Sustainability Stakeholder Networking Event
Report on Discussions

Hosted by the OxPOCH project, ONE & the OMS

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Summary

The sustainability landscape has been changing rapidly, with businesses, institutions, individuals, the media and governments worldwide fast coming to terms with the challenges the 'triple threat' of the biodiversity, climate and social crises and the scale of actions required to meet them. 2020 had been billed as a 'Super Year' for action on this front, marking the end of the UN Decade of Biodiversity with COP15 in Kunming and COP26 in Glasgow[1]. In Oxford, there has been a tangible change in pace on this front, with students, colleges and the central University renewing efforts to make more far-reaching, ambitious and measurably impactful commitments to sustainability. With that backdrop, the OxPOCH project, the OMS and ONE jointly hosted a stakeholder networking event to bring people together to discuss how best to promote sustainability within the university, and get feedback on the draft proposals for a new 'Environmental Sustainability Strategy' for the University.

The event focussed on two main areas for sustainability within the university: food consumption and land-use. We also discussed the Conservation Hierarchy framework and introduced OxPOCH, as well as the key issue of the university's strategy for offsetting its impacts. In this report, the ideas and suggestions from the event have been compiled and sorted into four broad themes based on these discussions.

Background

The Oxford Partnership for Operationalising the Conservation Hierarchy (OxPOCH) is a research project led by Prof. E.J. Milner-Gulland at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Conservation Science (ICCS) at the Department of Zoology, with partners from across the university (see full list of partners here[2]). The project aims to support the University to improve its environmental

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[1] Both now postponed to 2021 due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.
[2] https://conservationhierarchy.org/portfolio-items/institutional-sustainability-oxpoch/

sustainability as an institution, while testing the application of the 'Conservation Hierarchy', or 4Rs (Figure 1), with two key focal areas: the University's food consumption and land-use practices. The project is funded by the OUP's John Fell Fund and also has a strong focus on public engagement, education and outreach.

The Oxford Martin School (OMS) is an interdisciplinary research centre and think-tank with multiple research themes investigating sustainability issues. The Oxford Networks for the Environment (ONE) are a set of interdisciplinary networks for academics in any University department whose research coalesces around one of five themes: biodiversity, climate, food, water and energy. ONE's purpose is to facilitate networking and research by exploiting synergies between individual projects.

In October 2019 the University announced plans to implement a new overarching sustainability strategy, in recognition of the scale of action required to combat the ongoing crisis and the lack of significant targets on this issue. A working group has shaped the vision for the current draft document, which was launched for consultation in early March. All staff and students at the University are welcome and encouraged to respond to the consultation, which will run until mid-April 2020, before a revised strategy is sent to governing committees in Trinity Term 2020 and then Council in October 2020.

To view the full draft strategy, and respond to the consultation, please visit: https://sustainability.web.ox.ac.uk/consultation (SSO login required, deadline 14th April).
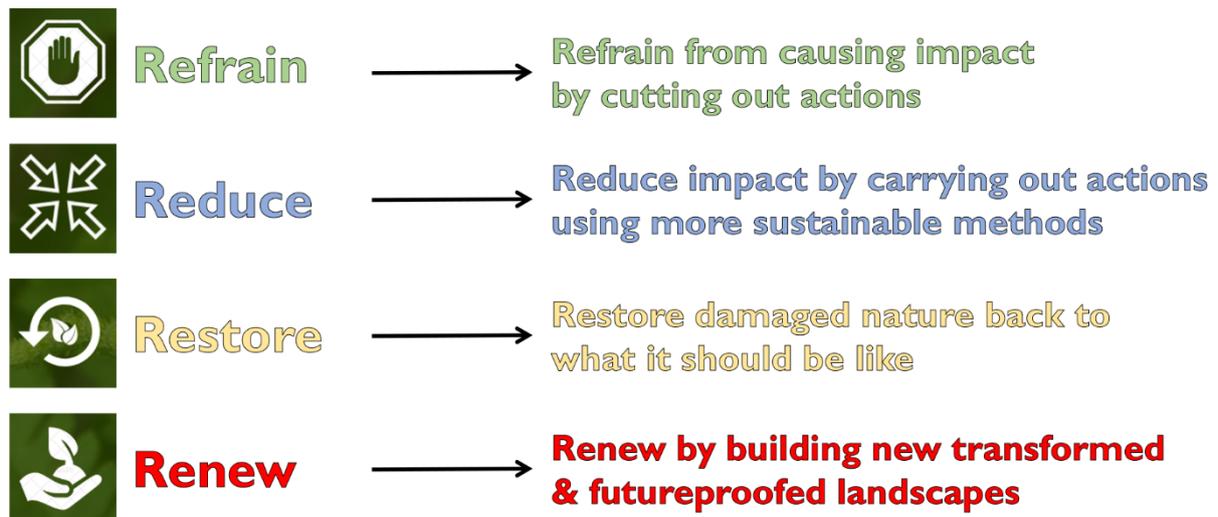

