

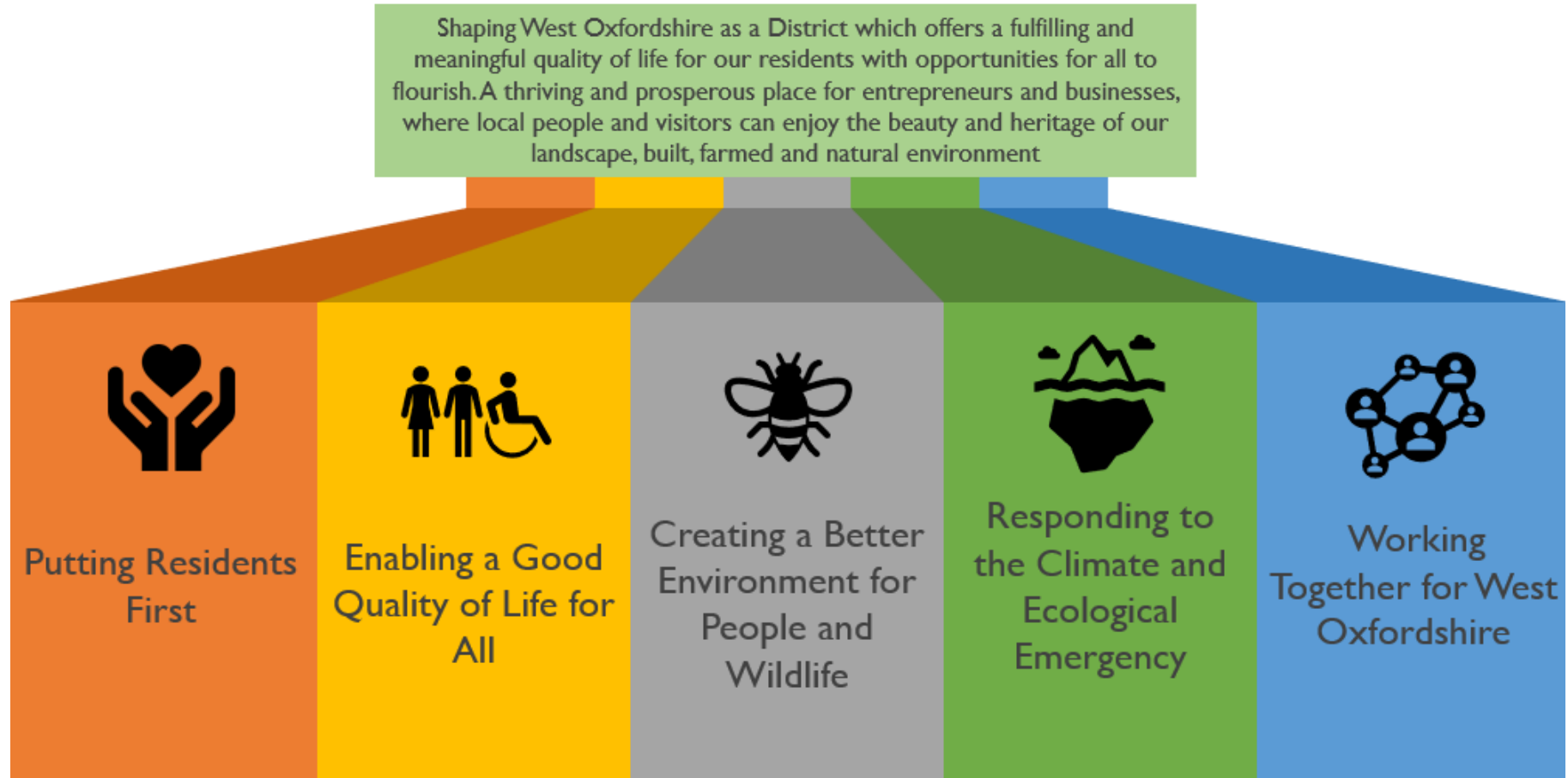


WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT
October 2023 – December 2023

Background

The Executive Action Plan was created to outline the steps needed to carry out the vision of the Executive after the new Council Plan was adopted in February 2023. In the Council Plan, the Executive looks to the district's future and establishes a vision for West Oxfordshire. In addition to updating the public on the status of each priority at regular meetings across the plan's four-year duration, a new performance framework has been created to offer timely updates for actions taken in relation to the priorities.



