

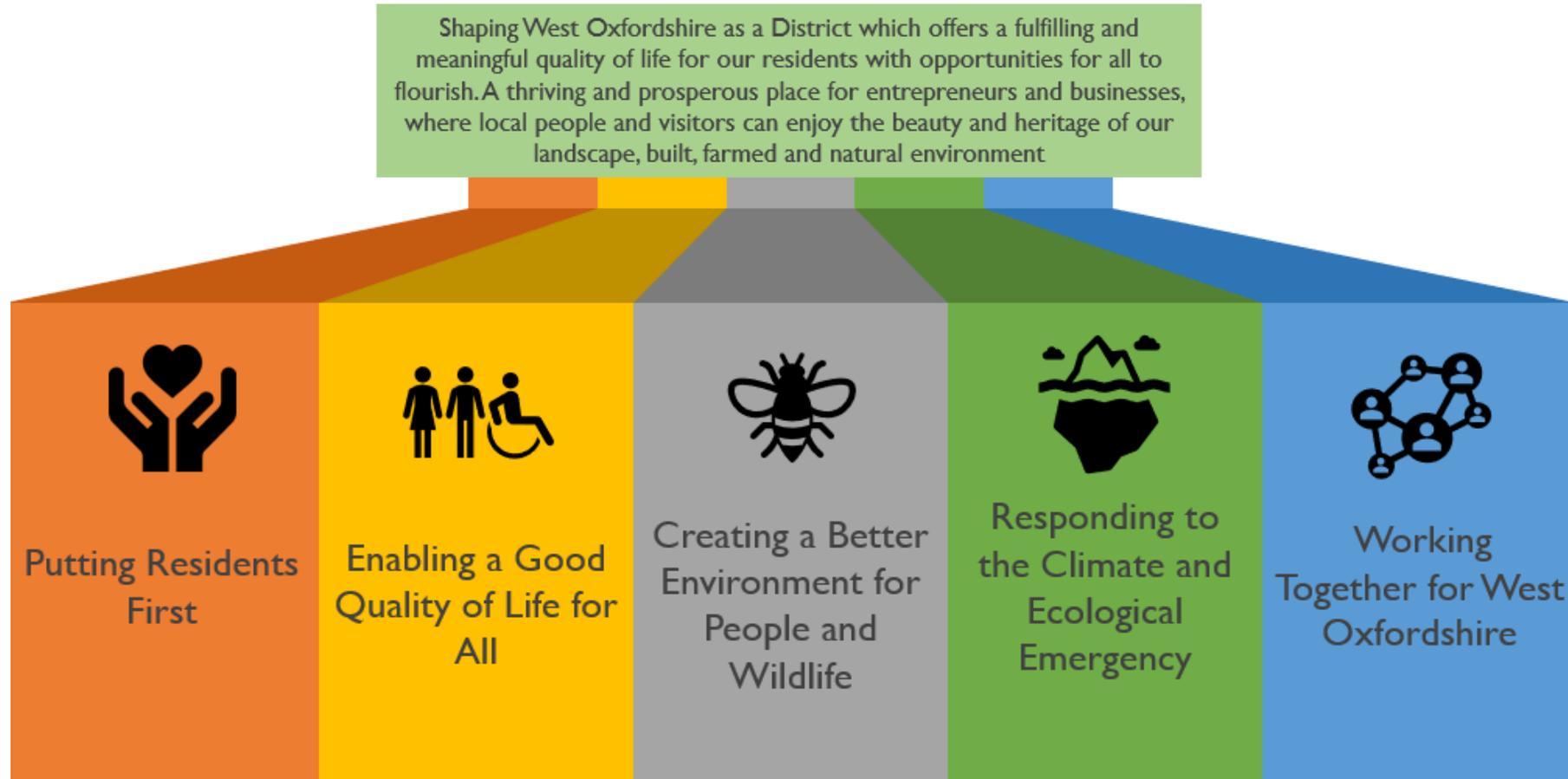


WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT
October – December 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, West Oxfordshire District Council conducted its first Youth Needs Assessment, gathering structured responses from 3,908 young people attending seven secondary schools or colleges, alongside feedback from parents and youth organisations. The assessment revealed significant challenges, including limited access to activities, widespread mental health concerns, safety issues, climate anxiety, and barriers linked to education, employment, and support services. Following a review of the findings in October 2023, the Council committed to strengthening youth engagement and approved the recruitment of a full-time Youth Development Officer in February 2024. By September 2025, the officer had engaged extensively with community groups, parish and town councils, Oxfordshire County Council, Thames Valley Police, specialist youth agencies, councillors, and internal teams, reinforcing six thematic youth priorities: developing new provision, sustaining existing services, improving safety and wellbeing, supporting education and skills, promoting volunteering, and amplifying youth voice.

Key initiatives emerging from this work include supporting the revival of youth clubs in areas with limited provision, such as Eynsham and Stonesfield, and facilitating multi-agency partnerships to address anti-social behaviour, mental health, and community safety. This includes ongoing collaboration with Witney Town Council and Thames Valley Police to strengthen coordinated responses to youth issues. The Council is also promoting youth-friendly employment, expanding engagement with both state and private schools, and exploring the development of a Youth Assembly to involve young people in climate action and local democratic processes. To widen opportunities, the Youth Development Officer is additionally working with sports clubs to reduce participation barriers and supporting initiatives to improve youth volunteering, including through local employers.

To support youth-led innovation, the Council allocated £20,000 from its COMF budget for initiatives delivered through Westhive, its civic crowdfunding platform. By Spring 2025, 12 youth-focused projects had been successfully funded, attracting over £412,000 in total pledges. Westhive's broader programme continues to grow, with 38 projects supported and more than £1.16 million pledged across the platform by 2025. Within this total, 2025 funding rounds saw £124,000 committed to 10 new community projects (including young carers and arts-based initiatives), and a further £114,000 directed to projects improving accessibility, biodiversity and family services. The Council continues to pledge up to £12,000 per project, with at least £20,000 ring-fenced annually for youth-led ideas.