Figure 1: the Conservation Hierarchy presented as the '4Rs' concept. The Rs are prioritised into a hierarchy, meaning preventative actions such as refraining and reducing should be given precedence to compensatory actions such as restoring and renewing. This common language can be used to frame actions from businesses, to national or sub-national jurisdictions, to individuals.

Event Structure and Aims

As an initial collaboration between OxPOCH, ONE and the OMS, the event held was a two-hour structured networking event for the five core groups of stakeholders working towards environmental sustainability for the University:
- University policy/operations decision makers (UAS staff)
- Colleges staff/decision makers
- Academics and researchers

- Students
- Oxford city and external partners

Each group approaches this overarching issue in different ways, coming from different perspectives and facing different constraints and opportunities. As such, the aims of this event were to:
- Facilitate **dialogue** between different parts of the university and wider partners, aimed specifically at fostering inter-group understanding and collaboration that promotes joint action
- Introduce the **Conservation Hierarchy** to a wider audience within the University
- Contribute to the **consultation** on the University's Environmental Sustainability Strategy

The welcome was given by Prof. Milner-Gulland, followed by short talks from Dr Cécile Girardin (who introduced ONE and specifically the Biodiversity Network), Henry Grub (who introduced OxPOCH, the Conservation Hierarchy and the '4Rs' concept, figure 1), and Harriet Waters. Harriet is the Head of Environmental Sustainability at the University's Estates Services and introduced the draft sustainability strategy to attendees. A summary of the draft core 13 'priority interventions' are shown in table 1.

Priority 1: Agree and implement a programme with defined actions and timelines for the University to achieve net zero carbon and net biodiversity gain by 2050 or earlier.
Priority 2: Agree an approach to carbon and biodiversity accounting and annual reporting.
Priority 3: Agree to embed environmental sustainability in the University's governance and decision making.
Priority 4: Agree to establish an environmental sustainability fund to help us avoid, reduce and offset biodiversity impacts and carbon emissions.
Priority 5: Encourage investment groups to engage with and support companies on net zero targets using the Oxford Martin School Principles for Climate-Conscious Investment. Introduce a specific ban on any investment funds whose activities are primarily focused on funding new oil and gas extraction, and ban holding direct equity in these companies.
Priority 6: Offer all students the opportunity to study environmental sustainability, either within or outside their examined curriculum.
Priority 7: Implement mechanisms to maximise leverage from our research collaborations, partnerships and knowledge exchange activity in support of environmental sustainability.
Priority 8: Implement proposals for the enhancement of biodiversity on the University estate.
Priority 9: Implement proposals to reduce the ecological and carbon impact of the food provided at the University.
Priority 10: Implement proposals to end the use of natural gas and oil and replace with zero carbon energy across the University estate.
Priority 11: Set targets for stabilising and then reducing carbon emissions from international travel in line with a net zero target.
Priority 12: Promote large scale infrastructure projects to improve walking, cycling and public transport in Oxford.
Priority 13: Develop policies to assess fossil fuel sponsorship of research and require sponsors to be signed up to net zero carbon and net biodiversity gain.

