

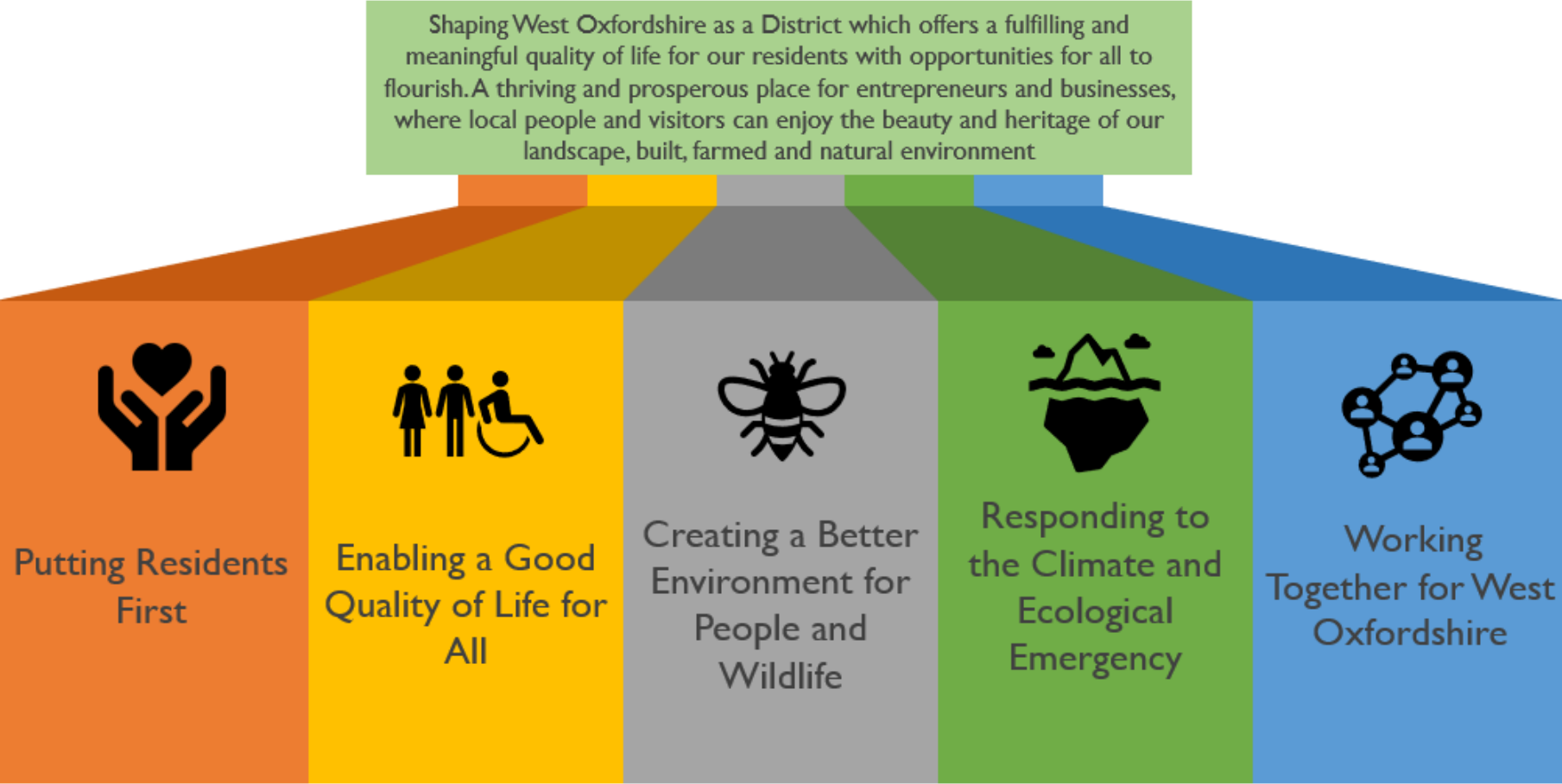


WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT
January – March 2025

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

In early 2022, the Council conducted the first Youth Needs Assessment for West Oxfordshire, gathering 3,908 paper survey responses and focus group feedback from young people between January and March. At its meeting on 11 October 2023, the Executive reviewed the findings and instructed officers to engage with Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) to develop a proposal for a dedicated youth specialist role within the Council to lead on youth-related matters and implement the assessment's recommendations.

