



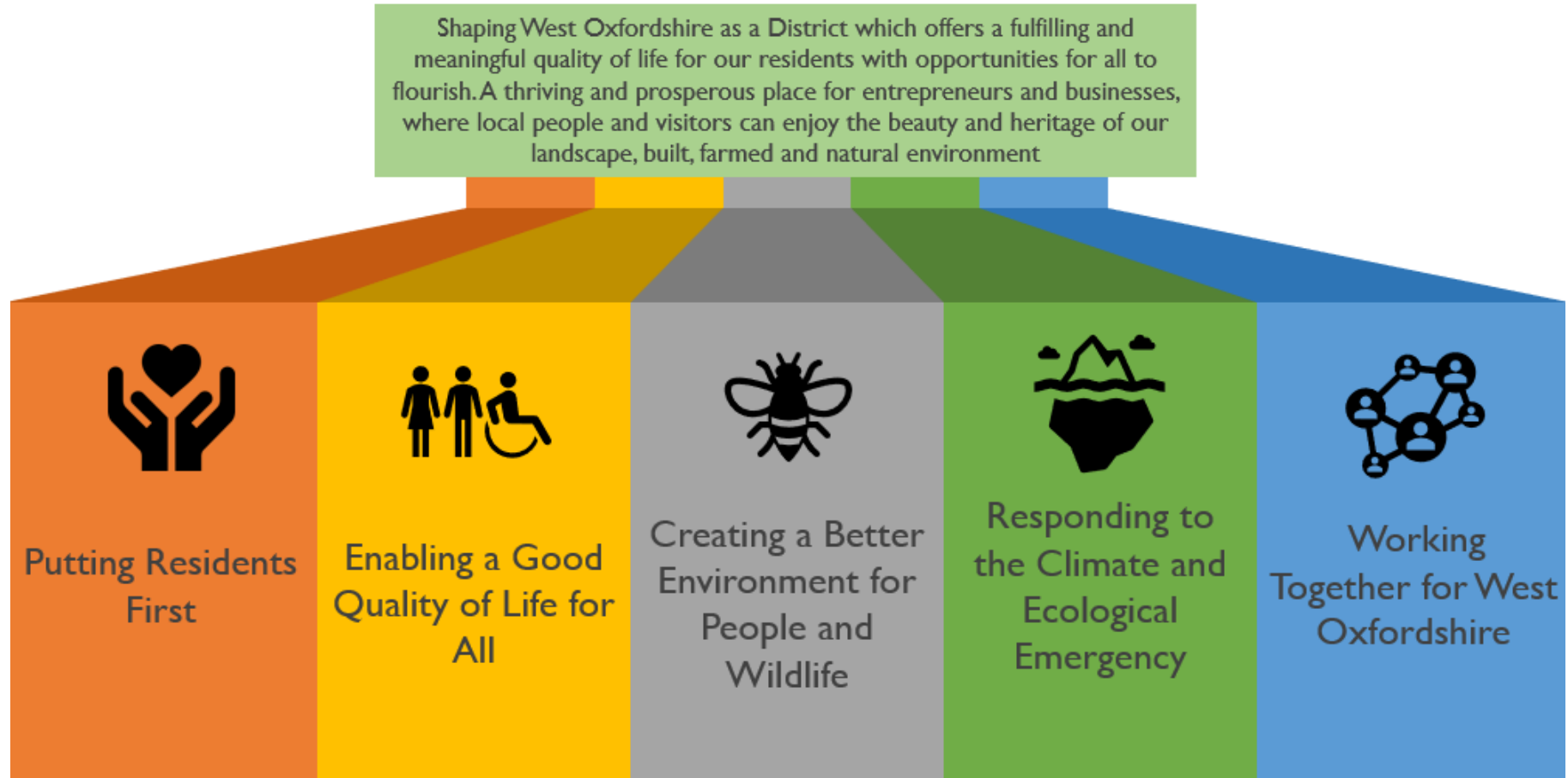
WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT

April 2024 – June 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 partnering with Oxfordshire County Council, the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, district and city councils, as well as town and parish councils and parish meetings, to develop a shared charter. This charter will commit to principles that support successful partnership working across all councils in Oxfordshire. Through a multi-organisational working group, we have collaboratively developed the Oxfordshire Councils Charter, which outlines our principles and commitments to achieving two main goals: stronger partnership working and enhanced local democracy. The Charter was crafted through an extensive three-stage engagement process, detailed in the Oxfordshire Councils Charter Engagement Report, with participation from 32 local councils in West Oxfordshire. Clear themes from this engagement have been incorporated into the Charter's aims. Endorsed by the Executive in June, the Charter is set to be launched at the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils Annual General Meeting on July 1, 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.