Table 1: headline interventions from the draft environmental sustainability strategy that is out for consultation. Priorities 1-5 are for implementation within the first 12 months of strategy executive approval, proposals 6-11 are on a 1-5 year timeline and priorities 12 and 13 five plus years. Priority 1 commits the University to net biodiversity gain and net zero carbon by 2050 at the latest.

There was then a half-hour panel session chaired by Prof. Milner-Gulland with representatives from each stakeholder group outlining their challenges and aspirations:

Academia: Alison Smith (*Environmental Change Institute*)
Students: Kaya Axelsson (*Oxford Student Union*)
Colleges: Bart Ashton (*Lady Margaret Hall*)
University: Harriet Waters (*Estates Services*)
External partners: James Giles (*Compass Group UK*)

The second hour of the event involved structured networking over drinks and refreshments, with facilitators guiding discussions around the four pre-chosen themes, and compiling ideas and discussion points on flipcharts.

Discussion Results

From the discussion across the four pre-chosen themes, points and ideas were raised that have been grouped into four different categories below. These new categories reflect the **interrelatedness** of many of the discussions that were occurring. Figure 2 shows keywords that were noted down on the flipcharts by facilitators during the discussions.

Figure 2: a word-cloud of keywords taken from the four flipcharts in the networking session. The size of each word is relative to the number of times that word appeared across all four flipchart's notes combined. 'Action', 'goal' and 'steps' were frequently mentioned, along with 'colleges', who many recognised that whilst outside the scope of the draft strategy must be encouraged to make their own commitments.

Maximising environmental sustainability across our land-holdings

The draft sustainability strategy proposes **biodiversity net gain** as a key commitment, but achieving this could be done in multiple ways, with different techniques and emphasis. On the theme of land-use, it became apparent that the need to improve sustainability across the whole estate was essential. This means to balance interests between increasing, for example, carbon sequestration as a nature-based solution to climate change, or ecosystem service value, or biodiversity for its own intrinsic value. There will be many situations in which there is **no trade-off** between these interests, and there are **"no-regret actions"** that can be taken that improve different aspects of the environment across all categories. Examples of ideas for actions that could be taken across the estate are listed in table 2.

Action	Jurisdiction	Land Type
Turning lawns to wildflower meadows, less mowing	University & colleges	Urban
Incentivising tenant farmers to take up environmentally friendly practices	University & Colleges	Agricultural
Creating 'messy' habitats, such as scrub in the landscaped parts of the estate (e.g. Uni Parks)	University & colleges	Parkland, gardens
Integrate food production into the estate (e.g. plant fruit and nut trees, herb areas, for use by staff/students and in the kitchens)	University & colleges	Mainly urban
Dedicated allotments for staff and students	University	Urban
Strategically joining up and creating green corridors, improving ecological connectivity	Colleges, university, wider City	Urban
Green walls and roofs on all new developments	University & colleges	Urban
Promoting engagement through competitions, citizen science and monitoring e.g. bioblitzes	University & colleges	All
Selecting plant mixes: emphasising native species and maximising services such as pollination	University & colleges	Developments, parkland, gardens
Committing to no-development areas on the estate	University & colleges	e.g. green belt
Mainstreaming biodiversity into the ethos of developments, and recognising the cultural value of land (equivalent to other assets which form part of our cultural heritage).	University & colleges	All