The Council's commitment to youth and housing is further reflected in the 'Our House' project, delivered in partnership with Cottsway Housing and Aspire Oxfordshire. The initiative provides shared, affordable accommodation and tailored employment, training, and wellbeing support for young adults under 35 on out-of-work benefits, enabling them to build independence and progress into education, employment, and long-term housing. In July 2024, the Executive approved a two-year funding extension from November 2024 to October 2026, ensuring the programme's stability and permitting continued partnership working and potential external funding applications.

In parallel with these strategic initiatives, the Council remains actively engaged in shaping the future structure of local government through the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) process. In November 2025, five of the seven councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire—including West Oxfordshire—formally backed a proposal to replace existing district and county councils with two new unitary authorities. They argued that this model offered the strongest improvements in services, the greatest annual savings (estimated at £59.8 million), and the best balance between efficiency and local accountability. Under the proposal, Oxford and Shires Council would encompass Cherwell, Oxford City, and West Oxfordshire, while Ridgeway Council would cover South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse, and West Berkshire. A full joint submission was made to Government at the end of November 2025.

This two-unitary model is being considered alongside two competing proposals: a single Oxfordshire-wide unitary authority put forward by Oxfordshire County Council, and a three-unitary model led by Oxford City Council, featuring Greater Oxford, Northern Oxfordshire, and Ridgeway councils. All proposals will be assessed by Government, with a final decision expected in 2026 and implementation anticipated in 2028.

Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All



Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Charging Schedule was adopted on 1 October 2025 and comes into effect for planning permissions granted from 31 January 2026. Preparations for implementation have continued at pace, including detailed staff training, the configuration of back-office systems and financial processes, and the development of clear guidance to support applicants and developers. This work ensures the Council will be ready to collect and allocate CIL from the effective date. Once operational, CIL will work alongside Section 106 obligations to support both strategic infrastructure and local priorities, with a proportion of receipts passed directly to town and parish councils to help deliver community-led improvements across West Oxfordshire.

