

ONCF was set up, first as an informal grouping in 1993, became more formal with the employment of the development officer in 1997, moving to a registered charitable association in 2000, with the primary purpose of bringing together all organisations that affect nature conservation in Oxfordshire to develop common goals and priorities and reduce competition and duplication. Co-operation is fundamental to the way ONCF works. We are now incorporating the charity as a company limited by guarantee and we feel it is important to write down and get all members of the new charity to agree to three principles that have enabled ONCF's first 15 years to be a resounding success.

From the beginning membership was very diverse and included government in the form of Councils and Government agencies, dedicated conservation bodies, farmers and landowners, utilities like Thames Water, wider countryside interests like CPRE and recreation bodies like The Ramblers Association. Despite very wide differences in primary purpose and public disagreement between some of these bodies we believed that there was common ground between all of them and ONCF's task was to highlight this and use it to develop partnership. To achieve this we had to agree that ONCF would not take sides or declare positions that might conflict with interests of any of the members.

Principle 1) ONCF is not a lobbying organisation. Members agree to respect its neutral stance on all issues (other than the general importance of biodiversity and ecosystems) and not to claim ONCF's support for any particular agenda or position.

60 member organisations are bound to have different priorities, working methods, values etc. One of the benefits of ONCF is that it allows these differences to be worked out, understood and dealt with maturely without harmful public displays of petulance. Public conflict between organisations that have similar headline objectives, damages the image and reputation of the whole sector and plays into the hands of developers and others who's agendas are served by portraying the conservation community as incoherent and narrowly focused on fragmented minority interests.

Principle 2) Members of ONCF recognise the damage that can be done by public criticism of another member's stance on nature conservation. They agree to do all they can to resolve disagreements privately and to respect the priorities and boundaries adopted by other organisations.

ONCF was set up to facilitate strategy development, communication, collaboration and efficient delivery of common agendas by its member organisations. It was not set up to compete with or duplicate any member's activities. It exists to be the mortar between the bricks and not to become a brick (i.e. a delivery organisation) in its own right. In practice the boundary is blurred and ONCF hosts two activities that might be seen as brick rather than mortar: co-ordination of the county's Biodiversity Action Plan, and the Community Conservation Initiative including the Jubilee Wildlife Spaces Project.

Principle 3) ONCF will not develop activities that duplicate or compete with its members. Projects may be developed at the request of members when they are seen to be important and there is either no more appropriate deliverer or members have declined to take on the activity.