmland in England. Arguably the land between high wildlife sites should be in the 'Medium' category as they are covered by the NPPF as part of an ecological network

There are significant transport barriers to major development

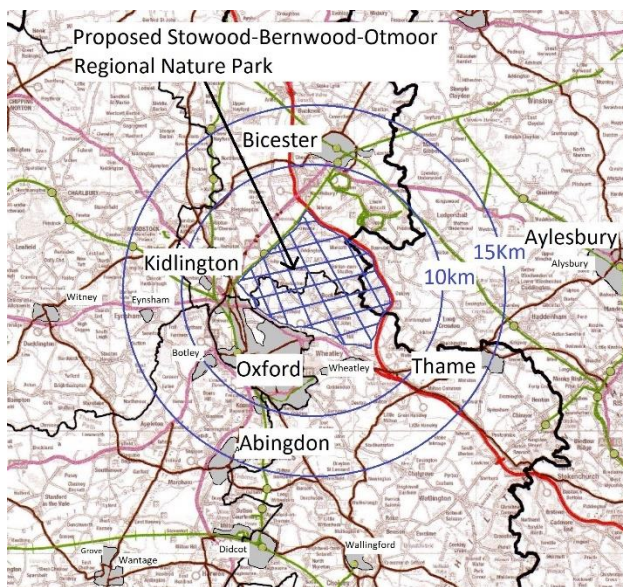
There are significant barriers to creating more road access for non-leisure strategic development in the proposed Countryside Leisure and Wildlife Area. From the West there are four barriers: the floodplain, the River Cherwell and River Ray, the Bicester Oxford railway line and the A34. The only vehicle access from the West is through Islip's narrow streets (already at capacity at peak times). Islip's narrow bridge further limits access. To the North the Ray and its floodplain continues as a barrier and is joined by the M40. The four road crossings over the M40 to the north are on small country roads that go through historic villages. To the East there is more flood risk areas and narrow country roads going through villages. To the South the Oxford Northern by-pass and roads into Oxford are at capacity in peak times.

Able to significantly contribute to climate change CO2 targets

The best opportunity in the County to provide sustainable transport access to countryside leisure

To meet our Climate Change targets we are going to have to reduce our travel. Countryside recreation and walks, mostly accessed by car, is the single most popular recreational activity in England.

The Regional Nature Park would make a significant contribution to reducing travel distances in and from Oxfordshire by providing areas of deep attractive Countryside near where people live as an alternative to longer car journeys to AONBs and National Parks.



The Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor area is the closest deeply rural area to the urban population of Oxfordshire. 330,000 people live within 10 miles of the centre of the proposed Area. This makes it ideal for day-trips by electric bike, rail (at Islip) and bus for the less fit, and by cycle and foot for the more active, and therefore likely to prompt a travel mode change from cars.

In contrast the AONBs are at the periphery of Oxfordshire, away from population centres, and therefore involving more car travel, and more difficult to give sustainable transport access, and achieve mode change from cars.

CO2 capture through Biodiversity action

The Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor Area has many opportunities to return land to uses that capture carbon (in contrast to current modern farming techniques); restoration of woodland, wetland and peat, hay meadow, and the putting down of land to permanent pasture for horses. Recent research shows that the amount of CO2 captured is considerable.

High potential for new leisure and biodiversity projects.

Countryside leisure

Countryside based leisure is both popular (Sports Council 2018 survey- walking most popular 'active recreational activity') and beneficial for mental health. Walks and working on wildlife sites and access projects are now prescribed by Doctors. Implementing the vision for the Regional Nature Park will improve the access, facilities and experience of the area, while enhancing local businesses.

The Area Action Plan can co-ordinate initiatives to improve the Countryside leisure on offer. It can co-ordinate the County's Transport Plan, planning policies, the County's Countryside Service and Highways, District Council facilities (Toilets) provision, the work of DEFRA on Farm Support, the Environment Agency and the work of the major biodiversity organisations with visitors (RSPB, Forestry Commission, and BBOWT).

