

# Thriving in Nature Fund

Spring 2025 update







# Introduction

**The Thriving in Nature Fund was launched in 2023, and aims to help more people prosper by engaging with green spaces and the rural environment. The focus is on improving health and wellbeing, and nurturing work opportunities, by supporting charitable organisations to unite people with nature.**

This is a collective fund where OCF combines together donations from multiple philanthropists, businesses and other funders, helping them make a bigger difference than they can individually.

The natural environment is well documented as benefiting both mental and physical wellbeing. But access to natural spaces is challenging for more deprived communities, due to lack of affordable transport, lack of confidence, or a feeling of exclusion.

The purpose of the Thriving in Nature Fund is to open up the potential of nature for those who are struggling with their mental and physical health, whilst also protecting our environment and green spaces. We are doing this by awarding multi-year grants to small and medium-sized charitable organisations that want to implement a brilliant idea to help people thrive in nature.

*Thanks to the support of a committed group of donors and funders, OCF's first ever cohort of 14 Thriving in Nature grantees received their first year of funding in August 2024. In February 2025, our grants team held one-to-one catch-up calls with every grantee. This report summarises their progress so far.*



## OUR FUNDERS

The following people and organisations contributed to the first round of Thriving in Nature funding in 2024, totalling £494k:

- David and Claudia Harding Foundation
- HDH Wills Charitable Trust
- John Laing Charitable Trust
- Lennox Hannay Charitable Trust
- Macfarlane Foundation
- Ormonde Charitable Trust
- Ponsonby Family Fund
- RWK Goodman Charitable Fund
- Saunders Family Fund
- Anonymous donors

## OUR GRANTEES

We are very proud to have funded the following 14 organisations for two to three years in the first cohort in 2024:

- 21st Century Thame
- Be Free Young Carers
- Benson Area Nature Group
- Cheney School Association
- FarmAbility
- KEEN Oxford
- Long Mead Foundation
- Maymessy CIC
- Oxford Community Action
- Pennyhooks Farm Trust
- Root and Branch Westmill
- Rose Hill Junior Youth Club
- The Nature Effect CIC
- Wallingford Accessible Boat Club

On the cover: The Nature Effect; Pennyhooks; FarmAbility; Rose Hill JYC

# Key themes and grantee examples

While grantee projects cover multiple themes, we have categorised them by primary focus.

**Improving mental health (five grants)** The Nature Effect CIC creates thriving wildscapes and urban green spaces for people to access and enjoy. With funding from OCF, they are working with the Prisoner Advice and Care Trust (PACT) to develop a garden in the visitor centre at Bullingdon Prison, with thoughtful planting and design to provide a positive experience when families visit a loved one. They are reducing the stress of families and contributing to child development by supporting volunteers and families to engage with outdoor play in the garden.



**Promoting physical wellbeing (two grants)** 21st Century Thame's vision is to enhance this historic market town through community activities such as a repair café and biodiversity projects. OCF funding is supporting a partnership with the new social enterprise Her Land to engage women and girls in regenerative agriculture, physical exercise and land restoration activities. They are taking part in gentle exercise in nature, including tree planting, land clearing, nature monitoring, and creating a Syntropic Agroforestry growing field and walled garden.



**Developing work skills (two grants)** FarmAbility offers farm-based programmes for adults with learning disabilities and autism through activities like vegetable growing, horse care and woodwork. A grant from OCF is providing pathways into land-based roles by funding a Countryside Curriculum Co-ordinator to develop and implement accredited learning modules. This project is part of a wider initiative with Abingdon and Witney College to develop apprenticeships and internships for people with learning disabilities.



**Improving the natural environment (two grants)** Long Mead Foundation (LMF) conserves biodiversity in the floodplain meadows along the Upper Thames and educates the public on nature-based solutions for climate change. OCF funding has enabled LMF to have paid support for administration and fundraising, allowing the CEO to focus on meadow restoration and community engagement. It will also support a second weekly nature recovery and plant propagation day, engaging diverse groups and making volunteering accessible to those from disadvantaged backgrounds.



