Parish Nature Recovery Survey Report

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AGILE INITIATIVE | OXFORD MARTIN SCHOOL | UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery

A survey of Oxfordshire parishes that received Treescape Opportunity Reports;

Spring 2023

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Executive summary

Oxfordshire Treescape Project have been delivering Treescape Opportunity Reports to parish groups since October 2021. Since then the range of resources offered and our ways of working have developed. In April 2023 a survey was sent to the 76 parish groups that had viewed our Opportunity Maps (the majority as pdf Reports, but some in addition or solely as interactive maps on the Land App), the aim of which was to understand what resources for nature recovery are already at parish councils' disposal; how useful different resources provided by OTP have been; what would most help parishes move forward with nature recovery planning and activities.

Responses were received from representatives of 18 parish groups. Of these, 13 had or were considering a Neighbourhood Plan (NP) within their parish. Nine of these 13 thought it likely or very likely that their NP would support nature recovery in the parish, highlighting that NPs could be a key tool for parishes in nature recovery.

The key theme to emerge was the importance of human connection: the difficulty of engaging with landowners came through strongly, as did the value of volunteers, connections with other groups such as neighbouring parishes and discussions with the Oxfordshire Treescape Project team. Respondents who had good relationships with local landowners described them as among their greatest strengths, but the majority wanted better guidance on how to approach them. Volunteers are highly valued, but respondents felt that volunteers lacked time.

The most used and influential OTP resources were discussions with the team, introductions to relevant people or organisations and the maps, in Opportunity Reports and in the Land App. The maps within the Opportunity Reports were the most used and most useful sections, being used to plan nature recovery and share ideas with parish councils. Some respondents felt that the maps could be improved in terms of accuracy and level of detail.

On the basis of this survey, it is recommended that OTP:

- Explore how to support parishes further in including nature recovery in Neighbourhood Plans;
- Develop resources for engaging with landowners, including a section in the Getting Started Guide;
- Create more opportunities for parish groups to meet in order to share experiences and develop local collaborations;
- Ensure that all OTP resources are available to all parish groups;
- Continue to supply Land App maps and Opportunity Reports, while managing expectations as to what they cover.

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Introduction

[Oxfordshire Treescape Project](#) (OTP) was established in 2020 to:

- address concerns about how to balance the government's ambitious tree planting schemes with nature recovery and food production;
- share knowledge about interventions which deliver natural benefits with farmers, landowners and communities;
- help to build better resilience into the farmed and natural landscape as the climate changes;
- facilitate new ideas about landscape scale thinking which are vital to help create ecological corridors so wildlife can move across the landscape.

While 74% of the Oxfordshire landscape is farmed, parishes are not only a useful size at which to think about landscape scale nature recovery, but they also have an existing role in the local planning system which can be adapted to make a framework for local nature recovery planning and through associated community activities can become a focus to help deliver stronger community cohesion and health and wellbeing benefits.

Since 2020 OTP has worked with stakeholders to develop accessible knowledge sharing and since 2021 worked with parish councils to consider nature recovery planning, using mapping as a tool to focus nature recovery planning. At the time of the survey 76 individual [Treescape Opportunity Reports](#) covering 88 parishes had been issued, with ca 40 parishes accessing our maps in an interactive format via the [Land App](#) (the majority also having an Opportunity Report). Maps and reports are tools in nature recovery, not the end in itself; OTP has been and continues to explore how these and other tools support parishes in nature recovery efforts, and what more they need.

OTP wanted to further our understanding as to what ways of working and resources are most effective in supporting parishes with nature recovery planning. In particular, to understand what parish councils need to get started in this area, as our experience is that lack of confidence and knowing where to start is often a significant barrier.

At the same time, researchers from University of Oxford's [Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery](#) and [Oxford Martin School Agile Initiative](#) working on nature recovery and nature-based solutions were interested in potential synergies and tensions between ecological and social dimensions of the debates concerning nature recovery.

To this end, a survey was devised collaboratively which aimed to understand:

- what resources for nature recovery are already at parish councils' disposal;
- how useful different resources provided by OTP have been;
- what would most help parishes move forward with nature recovery planning.

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Methods

The survey was sent to 101 recipients, all of whom had received a Treescape Opportunity Report or accessed the information via the Land App; the recipients represented a total of 88 parishes covered by 76 separate reports (one report covered 12 parishes, which for the purposes of this survey is treated as a single parish). Invitations were sent ca two weeks before the deadline for participation.

We received 18 responses, each representing a different parish. This gives a response rate of 17.8% in terms of respondents, but a response rate of 20% in terms of parishes that had received the reports.

Key themes

What resources for nature recovery are most valued by parish councils?

General
Neighbourhood Plans
13 of the respondents had, or were considering, a Neighbourhood Plan (NP; Q7). Nine of the 13 thought it likely or very likely that their NP would support nature recovery (Q8), highlighting that NPs could be a key tool for parishes in nature recovery. A useful suggestion for improving resources was to "be aware of neighbourhood plans, made and in progress of being made / renewed" (Q16).

Support from volunteers, community groups, district and parish councillors
17 of the 18 respondents had engaged with these groups and rated them at 3.5 or above. Community groups scored the highest (4.4) of any demographic. This correlates with nine of the respondents describing "volunteers" as one of their parish's greatest strengths or assets. Neighbouring parishes also scored highly, but with slightly fewer respondents (n=13) having engaged with them.

Land and nature
Existing spaces for nature and potential spaces for nature recovery were two key themes in the parish's greatest strengths or opportunities for nature recovery (Q17), while landowner engagement and lack of land were cited as key challenges (Q18). Respondents are keenly aware that collaboration with those making management decisions on land is important, but challenging (see section 2).

Provided by OTP
Supportive listeners
Respondents rated "Discussions with the OTP team" and "introductions to other individuals or organisations for support" as the most useful resources provided by

OTP (Q11), showing the importance of personal connection. Respondents said that discussions with the OTP team had supported them with identifying nature recovery opportunities, planning nature recovery activities and in engaging with the parish council, community groups, neighbouring parishes and the district or county council (Q12 and 13).

Opportunity mapping

After the OTP team and introductions, the Land App maps, opportunity report and story map ranked the highest in terms of influence on nature recovery activities (Q11), and were the most influential resources in identifying nature recovery opportunities (Q12, 13), and in engaging with a range of stakeholders (fig 12). When asked to select ways in which different resources had supported nature recovery, the Opportunity Reports had the highest total, with the 18 respondents identifying 61 ways in which the Reports had helped (Q12), highlighting the importance of these resources. Within the Reports, the maps of existing natural assets, treescape opportunities and opportunity benefits were considered most useful (Q14).

What would most help parishes move forward with nature recovery planning?

