

Thriving in Nature Fund



Spring 2026 update



Bridge Street Community Garden



KEEN



Benson Area Nature Group



FarmAbility

Improving lives through green spaces

Introduction

The Thriving in Nature Fund helps more people prosper by engaging with green spaces and the rural environment. Over the past two years, OCF has awarded over £744k in grants from the fund, with a focus on the smallest grassroots charities.

The fund demonstrates through local action that caring for nature is fundamental for people's daily flourishing, opening up the potential of the outdoors for those who are struggling with their mental and physical health.

Through this fund we are also building skills, confidence and pathways into employment, especially for people facing disadvantage. From farming skills for disabled adults to therapeutic horticulture that supports people back towards work, our grantees are delivering this impact right now.

Thanks to a collective of individuals, trusts and businesses, these grants are funding community-led projects that use land, food growing, conservation and outdoor activity to improve wellbeing and restore nature across Oxfordshire. These projects tackle deteriorating mental health and rising obesity levels, issues that the Director of Public Health for Oxfordshire has highlighted as particularly acute.

With a proven track record and a known need for funding, OCF is strongly committed to this fund for the long term. The flexibility of the fund has enabled a growing emphasis on food and farming, and an emerging focus on 'blue spaces' like our precious rivers. This report shares the progress of our 27 grantees across 2024 and 2025; we hope that their stories will inspire you to continue your support of the Thriving in Nature Fund as it grows into its next phase.

OUR 2024 GRANTEES

We funded the following 14 organisations in 2024 for two to three years, forming the first cohort:

- 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

OUR 2025 GRANTEES

We have funded the following 13 organisations in 2025 for one to two years, as the second cohort:

- Bridewell Gardens
- Bridge Street Community Garden
- Friends of St John Fisher
- Friends of Wallingford and Cholsey Green Spaces
- GroW Families
- Letcombe Brook Project
- Proud to Be Me CIC
- Roots Radical Learning CIO
- Stonehill Cohousing
- Sunrise Multicultural Project
- T(ART) Productions
- The Branch Trust
- TRAIN - Inspiring Young People

