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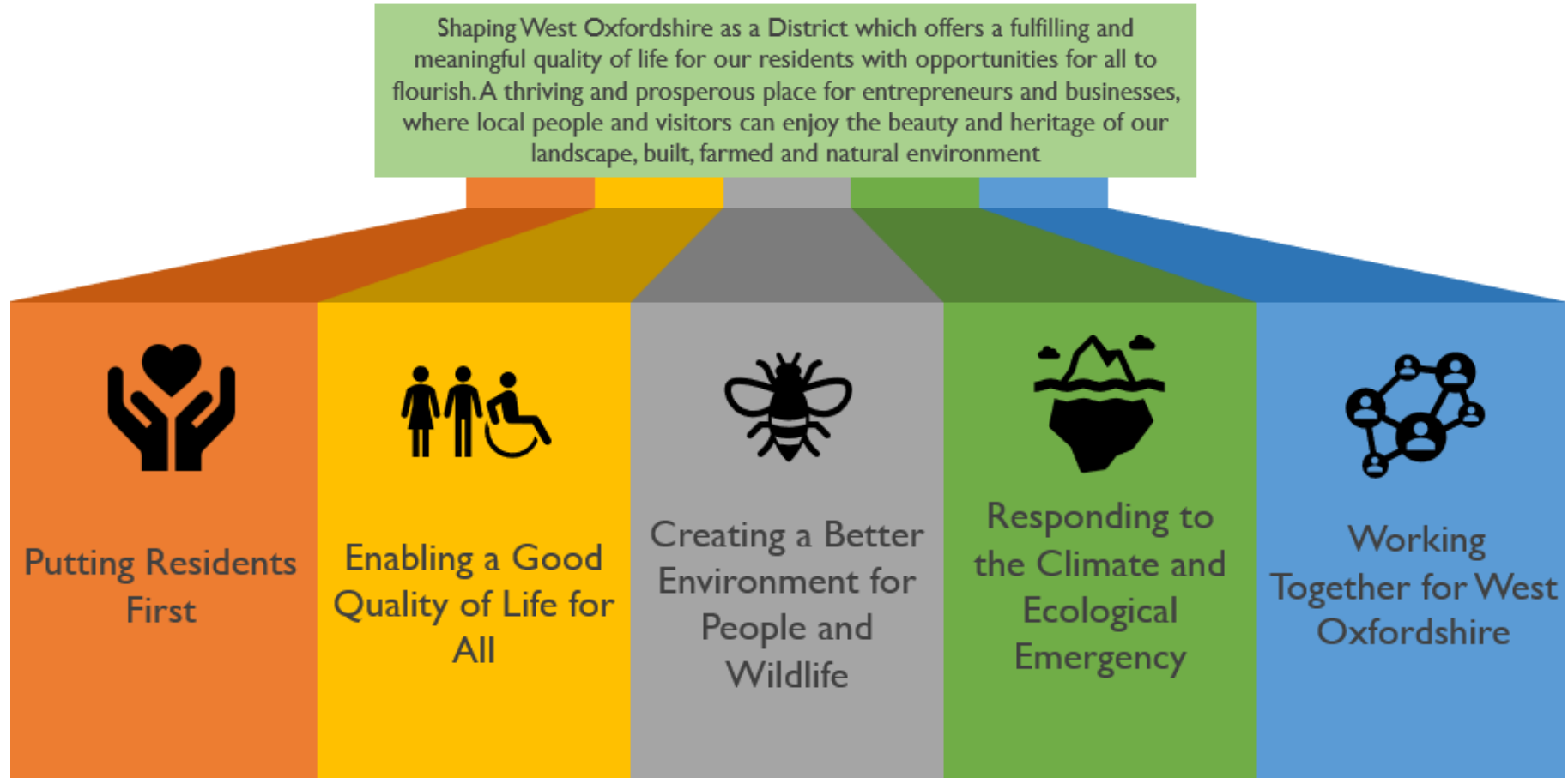
WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT  
**January 2024 – March 2024**

## 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 concluded in December 2023. Subsequently, a Town and Parish Forum convened in February to discuss the charter, with the intention of bringing it to the Executive for endorsement in the coming months.

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.

Residents and visitors who frequent Guildenford car park in Burford and Hensington Road car park in Woodstock were encouraged to share their feedback as part of the Council's Car Parking Strategy Consultation, which took place from January 15 to February 12. The consultation sought to gather insights from regular users, prioritising an understanding of their experiences and ensuring that the facilities meet both present and future needs. Additionally, comprehensive studies, including the use of counters at Guildenford car park, are planned to gather detailed usage data. The Council's overarching strategy for car parking in Woodstock and Burford aims to align provisions with the evolving needs of users, with the eventual goal of outlining improvements to enhance the usability of these facilities for all stakeholders.

## Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All



### Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) was introduced by the Government in 2008 to ensure fair and transparent contributions from developments towards necessary infrastructure like schools and roads. In March 2023, the Council's Executive decided to commission new viability evidence for a revised CIL charging schedule. Progress is underway as the Council actively moves towards adopting and implementing the CIL. Additional information has been provided to Dixon Searle Partnership, the appointed consultants, and discussions are ongoing about which development typologies to assess and the best approach for consulting with key stakeholders, including landowners and developers. A consultation survey, facilitated by the Council on behalf of the consultants, is scheduled for distribution in July 2024 to gather community input for a well-informed and collaborative implementation of the CIL. The draft viability report has been received and is currently under review by Officers, aiming for finalisation by the end of April 2024. It is anticipated to be presented to the Executive in June.