Guidance on engaging landowners / managers / farmers

A recurring theme was the challenge of working with landowners. This included difficulty in accessing materials to support working with them (Q10) and a perception that this demographic is not supportive of the parish's nature recovery efforts (Q9).

However, four respondents included supportive land managers / farmers as one of their parish's greatest strengths, whereas ten cited "landowner engagement" as one of their greatest challenges. This is in line with a comment that "It has become apparent how dependent on a few people we are for food and the environment" – the farming sector has huge potential to deliver nature recovery, which is recognised by the parishes (14 of the 18 respondents had approached farmers; Q9), but there is a lack of confidence in how to engage them (Q9, 10), evidenced by statements such as the parish's greatest challenge being "connection to landowners" and "We own very little land so most nature recovery in the parish is by negotiation with landowners". When engagement works, there is great potential for impact, but it is challenging to generate that engagement.

Surprisingly, when asked directly what resources would be most useful only three respondents cited more support in working with landowners (Q19), e.g. "Specific advice on how to talk to landowners who might be resistant to change" and "Advice and guidance on how to approach [local landowners]".

Volunteer engagement, resources

Volunteers provide the ideas, energy and manpower to enact projects; they are essential to the success of parish nature recovery efforts. As with farmers, whose influence on the management of such large areas of land also makes them essential to nature recovery, volunteers are seen as huge assets, but they are in short supply.

This is evidenced by "community groups", i.e. volunteer groups, ranking highest for the level of support they provide to nature recovery efforts (Q9).

Links with other groups

Introductions to relevant individuals / organisations were rated as having a strong influence (Q11), helping with the planning of nature recovery activities and supporting engagement with parish councils, community groups and neighbouring parishes (Q12, 13). In response to what resources or support they would like to have more of, four respondents mentioned interactions with other local groups or parishes, either to share experiences and knowledge, or to make coherent nature recovery plans with neighbouring parishes.

Proposed actions

Based on the survey results, Oxfordshire Treescape Project propose working towards the following:

- Consider how to better support parish groups in working with landowners, e.g. an expanded section on working with landowners in the Getting Started Guide, creating opportunities for parish groups to share experiences of working with landowners with each other, develop case studies of successful and innovative ways that parish groups and landowners can collaborate.
- Explore how to support parishes further in including nature recovery in Neighbourhood Plans;
- Explore how best to support parish groups in engaging and retaining volunteers;
- Create more opportunities for parish groups to meet in order to share experiences or develop local collaborations;
- Ensure that all OTP resources are available to all parish groups;
- Continue to supply Land App maps and Opportunity Reports, while managing expectations as to what they cover.
- Continue to connect parishes with other actors (NGOs etc) who can offer expert advice and support, strengthening existing relationships.

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Full results

Q1-3: Participant consent, name, email address

All respondents completed all of these questions, which for privacy reasons are of course not presented.

Q4. Which parish are you representing?

All respondents answered this question. The answers gave us context for responses, but are not presented in detail.

SODC have received the most reports, but WODC appear to be most engaged, by the ratio of respondents to recipients (Figure 1).
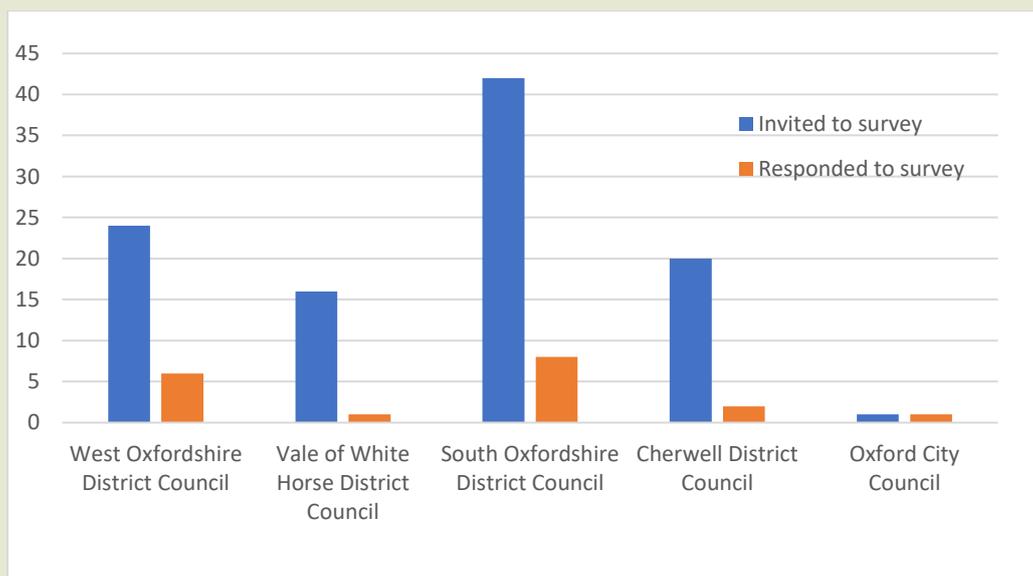

Figure 1 Survey invitation and response rate by District

Q5. Which of the following best describes your role?

The majority of respondents were parish councillors, followed by community group members (Figure 2).

The parish council representative, community group member and parish councillors are all voluntary roles, highlighting the level of resource contributed to nature recovery by the voluntary sector: amalgamating these categories shows that 15 out of the 18 recipients are volunteers in this sector. However, it is uncertain whether the respondents are representative of the full survey invitation list.
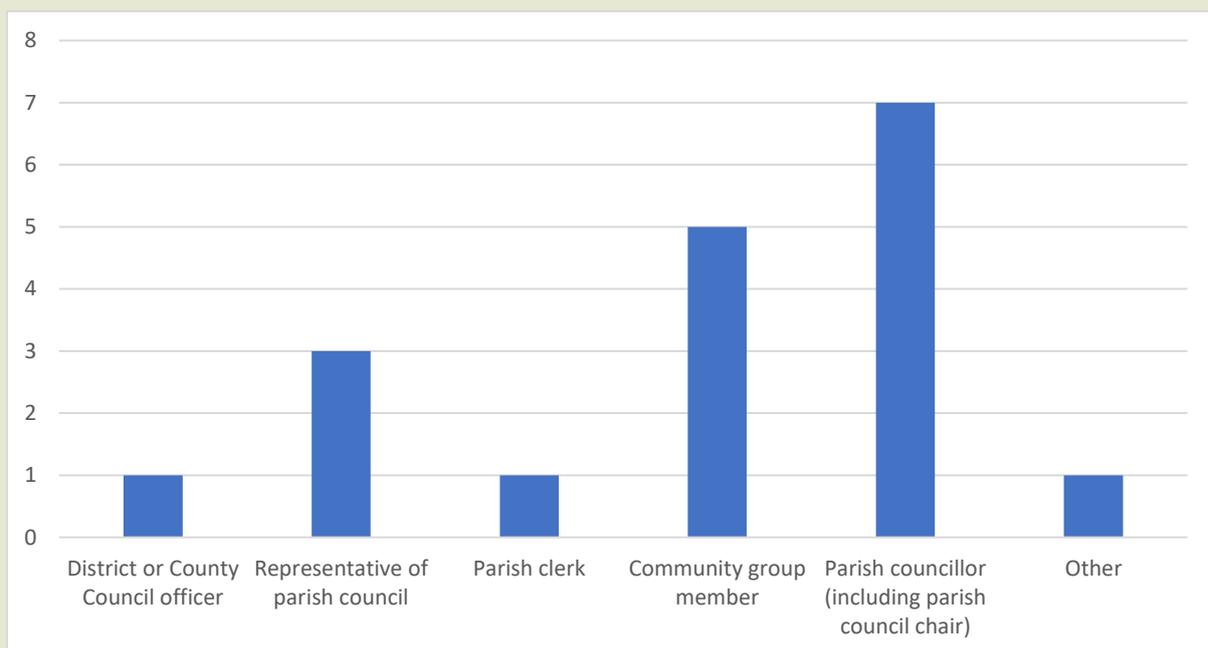