Table 2: suggested ideas for better land management that maximises various outputs across different types of the estate. Lots of possible actions would have much greater effect if colleges are also involved, a central and recurring theme, so a mechanism to involve colleges on University-led biodiversity initiatives could be useful.
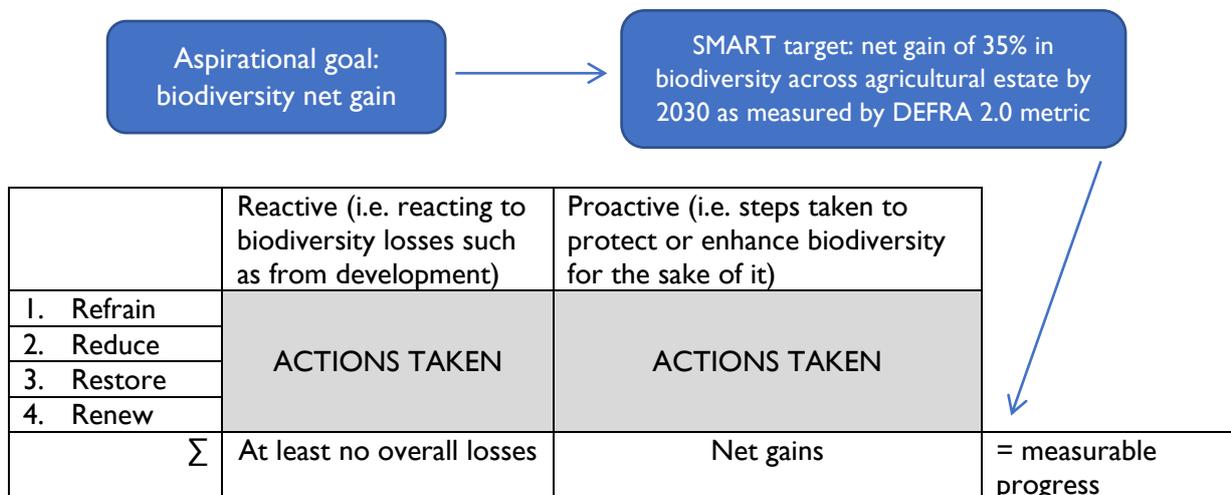
There are opportunities to improve the biodiversity value of land holdings across **different types** of the estate. For a target of biodiversity net gain, the University must first address threats to the current baseline levels of biodiversity, such as development projects, but also seek to **proactively enhance** biodiversity because, as an institution, it **has the capacity to**. Ideas and suggestions to react to loss of biodiversity (i.e. from development) are dealt with in the next section.

Accounting and stepping through the hierarchy

One of the key points raised about the 4Rs concept was 'when have you done enough' at earlier stages before you move onto the next stage? The 4Rs are framed with an **overall goal** but to work well goals must be **SMART** (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound). Whilst most suggestions currently in the draft strategy are not SMART, it has been made clear that the aim of the first year after executive approval will be dedicated to setting SMART targets and developing the system for accounting biodiversity gains and losses and measuring progress towards the **net gain** goal.

It was suggested that the 'a' for "achievable" in SMART should be replaced with '**ambitious**', to ensure that the overall goal that is being worked towards is not too weak. The 4Rs framework's relies on action at each step being taken according to what an institution's **capacity to act** is like at the time. Capacity for action increases as time moves on, so **each year can be reviewed** and more early-on (i.e. preventative) actions taken. As such, a **robust and transparent** accounting and reporting system with a clear review mechanism will be crucial to achieving success for the strategy.

From discussions, one outline of how progress towards a target could be annually reported is show below, allowing the University to show all the actions it is taking **towards a target**, how they contribute and how progress is going. If used transparently, it could provide a tool to then annually **review progress**, see where actions are missing, and revaluate for the next year. During the discussions, a 'fifth R' was suggested as being essential to setting and achieving ambitious enough goals – Rethink.

	Reactive (i.e. reacting to biodiversity losses such as from development)	Proactive (i.e. steps taken to protect or enhance biodiversity for the sake of it)	
1. Refrain 2. Reduce 3. Restore 4. Renew	ACTIONS TAKEN	ACTIONS TAKEN	
∑	At least no overall losses	Net gains	= measurable progress

Other issues that arose centred around how to establish **baselines**, clearly define **scope**, and the selected metrics. For the biodiversity net gain target, clearly setting how to measure biodiversity across the estate, and clearly setting out which parts of the estate are excluded (if any) will be essential. There was a concern that sticking to just one metric to assess net gain (e.g. DEFRA habitat metric) is too unnuanced, and instead a **suite of quantitative and qualitative information** should be used – but how this comes together is a significant challenge (but one that could be addressed with the help of Oxford's research community, e.g. we have substantial experience at Wytham).