**Increasing accessibility and inclusivity (three grants)** Oxford Community Action (OCA) supports BAME communities to tackle barriers created by structural inequality. This funding is helping OCA to support more people from diverse and minoritised backgrounds to access nature and the outdoors. The grant is addressing the lack of black and racially minoritised hiking guides, teaching hiking navigation, group leadership, and how to guide others through different terrains. Funding will also support OCA's project to develop more cycling champions and increase participation among black and minoritised communities.

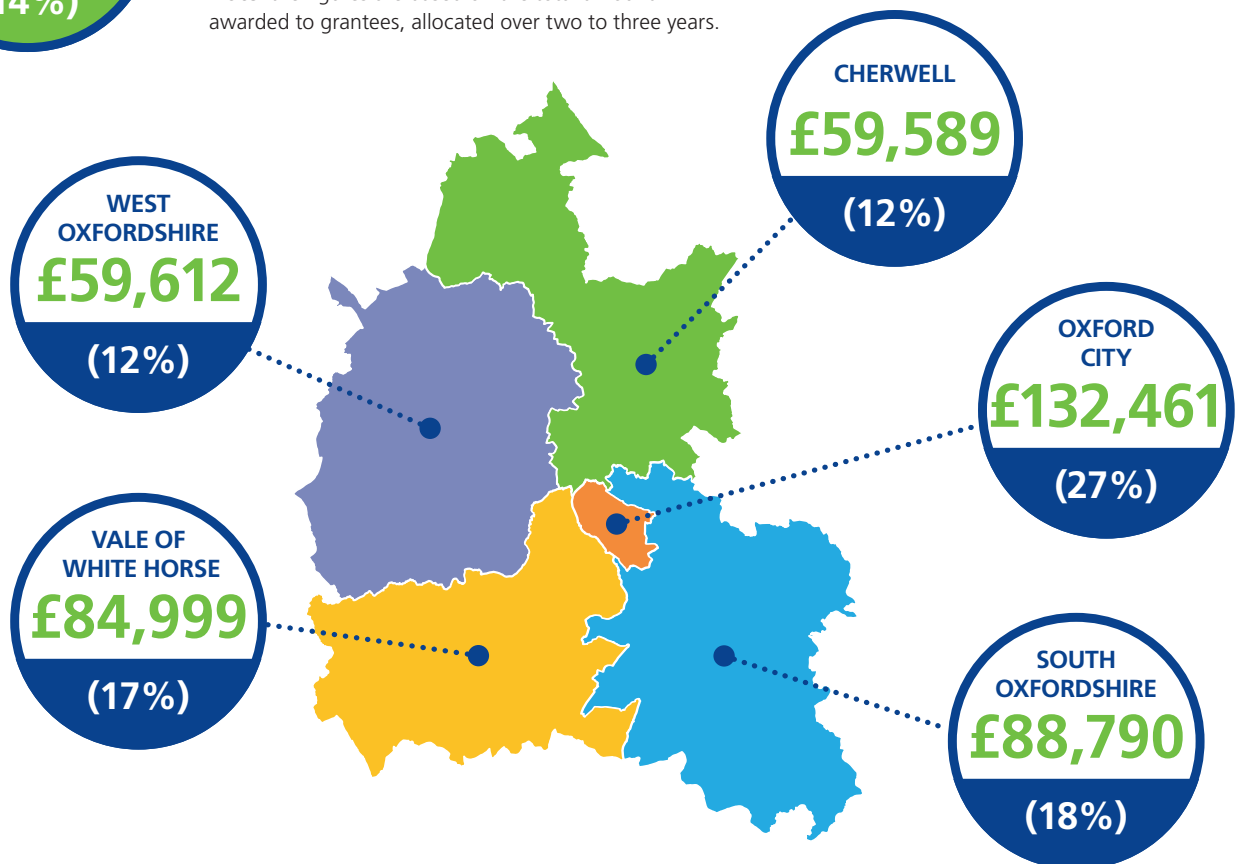




# Geographical spread

The map below shows the grants awarded by Oxfordshire district.