Figure 2 Role of respondents

Q6. When did you first start engaging with Treescape Opportunity maps of your parish (in an Opportunity Report OR within the Land App)?

Figure 3 Length of time for which recipients have been engaged with OTP opportunity mapping

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There is a strong correlation between the number of reports delivered and the number of survey responses for each time period (Figure 3) indicating that there is consistent engagement – if there had been fewer responses from the time when we'd sent out more reports this would indicate that over time people had lost interest in our activities.

Q7. Does your parish have a Neighbourhood Plan?

Of the 18 parishes that responded, only five have decided not to have a Neighbourhood Plan (NP), with over three quarters of respondents having or considering a NP (Figure 4).

Other responses: one said that they are renewing their NP which is included in the "renewal" option. The other one is writing a neighbourhood priority statement ahead of a full neighbourhood plan, so have moved to "considering one".

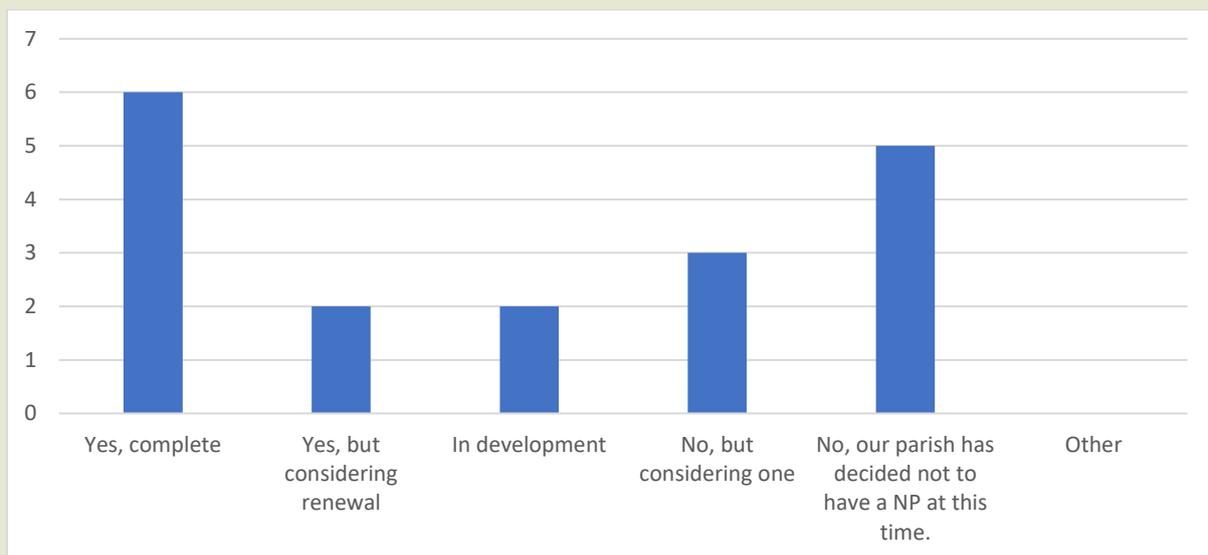It is unknown whether this is representative of parishes across the county.

Figure 4 Does your parish have a Neighbourhood Plan?

Q8. If you have or are considering a Neighbourhood Plan, how likely do you think it is that it will support nature recovery?

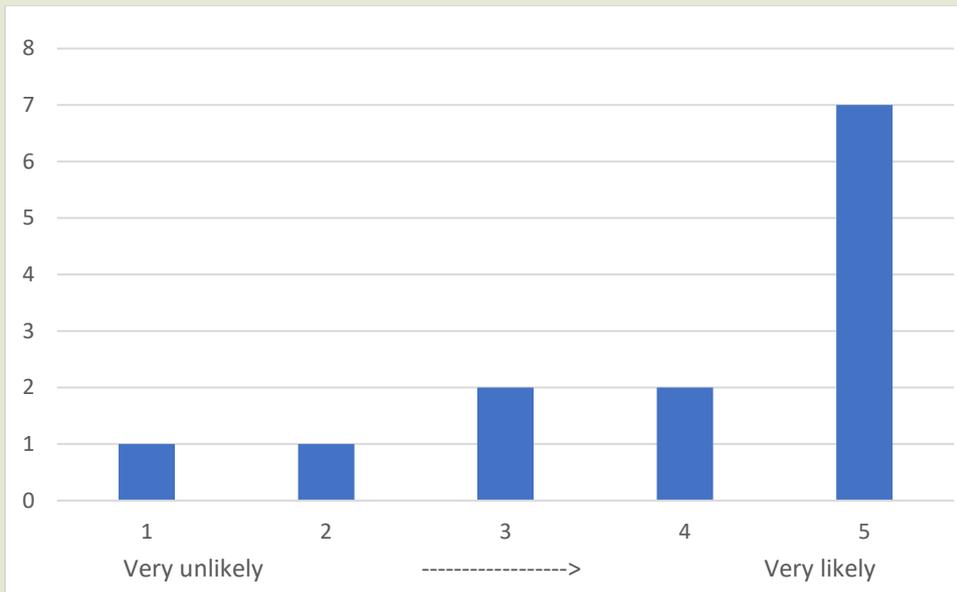*Figure 5 How likely do you think it is that a Neighbourhood Plan will support nature recovery? (1= very unlikely; 5 = very likely)*

Of the 13 who rated this question, nine thought it likely or very likely that their NP would support nature recovery, and only two thought it unlikely or very unlikely (Figure 5). Therefore, the majority of parishes see a NP as supportive of nature recovery.

