# Oxford Urban Wildlife Group – 2019 AGM minutes

12 June 2019, 8.30pm

Florence Park Community Centre

1. Chair’s report
2. Treasurer’s report
3. Election of Trustees

# 1 - Chair’s report

## Our position a year ago

A year ago, we faced enormous difficulties:

* The group had almost no active members.
* Most of the trustees had newly joined the group, having heard that BBNP needed rescuing.
* BBNP was heavily overgrown, with no realistic plan to bring it under control.
* The site was almost unused by the local community.
* There were reasonable complaints from BBNP’s neighbours that overgrown trees and brambles were both a nuisance and presented a health and safety risk.

But we also recognised the opportunity that BBNP should be a rich haven for wildlife in a dense urban environment.

## Refocussing the Group’s priorities

We lease Boundary Brook Nature Park from City Council. Having visited the site in May 2018, the council were clear that:

* It was not adequately maintained or used for wide community benefit in accordance with their *Green Spaces Strategy.*
* The Group needed to resolve urgent maintenance issues immediately, including dangerously overgrown trees along the boundaries with the cycle path and East Oxford Allotment.
* The Group needed to produce a management plan for BBNP that reflects the *Green Spaces Strategy*.

The committee took the view that the council’s position was reasonable and presented an existential risk to the Group’s tenure at BBNP.

Given the need to focus on these priorities and the Group’s very low capacity to effect change, the Committee agreed to:

* Stop :
  + Public activities and open days at Boundary Brook until it was safe for use and in generally more attractive order.
  + Publication of our resource-intensive newsletter.
  + Activities that did not relate to BBNP, for example general promotion of urban wildlife and active engagement with other wildlife sites across Oxfordshire.
* Slow:
  + Recruitment of new members, community engagement and publicity until BBNP was fit for public access and the Group had increased capacity to meet demands.
  + Updating the Group’s procedures, constitution and corporate structure.
* Start:
  + Seeking external support and partnerships to achieve our aims, especially from the City Council, Wild Oxford (a partnership between OCC and BBOWT) and Oxford Conservation Volunteers.
  + Developing an extensive programme of winter works to address urgent maintenance needs, especially to improve the overgrown boundary to the cycle path and East Oxford Allotments.
  + Drafting a long-term plan to manage BBNP and engage the local community in accordance with the City Councils *Green Spaces Strategy*.

## What have we achieved this year?

### Building partnerships

The Group has historically been inward facing and tried to do everything for itself. This is no longer sustainable given the low active membership and high effort needed to make best use of BBNP. We have begun to build partnerships following two principles:

* BBNP management must remain community-led.
* We can’t do it all ourselves and sometimes others are better at it than us, especially where we can build relationships with professional (conservation) organisations with more expertise and capacity than we have.

We have built new relations this year with:

* Wild Oxford (BBOWT and Oxford City Council partnership), who have agreed to include BBNP as one of their sites and help the group to develop habitat management plans, lead conservation parties, run courses and support fundraising. This relationship will allow the group to achieve BBNP’s potential for wildlife and community engagement.
* Oxford City Council volunteers, who have led several parties to clear scrub and begin restoring the site.
* Oxford Conservation volunteers, who have cleared willow trees around the pond.
* Earthwatch, who will soon lead regular nature events at BBNP under their ‘Naturehood’ programme.
* Oxford Brookes, whose MSc students have developed a pond management plan for us.

We will continue to develop these and other relationships next year.

### Community engagement

We have temporarily scaled back community engagement and events at BBNP this year. However, we have run a few successful events:

* An open day in summer 2018, when 120 passers-by visited BBNP. Many of them had never been there before and were unaware it existed, despite passing it regularly.
* Coppicing and hedging courses organised and led by BBOWT. These were well attended and help to both manage the site and engage the community. We will run similar events in the future.
* A family day in the Easter holiday, supported by the City Council and attended by over 200 adults and children.

The high attendance and enjoyment of these events shows the enormous potential that BBNP has for enabling local people to enjoy urban wildlife.