Planning policies can support the work of other agencies (for example DEFRA and its farm support payments scheme) and local authorities to support improved facilities. Examples include toilet provision, information boards, cafes, existing and new pubs serving food, farm tourism businesses, bed and breakfast, holiday lets, pick-your-own, cycle hire, electric bicycle charging posts, boat and canoe hire, biodiversity attractions like wetland and wildfowl areas and bird hides. The proposals for a new regime for farmer support is to link payments to activities that improve visitor experience, particularly landscape and foot and bridlepaths.

Improving access to countryside leisure opportunities

Sustainable access to Otmoor and Bernwood is an issue as currently car access is limited by parking and access roads through narrow village streets. This could be provided by Recreational trip bus services (weekends, holidays and summer evenings) linking to the railway station at Islip and the bus network at the JR hospital, for example, or extension of the 'Dial-a-ride service' could transform car overuse.

Improved cycle access, and electric cycle charging could significantly improve the cycling experience. Examples of road changes would be provision of cycle friendly speed reduction in the villages, changed junctions to help cyclists, better warning signs for motorised users of cyclists crossing the b-road, signposting circular routes and destinations (such as the Otmoor reserve) for cyclists, and designations of 'Quiet Lanes'. Where suitable lanes are absent, Cycle-only paths from the main population centres would also have a significant impact on leisure cycle access.

There is scope to create better and more circular routes for cyclists and horse riders. Examples include bridging the small gap in the Bridleway between Marston and Elsfield via Sescut Farm, and the short gap in the route from Woodeaton to Beckley.

Pedestrian access could be improved with walking leaflet trails, signage to destinations with walking time, improved surfacing on key access routes, and the designation of 'Quiet Lanes'. New footpaths could be created- either designated or permissive, to create circular walks of different length and grade (of effort). New more direct footpaths from Park and Rides and Oxford Parkway would be desirable.

A more ambitious scheme would be to create cycle access from the Water Eaton Park and Ride and Oxford Parkway railway Station via Sparsey Bridge across the Cherwell River, to Woodeaton. This would give access to the proposed Regional Nature Park from Cutteslowe, Kidlington (with its new housing areas by Yarnton) and the new housing areas of Oxford's Northern Gateway, and the frequent rail services from the Station.



Sparsey Bridge over the Cherwell, adequate to take a cycleway



Footpath from Sparsey Bridge to Woodeaton, could take a cycleway

The benefit of a co-ordinated plan of improvements concentrated in one compact varied area is that there is positive feedback loop- as better facilities are developed, more people will visit and spend more time in the area, further improving the viability of services and prompting further investment.

Can secure resilience to Climate change and significant increase in biodiversity of the area

Because of the unique high concentration of larger habitat blocks close to each other, and the low level of settlement and traffic with high levels of darkness, the area is very suitable for delivering significant improvements to biodiversity and providing resilience to Climate Change.

Concentrating on reserves has failed to halt the alarming decline in Biodiversity in England, and Biodiversity conservation action now aims to save wildlife at a landscape scale. The Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor Area is ideal to achieve this aim. This has been acknowledged by Local Authorities, the RSPB and the local wildlife Trust BBOWT. 65% of the area is Conservation Target Area with planning policies to protect it. BBOWT has included much of the proposed Area in their priority 'Living Landscapes' to secure significant benefits for wildlife- one of only two in Oxfordshire. The RSPB have a similar initiative 'Futurescapes' which covers Otmoor and the Ray and Cherwell Valley. Improvements would be to existing habitats, restoration and creation of lost habitat, and linking habitats to help more mobile species with large feeding areas, such as bats or insects that need more than one habitat for their life cycle.

This landscape-scale work can be through improved management, for example of the ancient woodland and former ancient woodland and semi-improved grassland meadow, and of the hedgerows.