Substantial progress is also being made on the Salt Cross Garden Village, which remains one of the district's most significant long-term growth areas. The Planning Inspector's final report on the Area Action Plan, including the revised Net Zero development policy, has now been received for fact-checking, with adoption expected at Full Council in February 2026. Work continues with Oxfordshire County Council and the developer to confirm the outstanding information needed for timely determination of the outline planning application, supported by an anticipated Planning Performance Agreement to establish clear timescales and resource commitments. Engagement with Eynsham Parish Council remains constructive, including review of its draft Neighbourhood Plan. Meanwhile, the Oxford Growth Commission has reaffirmed its support for the Garden Village as part of the national garden communities programme. Alongside planning work, the Council continues to explore opportunities for clean-growth employment and to collaborate with innovation partners to support low-carbon enterprise linked to the emerging development.

Following the close of the spatial options consultation in December 2025, work is now focused on preparing the Draft Regulation 19 Local Plan, which will set out a comprehensive policy framework for sustainable development, long-term stewardship and place-shaping across the district. Work on the Carterton Area Strategy is progressing in parallel, reflecting its close alignment with the Local Plan's vision for future growth. Early engagement has been positive, and the Oxford Growth Commission has endorsed the Council's approach. A dedicated officer will be appointed in early 2026 to lead work with residents and stakeholders, building a shared and ambitious long-term plan for Carterton to be in place by 2028. Alongside this, partnership work continues with the West Oxfordshire Business and Retail Park, Carter Jonas and local landowners to produce a focused investment prospectus and strengthen the town's economic offer, including development opportunities around the RAF Brize Norton main gate.

Walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure projects continue to advance across the district. The Carterton LCWIP, formally adopted by Oxfordshire County Council in October 2025, provides a 10-year programme of improvements designed to increase active travel and support future funding bids. The Eynsham LCWIP is being refined following public consultation, incorporating proposals for upgraded crossing points, traffic-free routes and heritage-sensitive wayfinding. In Witney, plans to enhance the High Street and Market Square have progressed through statutory consultation, and subject to approval of final designs and associated traffic orders, construction is expected to begin in early 2026 and complete by mid-year. Supported by £1.98m from Active Travel England, the scheme aims to provide improved accessibility, planting, public spaces and traffic-calming.

A wide range of UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) initiatives continue to deliver impact across the district's economy. The Wayfinding Signage Project is progressing in partnership with the Witney Chamber of Trade, while shopfront, rural enterprise, business boost and visitor economy grants remain on track to support more than 30 businesses by the end of Q4. Work continues with Marriotts Walk on enhancements to public realm and visitor experience, and officers are exploring opportunities to procure improved footfall data to strengthen the evidence base for town-centre decision-making. CBRE continues to support the management of retail units in a challenging market, with progress on new leases and ongoing design and costing work for further public realm improvements.

In housing, feasibility work has been undertaken with a range of modular construction providers, including timber-frame SIP and container-based manufacturers, though suitable sites have not yet been identified. Separately, 28 bedspaces are in the acquisition pipeline to meet high demand from single applicants on the housing register, with properties progressing through surveys, legal checks and contract preparation. At Woodford Way, partnership working with a Registered Provider remains the preferred delivery route, offering opportunities to leverage external funding and reduce financial exposure to the Council. Detailed design refinement continues, including parking arrangements aligned with the district's parking strategy, and commercial discussions with the RP and Homes England remain positive. However, the previous development partner has confirmed it cannot proceed with the proposed acquisition due to funding challenges. An Options Briefing Note will therefore be brought to Informal Executive in February 2026 to agree the best path forward and maintain momentum on delivery.

Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife



Actions we are taking

West Oxfordshire District Council has completed the Preferred Policy Options consultation for its emerging Local Plan 2041. Running from 26 June to 8 August 2025, this stage explored the updated vision, objectives and preferred approaches across housing, transport, climate, economy, infrastructure and the natural and historic environment. It did not propose site allocations but invited early views on the direction of travel, helping to build understanding of the key issues the Draft Plan will need to address. Engagement included online material, hard-copy documents and a programme of district-wide drop-in events and online sessions. A Consultation Summary Report was published in October 2025, setting out the themes raised and how they will inform the next stage of plan-making.

The Preferred Spatial Options consultation followed from 3 November to 22 December 2025, seeking views on the distribution of development, the settlement hierarchy and whether the plan period should extend to 2043 to ensure a full 15-year horizon. It revisited strategic sites including Salt Cross and West Eynsham and explored additional locations around towns and larger villages. This stage forms a bridge between early policy development and the forthcoming Draft Plan and is informed by the Preferred Options document published in June 2025. Preparation of the Regulation 19 Draft Local Plan is now underway, incorporating a strengthened, integrated approach to the water environment based on updated technical evidence.

Updating the evidence base remains a critical part of this work. Draft updated reports for the Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment and Phase 1 Water Cycle Study were issued in July 2025, assessing fluvial and surface water risk, water supply and wastewater capacity, and setting out principles for applying the Sequential and Exception Tests. These studies, aligned with national guidance, complement wider updates to Oxfordshire's Local Flood Risk Management Strategy and will underpin decisions about growth locations and infrastructure needs as the Draft Plan takes shape.

Nature recovery continues to be embedded across plan-making and delivery. The Pudlicote Farm habitat bank, established in March 2025 with the landowner and the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, remains a key mechanism for delivering Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) where on-site delivery is not feasible. Baseline BNG calculations for five priority sites are also being reviewed to support future project development. Opportunities for strategic land acquisition will be considered once the BNG market stabilises and in the context of local government reorganisation. Officers continue to participate in the Evenlode and Windrush Catchment Partnerships, supporting nature-based interventions such as wetland creation and helping to connect landowners with technical expertise.

The Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)—endorsed by West Oxfordshire's Executive in September 2025, and published in November 2025, identifies countywide habitat priorities and opportunity areas, with approximately 41% of West Oxfordshire falling within mapped opportunities. Officers and councillors attended the LNRS launch and the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership annual meeting, reflecting strong collaborative working with environmental partners. The LNRS is already informing delivery at a local level, including the Windrush in Witney project, where a February 2026 review meeting will consider future opportunities and help shape a planned National Lottery Heritage Fund bid in Year 3 of the Service Level Agreement.

Community-level nature initiatives continue to expand. The Coronation Community Orchard Scheme has supported six orchards in round one, sixteen in round two, and nine applications are progressing in the final round, with pruning workshops now scheduled. The Nature and Health Inequality project continues in partnership with local charities, councils and the University of Oxford, informed by updated Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025 data. Officers are also reviewing ecological reports with the Ecology Team and working with Assets, volunteer groups and Ubico to identify additional Road Verge Nature Reserves, with one verge already under revised management. At the Station Lane depot in Witney, an Environment Agency exemption application for composting is awaiting a March 2026 decision, and at the Woodgreen offices, glyphosate-free management has been strengthened by a move to peat-free practices. Broader woodland planting work remains on hold pending clarity arising from local government reorganisation.

As the Local Plan advances, the Council continues to align updated technical studies, the LNRS, BNG delivery work, catchment partnership activity and community-level initiatives to ensure a robust and environmentally led Regulation 19 Draft Plan for consultation in 2026, ahead of submission for independent examination.



Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency

Actions we are taking

West Oxfordshire District Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency in 2019 and remains committed to achieving carbon-neutral operations by 2030. This ambition is guided by the Climate Change Strategy 2025–2030, the Carbon Action Plan 2024–2030 and the West Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Plan, which together set a clear framework for cutting emissions, integrating climate considerations into Council services and strengthening biodiversity and climate resilience.