Putting Residents First



Actions we are taking

The Council is working in partnership with Oxfordshire County Council, the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, district and city councils, town and parish councils and parish meetings to develop a shared charter. The charter will be a commitment of principles to support successful partnership working across all councils in Oxfordshire. An event has been hosted where representatives of our local councils were invited to share their reflections to help shape the content of the charter. An online survey providing further opportunity for councillors to shape the priorities, aims and principles of the charter is now live (<https://letstalk.oxfordshire.gov.uk/ox-councils-charter>). It is intended that the Charter will be brought to Executive for endorsement in April, following a Town and Parish Forum to discuss it in February 2024.

Our House launched in 2018 and is run by Cottsway Housing in partnership with WODC and specialist support provider Aspire. Funded by the Government's Community Housing Fund, the project offers accommodation and support to up to 12 individuals, known as 'trainees', and offers assistance to get them back into employment, education, or occupational training. The Council continues to work together with partners and the community to combat homelessness and ensure safe and secure housing options for everyone. The current funding arrangements were set to expire in October 2023, but the Council's commitment to the safety and well-being of its residents has led to the decision to continue supporting this vital initiative for a further year, until November 2024.

Following a car park review, the Council has implemented permanent free long-stay parking in Woolgate Car Park to support local workers in Witney Town Centre. Survey results on car park usage informed this decision, including planned maintenance and repairs for areas like disabled bays in Woolgate. The Council surveyed over 1100 residents, identifying high usage in Hensington Road Car Park (Woodstock) and Guildenford Car Park (Burford), leading to further studies for those towns.

Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All



Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a planning charge introduced by the Government through the Planning Act 2008 to provide a fair and transparent means for ensuring that development contributes to the cost of the infrastructure it will rely upon, such as schools and roads. In March 2023, the Council's Executive agreed that fresh viability evidence should be commissioned to inform a new draft CIL charging schedule. The Council is actively moving forward with the adoption and implementation of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). Progress has been made with additional supporting information supplied to the appointed consultants, Dixon Searle Partnership, with discussions underway regarding the development typologies to be tested and the preferred approach to the consultation process with key stakeholders, including landowners and developers. A consultation survey is due to be sent out imminently by the Council on behalf of the consultants to gather input from the community for a well-informed and collaborative implementation of the CIL.

The Strategic Housing Project at the Council is undergoing significant developments with the planned recruitment for a Strategic Housing Development and Enabling Manager. This new role will lead project work focused on identifying and advancing innovative ideas and models for increased affordable housing. The project includes assessing the scope for investment and modelling, exploring the best route for more interventionist housing delivery, developing business cases for existing Council-owned sites, and further exploration of modular building options. This comprehensive strategy underscores the council's commitment to addressing housing challenges through proactive planning and innovative solutions.

The Weavers Fold development, comprising eight 2 and 3-bedroom zero carbon homes available through a discount market sale in Chipping Norton, offers buyers the unique opportunity to custom-build their homes, influencing design and specifications. Although there have been delays in the project, the Executive approved a new delivery model proposal in November, jointly developed by Green Axis and Homes England, with legal agreements currently in progress.

The Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) is an innovative capital fund that supports local authorities in England to obtain housing for those who are unable to find settled accommodation on resettlement schemes. The Council were successful in their bid for funding to relieve pressures on short term accommodation with a longer term objective of seeing the housing used for more general affordable purposes. Following the exchange of contracts between Cottsway and Miller Homes for the construction of 23 additional affordable units in the district, the project has entered the delivery phase.

Salt Cross Garden Village is a proposed new standalone settlement, self-contained with its own village facilities, such as schools, community resources and employment opportunities. The initial garden village proposals set out in the Local Plan include 2,200 new homes and a new science business park which will give local people an alternative to driving to work in Oxford. Nearby Hanborough railway station together with a new Park and Ride facility to the north of Eynsham will give people an alternative to using their cars. The Area Action Plan (AAP) has undergone a thorough revision, encompassing modifications identified during the examination process in preparation for its adoption. After the Inspector's report was received, a legal challenge was submitted focusing on the conclusions reached by the Inspector in relation to the soundness of AAP Policy 2 – Net Zero Carbon Development. The case was heard in the High Court on 14-15 November 2023, with the judgement due in early 2024.

