

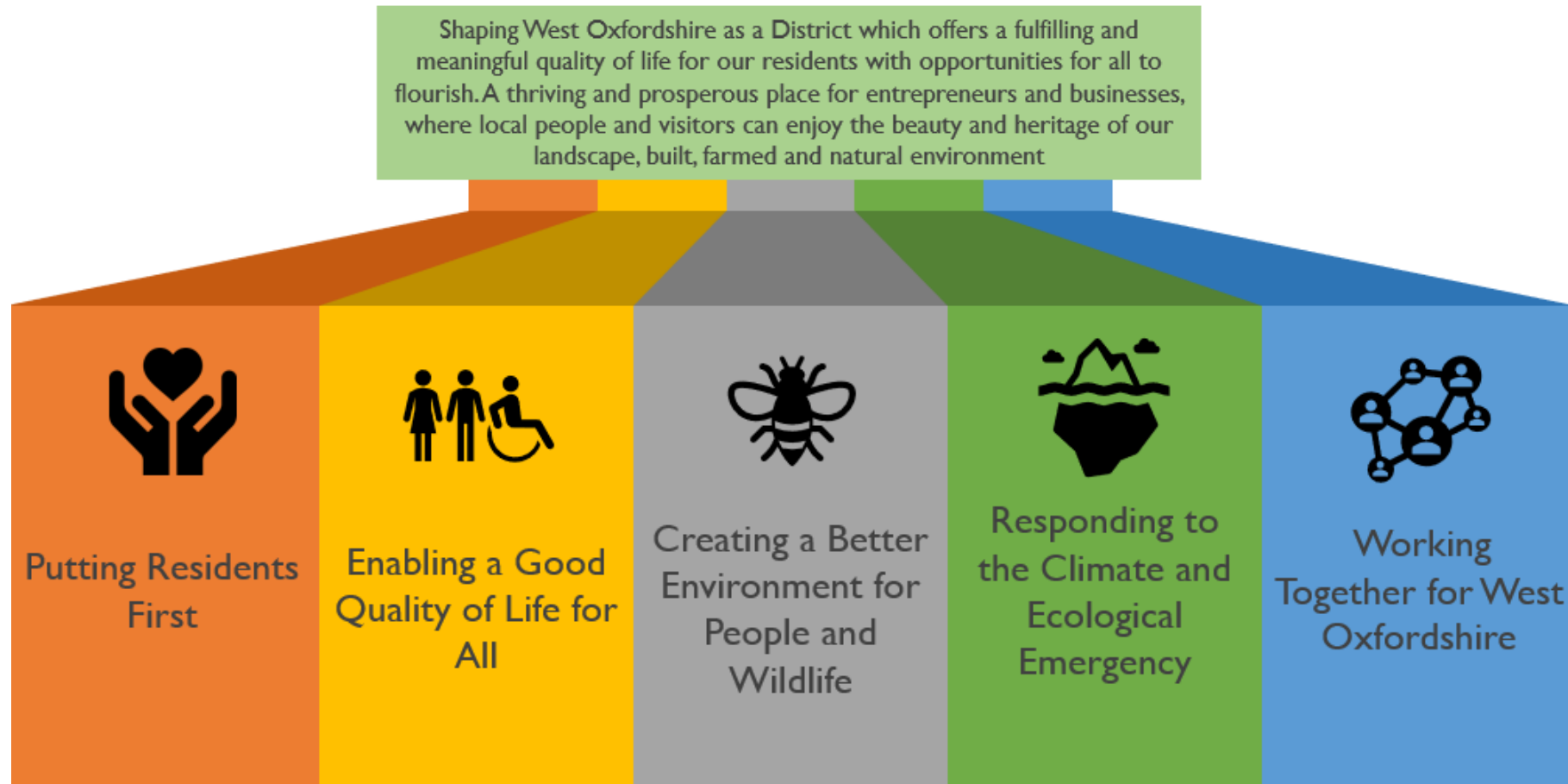


WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT
January – March 2026

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 March 2026, the officer had engaged extensively with community groups, parish and town councils, Oxfordshire County Council, Thames Valley Police, specialist youth agencies, councilors, 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.