Progress continues on decarbonising the Council's estate. Heat-decarbonisation plans have been completed for Elmfield, 3 Welch Way and the Old Court House. At Windrush Leisure Centre, the PSDS Phase 3c scheme has advanced significantly, with the new air-source heat pump system installed and the asbestos boiler removed; completion remains on track for March 2026. The PSDS Phase 4 scheme for Chipping Norton Leisure Centre is still under review, and new funding will be required to decarbonise Carterton Leisure Centre following the unsuccessful PSDS Phase 3b bid. Solar PV has been installed at Carterton, although further upgrades will be needed to reduce emissions. Budget provision has been identified for low-carbon heating and solar PV at 3 Welch Way in 2026/27, while the Senior Leadership Team has confirmed no wider solar investment on Council properties ahead of Local Government Reorganisation.

The district's electric vehicle charging network continues to expand through Council-owned sites and the countywide OXLEVI programme. Oxfordshire secured £3.6 million in LEVI funding to triple public EV charging by the end of 2025, supported by procurement completed in 2025. Legal contract documents for the countywide rollout are prepared, with approval anticipated in January 2026. A connection surgery is scheduled for 28 January 2026 to assess depot electrical capacity for fleet electrification.

Work to align waste and fleet operations with the Council's climate goals also continues. The Waste Environmental Services Programme (WESP) business case is being updated to reflect infrastructure needs such as depot decarbonisation and EV charging. A fleet review has been completed and procurement is underway for four new electric food-waste vehicles, with broader electrification planned as vehicles reach replacement. The Sustainability Impact Assessment Tool (SIAT) is now mandatory for all Council decisions.

The Council remains an active partner in CAPZero—the community-led energy plan around the Eynsham (Cuckoo Lane) primary substation—and discussions continue with Low Carbon Hub on districtwide application. Oxfordshire's Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) modelling has identified significant solar and wind potential, and the district LAEP will assess how these opportunities can be delivered for maximum community benefit. Countywide retrofit planning is being advanced through Arup's work for Oxfordshire County Council, supporting local efforts to scale retrofit. The Council continues to promote ESOX energy assessments for businesses and uses the Greenlight hub to support community climate action, funding signposting and engagement with town and parish councils. Work is also underway to strengthen youth climate networks.

The Council is preparing to enforce Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) more strongly in the private rented sector, with reported breaches to be investigated. Funding secured through a 2025 report is enabling development of a new Asset Management Strategy, including carbon assessments of tenanted buildings.

Support for low-income and off-gas households continues through HUG2 (Home Upgrade Grant Phase 2), which upgraded 15 homes in Year 1 and now benefits from expanded eligibility. This complements services offered through Better Housing Better Health, ensuring support reaches households least able to invest in upgrades themselves.

Delivery of the West Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Plan continues, with actions prioritised according to capacity and impact. The Ecology Team has returned to full staffing (3 FTE planning ecologists and 2 FTE nature recovery officers), enabling stronger project delivery. A full update will be presented to Overview & Scrutiny in February 2026, and Executive Members are considering budget provision for new and multi-year nature recovery projects in 2026–27. Officers remain engaged with county and regional partners on mitigation and adaptation.

A countywide energy baseline and modelling exercise is nearing completion, and the district LAEP will guide future energy infrastructure decisions. Work on Local Plan energy policies is being strengthened ahead of Regulation 19 to ensure alignment with the Oxfordshire Climate Adaptation Route Map and wider strategies.

In June 2025, West Oxfordshire was named the top-performing rural district in the national Council Climate Action Scorecards, recognising strong governance, community engagement and practical progress across areas including decarbonisation, retrofit, nature recovery and carbon-literacy training.

Working Together for West Oxfordshire



Actions we are taking

West Oxfordshire District Council is entering the final year of UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) delivery, with a clear focus on ensuring continuity for communities and businesses as national funding winds down. Final allocations for 2025/26 have been confirmed as £327,146 (UKSPF) and £214,829 (REPF), extending the district's overall Prosperity Fund programme into a fourth year and supporting local investment through March 2026. In December 2025, the Government announced an extension to the national programme, allowing expenditure until October 2026. This provides additional flexibility to manage any underspend and work collaboratively with the Delivery Group and Partnership Group ahead of the new hard stop deadline. A celebratory event is being planned to recognise the achievements of UKSPF and REPF participants and highlight the positive impact created across the district.