**Note:** the figures are based on the total amount awarded to grantees, allocated over two to three years.



## Best-in-class grant-making

This fund has been OCF's first opportunity to implement the latest best practice in modern, equitable and trust-based grant-making:

- **Applicant-friendly processes** that don't waste precious time, such as simplified forms, and an expression of interest that rules some out of the running quickly
- **Multi-year funding** that gives grantees the stability and headspace to plan, and the time to create sustainable impact
- **Grantee-led impact measurement**, giving charities the chance to set their own desired outcomes and own indicators for success
- **Relationship-based support** from a funder that understands the challenges faced by small charities, and is willing to flex when circumstances change
- **Additional support from mentors** with expertise in running charities, and act as a non-judgmental sounding board for leaders of small organisations.

*"We appreciate the opportunity to talk to someone about the project."* Be Free Young Carers



*"Being able to have an honest conversation about how we are using the grant is working really well. The fact that the grant is not restricted to specific project items is brilliant for grassroots charities."*  
Long Mead Foundation



# Achievements so far

Grantees told us that they had so far succeeded in:

- Completing **research and project planning** that will underpin impact
- Networking and kicking off **new partnerships** with other charities
- Appointing and inducting **new staff** to deliver the work, significantly boosting capacity
- Leveraging **other funding** as a result of the Thriving in Nature Fund's investment
- Onboarding significant numbers of **new beneficiaries** to take advantage of opportunities on offer through communications and events
- Building **new infrastructure** to support beneficiary engagement, such as therapeutic gardens, planters, hedges and allotments
- Gaining **real engagement and positive feedback** from beneficiaries and volunteers about the early stages of the work.

*"Teachers have said that children are behaving better and showing more respect for their environment." Cheney School*



## Challenges faced by grantees

Grantees reported that they had to adapt or delay their plans due to:

- **Weather conditions** such as wind, ice and flooding, meaning that changes were needed to physical infrastructure compared to what was planned; that volunteers were less keen to take part or could not access fields; and in one case that a project hasn't yet started
- **Staff and volunteer capacity**, due to issues such as ill health, bereavement, new recruit mismatch and competing priorities on a stretched small charity
- **Changes to budgets**, driven by price increases, or because grantees had covered costs elsewhere and sought agreement to redeploy OCF's funding
- **Lack of confidence from the beneficiaries** in engaging with nature, due to their unfamiliarity with rural environments
- **Limits to IT infrastructure** to support the work, such as establishing appropriate databases, filing structures and other systems.

*"The governor of the prison and senior personnel seem very pleased with the changes – but of course it will take months for the planting to get established and the garden to really bloom." The Nature Effect*

# Results so far

Our grantees reported back just four months after receiving multi-year grants, so the outcomes are still under review. Nonetheless, they have already seen results:

- **21st Century Thame**, in partnership with Her Land, is engaging women and girls in a programme of regenerative agriculture, physical exercise and land restoration. So far, they have completed one term of activity on the Her Land site involving planting a hedge and trees, cutting back overgrowth, putting in the first row for a Syntropic Agroforestry system, and other manual tasks. They have received positive feedback with strong interest and regular engagement since day one.
- **Be Free Young Carers** has rolled out a year-round programme for young carers promoting environmental education and wellbeing through nature. So far, 19 young carers aged 8-12 have taken part in a trip to Science Oxford, and participated in a woodland walk and outside water play activities. Eleven of the young carers expressed this was a trip they would otherwise never have had.
- **Benson Area Nature Group** is restoring natural habitats and promoting biodiversity across local green spaces. A volunteer coordinator has been recruited, who is building relationships with partners such as the parish councils and local primary schools. Communications have been rolled out to the local community, and the team is building a picture of what people are interested in. All of this has fed into the strategy for the year ahead.
- **Cheney School Association** has already transformed an inner courtyard of this urban school into a lively green space that encourages wildlife and wellbeing. Large planters were erected and trees planted, along with a wildflower patch and bench, breaking up the stark tarmac spaces. Children are now making use of this space and diluting the crowds in other areas. Having spent less on the work than expected, the charity is redeploying the rest of the grant on a bonus green space in the sixth form area.
- **FarmAbility** is implementing an adapted training programme for people with learning disabilities, focused on rural/farm skills and conservation. To date they have taken an in-depth look at the potential award provider, explored options for recording evidence and carrying out assessments, and finalised the list of awards to pilot, and a plan for roll-out.
- **KEEN Oxford** is expanding its gardening project, in both scope and accessibility, to support the work it currently does with disabled children and young people. A consultation has taken place with the gardening participants to get their input on the most user-friendly options for the garden. As a result it became clear that participants wanted greater involvement in the planning and implementation of the project, which is now being incorporated into the revised timeline. Session planning is now complete and ready to start in April.
- **Long Mead Foundation** is scaling up meadow restoration through community and landowner engagement, skills sharing and community support. Recruitment of an administrator and a therapeutic gardener is enabling them to work with groups visiting the site. 1 km of hedging was laid thanks to local community engagement. 7,000 rare floodplain meadow plants were grown by Long Mead Foundation's plant propagation groups, with 2,000 planted to date.
- **Maymessy CIC** has collaborated with women's domestic abuse charity Project Salama, taking survivors on a nature walk around the fields and making lavender bags, which they said gave them skills to calm themselves. A new beekeeper has meant 'home-grown' honey can be used in the cookery school. Children and adults with complex needs have been consulted about what equipment and plants they want in a new sensory garden.