At the Executive meeting on 14 February 2024, the recruitment of a full-time Youth Development Officer for a two-year period was approved. This senior role is designed to strengthen local capacity, influence external partners, and address key barriers faced by young people—such as access, affordability, isolation, and limited service availability. The officer will work with local providers, engage directly with young people, support internal youth engagement efforts including Local Plan consultation and communications activity, and collaborate closely with OCC.

The Council partnered with Oxfordshire County Council, the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, and other local bodies to create the Oxfordshire Councils Charter, a pioneering framework aimed at enhancing local democracy and improving collaboration across all councils in the county. This charter, the first of its kind in the UK, brought together all three tiers of local government—parish, town, district, city, and county councils. Co-produced through a three-stage engagement process involving 32 local councils in West Oxfordshire, the Charter incorporated key themes from their feedback and outlined principles for stronger partnership working while acknowledging the essential role of local councils in supporting residents and delivering services. Designed to be flexible, the Charter empowered councils without imposing additional operational burdens. Endorsed by the Executive in June, the Charter was officially launched at the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils AGM in July 2024, marking a significant milestone in fostering more effective collaboration and communication between Oxfordshire's councils.

The 'Our House' Project, launched in 2018 by West Oxfordshire District Council in collaboration with Cottsway Housing and Aspire Oxfordshire, is an innovative initiative aimed at addressing the housing needs of local young people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. The project provides shared accommodation for single individuals under 35 who are on out-of-work benefits in West Oxfordshire, offering housing and support for up to 12 young people across three shared houses. In July 2024, the Executive approved an extension of funding for the project, ensuring its continued support until October 2026.

As part of the Council's Car Parking Strategy Consultation, residents and visitors of Guildenford car park in Burford and Hensington Road car park in Woodstock were encouraged to share their feedback between January 15 and February 12. The consultation aimed to gather insights from regular users to better understand their experiences and ensure the facilities meet both current and future needs. Studies, including the use of counters at Guildenford car park, were planned to collect detailed usage data. The strategy sought to align provisions with the evolving needs of users and improve the usability of these facilities. A Mid-Point Review presented to the Executive in December highlighted that both car parks were fully occupied during peak times, with limited capacity. The review also detailed improvement works undertaken in response to the consultation, including the installation of 64 new, larger signs, a flood risk assessment at Guildenford car park, and the repainting of faded give way markings. Additionally, a line painting programme was initiated following customer feedback on bay visibility, with further reports expected later in the year.

To inform the 2025/26 budget, the Council conducted a public consultation from 18 November to 15 December, inviting residents to prioritise spending decisions. Residents could take part online or through paper copies available at Council offices. The consultation took place in the context of continued financial pressures, including high inflation and reduced government funding. Despite these challenges, the Council made some operational savings over the past year, including £125,000 in customer services and an additional £300,000 in recycling income through revised contracts. It also secured external funding, including £100,000 from the PropTech Innovation Fund and £101,000 from the Planning Skills Delivery Fund. The final budget, approved by Full Council on 26 February, includes investment in areas such as leisure services, tree management, estate maintenance, and planning enforcement. It also includes a £5 increase in Band D Council Tax, in line with national assumptions, and makes provision for additional income through upcoming changes to second home council tax rules. While the Council has balanced its budget for 2025/26, longer-term financial pressures are expected to continue.

Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All



Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), introduced by the Government in 2008, is intended to ensure that new developments contribute fairly and transparently to vital infrastructure such as schools, roads, and community facilities. In March 2023, the Council's Executive took a key step towards updating its CIL charging schedule by commissioning new viability evidence. To support this work, consultants from the Dixon Searle Partnership were appointed, with the Council providing further data and working with them to determine which types of development to assess. Discussions also took place around how best to engage with stakeholders, including landowners and developers. Once the viability study was completed, a draft CIL charging schedule was prepared and approved by the Executive in July 2024. A public consultation then ran from 2 August to 27 September. Due to the large number of responses received, it took longer than expected to review and summarise the feedback, causing a brief delay. In March 2025, the draft charging schedule was formally submitted for independent examination—marking the next stage in adopting the updated levy. A Programme Officer has been appointed to help administer the examination, and the Council is currently awaiting further directions from the appointed examiner. All relevant information has been published on the Council's website, and interested parties have been invited to register their interest in participating in any future hearing sessions.