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. A review of the consultation responses is underway by Officers with a Mid-Point Review of the Car Parking Strategy anticipated to go to the Executive in September.

Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All



Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), introduced by the Government in 2008, aims to ensure fair and transparent contributions from developments towards essential infrastructure, such as schools and roads. In March 2023, the Council's Executive commissioned new viability evidence for a revised CIL charging schedule. Progress is underway as the Council moves towards adopting and implementing the CIL. Additional information has been provided to Dixon Searle Partnership, the appointed consultants, and discussions are ongoing regarding the development typologies to assess and the best approach for consulting with key stakeholders, including landowners and developers. An 8-week public consultation survey is scheduled to run from August 2 to September 27, 2024, to gather community input for a well-informed and collaborative CIL implementation. The draft CIL charging schedule was prepared and approved by the Executive in July. After the public consultation concludes, Officers will review the responses. Unless major concerns arise, the charging schedule will be submitted for independent examination later in the year.

The Strategic Housing Project at the Council is undergoing significant developments with a Housing Delivery Programme Manager appointed in April. 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 in Chipping Norton features eight 2- and 3-bedroom zero-carbon homes available through a discounted market sale, offering buyers the unique opportunity to custom-build their homes and influence design and specifications. Despite some delays in the project, the Executive approved a new delivery model proposal in November, which was jointly developed by Green Axis and Homes England. The legal agreements have been drafted and agreed upon by Legal Services, the housing team, and the developers.

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. Following the High Court ruling, the Planning Inspectorate has set a timeline for hearings based on the Council's submission of the revised Policy 2 (Net Zero) and related evidence. The Council has appointed consultants to assist with a revised viability assessment and sustainability appraisal, expected to be delivered by mid-September 2024. As a result, the Council plans to submit the documents to the Planning Inspectorate in October 2024, with hearings scheduled for February 2025.

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 Council 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. Additionally, the Environment Agency's 'Spheres of Influence' Project, which the Council is participating in as one of three national pilot areas, will influence local plan policies related to the water environment. Updated Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) and Phase 1 Water Cycle Study are being commissioned as part of the Local Plan evidence base. The Council is also working closely with the Environment Agency on a more integrated approach to water management, which will be reflected in the emerging draft Local Plan.

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 aims to plant trees in non-woodland areas near residential communities as a lasting tribute to King Charles III's coronation. 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 received grants to start planting fruit trees, with grant claim submissions currently underway. The second round of funding opened in June 2024, with applications closing at the end of July. Evaluations will occur in August, and funding will be awarded to recipients, with the goal of completing all planting activities by March 2025.

The Deer Park South Access Project is progressing with infrastructure enhancements aimed at improving public access to the adjacent woodland. Key developments include the installation of two new bridges over Colwell Brook and completed footpath upgrades, including a new bench offering a scenic view of the site's balancing ponds. Local artist-collaborated nature trail brass rubbing posts, crafted with Windrush CofE Primary School students, have been installed by Ubico, adding to the trail's immersive experience. Interpretation panels, now installed, are designed to enhance visitors' understanding of the area's natural features and heritage. Schoolchildren from Windrush CofE Primary School have already visited and enjoyed the nature trail. Additionally, surfacing improvements have been made to the bridleway along the southern boundary of Deer Park South, and nature recovery officers will review land management and site access with Witney Woodland volunteers.