A strengthened programme of business support schemes has been launched to help local enterprises innovate, grow and future-proof their operations. This includes the new West Oxfordshire Business Boost Grant, offering up to £5,000 in capital funding for equipment, expansion and low-carbon investment, opening formally in September 2025. It complements existing schemes such as Shop Front Improvement Grants (up to £1,000), Visitor Economy Grants (£1,000–£10,000) and Rural Enterprise Growth Grants (£5,000–£20,000), all refreshed in June 2025. Six-month impact reporting for the 2025 rounds begins in October. Business and environmental sustainability support continues through the Carbon Action Fund, which has seen strong uptake, and the Tools for Tomorrow initiative, which continues to address skills shortages in the construction and retrofit sector. Wider support also includes delivery of the West Oxfordshire Business Support Programme (June 2025–January 2026), offering Business Sparks and Business Accelerator provision for start-ups and scaling businesses.

The Westhive civic crowdfunding programme continues to act as a flagship for community-led investment. By the end of Round 4 (July 2025), the platform had supported 28 projects worth £948,172. A further Round 5 has since been completed, with 10 additional projects receiving pledges. The Council has also invested an additional £60,000 in the Westhive Community Infrastructure Fund to support projects focused on youth engagement, inclusion and mental health. In 2024/25 alone, £273,682 in UKSPF support was channelled into VCS projects through Westhive. Recent Westhive-supported initiatives include:

- **Let's Roll!** - inclusive wheelchair dance classes, now fully funded for continued delivery and hosting a national competition in 2026.
- **Carterton Family Centre** - receiving funding to expand low-cost provision for young families.
- **Community Floodplain Restoration** - creating new meadows and wet woodland to boost biodiversity and natural flood management.

Youth-focused work continues to expand. The Council's Youth Development Officer has supported emerging youth-led projects in Stonesfield, Freeland and Eynsham, while a new Youth Partnership with Witney Town Council and Thames Valley Police focuses on inclusion and safeguarding. The YouMove programme now supports more than 500 families in West Oxfordshire and has seen a significant rise in activity levels countywide, with nearly 14,000 residents registered by mid-2025. The Leisure Cards scheme, delivered through GLL, also continues to offer free leisure access for residents experiencing poor mental health.

Engagement with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) remains strong, supported through forums in key settlements and biannual Health and Wellbeing Alliance meetings. New initiatives include the recruitment of a Food Action Plan Officer to deliver the district's Food Action Plan, and the launch of the Community Activity Grant (CAG) scheme, providing £500–£1,000 for small community action projects, with decisions due in October 2025. The Community Insight Profile Grant Scheme, funded by Oxfordshire County Council Public Health, will support organisations in Witney Central, with awards expected in November.

Business and environmental sustainability support continues through the Carbon Action Fund, which has seen strong uptake and has been submitted for consideration in the LGC Awards. This fund, worth £10,000–£20,000 per grant, targets SMEs seeking to decarbonise buildings, install renewables, or invest in waste-reduction equipment. The Tools for Tomorrow initiative also remains active, addressing skills shortages in the local construction and retrofit sector. [news.westoxon.gov.uk] Wider economic development initiatives include the West Oxfordshire Business Support Programme (June 2025–January 2026), delivered by ALP Synergy, offering a combined cycle of Business Sparks and Business Accelerator support for start-ups and scaling firms. The district continues to promote enterprise and innovation through workshops, peer-to-peer networks and tourism-sector support via Cotswold Tourism partnerships.

Together, these programmes and investments reflect the Council's commitment to sustaining the impact of the Prosperity Funds beyond their national end date, strengthening community resilience, supporting business growth, and ensuring that local priorities continue to be delivered through 2026 and beyond.