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Q9. How would you rate support for nature recovery in your parish from the following groups?
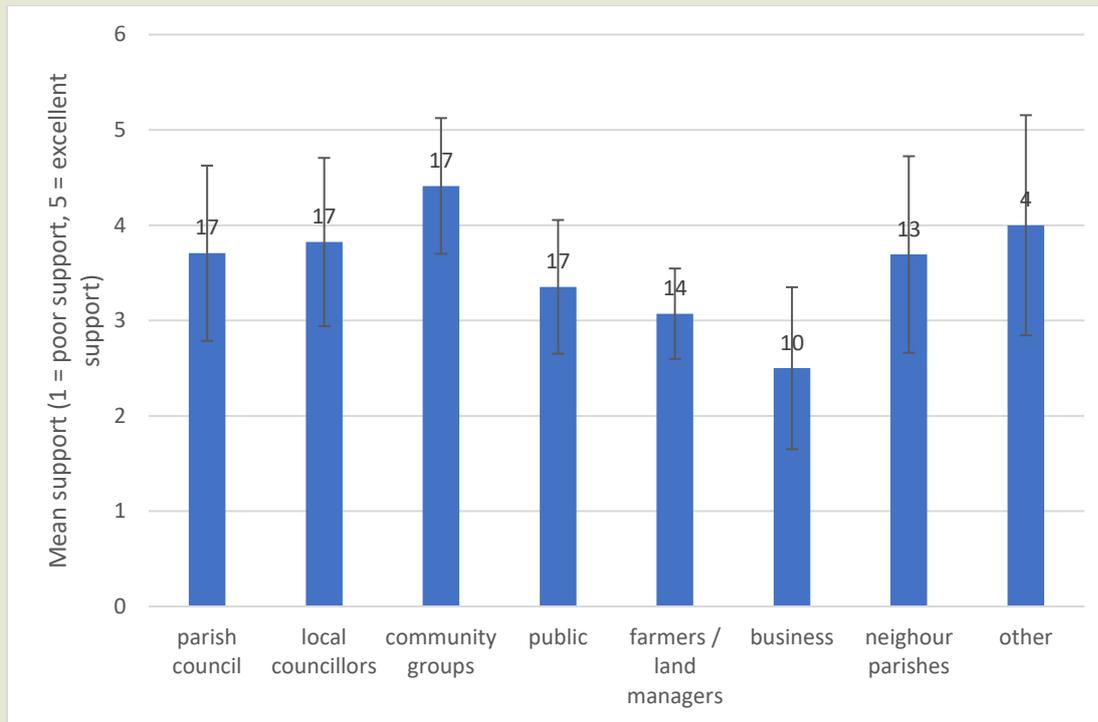

Figure 6 Support for nature recovery from different groups. Numbers above bars show the number of respondents that selected this option. Error bars are standard deviation.

Seventeen of the eighteen parishes had engaged with the parish council, local councillors, community groups and the general public, with highest support rating for community groups.

Local businesses were the group least engaged with (10 out of the 18 respondents) and also had the lowest rating for support (mean = 2.5, st dev = 0.85). Next lowest support was from farmers / land managers, with mean rated support of 3.1, from the 14 parishes who had engaged with this group.

Three respondents selected "other" and described support from specific community groups and a local (?) charity; churches were mentioned as a supportive group by one respondent and, schools twice.

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Q10. How easy do you find it to get support (from any sources) for the following issues related to nature recovery?
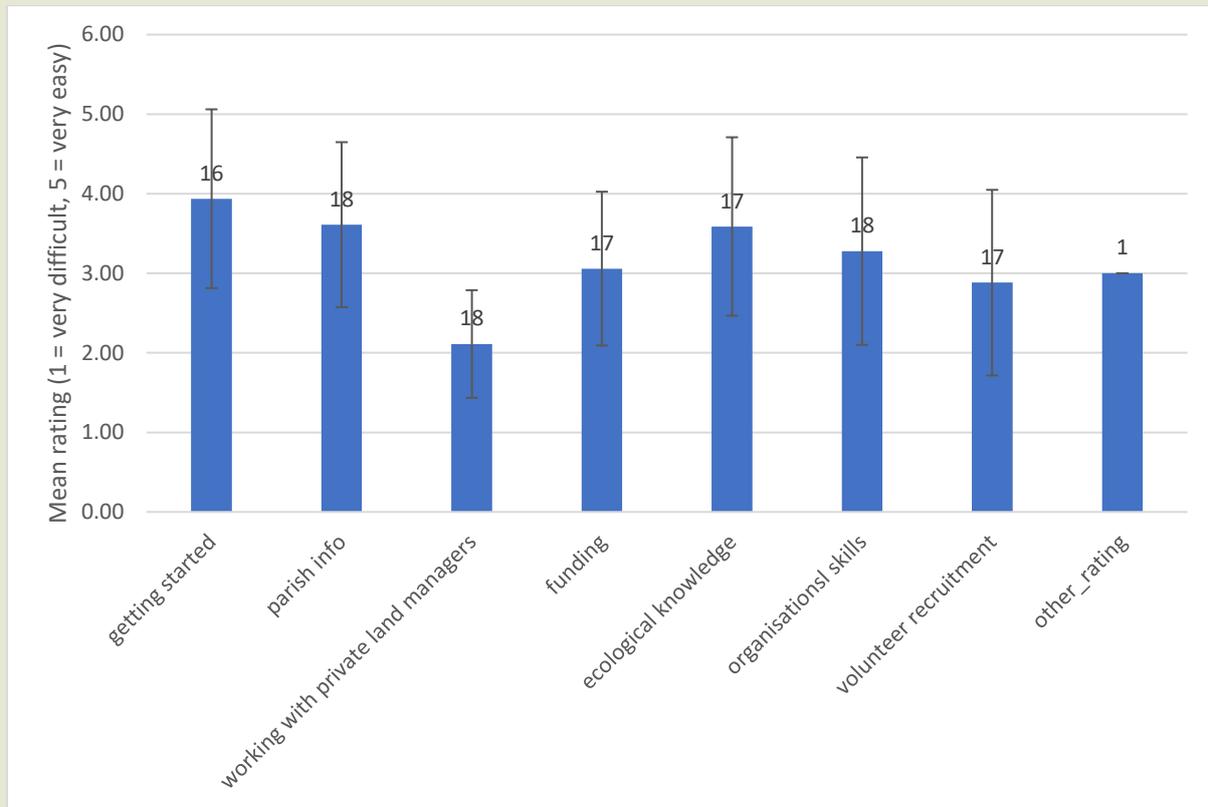

Figure 7 Ease of access to support for issues related to nature recovery.

Most respondents rated most of the options, showing that they had experience of searching for this information and implying that these are important areas for parish nature recovery.