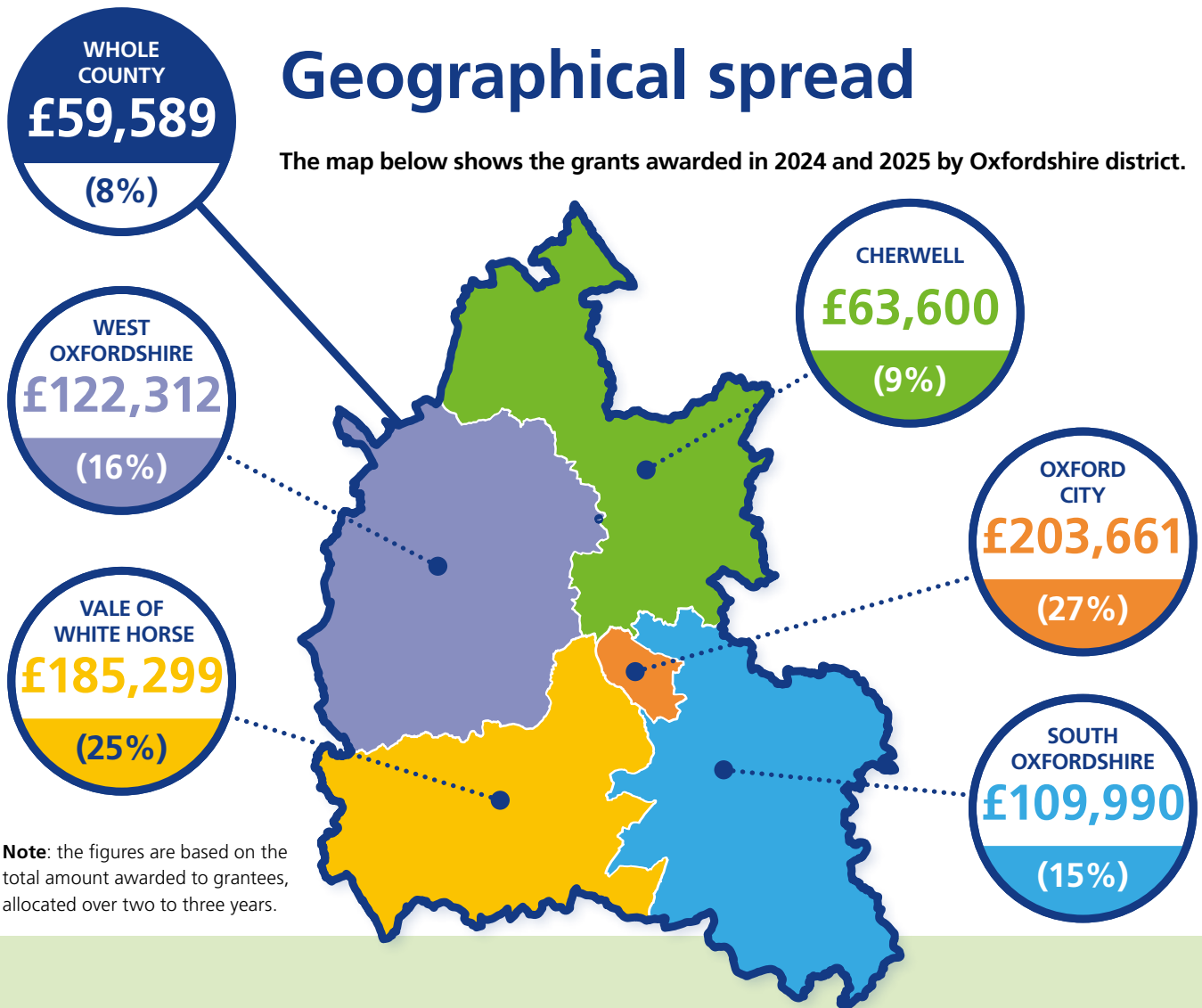


OCF was four times over-subscribed for Thriving in Nature funding over the past two years

Maymessy

Geographical spread

The map below shows the grants awarded in 2024 and 2025 by Oxfordshire district.



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

Added value through gold-standard grant-making

The way we make grants is just as important as the thematic areas we target – and this is how we ensure your donations have a genuine and lasting impact.

- **Focus on the smallest charities** that funders may struggle to know about otherwise
- **Streamlined application processes** that make the best use of a charity's precious time
- **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 realistic and flexible outcomes and indicators for success
- **Relationship-based support** from a funder that understands the challenges faced by small charities, and has regular one-to-one catch-ups with grantees.

"The support from OCF has been great, light touch but also available for discussion when needed and open to the evolution of the project as we develop it."
FarmAbility

"The guidance was clear, and the reporting requirements feel reasonable and manageable. This makes a big difference for small grassroots organisations, where most of the work is carried out by a very small team."
Bridge Street Community Garden

Key outcomes

The Thriving in Nature Fund was designed with three key purposes: to improve wellbeing, skills and access.

Within these broad purposes, grantees were invited to set their own outcomes and indicators, which they are reporting back on every six months. Below are some highlights from both cohorts.

BUILD MENTAL OR PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING



90%
of young people

taking part in KEEN's accessible gardening project said their mental wellbeing had improved "a lot" by the end of year 1



Root and Branch has seen a
65%
improvement in wellbeing

through their therapeutic gardening sessions, with 72% of participants achieving at least one of their goals



76%
of participants

reported improved mood and better coping strategies as a result of participation in the project at Rose Hill Junior Youth Club

INCREASE RURAL SKILLS, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT



FarmAbility has engaged
54
co-farmers

with seven of them attaining the John Muir Award, which trains them to become Wild Places Guardians, and 35 expected to complete by 2027



Long Mead Foundation has trained and supported local volunteers to propagate over

6,000
rare plants

and plant 850m of hedge

Maymessy has supported

12 
unemployed adults

with upskilling and training courses in their therapeutic garden

IMPROVE ACCESS TO GREEN SPACE FOR MARGINALISED GROUPS

Benson Area Nature Group has created an

833%
increase



in organised opportunities for local residents to spend time in nature, more than doubling numbers of attendees and volunteers

Wallingford Accessible Boat Club welcomed

 **500**

disabled passengers who consistently rated trips at 99% satisfaction

Oxford Community Action has given away

290 
free bikes

to people from minoritised communities, and has a dedicated mechanic to maintain them

Achievements so far

Grantees told us that they had so far succeeded in:

- Building **regular weekly sessions** that offer structure and a strong sense of community for participants throughout the year
- Enhancing programme delivery by developing **welcoming natural spaces** that support engagement, confidence and improved wellbeing
- Onboarding **growing numbers of participants**, shown through steady attendance, new enquiries and people choosing to return regularly, even during winter
- Strengthening **new partnerships** with local organisations and charities, enabling wider reach and more varied activity
- Developing **practical skills** including gardening and creative outdoor activities
- Leveraging **additional funding**, building on the Thriving in Nature Fund investment and strengthening long-term sustainability.

