



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and date of Committee	EXECUTIVE – 10 SEPTEMBER 2025
Subject	SERVICE LEVEL AGREEMENTS – YEAR 1 REPORTING
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Cllr Rachel Crouch Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities Email: <a href="mailto:rachel.crouch@westoxon.gov.uk">rachel.crouch@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Accountable officer	Phil Martin Director of Place Email: <a href="mailto:phil.martin@westoxon.gov.uk">phil.martin@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Report author(s)	Heather McCulloch Community Wellbeing Manager Email: <a href="mailto:heather.mcculloch@westoxon.gov.uk">heather.mcculloch@westoxon.gov.uk</a> Lucy Empson Community Funding Officer Email: <a href="mailto:lucy.empson@westoxon.gov.uk">lucy.empson@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Summary/Purpose	The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the performance at the end of Year 1 of all 7 organisations receiving grant funding. Furthermore, it is to consider the Council's appetite for offering future multi-year funding once this current arrangement comes to an end in March 2027.
Annexes	Annex A – Summary of performance
Recommendation(s)	That the Executive resolves to:  I. Delegate to the Director of Place, in consultation with the Executive Member for Stronger Healthy Communities, to explore the feasibility of securing a legacy position for the Voluntary and Community Sector in this year's budget setting round to continue to offer a multi-year funding arrangement from 2027-2030.
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Putting Residents First</li><li>• A Good Quality of Life for All</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Better Environment for People and Wildlife</li> <li>• Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency</li> <li>• Working Together for West Oxfordshire</li> </ul>
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	All organisations have provided full reports detailing their performance in year 1. Officers have met with each organisation to review progress. Officers have distilled the full reports to provide summaries as Annex A.

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The report provides a summary of the year 1 performance of each organisation in receipt of a Service Level Agreement funded from community grants. Furthermore, the report seeks to make the case for continuing to provide multi-year funding beyond 2027.

## 2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Following the Community Grants review in 2023, multi-year Service Level Agreements were awarded in March 2024. The agreements are in place between 2024 and 2027 and were awarded to:
- Wild Oxfordshire
  - Wychwood Forest Trust
  - Low Carbon Hub
  - Theatre Chipping Norton
  - Age UK Oxfordshire
  - Volunteer Link Up
  - Home-Start Oxford and Witney (with Home-Start Banbury and Chipping Norton)
- 2.2 The value of the agreements is £553,500 over 3 years – details are set out below.
- 2.3 The 7 organisations mentioned above are receiving Community Grant funding to deliver the following programmes:

Programme	Organisation	Award total (3 years)
Evenlode Catchment Partnership and Plan	Wild Oxfordshire	£75,000
West Oxfordshire Community Ecology programme	Wild Oxfordshire	£66,000
Conservation, land management and habitat restoration works	Wychwood Forest Trust	£99,000
Eynsham CAPZero	Low Carbon Hub	£75,000
Socially impactful arts, entertainment and culture programme	Theatre Chipping Norton	£75,000
Community development role	Age UK Oxfordshire	£54,000
Volunteer driver scheme	Volunteer Link Up	£37,500
1:1 Home visiting service; nurture groups and activities for struggling families with a child under 5	Home-Start Oxford and Witney	£72,000
Total		£553,500

- 2.4** Separately the Council has a multi-year contract with Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire (CAWO) which is overseen by Resident Services – Revenues and Benefits. This service is commissioned and runs from 2024-2027. Annually CAWO receives £150,000. Under this contract CAWO is required to give advice and support in respect of all types of welfare benefits; supporting residents with appeals as well as applications. They support residents in all aspects of housing, such as possession proceedings, disrepairs, tenancy issues, illegal evictions etc; as well as maximising income and reducing debt.

### **3. MAIN POINTS**

- 3.1** Each organisation has provided an annual report on performance. Officers have also met with each organisation to review progress and capture any highlights and challenges. A summary of the performance of each organisation is provided in Annex A. It was decided to remove SLA reporting from the standard quarterly corporate reporting and instead report separately.

- 3.2** Some highlights from the reports:

- Home-Start Oxford has reached an additional 381 beneficiaries over the target of 550 through 1:1 home support and groups with 95% of participating parents reporting increased self-esteem and confidence in parenting, thanks to the service.
- Theatre Chipping Norton has run a Free School Meal programme during school holidays delivering 10,920 food vouchers and art packs, run mental health workshops in schools and mental health groups providing 200 places for parents of young people affected by poor mental health.
- Age UK Oxfordshire has seen over 2000 people attend sessions including 12 pop-up events in towns and villages including Brize Norton, Cassington, and Fulbrook and 10 regular groups plus two one off events, Celebrating Age at Cogges and a Family Fun Day at Bablock Hythe.
- Volunteer Link Up's Community Transportation Service completed 2399 return journeys and have 916 clients registered with their service, 68% of whom live outside Witney and 84% of whom are aged 66 and over.
- Wild Oxfordshire's Nature Recovery officer has seen 6 further green spaces being managed for nature in Bladon, Ducklington, Kelmcott, Asthall Leigh, Stonesfield and Witney and supported Hedgerow for Heroes which totalled 1,176 volunteer hours.
- Wild Oxfordshire's Evenlode Catchment Partnership project has launched the film 'A River Sings', secured £201,000 for local projects from Thames Water and delivered four schemes with Wetland Creation Grant Scheme funding of £100k.
- Low Carbon Hub have built broad community representation into the governance of CAPZero and formed two new community groups, explicitly with the purpose of supporting net zero in the local area - Freeland Energy Group and Go Green Hanborough.