The rating for this question is generally somewhat lower than the support from groups – perhaps respondents feel that people are supportive, but accessing the necessary information is harder?

Accessing information on working with private land managers received the lowest rating (2.1), with the highest ratings being for "getting started", "parish information" (i.e. information about the parish such as sites of ecological interest) and "ecological knowledge". Based on conversations with parishes, it was unexpected that getting started and ecological knowledge were rated as highly as this.

Three respondents selected "other", but only one rated it. "Other" included arranging a meeting with an ecological specialist; specific funding opportunities and "Land App and TVERC data", which could be considered as "parish info".
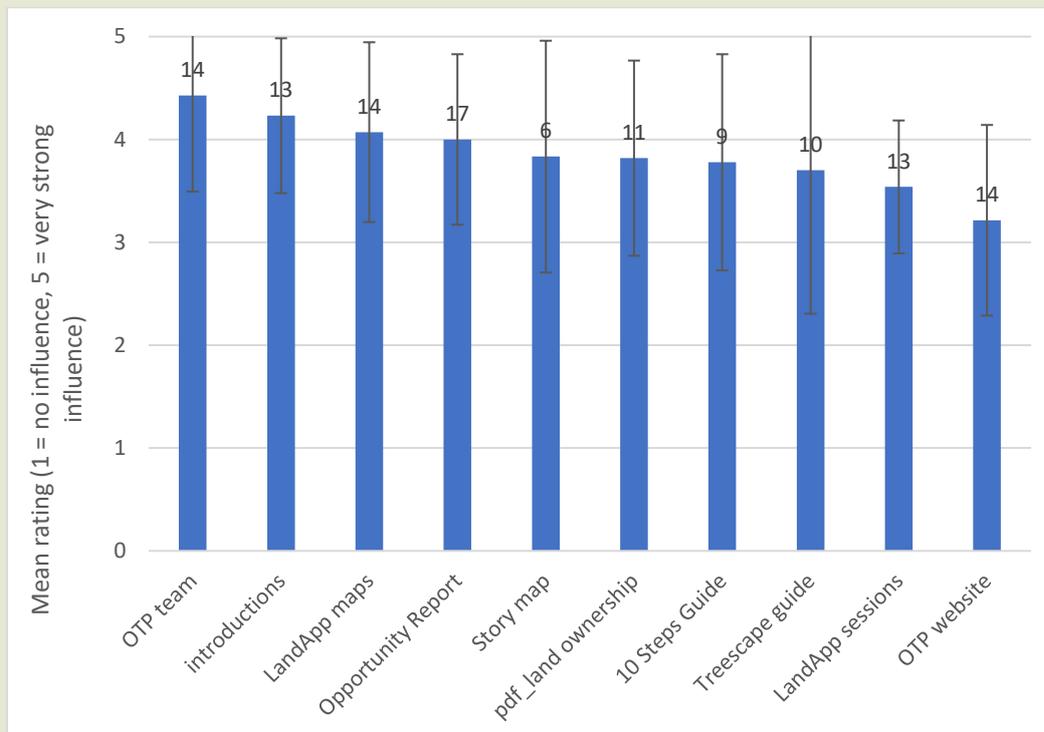
Figure 8 Influence of OTP resources on nature recovery efforts. Numbers are the number of respondents that rated the resource. Error bars are standard deviation.

There was relatively little variation in rating of the usefulness between the resources, although there was large variation for some resources (especially the Treescape Guide) and the OTP website was rated only 3.2.

The difference in the number of respondents who had rated each resource is because not all respondents had access to the same resources - what is offered has evolved over time. There is also the *perception* that they've not been offered these resources, e.g. all parishes received the newsletter with stories explaining about the Land App, but four respondents say that they haven't been offered these maps. The Story Map should have been offered to all recipients, but for some reason has been neglected internally, perhaps as the interactive mapping of the Land App has developed. The Treescape guide should have been sent to everyone with their report. The 10 steps guide hasn't been sent to many as it was a draft only, which has since been re-worked. We've offered discussions with ourselves to everyone we've worked with. We've made introductions where appropriate.

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Q12. How have these resources supported you?

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Q13. How have these resources supported you in engaging with the following groups?

Respondents were asked to select ways in which the OTP resources had supported them with nature recovery activities (identifying nature recovery opportunities; planning nature recovery activities; accessing finance / funding, other) and with engaging with various groups (parish council, community groups, district / county council, general public, local businesses, environmental charities, local land managers, local developers, neighbouring parishes, other).

Aggregated across all ways in which it could provide support, the Opportunity Report had the greatest total count of ways in which it helped respondents (Figure 9), showing the diversity of ways in which the Reports are used.
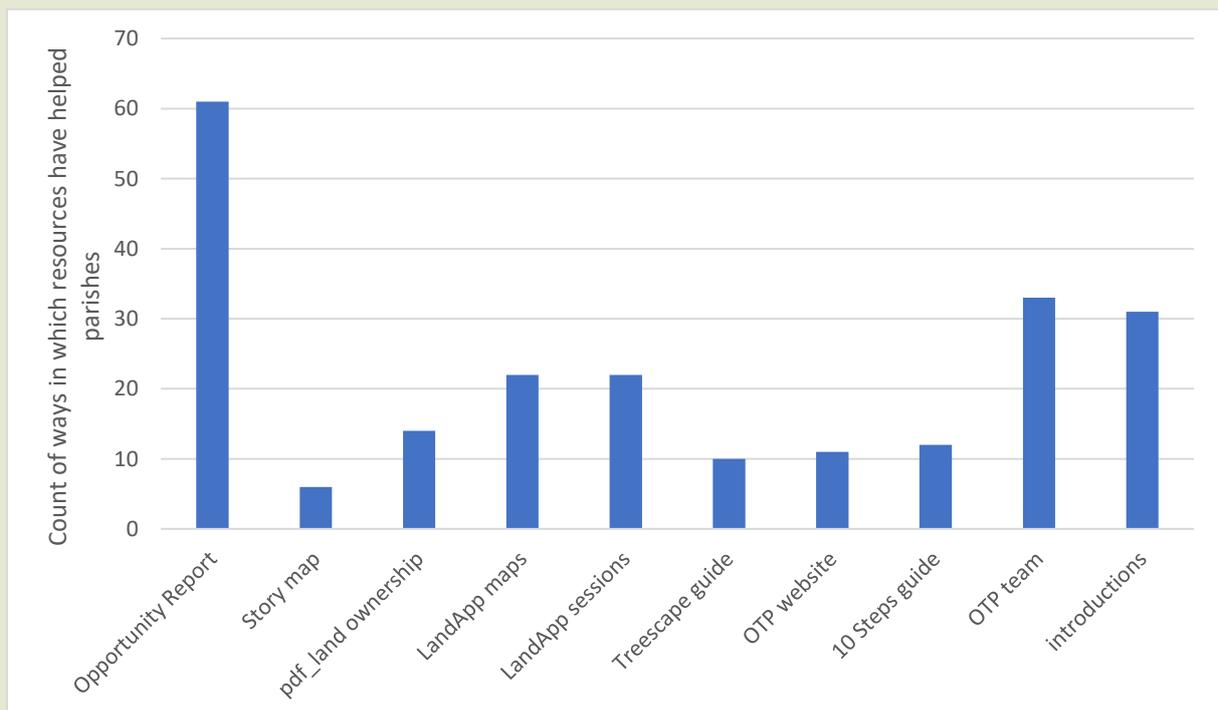

Figure 9 How OTP resources have supported parishes. Numbers are the aggregated data for ways in which each resource helped all parishes, e.g. the 18 respondents selected a total of 61 ways in which the Opportunity Report assisted them.