A Market Towns Study was commissioned as part of the government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund Levelling Up scheme to help identify issues to be addressed through the fund. The study recommended establishing town partnerships in order to identify detailed projects in each of the towns, for which £158,000 has been allocated to Witney Town Partnership has been established as the first of the Town Partnerships with the priorities for the Witney Town Partnership agreed as:

- Develop a long term strategic plan for the Town
- Promote the town to increase footfall
- Improve wayfinding and signage

The latter is being informed by a detailed audit of signage and wayfinding issues with officers from both planning and parking teams involved to ensure that any proposals will be acceptable in planning terms and are aligned with existing WODC work to update carparking signage in Witney.

Residents have been encouraged to shape the future of the Council's leisure and wellbeing services through a district-wide survey. The survey, running for 6 weeks from 11 December 2023, aims to understand residents' views on physical activity, local leisure facilities, and potential barriers to being active, with results informing the development of accessible, inclusive, and community-oriented services. The survey seeks community perspectives for a strategic approach to future services.

Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife



Actions we are taking

The Council has committed to the preparation of a new Local Plan covering the period up to 2041. The emerging plan is currently at the 'Regulation 18' stage of plan preparation, where views are sought on the content of the plan and different options and alternatives are considered and tested. An initial public consultation, 'Your Voice Counts' took place from August – October 2022 seeking general views on what sort of issues the new plan should focus on. More recently, a further public consultation took place from 30 August – 25 October 2023, and sought specific views on potential draft objectives for the new plan, along with different scenarios for the potential future pattern for growth and ideas/opportunities for how land might be used across the District, as well as a call for sites which Officers are assessing their potential suitability. The consultation was held predominantly online via the Council's digital engagement platform, citizenlab, but also included a number of 'in-person' events. 225 individuals and stakeholder organisations responded through citizenlab and a further 180 representations were received via email or letter. Further public consultation will take place in the new year as the Local Plan moves forward through further Regulation 18 consultation. It is anticipated that this will comprise a series of preferred policy approaches, building on the consultation feedback to date and emerging technical evidence on issues such as housing need. The Environment Agency has launched their 'Spheres of Influence' Project, for which WODC is one of three pilot areas nationally. Participation in this initiative will help shape local plan policies related to the water environment.

A Biodiversity Land Management Plan has been created in collaboration with Ubico which aims to establish habitat enhancements, including decreasing mowing frequency, establishing urban meadows, adjusting floodplain meadow management, implementing invasive species control, and addressing subsidence issues. Ubico have started winter works, including subsidence areas around Deer Park Estate.

The Deer Park South Access Project is progressing with infrastructure improvements designed to enhance public access to the woodland adjacent to the strategic development area with the installation of two new bridges over the Colwell Brook. Footpath improvements have been completed, with a bench installed looking out over the sites balancing ponds. Additionally, the project team is collaborating with a local artist and local schools to craft a woodland trail, which provides an opportunity for young people in the local area to influence the shaping of this space.

Over the past year, the Council and Thames Water have worked collaboratively to improve sewage treatment, infiltration systems, and planning processes, addressing water pollution, flooding, and sewage pollution hotspots. The Council ensured transparency for residents by implementing Thames Water's interactive map for tracking discharges and an online reporting tool for sewage issues. Successful initiatives, including a Waterways Day with over 100 attendees, highlighted ongoing efforts to address environmental concerns. Real-time sewage discharge mapping and flood zone reviews signify progress in collaboration with Thames Water, with future plans focusing on enhanced river and brook management to reduce flood risks in partnership with landowners and the Environment Agency.

Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency



Actions we are taking

In June 2019, the Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency and pledged to become a carbon-neutral council by 2030. In January 2020, the Council published a report on Climate Action for West Oxfordshire, which set out a proposed framework for developing a Carbon Action Plan to deliver the Council's carbon-neutral commitment and develop a Climate Change Strategy for West Oxfordshire.

