



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and Date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 12 JUNE 2024
Subject	ENDORSEMENT OF THE OXFORDSHIRE COUNCILS CHARTER
Wards Affected	All
Accountable Member	Councillor Andy Graham – Leader of the Council. Email: andy.graham@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable Officer	Giles Hughes – Chief Executive Officer. Email: giles.hughes@westoxon.gov.uk
Report Author	Astrid Harvey – Strategic Policy and Partnerships Officer. Email: astrid.harvey@westoxon.gov.uk
Summary/Purpose	To endorse the Oxfordshire Councils Charter.
Annexes	Annex A – The Oxfordshire Councils Charter; Annex B – The Oxfordshire Councils Charter Engagement Report.
Recommendations	That the Executive resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Note the contents of the Oxfordshire Councils Charter;2. Endorse the Oxfordshire Councils Charter;3. Agree to be a signatory to the Oxfordshire Councils Charter.
Corporate Priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Putting Residents First• Working Together for West Oxfordshire
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees Consultation	The Oxfordshire Councils Charter Engagement Report (Annex B) sets out the wide-ranging consultation for development of the Charter, including a Roundtable Event for all Town and Parish Councils, Surveys, Consultation on the draft Charter and regular communications with Town and Parish Councils during its development and through Oxfordshire Leader and Chief Executive Groups.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1** West Oxfordshire District Council has been working in partnership with the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council, Vale of White Horse, Cherwell, South and Vale District Councils and town and parish councils and parish meetings to strengthen partnership working across all tiers of local government in Oxfordshire.
- 1.2** Through a multi-organisational working group, we have worked collaboratively to develop an Oxfordshire Councils Charter which sets out our principles and commitments to achieve two aims: stronger partnership working and enhanced local democracy.
- 1.3** The Charter has been developed through an extensive three-stage engagement process which is set out in Annex B, the Oxfordshire Councils Charter Engagement Report, in which 32 of West Oxfordshire local councils participated.
- 1.4** A number of clear themes emerged from the engagement which were translated into the aims of stronger partnership working and enhanced local democracy presented in the Oxfordshire Councils Charter and this will be considered for endorsement by the City, County and District Councils through May and June 2024.
- 1.5** It is intended to launch the Oxfordshire Councils Charter at the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils Annual General Meeting on 1 July 2024.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHARTER

- 2.1** Oxfordshire has 235 parish councils, 15 town councils and 68 parish meetings, of which 48 parish councils, 6 town councils and 27 parish meetings sit within West Oxfordshire. Recent engagement (see Annex B) has demonstrated some dissatisfaction with the working relationships between the tiers of local government and a genuine desire to improve these, the effectiveness of partnership working and an enhancement of local democracy.
- 2.2** A multi-organisational working group of Officers from the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (a membership organisation that represents 97% of Oxfordshire's local councils), West, South, Vale of White Horse and Cherwell District Councils, Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council undertook the development of the Oxfordshire Councils Charter. The Oxfordshire Chief Executive Officers and Council Leaders have also provided oversight of the Charter's development.
- 2.3** On 26 October 2023 a roundtable event was held at County Hall attended by 100 people representing 88 local councils from across Oxfordshire. West Oxfordshire was represented by the following local councils: Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney, Black Bourton, Hailey, North Leigh, Witney, Bladon, Brize Norton, Carterton, Charlbury, Crawley, Leafield, Minster Lovell, Shipton under Wychwood, Swinbrook and Widford, and Filkins and Broughton Poggs.
- 2.4** Following the roundtable event, a survey was launched to enable all local councils an opportunity to input into the development of the Charter. 20 local councils from West Oxfordshire responded to the survey, out of a total of 85 from across Oxfordshire.

- 2.5 Five key themes for improvement were identified through this research: relationships, communications, communities, consultation and engagement, and resources.
- 2.6 A draft Charter was developed based on the findings and themes from the first phase of engagement. All town and parish councils and parish meetings were invited to feedback on the draft Charter via a consultation on the County Council's digital consultation platform 'Let's Talk Oxfordshire' over a six-week period during January and February 2024. District, City and County Councillors were also invited to respond to the consultation.
- 2.7 96 consultation responses were received, 18 of which were from West Oxfordshire. Overall, a supportive response of the aims, principles and commitments in the draft Charter was received.
- 2.8 A West Oxfordshire Town and Parish Forum was held during the consultation on 6th February 2024 so that local councils could receive a presentation on the draft Charter and participate in a workshop to explore the themes further and input into the consultation. The West Oxfordshire District Council Executive were also present to participate in the workshop and explore opportunities for further strengthening the working relationship between the District Council and town and parish councils and parish meetings.
- 2.9 The Charter working group analysed the qualitative feedback from the consultation and identified areas for further consideration and redrafting. The contents of the Charter remained broadly the same, but some points were edited to provide greater clarity, remove duplication, and ensure that the wording captured and communicated the ambitions of those who inputted to the Charter.
- 2.10 The responses from the consultation indicate that the early engagement activities effectively captured the needs, ambition, and concerns of Oxfordshire Councils. These have been translated into a flexible framework for better partnership working and enhanced local democracy.

3. NEXT STEPS

- 3.1 The Oxfordshire Councils Charter will remain a 'living document', a flexible framework that enables each council to work to the principles and commitments in a way that aligns with their own ways of working, resources and priorities.
- 3.2 The Charter will be taken through the individual democratic processes in the Oxfordshire County, City and District Councils through May and June 2024.
- 3.3 The Charter will be launched at the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils Annual General Meeting on 1 July 2024, and local councils will be invited to endorse and become a signatory to the Charter.
- 3.4 Each Council will be responsible for their own implementation of the Charter and how they wish to deliver against it. It is anticipated that the working group will continue to meet to share best practice and maintain open communication channels in line with the ethos of the Charter.

- 3.5 West Oxfordshire District Council will continue to proactively engage with local councils on parish specific issues as well as more strategically, the next focus being the Regulation 18 Local Plan consultation on a series of Preferred Policy approaches in the summer of 2024.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no immediate financial implications resulting from the Oxfordshire Councils Charter.
- 4.2 It is possible that future actions to implement the principles of the Charter may have budgetary implications. If this is the case, any future project or programme proposals to support the delivery of the Charter that require funding will be developed by the lead service and subject to the relevant sign off process.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no legal implications arising from the Oxfordshire Councils Charter. The Charter is not a legal agreement and is not designed to override any legal agreements between partners or any codes of conduct of individual councils.

6. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 6.1 There are no risks anticipated in endorsing the Oxfordshire Councils Charter.
- 6.2 There are potential reputational risks associated with not taking action to improve partnership working between Oxfordshire Councils.

7. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 7.1 Equalities have been considered at every stage of the process of producing the Oxfordshire Councils Charter, including in making the survey and consultation as accessible as possible. The Charter aims to improve local democracy, which includes making local democracy more accessible to underrepresented groups and increasing diversity in participation of local democracy, such as for young people, parents and ethnically diverse groups.
- 7.2 Many local councils in Oxfordshire are in rural areas so there is an anticipated positive impact on rural communities.
- 7.3 No negative impacts resulting from the Charter are anticipated towards protected groups.

8. CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There are no anticipated climate implications from this report.

9. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 9.1 Whilst not recommended, Executive could decide not to endorse the Oxfordshire Councils Charter. This would be out of sync with the other Oxfordshire authorities who have endorsed the Charter, demonstrating their commitment to stronger partnership working between Oxfordshire councils and enhancing local democracy.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 None.