“Some of the young people who attend the project need a lot of support to engage, particularly with a new place and situation. Chaotic home lives have sometimes meant that the school has had challenges in obtaining parental permission needed for young people’s attendance.”

The Branch Trust

“The main achievement has been the consistency of the sessions that has made everything else possible and we now have a really strong community of women dedicated to the site and the project.”

21st Century Thame

Challenges faced by grantees

OCF’s relationship-based approach puts grantees in the driving seat, enabling a flexible response to challenges as they emerge. Grantees reported that they had to adapt or delay their plans due to:

- **Weather conditions** creating difficult outdoor working environments during winter, with cold, rain, flooding and reduced daylight forcing some sessions indoors, limiting attendance and delaying planned activities
- **Staff capacity pressures** such as small teams and limited available hours, slowed progress at times and required organisations to adapt or delay planned activities
- **Site accessibility** where temporary adjustments or alternative spaces were needed to ensure safety and inclusion for children, disabled participants and others unfamiliar with natural environments
- **Participant confidence** affecting engagement for some participants, particularly those facing disadvantage, with time and trusted relationships needed to feel comfortable attending
- **Environmental pressures** such as wildlife damage, equipment loss and water restrictions disrupting planting plans and day-to-day site maintenance
- **External delays** caused by suppliers, partner organisations or unavoidable logistics, which required changes to timelines and the replanning of activities.



Roots Radical Learning

Progress update for our 2024 grantees

These grantees are now around 15 months into their projects. Here we share a selection of stories about the inspiring progress they have made.

ROSE HILL JUNIOR YOUTH CLUB (RHJYC)

A weekly green space where young people feel calmer, more confident and connected

Since appointing a dedicated wellbeing coordinator in January 2025, the allotment has been developed into a calm and inclusive space used by children, young people and adults.

Weekly sessions focus on gardening and nature-based activity, alongside creative and reflective time, including arts and crafts, mindfulness and nature observation, helping participants slow down and feel more comfortable spending time outdoors. There have also been trips to local green spaces and estates, with costs covered to help low-income families take part.

RHJYC report strong engagement and retention, with 76% reporting improved mood and better coping strategies. Feedback from participants and staff observations show children becoming more sociable and engaged during sessions, with noticeable changes in confidence over time.

Alongside activity at the allotment, project delivery has extended into community venues, with nature-based sessions held at local organisations. This has helped reach people who may not initially feel comfortable attending the allotment itself, while continuing to build familiarity with green spaces and outdoor activity.

"When we're sitting here quietly, it's like you can almost hear the plants growing."

Participant, RHJYC



Rose Hill Junior Youth Club

WALLINGFORD ACCESSIBLE BOAT CLUB

Opening up accessible boating on the river to disabled people and their families

During their 2025 boating season, the club carried just under 500 disabled passengers with their friends and families on free trips on the river. Delivered across almost 100 free two-hour journeys, this represents a substantial level of activity for a volunteer-led service, and was supported by a committed team of more than 50 volunteers. Passenger feedback on their enjoyment of the trip was consistently rated at 99% satisfaction. This level of activity has brought wider recognition for the service, including a nomination for the King's Award for Voluntary Service.

During this period, the club also moved into a permanent operations facility at Riverside, Wallingford, completing an eight-year project to secure disabled-friendly access to the river. The new base provides improved boarding and access to their wheelyboat, supporting safer and more dignified experiences for passengers with a wide range of mobility needs.



Wallingford Accessible Boat Club



PENNYHOOKS FARM TRUST

A working farm helping autistic young people and adults build skills and confidence

The past year has marked a breakthrough in rural skills training with autistic young people and adults. Funding has provided stability at a pivotal time, enabling Pennyhooks to strengthen specialist staffing, deepen training and extend meaningful access to a real working farm environment.

More than 30 autistic young people and adults now train at Pennyhooks across the week, taking part in structured four-hour sessions with highly bespoke learning plans. Students take on real responsibility within a living rural landscape, including caring for animals and restoring hedgerows.