Because not all of the resources had been used by all of the respondents, the data were weighted according to how many respondents had used each resource.

The most frequent ways that all OTP resources have supported parishes are in identifying nature recovery opportunities, planning nature recovery opportunities (Figure 10) and engaging with parish council and community groups within and between parishes (Figure 11).

The most frequent application of resources is using the Treescape Opportunity Report for identifying nature recovery opportunities and engaging with parish councils, with 16 out of the 18 respondents saying that they used them in these ways.

Having weighted the responses shows that the story map and treescape guide, although less frequently available to respondents (Figure 8), were deemed useful in supporting nature recovery activities (Figure 10).
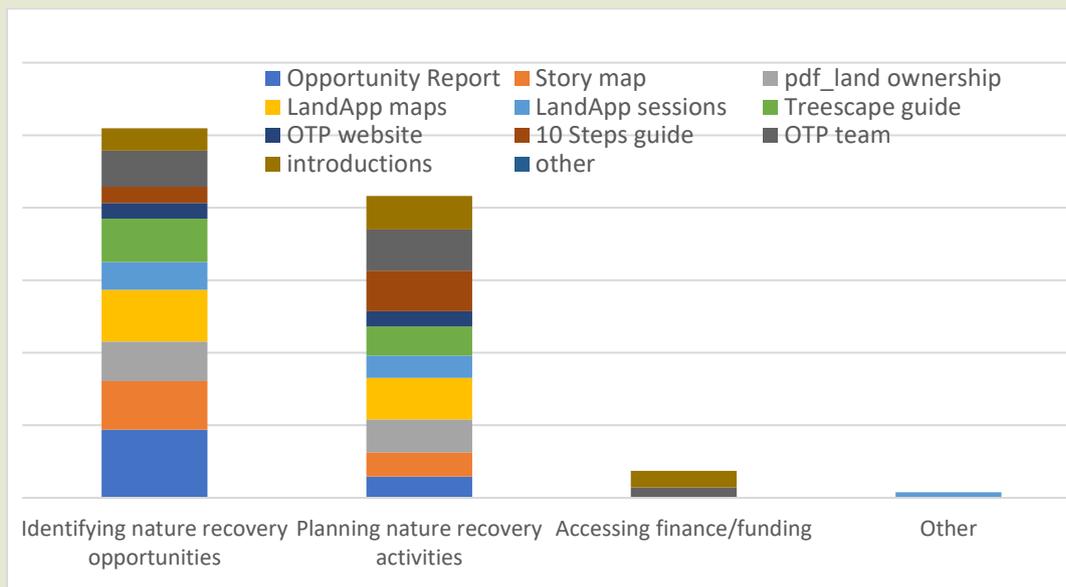

Figure 10 How OTP resources have supported nature recovery activities, weighted by number of respondents who had had the use of each resource.

Figure 11 How OTP resources have supported engagement with nature recovery, weighted by the number of respondents who had had the use of each resource.

Q14. How useful did you find the different parts of the Treescape Opportunity Report?

Figure 12 Usefulness of different sections of the Treescape Opportunity Report; 1= not useful at all, 5 = very useful.

The map sections (showing existing natural assets, opportunities and opportunity benefits) were the most useful section and the funding ideas section the least useful (it was unused by 6 respondents).

All sections had at least some respondents scoring them as "very useful", but the only used by all respondents was the treescape opportunity maps.

Q15. Please tell us more about what made the resources particularly helpful or unhelpful.

11 out of 18 respondents answered this question. 10 of the comments referred to the Treescape Report and / or maps, which could have been within Land App or the Treescape Report.

Within the comments we identified nine ideas that were positive, describing how the resources had helped them, and five that were negative or suggested improvements; two were neutral.
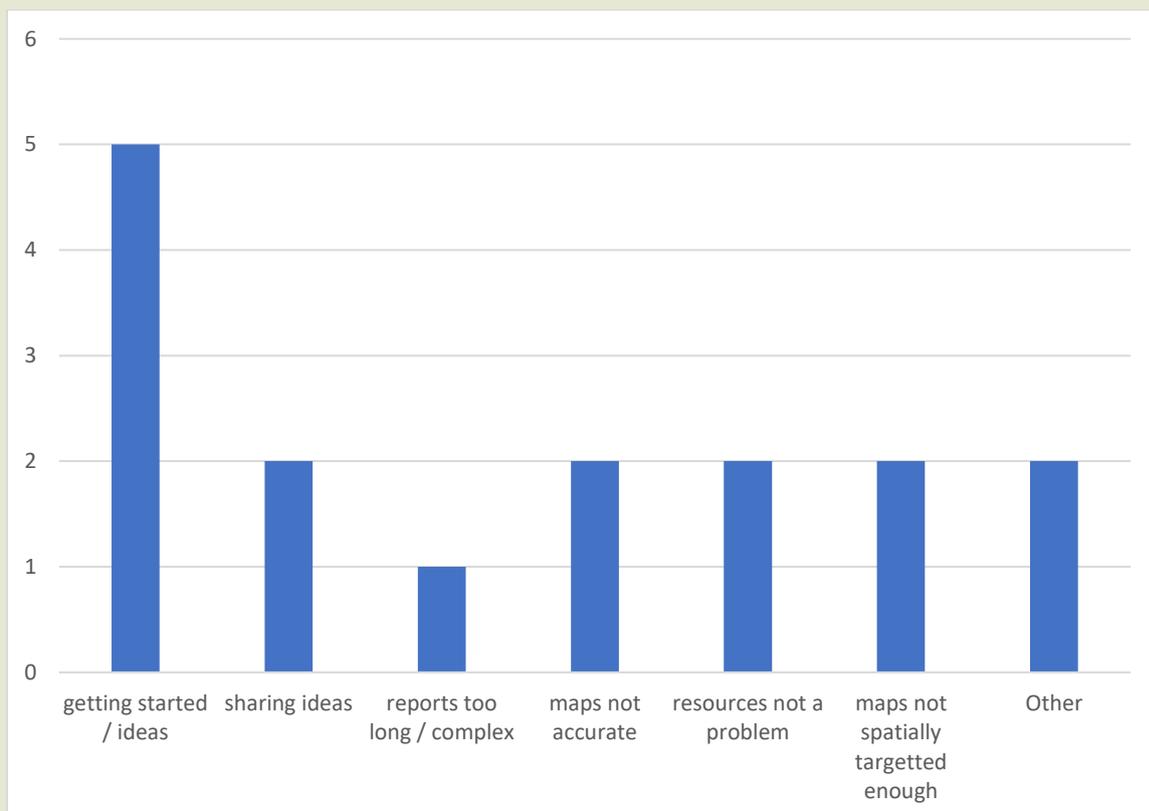

Figure 13 What has made resources particularly helpful / unhelpful?