- Wychwood Forest Trust has continued to promote Gibbets Hill hosting high profile DEFRA visits, research projects and public tours as well as the creation of 9 wetland habitats on the site.

**3.3** Organisations will continue to provide reports on an annual basis. Officers will arrange regular meetings to discuss progress and challenges throughout the remaining funded period. The current agreements will come to an end in early 2027.

## **4. FUTURE FUNDING OPTIONS**

**4.1** Local Authorities have provided financial support to the Voluntary and Community Sector for decades, seeing the importance of investing in local organisations who are close to communities and understand their needs. The VCS are flexible and adaptable and can adjust to meet changing need much more effectively than the Council can. This was evidenced in the response to Covid in 2020. They are also highly cost effective and moreover are stepping in to support where statutory services are no longer able to. The Council has invested continually in the sector for over 30 years, long after some neighbouring Councils who have been unable to sustain this support.

**4.2** Local Government Reorganisation brings huge uncertainty for the whole system. Residents value highly the services provided by the VCS. The Council is expecting restrictions on spending to come into effect in 2027.

**4.3** Given that these multi-year agreements come to an end in 2027, it is recommended that the Council give careful consideration in this year's budget setting to continuing to offer a multi-year funding arrangement to run from 2027-2030 and Officers are asked to look at the feasibility of creating a legacy position so safeguarding key VCS partners and the essential support they provide to residents across the district. This SLA model for funding should be taken forward at such a time to not be impeded by anything that comes with local government reform. Early notification of this is required to enable the opportunity to be advertised during the 2026/2027 financial year. This could be an extension of existing contracts or an entirely new process.

## **5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

**5.1** The Council could decide not to commission a further round of multi-year funding and instead agree to award annual grant funding for 2027/2028 – this would be helpful but would not provide the optimal level of security for the VCS. It would likely be the case the activities for which funding has been approved would cease once the 12 months is complete unless replacement funding can be found. We anticipate that competition, which is already very intense for other sources of funding, will further intensify for the period between 2027 and 2030 due to the uncertainty of local authority funding caused by the reorganisation and establishment of new organisations.

**5.2** The Council could decide not to invest further into community organisations from 2027 onwards. As above, this is likely to result in the reduction and in some cases closure of community services.

## **6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Funding to meet the commitments of the existing Community Grant funded Service Level Agreements is within existing budgets. This budget of £553,500 is made up as follows:

	£396,000	Budget
	£90,000	Underspend Round 1 Westhive
	£60,000	Contain Outbreak Management funding (COMF)
	£7,500	Councillor Priority Fund
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£553,500</b>	

- 6.1 Maintaining future multi-year funding could not be achieved at the current level, including an inflationary increase, without securing additional internal or external funding.
- 6.2 Funding for Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire is also within budget and also comes to an end in 2027.

## **7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 Legal agreements are in place with all Service Level Agreement organisations.
- 7.2 Should the Council wish to continue with multi-year funding from 2027 onwards then the process for the introduction of these agreements would begin in April 2026/2027 and require legal support in the second half of the financial year.

## **8. RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 8.1 The continuation of the existing Service Level Agreements has minimal risk as progress is monitored by staff and subject to annual reporting. Any issues with performance can be picked up and either resolved or managed. There is scope for the Council to withhold funding if performance does not meet expectations or if there is a significant breach of contract.
- 8.2 In terms of future funding, removing all funding after April 2027 would present community and voluntary sector organisations with considerable challenges and render them unable to deliver some services. In addition, it could be reputationally damaging to the Council.
- 8.3 By continuing with funding for a further year the impact of the above risks would be delayed for 12 months. The reputational risk would be less as at this point the organisation would not be in its current form.
- 8.4 By continuing with funding for a further 3-year period the Council risks investing in activity which it will not directly see the recognition for supporting or the benefit to residents. It would however provide the greatest level of security to the VCS who receive it.

## **9. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

**9.1** All SLA organisations are expected to pay ‘due regard’ to the need to eliminate discrimination and promote equality in relation to:

- Race
- Disability
- Gender, including gender reassignment
- Age
- Sexual Orientation
- Pregnancy and maternity
- Religion or belief

**9.2** The Council requires organisation to submit their Equal Opportunities policy on application.

## **10. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS**

**10.1** Wild Oxfordshire and Wychwood Forest Trust programmes have positive impact on land use. Projects are focussed on creating more natural, resilient and biodiverse areas.

**10.2** Low Carbon Hub CAPZero is taking a fresh look at how to create a zero-carbon society.

**10.3** Age UK Oxfordshire projects will see a mixture of activities delivered close to where people live as their target participants are often isolated and do not drive.

**10.4** The Theatre programme generally takes place at the Theatre building itself, making use of a space which is already open and where other activity is already taking place.

**10.5** VLU’s transport scheme provides a service for those who cannot use public transport and who otherwise would be isolated and vulnerable. The scheme utilises volunteer’s own vehicles, so VLU has no control over the vehicles utilised for this purpose.

## **11. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

**11.1** None

(END)