The restoration and creation of habitats in this area has a much higher chance of success than elsewhere because it can be adjacent to existing priority habitats, making it more likely they share soil and water regime conditions, and making it possible for the invertebrates to extend their range over the new habitat.

Larger wildlife reserves have larger populations of wild species which are more resilient to environmental variability likely with Climate Change. The proposed Regional Nature Park has many opportunities to link nature reserves into larger units and the reserves and priority habitats are close together.

Cherwell riverside and wetland wildlife and recreational Park

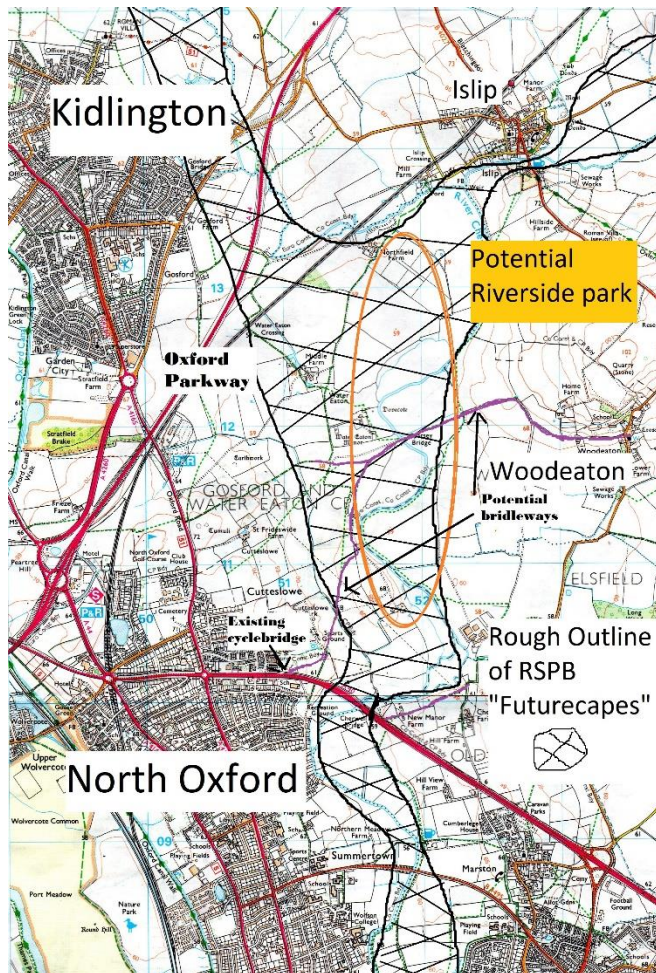
An ambitious project is the creation of riverside activities and attractions along the River Cherwell. This area is currently not easily accessed and holds few attractions because of the highly farmed landscape. However there is scope to improve access to the River for leisure pursuits and, with the high water table, create wetland wildlife attractions and restored wildflower flood meadows.



River Cherwell at proposed Riverside Park



Former water meadow with Stowwod Hills



Location of potential Riverside Park on the River Cherwell, North of Oxford



Possible actions and results (from Great Fen, Cambridgeshire)

is

The area is adjacent to three areas of deprivation in Oxford-Barton, Northway and Cutteslowe

The proposed Regional Nature Park is adjacent to the wards of high deprivation at Barton, Northway and Cutteslowe, providing good access to deep Countryside for those usually excluded. Barton is in the top 10% of wards nationally in terms of multiple indices of deprivation.

(From Cutteslowe there is footpath access over the footbridge over the A40 into the proposed Regional Nature Park and via Sparsey Bridge over the Cherwell to Wooddeaton centre of the Area).

Conclusion

The Regional Nature Park Stowood-Bernwood-Otmoor can have the strategic role for Oxford, Kidlington, Abingdon and Bicester that the Peak District has for Manchester and Sheffield- an accessible, walkable, protected 'lung' adding quality to many lives and securing bioabundance in the face of Climate Change