We classified comments according to themes, as above. Interestingly, the "resources not a problem" category contained two virtually identical comments saying that the resources were not a problem, the tricky thing was working with landowners: "The resources have been really helpful. The hard part is to get the engagement of local landowners."

Accuracy of maps is an ongoing issue that should be addressed through managing expectations. There are always inaccuracies; this can be because the data we have is simply wrong, or it has not been updated. This is frustrating for recipients in either case, especially if they've been involved in nature recovery actions that aren't reflected in the maps. How to keep the maps up to date is an ongoing issue of which

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we are aware, and continue to consider how to address. In terms of the resolution, this is again about expectation management – the maps only go to field level, and show opportunities, rather than recommendations. It's then up to the recipients to work with whoever is in charge of that land to identity the appropriate areas for action within that land parcel.

The most common theme was that the maps / reports had helped to generate ideas, including where to get started. For example, "we wouldn't have known where to start without this. It will help us to join up thinking".

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Q16. How could we improve the resources provided?

Nine respondents answered this question. In general the suggestions referred to the full range of what is offered, rather than a specific resource. The responses were more specific than in the previous question, with fewer themes emerging, although there was one common theme of a wish for case studies to be included within the resources.

There were suggestions to include resources on:

- Engaging with landowners;
- How to bring nature recovery into neighbourhood plans;
- What next steps to take.

And that our reports / maps should include:

- Landscape character;
- More detailed features such as soil characteristics.

There were also comments on specific resources, with one respondent saying that the Land App was frustrating to use, and another that the draft 10 Steps Guide to Nature Recovery should be finalised and shared more widely, with the inclusion of case studies.

There was also a comment that land ownership should be made clearer, but it's not apparent whether this is in the Land App or pdf land ownership maps, so is difficult to address.

Q17. What do you see as your parish's greatest strengths or opportunities for nature recovery? This could be anything from existing nature-rich sites to supportive volunteers.

16 respondents answered this question. Key themes that emerged were around landscape features (existing spaces for nature or potential spaces for nature recovery) and support from different groups (willing volunteers, enthusiasm or support from the local public, supportive farmers or land managers, supportive local organisations), and also existing expertise, i.e. people already engaged in nature recovery in the parish who have particular skills or expertise.

It could be that the answers are skewed towards these themes due to the inclusion of the statement "This could be anything from existing nature-rich sites to supportive volunteers", but it is interesting how these two themes have emerged into the different, more subtle categories.

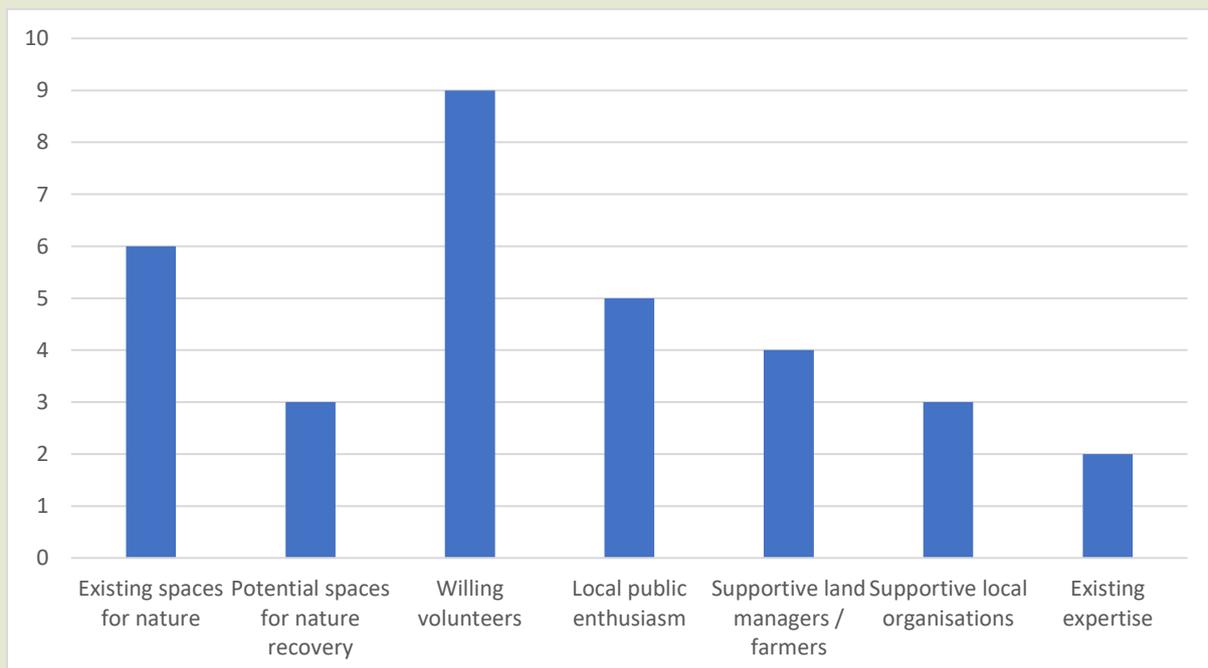Volunteers were described as "supportive", "eager", "highly motivated / active" and "good".

Figure 14 Parish's greatest strengths or nature recovery opportunities

Q18. What do you see as your parish's greatest challenges for nature recovery?