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 is progressing with various initiatives. Funding from the Local Carbon Skills Fund has been secured for heat decarbonisation plans at Elmfield Council Offices and Welch Way. The Windrush Leisure Centre has received £1.6 million from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme Phase 3c (PSDS 3c), with Council approval granted on March 11, 2024, and work commencing on April 1, 2024. Additionally, a successful bid to the Swimming Pool Support Fund will finance the installation of solar PV panels and shower flow restrictors at Windrush Leisure Centre. Solar PV panels and heat recovery systems will also be added to the air handling units at Chipping Norton Lido to boost energy efficiency. Heat decarbonisation plans for Elmfield, Welch Way, and Old Court House were finalised in March 2024, advancing the Council's sustainability efforts. The PSDS 3c design and build contract for Windrush Leisure Centre will be procured through the Pagabo framework, with a mini competition launched on June 28, 2024. A bid has been submitted under the Public Sector Low Carbon Skills Fund Phase 5 (LCSF 5) for initial design work for the decarbonisation of Chipping Norton Leisure Centre and additional Council-owned buildings in Chipping Norton, Witney, and Oxford.

The Executive approved the updated Carbon Action Plan for 2030 in March 2024, signalling a commitment to addressing climate change. The document is undergoing a redesign to enhance accessibility and readability before its publication on the website. A tender process has been initiated for establishing the carbon baseline, which will serve as the foundation for the new Climate Change Strategy. The scope of work for the carbon baseline has been revised, and consultants have been asked to submit revised costs. Meanwhile, work on the delivery of the Carbon Action Plan continues, and the drafting of the new Climate Change Strategy has begun.

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 a recently added library to encourage communities to share resources on nature recovery and climate action, with regular updates to keep information current. A new competition on retrofit measures is set to launch soon. The initiative also includes ongoing liaison with Oxfordshire County Council on climate engagement.

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.

Ubico, the District Council's waste partner, tested a zero-emission Dennis Eagle eCollect in West Oxfordshire, collecting over 94 tonnes of rubbish in two weeks to evaluate its performance in a large rural district. Transport emissions from the Council's waste services contribute around 40% of the authority's greenhouse gases. Reducing this figure is crucial for the Council's goal of becoming carbon-neutral by 2030. The test vehicle, on loan from Dennis Eagle, features five lithium-ion battery packs to maximize payload. The District Council's fleet already includes three electric supervisor vans, three electric sweepers, and an electric car. The Council's updated Carbon Action Plan focuses on making its buildings, vehicles, and waste services more energy-efficient to achieve net zero by 2030, aligned with the Climate Change Strategy 2021-25.



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. The initiative has had eight projects crowdfunding, with four fully funded: Food Surplus Redistribution in Witney, Cotswolds Arts Through Schools, Get Set Gagingwell - The MAP Garden, and Cycles of Good. Round 3 of Westhive is underway, with a further creator workshop to be held on July 22.

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 guide Town and Parish Councils 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. 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. The guidance was also launched online on April 16, 2024, providing a broader audience with access to the resources virtually. The grand opening of Water Close in Asthall Leigh on May 23, 2024, marked another milestone in the initiative. Additionally, £2,000 was transferred to parish councils for long-term maintenance, using the underspend to further support sustained nature recovery efforts across the region.

Several community-focused initiatives are underway to enhance local well-being and support. The Food Action Plan benefits from £23.5k in funding, with an additional £40k+ from Household Support Fund 4 (HSF4) to strengthen the community food network. The Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) is being utilised for a cultural programme for young people in collaboration with Oxford Cultural Education Partners (OXCEP). A new local area coordination pilot in Chipping Norton, funded by Oxford County Council (OCC), will introduce a permanent coordinator to assist residents. Starting in March 2024, a Local Ward Profile in Witney, funded by Public Health, will develop a health profile to guide service delivery and identify local needs, with grants available for community groups. Additionally, £120k from COMF is allocated to address poor mental health, split between Service Level Agreement (SLA) grants and two Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations in West Oxfordshire. The Community Insight project will provide £25k for VCS groups in Witney. A bid for OCC Public Health funding aims to support 2-4 community-based health and nature recovery projects, and £10k from COMF will aid local groups offering mental health support to parents based on Youth Needs Assessment findings. Decisions on the allocation of Household Support Fund 5 (HSF5) funds are anticipated soon. These efforts collectively aim to boost community support, promote environmental sustainability, and improve overall health and well-being.