Across all four discussions, the need to **emphasise refraining and reducing** (preventative steps) was mentioned (as seen in figure 2). Suggestions around this theme were:

- Avoidance at the <u>first stage</u> of development planning – meaning there's budget allocated for biodiversity within the development (rather than it being a later add-on)
- Clearly using the mitigation hierarchy right from the start for all developments
- For flying/carbon: reducing the amount and need for flying is essential over just offsetting emissions
- Moving away from tick-boxes (e.g. just doing the minimum required in law) to more proactive engagement with the need for Net Gain

Offsetting emissions and biodiversity

Offsetting as a concept remains controversial, mainly due to the **risk attached** with the process. As such, it was repeatedly highlighted that less risky measures, such as preventing loss or emissions in the first instance, are preferable to relying on offsetting to make up the majority of biodiversity gains or emissions reductions.

Other key points that were mentioned include:
- Need to prioritise **local, like-for-like** biodiversity gains and not just offsets elsewhere
- Carbon offsetting will be required to achieve net zero, but should be seen as a last resort
- Offsetting the emissions of travelling (international) students may be deemed part of scope
- Which offsetting schemes should we be working with? – should have someone responsible for compiling **guidelines** on which offsets to use, following reviews up, and ensuring transparency with offsetters we use
- For biodiversity offsetting, we need to find synergies with other land-use demands as land is at a premium – but no monoculture or rapidly growing trees just for carbon benefits
- Working with **local partners**: handing over some responsibility to design good biodiversity offset projects to them (e.g. local wildlife trusts)

A large proportion of the offsetting discussions revolved around offsetting carbon emissions from flying, but the need to reduce flying in the first instance was fundamentally recognised. Ideas to contribute to this included:
- Use the University's **influence** to pressure airlines themselves to invest in the right schemes
- Only allow longer trips for expenses claims, ensuring academics travelling longer distances **make more of the trip**
- How can we change the way we work? Increasing online presence, regional conferencing
- Setting a **good example**: making Oxford conference materials available online, webcasting, making it easier for people to access Oxford conferences remotely

Food and farming

The University serves a large amount of food, but emphasis during discussions was put on the **whole food system**, rather than just the end product in canteens. Given that a large proportion of the University and colleges' estates is **farmland** too, there are sustainability improvements to be made across the whole system that will have profound **carbon and biodiversity** benefits.

Suggestions for changing the food we serve included:
- Having vegetarian and vegan meals as **the default** across the University, along with making those options cheaper to purchase (**removing subsidies for meat**), and having default dairy free milk

- Setting SMART, **rigorous targets** for lowering meat consumption, potentially bringing consumption of the most damaging meats to **zero**
- Rigorous targets for sourcing – moving to 'must be' rather than 'where possible'
- Obtaining/sourcing locally – setting up **community gardens**, or herb gardens in colleges, using University/college estates to supply Compass with produce and/or the more 'iconic' products e.g. **Encaenia strawberries, exam carnations**
- Making academically **informed choices** when it comes to setting policy on which certifications to go for – organic, Red Tractor, MSC-certified, Fairtrade-certified

Suggestions for dealing with waste food products from canteens:
- Mandatory food waste bins and **compost facilities** across the whole of functional estate
- Active monitoring of purchasing and food waste for constant adjustment
- **Central resource/dashboard** (publicly available) to track purchasing, impacts, and waste
- Food waste sent to shelters if possible
- Setting up food **surplus transfer policies** between University and colleges to reduce waste

Suggestions for working to improve tenant farms:
- More circular system – University and colleges deliberately buy more from their tenants
- Inventories of food being produced on the collegiate university's estates so colleges and the University can buy from each other
- **Leases – longer** to promote sustainability, and include biodiversity targets or objectives as they are renewed
- Supporting sustainable **innovations for tenant farmers** – this must be actively done rather than passively waiting for farmers to catch up – setting up a farmers **advisory group** for tenants?
- Linking tenant farming back to carbon or biodiversity goals – where can we maximise synergies e.g. encouraging and then facilitating switches from pasture to **silvopasture or agroforestry** where viable

There is a lot of potential for the University to have a positive sustainable impact across the whole food system, and there is also a lot of room for synergies between different goals. Setting clear SMART targets with a transparent regular review should help exploit the most viable ideas in the first instance.

Acknowledgements