The Woodwork and Conservation Instructor now works four days per week, widening access to traditional woodwork and conservation activity and enabling consistent skill development. In 2025, for the first time in Pennyhooks' history, students were invited to set and meet production targets for woodwork items. Students successfully produced bee houses, bird boxes and planters for sale through local farm shops, with students demonstrating pride and confidence in their achievements.

Nature at Pennyhooks is treated as regulation and purpose, with predictable seasonal rhythms, clear routines and physical activity supporting mental wellbeing for students who experience the world as overwhelming. Families have noticed changes too. Improved confidence has enabled some students to engage in activities that were previously impossible. Community moments such as open days and fayres have reinforced this progress, with sales of student-made products raising £5,000 for the charity. Families saw their sons and daughters recognised as skilled contributors to a working farm.

"I am really amazed in myself doing skills that have really useful meaning. Pennyhooks is providing me with help and hope for my real future."

Student Ambassador at Pennyhooks Farm Trust

BENSON AREA NATURE GROUP

Hands-on conservation bringing local residents together in green spaces and supporting wellbeing

This project has increased opportunities for local residents to spend time in nature across its parish area, combining hands-on conservation with community engagement. The group delivered 25 organised activities, averaging more than two events per month, representing a substantial increase on previous levels of activity.

Activities include creating and restoring wildlife ponds, supporting schools to develop nature-friendly spaces, and running family nature days that bring people together outdoors. Over 350 people have taken part with a growing sense of engagement and commitment among local residents, including in parishes that were initially less engaged. Volunteers have received training in activities such as water vole monitoring, helping to build local capacity to care for green spaces over the longer term. Feedback from participants shows strong wellbeing benefits, with all saying they felt happier after attending an activity.

"The garden is now a valued school resource, enjoyed daily by pupils and used for outdoor learning and nurture sessions."

Benson Area Nature Group

FARMABILITY

Farm-based activities building skills and confidence for adults with learning disabilities

Fifty-four participants, known as co-farmers, have had a Thriving in Nature experience through FarmAbility's programme for adults with learning disabilities. At least 35 co-farmers are now working on extended projects focused on nature-friendly site improvements and citizen science activity.

FarmAbility selected the John Muir Award as the best fit for co-farmers' learning styles. This nationally recognised environmental award supports structured learning through practical activity in nature, enabling individuals to work towards recognised achievements while developing skills and confidence. One group of seven co-farmers has completed the award from start to finish, and following its success, a whole-organisation John Muir Award is now being rolled out across multiple groups.

This work is supporting co-farmers' self esteem and confidence, with participants recognising the value of their skills and contribution to the local environment.



"She had lots of input into the design of the pond, and this gave her the opportunity to lead or support other co-farmers in award activities."

FarmAbility

LONG MEAD FOUNDATION

Meadow restoration activities supporting wellbeing, connection and shared purpose

Through floodplain meadow restoration, a wide range of people are taking part in hands on conservation activity. Volunteers have worked together to propagate more than 6,000 rare plants, which have been planted across meadows and used in habitat restoration, alongside planting 850 metres of hedge.

People return week after week to take part in surveying and contribute to meadow management. Volunteers describe a strong sense of pride and value in seeing plants they have grown out in the landscape, while delivering clear benefit for nature. People taking part include young people, retired volunteers, career changers, individuals recovering from illness, and adults with learning disabilities participating through social farming activity. Participation has supported mental wellbeing and social connection, helping people feel part of a community with shared purpose.



"I feel that being part of Long Mead has honestly given me back a life that I didn't realise I was missing. I have been a full-time carer for many years, and my only place was at home, but now I feel like I'm more part of society. I have friends, social events and people who ultimately have my back."

Volunteer at Long Mead Foundation

"I'm going to be able to watch the sunflowers grow from my cell and sit on the bench here and look at it."

Participant, The Nature Effect project at HMP Bullingdon



The Nature Effect

THE NATURE EFFECT

Developing nature-rich spaces at HMP Bullingdon to help prisoners connect with their families

The Inside Out project is a collaboration with Prison Advice and Care Trust (PACT) at HMP Bullingdon, creating nature-rich spaces that support wellbeing, nature connection and rehabilitation. A garden at the prison's Visitor Centre has been completed, now known as the Bloom & Play Garden, alongside ongoing work to develop a therapeutic garden connected to the prison's Incentivised Substance-Free Living (ISFL) wing.