*"Our success in creating an inclusive nature recovery project is being recognised and other communities want to come and learn from us." Long Mead Foundation*

*"We have extremely positive feedback from service users who are excited by the prospect of gaining an award or qualification."*  
FarmAbility





- **Oxford Community Action** has been able to reach out to many more people who faced financial barriers to entry to outdoor sports like hiking. They now have over 275 people in their hiking and outdoor group, have informally trained people to become mountain leaders and are in talks with another organisation to formalise this training.
- **Pennyhooks Farm Trust** is developing specialist skills of farming, conservation and green woodwork for adults with learning disabilities. Student numbers attending the woodwork sessions have increased from seven to 18. There has been a willingness to attend regularly where this has been problematic at other times. One student has been able to take up education outside of this organisation and attend an evening college course.
- **Root and Branch Westmill** is supporting adults with mental health difficulties using nature-based therapy. The grant is enabling them to provide activities ranging from working in their garden alongside a qualified Social and Therapeutic Gardener; art and craft activities; learning to cook and prepare healthy meals; and developing woodworking and blacksmithing skills.

***"Thank you for supporting our communities and giving us the resources to help activate our community."*** Oxford Community Action

***"Your support on this project has been so effective, and gives greater weight to our belief in our clients' abilities and their wish to be engaged in work-based training."*** Pennyhooks Farm Trust

- **Rose Hill Junior Youth Club** is developing a community allotment to promote long-term physical and mental health in a deprived part of Oxford. They have now recruited a new Wellbeing Coordinator and started to engage with community groups that will make referrals to the project. The first groups of children have attended outdoor activities, helping to boost their self-confidence.
- **The Nature Effect CIC** is using nature to rehabilitate residents of Bullingdon prison. The blank, unused space outside the Visitor Centre has been transformed with paths, vegetable beds and a sandpit, and a willow play dome has been constructed. Children and families joined in to help plant some vegetables and herbs in the raised beds and then decorated pots with hyacinth bulbs, which they took home. More sessions are planned throughout the rest of the year.
- **Wallingford Accessible Boat Club** will be enabling disabled and less mobile people in South Oxfordshire to get out and about on the River Thames. Due to flooding on the site over winter the project start has been delayed until Spring 2025.







The Nature Effect



FarmAbility



KEEN

# Our vision for the future of the fund

Feedback from our first cohort of grantees demonstrates the tangible impact our Thriving in Nature funding is having, even over a short timescale. We are excited to see what will be achieved as a result of the multi-year commitment we have made to these charities.

Our first round of funding is proof that we really can improve people's lives locally by connecting them with Oxfordshire's natural assets. We believe in the power of nature, not just to improve wellbeing, but to nurture a love of the environment, helping to preserve Oxfordshire as a safe and beautiful home for our future.

With funding already in the bank to support the remaining years of the first cohort, **we are now planning to launch a second round of funding for a brand-new cohort of grantees in summer 2025.** We already have nine funders on board, and are seeking more philanthropic individuals and organisations to join the fund. Our target is a further £270k, which would enable us to once again deliver nearly £0.5m in grants for people to thrive in nature.

## GET IN TOUCH

With your help, we can improve the health and wellbeing of those most in need through the benefits of nature.

**Please contact OCF's Deputy Chief Executive Kate Parrinder for a conversation about the part you can play.**



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