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. Collaborating with Cottsway and Miller Homes, the Council facilitated the construction of 23 additional affordable units within the district. All properties have been exchanged, and an allocation program is now in progress. With LAHF Round 3 currently open, the Council is optimistic about securing a successful bid that would enable the acquisition of an additional 4 properties in partnership with Soha HA.

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 High Court ruled in favor of the community group in a hearing held on 14-15 November 2023. Subsequently, additional clarity on Net Zero was provided through a Ministerial Statement on 23 December 2023, work is underway to amend APP Policy 2 to align with the new requirements.

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.

# 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.

The Council is collaborating with the Wychwood Forest Trust on a funding bid for the Windrush in Witney project. This initiative aims to implement landscape-scale enhancements across the Witney Floodplains area. Partnering with Oxfordshire County Council (OCC), Witney Town Council (WTC), and the Wychwood Forest Trust, the project will focus on introducing grazing, enhancing floral diversity, pollarding willow trees, establishing a new volunteer group, and organizing a series of community engagement and rural skills training events.

The Coronation Community Orchard Scheme seeks to facilitate the planting of trees in non-woodland areas, strategically located near residential areas, to serve as a tangible and enduring homage to King Charles III's coronation within local communities. The Council has secured £50,000 from the DEFRA Coronation Living Heritage Fund to support this initiative. Following the closure of the first round of applications in January 2024, six community groups have been awarded grants to commence fruit tree planting. Currently, grant claim submissions are underway. The second round of funding is slated to open in June 2024, with the goal of completing all planting activities by March 2025.

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 enhancements have already been completed, accompanied by the addition of a bench offering a picturesque view of the sites' balancing ponds. As part of the project, nature trail brass rubbing posts have been crafted by a local artist in collaboration with Windrush CofE Primary School students. Ubico has installed these posts, contributing to the immersive experience of the trail. Furthermore, interpretation panels are currently in production, designed to enrich visitors' understanding of the area's natural features and heritage.



# 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. The Windrush Leisure Centre has achieved success with Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme Phase 3c (PSDS 3c), securing a significant £1.6 million investment. Council approval for the project was granted on March 11, 2024, and the project commenced on April 1, 2024. Additionally, a successful bid has been made to the Swimming Pool Support Fund, enabling the installation of solar PV panels and shower flow restrictors at the Windrush Leisure Centre. Furthermore, solar PV panels and heat recovery systems will be added to the air handling units (AHUs) at Chipping Norton Lido, enhancing energy efficiency. In March 2024, heat decarbonisation plans for Elmfield, 3 Welch Way, and Old Court House were finalised, marking progress in the Council's sustainability efforts.

The Executive approved the updated Carbon Action Plan for 2030 in March 2024, signaling a commitment to addressing climate change. Ahead of its publication on the website, the document is undergoing a redesign to enhance accessibility and readability. Furthermore, a tender process has been initiated for establishing the carbon baseline, which will serve as the foundation for the new Climate Change Strategy. Nine bids have been received and are currently under evaluation, with decisions expected in April 2024.

The Council's New Nature Recovery Plan aims to tackle the climate and ecological emergencies across the district up to 2030. Currently, the plan is undergoing revisions to ensure it is engaging and accessible to the public before its publication on the Council website. Given the Council's custodianship of approximately 106 hectares of greenspace, including parks, fields, greens, and public spaces within housing estates, there is a recognition of the ongoing need to enhance these areas for both wildlife and public enjoyment. While progress has been made on Council-owned sites in recent years, there remains much work to be done to safeguard and restore habitats and species. The new plan will focus on identifying areas for improvement within Council-owned spaces and exploring natural methods to enhance resilience and biodiversity. By adopting these strategies, the Council aims to make these areas more vibrant and resilient ecosystems for the benefit of both wildlife and the community.

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 Library to encourage communities to share resources on nature recovery and climate action, 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. At the conclusion of Year 1 of the HUG2 scheme, 15 homes within the district received grant funding to implement energy-saving measures. Additionally, the Revenues and Benefits Team facilitated the provision of Council Tax discount recipient data for a targeted mailout, ensuring effective outreach to eligible residents.

# 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, six projects are actively crowdfunding, with Cotswolds Arts Through Schools and Cycles of Good fully funded.

Funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Wild Oxfordshire, a charity dedicated to fostering a more natural, resilient, and biodiverse Oxfordshire, is collaborating with Officers to update a Biodiversity Toolkit. This toolkit aims to offer guidance for Town and Parish Councils interested in managing their land in nature-friendly ways. Three pilot projects in Asthall, Eynsham, and Filkins & Broughton Poggs will serve as demonstrations of the toolkit's efficacy, producing case studies to assist other parishes in their nature recovery endeavours. Meanwhile, the recently updated Community Town and Parish Guide to Nature Recovery provides valuable insights and resources for local communities to enhance biodiversity and promote nature conservation. An in-person launch event held at Woodgreen Offices on March 21, 2024, featured demonstrators showcasing practical examples to representatives from various town and parish councils, fostering knowledge sharing and collaboration. Furthermore, an online launch event, rescheduled for April 16, 2024, aims to provide a broader audience with access to the guidance and resources virtually. This event seeks to deepen community involvement in nature recovery efforts across the region, emphasising the importance of collective action in preserving and enhancing Oxfordshire's natural heritage.