Salt Cross Garden Village is a proposed new, self-contained settlement designed to include schools, community facilities, employment opportunities, and 2,200 homes. A new science business park will provide local job opportunities, reducing the need for residents to commute to Oxford. Sustainable travel is central to the plan, supported by proximity to Hanborough railway station and a proposed Park and Ride facility north of Eynsham. The Area Action Plan (AAP) guiding the development has undergone significant revisions following the formal examination process. A key element—Policy 2 on Net Zero Carbon Development—was challenged legally by the community group Rights Community Action (RCA) after the Planning Inspector found the policy unsound. In November 2023, the High Court ruled in favour of RCA, allowing the Council to reconsider the policy. Following this, the Council resubmitted a revised Net Zero policy to the Planning Inspectorate. This move comes amid national uncertainty, following a Ministerial Statement in December 2023 that cast doubt on the viability of local Net Zero policies. Despite strong local support and legal backing, this national guidance effectively blocked the original policy. In response, the Council requested a pause in the examination process while seeking clarification from the Government—particularly given that similar policies have been approved in other areas. The revised policy will now be subject to a formal hearing, with a decision expected later this year. The Council remains committed to delivering a truly sustainable development at Salt Cross and awaits further direction on how best to proceed within the national policy framework.

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

A recent review of Charter Markets in Witney and Chipping Norton received encouraging feedback and informed a new district-wide strategy to revitalise local markets. Developed through extensive collaboration, the strategy aims to support small retailers and start-ups while preserving the traditional character of the markets. Utilising the final UKSPF spend for 2024/25, the fund supported towns and parishes with public realm improvements, enhancing town/village centres and the visitor economy. Work is underway to support Oxfordshire Art Weeks, linking with local retailers. The Council continues to tap into local events to stay connected with the local economy and provide necessary support. A tender was issued to appoint operators for two lots: Lot 1 covering traditional markets in Witney and Chipping Norton, and Lot 2 focused on innovative formats at Marriotts Walk. However, no submissions were received for any of the locations. In response, and following feedback from local operators, the brief for Witney and Chipping Norton has been revised and will be reissued shortly. Public realm improvements at Marriotts Walk have been deferred for a year. In the interim, a Market Operator will lead the delivery of a Christmas market, alongside a series of specialist markets planned for 2025. Complementary wayfinding enhancements are also underway, including new information boards for Chipping Norton town centre.

Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife



Actions we are taking

West Oxfordshire District Council is committed to preparing a new Local Plan covering the period up to 2041, focusing on the long-term maintenance of green infrastructure and community assets through emerging policy options. The plan's preparation is ongoing, with the site assessment process currently underway, evaluating key factors such as flood risk and foul water capacity to inform potential site allocations. The Local Plan will also incorporate an integrated approach to water management, building on the work completed with the Environment Agency's 'Spheres of Influence' project, in which the Council participated as one of three national pilot areas. As part of the evidence base, the Council has commissioned the Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) and Phase 1 Water Cycle Study. Additionally, the Preferred Options paper is being drafted and discussed with Members through the Local Plan Working Group, with the intention to report to the Executive in mid-May. Consultation is planned to take place from the end of May onwards for six weeks. The evidence base is continually being developed, with draft reports from consultants now being received, and further evidence likely to be commissioned during the next stage of plan preparation leading to Regulation 19 publication. The Council has successfully secured additional central government funding to assist with the Regulation 18 stage, ensuring the timely allocation of funding for key projects. Infrastructure challenges, including transport, sewage systems, and community services, are being addressed to support sustainable growth. The Council is also actively securing developer contributions through the Infrastructure Funding Statement (IFS) to ensure all new developments are supported by the necessary infrastructure for both current and future needs. The updated timeline for the Local Plan is as follows:

- Preferred Options Consultation (Regulation 18): May 2025
- Publication of Pre-Submission Draft (Regulation 19): October 2025
- Submission for Examination: March 2026

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. With £50,000 secured from the DEFRA Coronation Living Heritage Fund, the Council is supporting this initiative. After the first round of applications in January 2024, six community groups received grants to start planting fruit trees. Since then, funding has been provided for an additional 11 orchards, with agreements in place for the ongoing maintenance of the trees. Although the second round of funding was initially set to close at the end of July, applications remain open due to the availability of remaining funds. The scheme has been extended to March 2026, and the Council is actively engaging with stakeholders to encourage further submissions.

The Deer Park South Access Project is progressing with infrastructure enhancements to improve public access to the adjacent woodland. Key developments include the installation of two new bridges over Colwell Brook, footpath upgrades, and a new bench offering a scenic view of the site's balancing ponds. Nature trail brass rubbing posts, crafted in collaboration with local artist and Windrush CoFE Primary School students, have been installed by Ubico, enriching the trail's immersive experience. Interpretation panels are now in place to help visitors better understand the area's natural features and heritage. Additionally, surfacing improvements have been made to the bridleway along the southern boundary of Deer Park South. A land management review and access improvements to Deer Park Wood are currently underway, involving nature recovery officers and Witney Woodland volunteers. A habitat survey, set to be carried out this spring, will inform the land management review.

West Oxfordshire District Council is working with partners to create a habitat bank at Pudlicote Farm near Chipping Norton, marking a significant step forward in protecting local nature. This initiative aligns with the government's Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) policy, introduced in February 2024, which mandates that developers enhance biodiversity by at least 10% for new projects. The habitat bank will allow developers to meet their BNG obligations by funding habitat creation and enhancement projects, such as wildflower meadows, native woodlands, and wetland areas. These habitats will support a variety of wildlife, enhance ecosystem services, and contribute to the district's nature recovery efforts. The Pudlicote Farm project will generate biodiversity units registered with Natural England, which developers can purchase to fulfil their BNG requirements, provided they have first considered all options on the development site. The land used for the habitat bank is often low productivity farmland, providing farmers with alternative ways to generate income. Similar initiatives, like the Emberton Habitat Bank in Buckinghamshire and the Horwich Habitat Bank near Bolton, have proven successful in enhancing local biodiversity and providing stable income for landowners. The Council is also working to streamline the process for future habitat banks to facilitate more projects across the district. Brad Wickens, the landowner, highlighted the ecological benefits of transforming flood-prone land into diverse habitats, including water meadows, wetlands, and wildflower meadows, which have led to a resurgence of wildlife. Ben Heaven Taylor from the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment emphasised that the project is a vital step towards nature recovery in Oxfordshire and aligns with the government's '30-by-30' biodiversity target. It also exemplifies a successful partnership between charitable bodies and local landowners, contributing to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and offering local options for developers to meet their planning obligations.



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 installation of Solar PV panels at Elmfield has been successfully completed as part of the decarbonisation project. This initiative ensures tenants will benefit from renewable, green energy, while the Council's capital investment is recouped through recharges or power purchase agreements with tenants.

The detailed decarbonisation scheme for the Windrush Leisure Centre, under the PSDS 3c funding initiative, has been completed, including an in-depth cost analysis. The next step is to seek approval for progression to the construction phase, with a formal request to be presented at the June Executive meeting.

Additionally, PSDS 4 funding has been successfully secured for the decarbonisation of Chipping Norton Leisure Centre. The next phase involves procuring a design and build contract to implement the necessary upgrades, ensuring that both leisure centres contribute to the Council's commitment to sustainability and reducing carbon emissions. These projects represent significant strides towards the Council's broader environmental goals, ensuring that public facilities are both energy-efficient and aligned with climate action targets.