Family engagement sessions have taken place, with children and adults planting vegetables and taking part in art activities such as natural weaving and chalking. The garden provides a calm and welcoming space, helping ease the pressure of prison visits and offering families a positive shared experience. Alongside this, men on the ISFL wing are actively involved in developing and caring for the therapeutic garden, which is already beginning to take shape.

Results so far for our 2025 grantees

Our 2025 grantees have only been working on their Thriving in Nature projects for seven months, but have already seen tangible results thanks to the new funding. What follows is just a selection!

IN-DEPTH: BRIDGE STREET COMMUNITY GARDEN

Since autumn 2025, Thriving in Nature funding has enabled Bridge Street Community Garden in Banbury to offer a steady rhythm of nature-based activity throughout the winter.

Weekly gardening sessions have brought people together to plant seeds, prune fruit trees, tend canal-side planters and nurture shared beds. Alongside this practical work, creative activities such as lantern-making and seasonal food-sharing have provided calm, grounding experiences at a time of year when many feel isolated.

The garden attracts a wide range of people: teenagers discovering confidence through volunteering; adults in recovery building routine and purpose; families from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds enjoying creative outdoor play; older adults joining when health allows; and new residents finding community after moving to Banbury.

A 65-year-old volunteer explained that coming each week "helped me move on from my alcoholism, meet new people... and have something to look forward to on a Monday", describing a "real sense of achievement"



Bridge Street Community Garden

from seeing the garden transform. A local mother shared that the garden has helped her "feel more at home... and part of a positive community", boosting her mental health. Another volunteer said the project inspired her to lead a Nature Connection Campaign after seeing "how meaningful it is to connect people through learning and caring for the environment together".

With more than 650 visits and 170 individuals already benefiting, the garden has become somewhere people feel they belong, and commit to a shared responsibility for the environment.

“One young man who has anxiety and communication needs linked to autism has noticeably gained in confidence, now asking questions, addressing staff by name and making choices of activity in the garden. He took part in harvesting and cleaning mason bee cocoons, recognising and removing pollen mites, replacing nesting tubes and installing a bee hatchery in the garden. A home support worker who knows him well had been absent for some months and commented on the big improvement in his communication skills on returning.”

The Branch Trust

- **GroW Families** has created a calm outdoor space where children who struggle in busy toddler groups can explore at their own pace. Twice-monthly sessions in Betjeman Park offer mud and water play, treasure baskets, simple nature crafts and themed activities that spark curiosity. Parents say their children settle more easily here, and the team has already welcomed 28 families across 72 attendances. One boy who usually “never engages” spent most of a session studying ladybirds alongside another quiet child he’d just met – a small but significant moment of connection that reflects the confidence the group is helping to nurture.



GroW Families

“I thought I was crashing to the ground before starting at Bridewell. Bridewell has been my parachute and has glided me down. It has increased my confidence and helped reduce anxiety levels. It got me out of the house and gave me structure and routine to my week.”

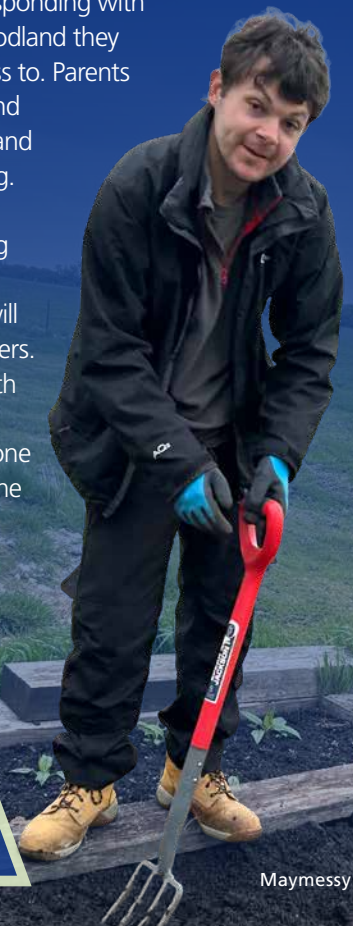
Bridewell participant

- **Proud to Be Me CIC** is steadily building a nature-based programme that feels genuinely safe and affirming for LGBTQ+ young people, who often arrive carrying anxiety, stress or the effects of exclusion. Their pilot session suggested the approach is working: young people described feeling calmer outdoors – more able to think clearly and participate without fear of judgement. Moving delivery to a familiar park reduced the emotional load of entering a new environment, particularly for those with negative experiences in public spaces. Early feedback shows a steady lift in confidence, with participants beginning to imagine future possibilities through reflective exercises and creative enterprise activities designed specifically with their needs in mind.