The group’s future challenges are to:

* Increase visitors to the site, whilst ensuring that site use is controlled (to avoid public nuisance) and sustainable for our wildlife.
* Expand the group’s community reach and diversity.

### Developing our strategic plan

We have begun to draft a strategic plan based around three aims:

* Developing BBNP as haven for local urban wildlife
* Community engagement in urban wildlife
* Education (especially forest schools)

We hope to consult publicly on a draft in September and will welcome input.

### Wildlife and habitat management

A year ago, BBNP needed a huge amount of restoration work to improve both amenity and habitat quality. We are indebted to the support of our members and partners to bring BBNP under control:

* City Council’s volunteer group
* Oxford Conservation Volunteers
* BBOWT.

The park is now generally more accessible and pleasant, and we are developing plans to further manage vegetation and improve infrastructure.

Anecdotally, the overgrowth in recent years has impacted BBNP’s biodiversity, especially butterflies. However, the site still supports locally significant species such as hairstreak, and two populations of slow worms have been introduced. We will develop plans to restore and improve its biodiversity.

Water levels in the pond have fallen significantly due to low rainfall and evapotranspiration from willow trees. Conservation volunteers have cleared these trees and we hope to restore the pond in the future.

### Education and forest schools

We would like BBNP to promote urban wildlife to the local community, especially through forest schools. The site has been used by Larkrise Primary School for a number of years, and we have extended its use to St Mary’s and St John’s and The Children’s Allotment on a trial basis.

Our management plan will need to ensure that forest schools do not adversely affect site biodiversity, as well as coordinating forest schools more formally.

We are also pleased to support opportunities for adult education through training courses and guided walks run by the Earthwatch ‘Naturehood’ project.

### Building Oxfords Urban Wildlife Group

The group itself needs significant development if it is to realise BBNP’s potential. We have not been able to devote resources to that this year, but in the future will need to:

* Develop a larger and more active membership.
* Revisit our governance, corporate structure (we are unincorporated) and charitable aims (especially if the Group should still aim to promote urban wildlife in Oxford or if other groups now fulfil that role).
* Develop better (online) systems to manage membership and for social media/comms.
* Explore membership models to promote best use of BBNP (access is currently limited to members who have keys).
* Develop a fundraising strategy.

# In summary

This has been a busy and productive year for the group, albeit one where we have had to focus on reinvigorating the group, building partnerships and necessary remedial work at BBNP. Whilst not much of this is visible to the local community, we are now in a far better position to promote BBNP as a rich resource for local urban wildlife. In particular, joining the Wild Oxford programme offers us an enormous opportunity to take advantage of its expertise and professionalism.

Some challenges remain for the group, especially to grow its active membership and to balance habitat management with community engagement at BBNP. But we are in a far better place to meet these challenges than we were a year ago.

# Thanks

None of this would have been possible without the support and hard work of many people, including:

* East Oxford Allotments for their forbearance while we restore BBNP and improve site boundaries.
* Oxford City Council, especially Chris Bell for strategic support and in particular Carl Whitehead for leading volunteer groups, offering advice and practical help.
* BBOWT, especially Andy Gunn and Ed Munday.
* Our trustees and members, especially Jon for his work as Treasurer, Lily as secretary, Pete and Pat for their hard work and expertise, Candy for her experience and contacts in community engagement, Phil for overhauling our website, Katie for championing forest schools, Emma for working with Oxford Brookes, and everyone else who has chipped in along the way.

Finally, I would like to recognise the hard work and vision of previous members, and especially Janet Keene who co-founded the group and BBNP nearly 30 years ago.

**Dr Jens Evans, Chair 2018/19**

# 2 – Treasurer’s report



# 3 – Election of Trustees

Duly elected trustees for 19/20 are:

* Jon Willis
* Candy March
* Chloe Dalglish
* Karen Salter
* Delia Twamley
* Pete Byfield
* Pat Mansfield
* Helen Edwards
* Penny Murray

Trustees will meet shortly to elect officers (Chair, Trustee, Secretary)

[Ends.]