Electric vehicle drivers can now access charging facilities at the Woolgate car park, owned by West Oxfordshire District Council. This installation is part of a broader initiative to expand electric vehicle charging points (EVCP) across the district. The new chargers are designed to encourage the adoption of cleaner driving practices by providing more convenient charging options, particularly for residents without off-street parking. The Woolgate car park features 12 charging bays, which include a combination of 7.4kW Type 2 chargers and 75.0kW rapid chargers. With this addition, the District Council's car parks now host a total of 42 charging units across 74 parking bays. This development supports the Council's Climate Change Strategy, which aims to decarbonise transport in the region.

The Community Action Plan for Zero-Carbon Energy (CAPZero), developed by Low Carbon Hub in partnership with the community group GreenTEA (Transition Eynsham Area), is the first of its kind in the UK. The plan outlines the steps needed to achieve a net zero energy system in West Oxfordshire by 2050, with a particular focus on the Eynsham Primary Substation Area (PSA), which includes parts or all of eight parishes: Cassington, Eynsham, Freeland, Farmoor in Cumnor, Hanborough, North Leigh, South Leigh, and Stanton Harcourt & Sutton.

CAPZero translates county-wide net zero targets into specific goals for this smaller area, emphasising actions that can be taken by local residents, businesses, and authorities, including West Oxfordshire District Council, to help create a sustainable future. The plan includes strategies for reducing energy consumption, transitioning to renewable energy sources like solar power, replacing gas boilers with heat pumps, and ensuring new homes are built to zero-carbon standards. It also advocates for electric bus services and environmental restoration initiatives such as tree planting, agroforestry, and habitat restoration.

In line with this, the Council has continued to work closely with the CAPZero project team to accelerate both domestic and commercial retrofitting efforts. As part of this initiative, tenders for preliminary retrofit research were reviewed, consultants have been appointed, and work has now commenced. West Oxfordshire District Council has also contributed funding through a three-year Service Level Agreement to support the implementation of these actions, working alongside Low Carbon Hub, community groups, and parish councils to facilitate the plan's goals.

Working Together for West Oxfordshire



Actions we are taking

As the Council enters the final year of UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) funding, the primary focus is to manage the potential 'cliff-edge' in support these funds currently provide. To ensure continued momentum, the Council is working to transition key projects into the 2025/26 funding year. New grant agreements are being developed, tailored to meet the specific needs of each intervention, ensuring ongoing projects remain aligned with long-term goals. Alongside this, the Council is in the reporting phase, with final project reports being submitted to confirm that all agreed outcomes and outputs have been successfully delivered, ensuring transparency and accountability.

A key initiative in this transition is the Westhive programme, which launched Round 4 with a deadline of 31st March. This programme will also be used to distribute an additional £48k in unallocated UKSPF funding by March 2025. A review report presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (O&S) in March was well-received, reinforcing the programme's value. Westhive will continue throughout the contract period, providing essential support to local businesses, entrepreneurs, and communities. The introduction of the Youth Development role has already encouraged an increase in youth-led projects coming forward for Council funding. To complement these efforts, the Council has agreed to launch a small grants fund in June/July, which will support youth activities, grassroots initiatives, and smaller-scale community projects that may not otherwise receive funding through traditional channels.

In addition to these efforts, the Council has experienced some transitions within the team. The Community Funding Officer position became vacant in March, but a new person is set to start in April, ensuring the team remains fully resourced to continue supporting these important initiatives. Looking ahead, the Council remains committed to exploring innovative ways to sustain community development and support local businesses beyond the current funding rounds.

In an effort to support community initiatives and address pressing environmental and social issues, West Oxfordshire District Council has established three-year grant agreements (SLAs) for 2024-27. These grants aim to enhance the region's natural environment, combat climate change, and strengthen community resilience. The grants were awarded under three lots:

Lot 1: Improving the natural environment and access to it to enhance physical and mental well-being and foster connected communities.

Lot 2: Addressing climate and ecological emergencies to reduce carbon footprints and promote nature recovery.

Lot 3: Increasing community resilience and amplifying the voices of the seldom heard, focusing on critical issues such as food access, youth support, and cultural provision.

Under the terms of the SLA, organisations are required to submit biannual progress reports in Q2 and Q4. For the 2024-25 period, a total of £188,500 in funding has been allocated to various organisations.