- **Stonehill Cohousing’s** new forest school club has quickly become a lively anchor point for local families with young children. Even in cold autumn weather, under-fives arrive ready to scramble over logs, build dens and gather around the fire circle, responding with immediate enthusiasm to a woodland they might not otherwise have access to. Parents emphasise how valuable this kind of wilder space is in their area, and attendance has remained strong. Volunteers have been equally active, creating paths, improving safety and helping develop an accessible compost toilet that will open the woodland to more users. Families keep returning, and with each visit children grow more confident, more connected to one another and more at home in the natural environment.

“Many of our beneficiaries live in homes without gardens or access to safe outdoor space. The planting sessions have provided opportunities to spend time outdoors in a calm, therapeutic setting. They are giving practical skills that support healthier eating and food confidence; gentle physical activity that improves mobility and wellbeing; a sense of ownership, achievement, and routine; and social connection through shared tasks and teamwork.”

Sunrise Multicultural Project



Maymessy

The power of collective funding

OCF is incredibly grateful to the group of funders who share a common vision to help people thrive through nature, and are on this journey with us.

By working through OCF, these funders can achieve greater impact on this issue together than they could alone. Thanks to this collective approach, we are in a position to make larger, multi-year grants to the small, grassroots charities we support, which gives them the stability to plan and implement their ideas effectively.

For example, the team at 21st Century Thame told us how their multi-year Thriving in Nature grant has revolutionised their 'Her Land' project from a longstanding dream to a reality, having a daily impact on women's wellbeing. Working with OCF to set KPIs, articulate plans and take action has created something real and lasting for the vulnerable women they are supporting.

A huge thank you to:

- Adrian Swire Charitable Trust
- Beeching Trust
- Christopher Laing Foundation
- David and Claudia Harding Foundation
- HDH Wills 1965 Charitable Trust
- Ian Mactaggart Trust
- John Laing Charitable Trust
- Kinraig Trust
- Lennox Hannay Charitable Trust
- Macfarlane Family Foundation
- Michael Bishop Foundation
- Ormonde Foundation
- Ponsonby Foundation
- RWK Goodman Charitable Fund
- Saunders Family Fund
- Six individual philanthropists.

Several of these funders have made multi-year commitments to the fund, which helps us invest our time to continuously grow the pool of contributors.



OCF's Deputy CEO Kate Parrinder hosts a panel discussion amongst Thriving in Nature funders at Asthall Manor

A commitment to continuous learning

OCF is using the Thriving in Nature Fund to build momentum in this area and enable learning within the sector, as well as allowing funders the opportunity to hear directly from the organisations supported.

In particular, we hold an annual celebration and learning event, bringing together Thriving in Nature grantees and funders. At our first event in May 2025, we facilitated open and honest discussions between them, which reinforced the need for more human, compassionate and flexible funding practices. Both funders and grantees expressed a desire to understand impact qualitatively, balancing storytelling and in-person engagement with a moderate and reasonable amount of hard data.

OCF is continuing to build relationship-based support and feedback into the Thriving in Nature Fund and other funding streams in our portfolio.



Building long-term momentum

We are confident that we now have a proven and effective model for improving local lives by uniting people with nature. There is a huge potential for us to grow this fund and its impact over the long term.

Our experience so far proves that:

- There is a strong need for this funding, with more excellent applications than we are able to fund
- We can reach grantees who can genuinely deliver impact for our funders
- There is an appetite to support these themes within the local philanthropic community.

Looking towards 2030, we believe we can scale this fund to meet more of the need. In 2026, we are excited to open a third round of Thriving in Nature grant funding, building on the principles of the first two rounds. We will invite applications from a brand-new cohort of charitable organisations, and this year we intend to build a stronger focus on food and farming into the design of the grants, capitalising on Oxfordshire’s rural and agricultural heritage, and encouraging engagement and skills development within the farming community.

With nearly £200k already secured for this year, **we are now seeking at least a further £150k to resource this year’s grants.** Multi-year commitments from our funding partners will really help us to build this momentum, helping more people thrive, nurture a love of nature, and develop the skills needed to steward our world into the future.

GET IN TOUCH

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



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“Quite simply, on behalf of our participants and their families and carers, thank you for all your support, it makes a huge difference to their lives and experiences.”

KEEN

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