The decarbonisation of Council owned buildings continues with funding secured via the Local Carbon Skills Fund for heat decarbonisation plans at Elmfield Council Offices and Welch Way. Commissioned work includes the preparation of a heat decarbonisation plan for Windrush Leisure Centre, aligning with the objectives of Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme Phase 3c (PSDS3c) to return leisure centre emissions to Scope 1. Under the previous phase of the scheme, the Council secured funding for the works at Carterton Leisure Centre, focusing on carbon reduction through the replacement of the heating and hot water systems with a low-carbon alternative and the expansion of on-site solar PV with a planning application submitted in late August and subsequently granted in November 2023.

The Council is working on a Carbon Action Plan for 2030, covering scope 3 emissions, district carbon budgets, route maps to net zero, and actionable steps. The plan, still in draft, underwent market testing for the Climate Change Strategy's carbon baseline. Reflecting its sustainability commitment, the Council is testing the Climate Impact Assessment Tool (CIAT) with the aim of making it a mandatory requirement and embedding climate and nature considerations into decision-making processes.

The business case and Council investment for solar PV and battery storage at the Council's offices at Woodgreen and two other tenanted sites was agreed upon by the Executive and Council in July. System design discussions are now well underway with the appointed installer, with the expectation of installation before the end of the year. The installation of electric vehicle charge points are delayed but ongoing, with a funding application submitted for the charging points at Woodgreen.

The Greenlight initiative, launched on July 17, 2023, is a nature and online hub fostering community action for a greener future. It features a greenspace competition, Q&A sessions, local group events, and recently added a nature quiz, along with regular updates to keep the information current.

The Home Upgrade Grant (HUG) is a countywide initiative aimed at enhancing energy efficiency and promoting low carbon heating solutions, particularly targeting low-income households residing in the least energy-efficient off-gas grid homes. The council, in collaboration with Oxfordshire County Council, are highlighting the Home Upgrade Grant Phase 2 (HUG2) to those residents that may be eligible, with communications to residents outlining the Welcome the Warmth Oxfordshire Scheme.

Working Together for West Oxfordshire

Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Fund, hosted on the Westhive platform (<https://www.spacehive.com/movement/westhive/>), aims to revitalise and grow local infrastructure as part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund Levelling Up scheme. It offers capital grants of up to £20,000 or 50% of the project's crowdfunding target. With a generous budget of £40,000 for this financial year and a total of £226,000 over two years, the fund supports projects fostering community restoration, local pride, belonging, and positive contributions to health and wellbeing. The Council encourages submissions emphasising environmental sustainability, aiding vulnerable communities, and addressing exclusion due to mental health, physical or mental disability, or financial hardship. There's a particular focus on projects for or by young people, aligning with the Council's commitment to empower young voices. The Spacehive team hosted a well-attended project creators workshop to guide potential applicants in developing and securing funds for project delivery. The Council pledges up to £10,000 for eligible projects, in addition to public contributions via the platform. Currently, five projects are crowdfunding, with Cotswolds Arts Through Schools and Cycles of Good having surpassed 50% of their goals.

Funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Wild Oxfordshire, a charity which seeks to create a more natural, resilient, and biodiverse Oxfordshire for the benefit of all, is working with Officers to update a Biodiversity Toolkit that will provide guidance for Town and Parish Councils wishing to manage their land in nature-friendly ways. Three pilot projects in Asthall, Eynsham and Filkins & Broughton Poggs will be used to demonstrate the toolkit in action and produce case studies that will assist other parishes in working towards nature recovery through the management of their land. A series of events are being organised to promote the demonstrators to Town and Parish Councils.

The Council aims to revitalise local markets in town centres, responding to a decline in stalls and visitors. A review by Wild Property Consultants has provided recommendations, emphasising collaboration with town partnerships and existing stallholders to create vibrant markets at Carterton, Witney, and Chipping Norton. Following the success of the Witney Christmas Market, which saw a 59% increase in footfall and a 70% surge in town centre footfall, the Council plans to extend positive impacts to all local markets throughout the year.