The most common theme, occurring in 10 of the 17 responses to this question, was the difficulty in engaging with landowners or farmers, which is linked to lack of available land for nature recovery. Comments such as "Connection to landowners" and "We own very little land so most nature recovery in the parish is by negotiation with other landowners" illustrate that communication is the key challenge frequently faced here.
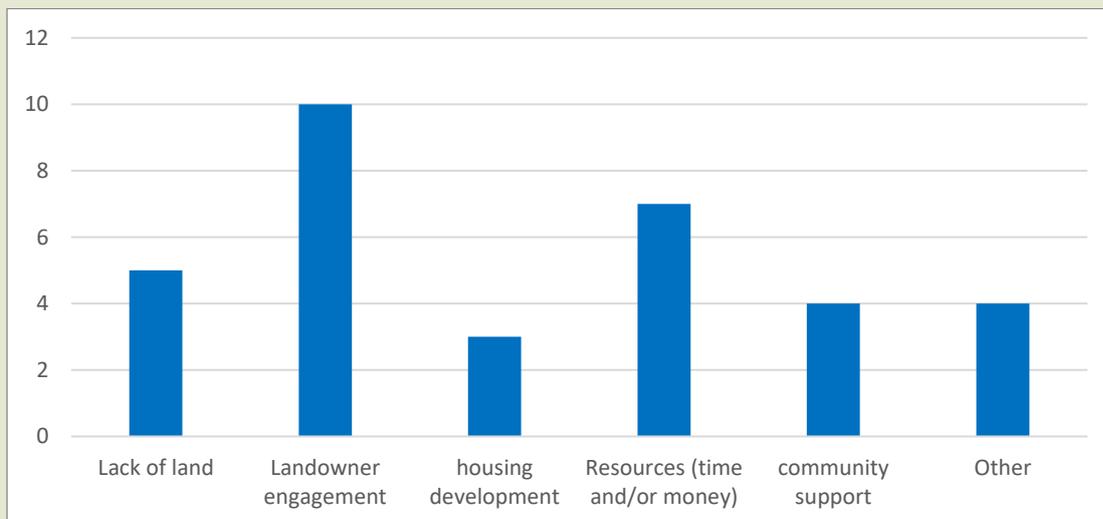

Figure 15 Greatest nature recovery challenges for parishes

A comment that illustrates what a learning experience the process of nature recovery can be for people was "It has become apparent how dependent on a few people we are for food and the environment".

Linked to land availability were concerns about housing development (three responses), which were mentioned much less frequently than had been expected from our experience of working with parishes.

Resources, generally described in terms of resources available to community volunteer groups, was the second most frequently cited challenge (seven responses). (Although volunteer time and funding are two quite separate issues, the respondents used the term "resources" in such a way that it that it was difficult to differentiate time and money.)

The challenge of community support included comments about lack of support from others within the parish, e.g. "public apathy" and "lack of volunteers", but also the difficulty in working together: "The volunteers all want to do things differently" and "village politics".

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More detailed, practical challenges were mentioned much less frequently, so that comments such as "expertise lacking" and "lack of coherent projects for any of the nature recovery network areas identified" are in the "Other" category, implying that lack of expertise is not limiting progress on nature recovery in these parishes, or perhaps that groups are not yet getting to the stage of requiring expertise because other elements, such as resources and challenges around finding available land, are holding groups back before they reach the stage of requiring expert advice.

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Q19. What other resources or support (provided by Oxfordshire Treescape Project or elsewhere) would help you and your parish move forwards in planning for nature recovery?

15 respondents answered this question. The responses were diverse, with loose themes that did not recur frequently between respondents (Figure 16). Only one respondent specified whether the support that they were requesting should be provided by OTP or another organisation.
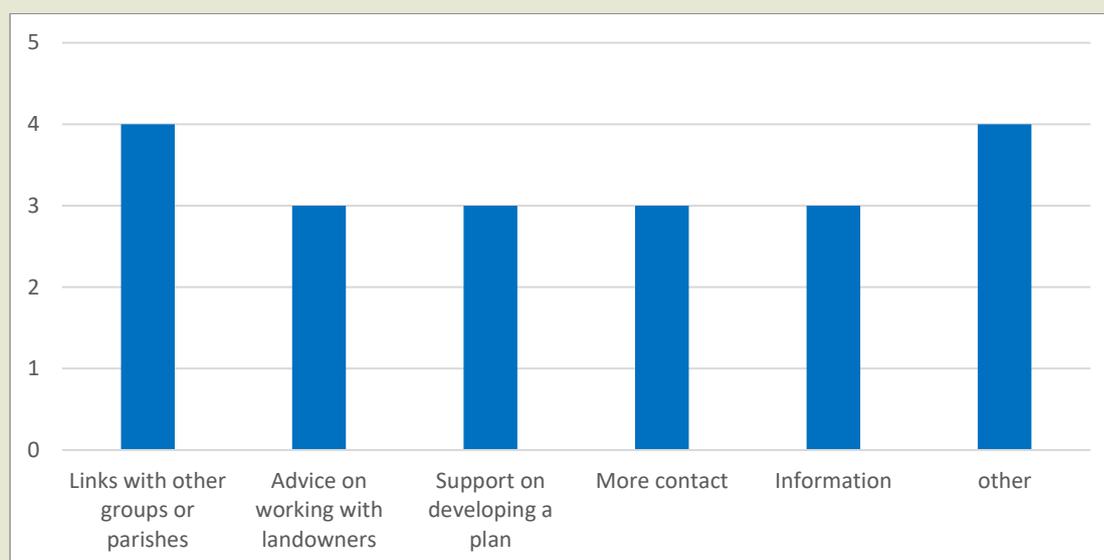

Figure 16 Resources or support that parishes would like to receive

Of the themes that emerged, "links with other groups or parishes" and "advice on working with landowners" include some element of facilitating relationships. The reasons for wanting more connections with other groups or parishes included joint workshops on specific themes, e.g. biodiversity corridors, and bringing together parishes / groups within an area to support each other highlighting that groups can support each other with general knowledge / experience, regardless of their location, but that there is also a value in local groups working together to maximise the impact of nature recovery activities.

Perhaps the most coherent theme was "Advice on working with landowners", where respondents made unambiguous statements such as "Specific advice on how to talk to landowners who might be resistant to change" and "Advice and guidance on how to approach [local landowners]".

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The "more contact" theme included the specific suggestion of "talking to a parish meeting", and the more general request for "more guidance and potentially more involvement, e.g. arranging a workshop…".

The "Information" theme included one comment about accessing species-level data for their parish and the suggestion for joint workshops on themes such as biodiversity corridors, indicating an interest in specific knowledge areas. Also included in this theme was a comment that a specific website (Buglife) had proved particularly useful – although not a request for more resources, it indicated that the information included on this website was of particular help with their nature recovery efforts.

The "Other" category included a request for guidance on funding ("it's complicated out there"), two general references to the Land App and an ambition to work with "Local Nature Recovery Forum organisations".

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Q20. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us?

This question received seven responses, two of which were general "Thank you's" to OTP. The only other theme that emerged was around slow speed of action: "Progress has been slow starting… [but] we're gathering momentum" and "Just sorry that we cannot move quicker".

Other comments included a suggestion that CAGs, rather than parish councils, might be more productive recipients of treescape maps, that a person working so far singlehandedly hopes to bring in more volunteers, and uncertainty on the role of parish councils in the Local Nature Recovery Plans.