A key development this quarter has been the formation of the West Oxfordshire Youth Partnership, marking an important step forward in strengthening how the Council engages with young people. The partnership brings together key stakeholders and provides a coordinated approach to youth engagement across the wide range of council and partner activity. A programme of work focused on Youth Voice is now coming forward, supporting the Council's commitment to actively seek the views of seldom-heard communities and ensure that decisions reflect the needs and perspectives of younger residents. This work has been enabled through external funding secured from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) via Oxfordshire County Council, providing a strong foundation for delivery in the year ahead.

To support youth-led innovation, the Council allocated £20,000 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 14 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. Executive approval was secured to extend the Westhive programme for a further three years starting April 2026.

In response to ongoing cost-of-living pressures, approximately £60,000 of Household Support Funding was distributed during Q4. Funding was targeted at households experiencing financial barriers and delivered through local food groups, organisations supporting informal and formal carers, and voucher schemes for eligible residents identified through LIFT. This activity ensured support reached residents most in need through established community networks.

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.

The Council remains actively engaged in shaping the future structure of local government through the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) process. In February 2026, Government launched a statutory consultation on three Local Government Reorganisation proposals for Oxfordshire, including the two-unitary model supported by West Oxfordshire, which ran until 26 March 2026. The Council's Executive approved the submission of a response to the consultation, reaffirming support for the two-unitary model.

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) went live in 2026, it is now being applied to all relevant planning permissions granted from 31 January 2026. While early concerns have been raised by developers and applicants regarding the balance between CIL and Section 106 obligations, the Council is considering how best to provide further clarity to support consistent application. Once embedded, CIL will play a critical role in funding both strategic infrastructure and local priorities, helping communities adapt to growth while maintaining quality of life. The Council has continued progress on the Local Plan Review, following the close of the spatial options consultation in December 2025. The Draft Regulation 19 Local Plan remains on track for formal publication in June 2026.

The Council has continued to make significant progress on Salt Cross Garden Village, one of the district's most important long term growth areas. The Area Action Plan and planning policy framework were adopted by the Council in February 2026, providing a clear basis for delivery. The Council is now reviewing the outline planning application against the adopted policy framework and is working closely with Oxfordshire County Council to agree the required updates and additional information from the developer. A Planning Performance Agreement has been reviewed and prepared for signing, supported by a detailed work programme and costed resource plan. Section 106 requirements have been reviewed by partners and are being updated by the Council, alongside the procurement of additional viability expertise. Engagement with Eynsham Parish Council remains constructive, including consideration of the draft Neighbourhood Plan, while the Oxford Growth Commission continues to support Salt Cross as part of the national Garden Communities programme.

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 new Interim Regeneration Lead has now been appointed for Carterton, who will begin work on the Carterton Area Strategy. This will include exploring and masterplanning opportunities for green investment across the Carterton area, working closely with the West Oxfordshire Business and Retail Park and RAF Brize Norton to identify sites and projects that can support low-carbon growth and future-focused infrastructure. As part of this wider programme, work with the Low Carbon Hub to support local businesses with their green infrastructure needs has now successfully concluded under UKSPF. This has helped build a stronger foundation for businesses looking to reduce emissions, improve energy efficiency and invest in sustainable technologies. Together, these strands form a key part of our emerging regeneration approach ensuring Carterton is well-positioned to attract green investment, support business innovation and deliver long-term economic and environmental benefits for the town and surrounding area.

Walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure projects continue to advance across the district, the Council has also continued to work with partners to improve sustainable transport and active travel. The Carterton Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) was adopted by Oxfordshire County Council in October 2025, and the Council continues to support its implementation. The Eynsham LCWIP has been refined following consultation, while the Charlbury LCWIP is with Oxfordshire County Council for further editing ahead of anticipated adoption in October 2026. A Walking Bus scheme, supported by the Council, has been introduced at Witney Community Primary School to encourage healthier travel choices.

Across town centres, regeneration and economic vitality remain priorities for the Council. In Witney, the Council is progressing the Wayfinding Signage Project in partnership with the Chamber of Trade, alongside shopfront improvement grants and wider UKSPF funded initiatives. Work continues at Marriotts Walk on public realm improvements and visitor experience, supported by CBRE in a challenging market. In Carterton, the Council has begun identifying regeneration priorities following completion of the Strategic Masterplan, alongside the submission of an Expression of Interest for Town of Culture 2028, signaling clear ambition to raise the town's profile and strengthen community pride.

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, the Council continues to progress a delivery partner model for a 55 home scheme, integrating public parking and retaining existing EV charging infrastructure. Both Executive and Overview and Scrutiny have authorised further work to refine the business case. Separately, the Council continues to progress property acquisitions to relieve pressure on the housing register, with additional bedspaces moving through surveys, legal checks and contract preparation.

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 policy approaches across housing, transport, climate, the economy, infrastructure, and the natural and historic environment. A Consultation Summary Report was published in October 2025, setting out the themes raised and how they are shaping the next stages of plan-making.

The Preferred Spatial Options consultation, undertaken between 3 November and 22 December 2025, built on this work by 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. Strategic sites including Salt Cross and West Eynsham were revisited, alongside exploration of additional locations around principal towns and larger villages. This stage formed a bridge between high-level policy development and preparation of the Draft Plan.

Preparation of the Regulation 19 Draft Local Plan is now underway, incorporating a strengthened and more integrated approach to the water environment, informed by updated technical evidence. Supporting studies underpinning this work set out updated principles for applying the Sequential and Exception Tests and align with national guidance and Oxfordshire's Local Flood Risk Management Strategy. Together, these will inform decisions on growth locations and future infrastructure requirements as the Draft Plan develops.

The Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), endorsed by the Council'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 opportunity areas. A Council representative attended meetings of the newly established LNRS Delivery Advisory Group, contributing to discussions on strategic project criteria, funding, and priority projects. The next project review meeting is scheduled for April–May 2026. The LNRS is already informing local delivery, including exploration of a potential land acquisition in Eynsham to support a community group as a BNG habitat bank. Partnership working remains central to delivery. A meeting was held with the Windrush Catchment Partnership on 24 March 2026, and officers are following up with the new Chair and CEO of the Wychwood Forest Trust. Continued involvement is being maintained with both the Evenlode and Windrush Catchment Partnerships across several projects to support ongoing community-level nature initiatives.

The Coronation Community Orchard Scheme has reached its final delivery stage.

- 190 trees were planted across five orchards in the third and final application round.
- 392 trees have been planted overall, across 25 orchards district-wide.
- 2 pruning workshops were delivered, with representatives from eight orchard groups in attendance.

Remaining funds have been transferred to the Long Mead Foundation to deliver orchard meadow creation workshops between April and November 2026, including propagation of local wildflowers, plug planting and soil testing, targeted at supported community orchard groups.

Work continues to link nature recovery, land management and food systems. Engagement is ongoing with the North-East Cotswold Farm Cluster on carbon sequestration, while the Food Action Plan Delivery role continues to achieve high levels of engagement with farmers and market gardeners, supporting innovation and collaboration across the local food system. Ecology and land management activity remains active. Ecological reports are under review, with proposed changes being discussed with volunteer groups at Deer Park Wood and Deer Park South. Work will continue into the next financial year to identify management changes and enhancement opportunities. The roadside verge project will also continue into next year. Ongoing activity is underway to better match resources to activity, with communication channels to be updated once complete. The Nature Connected programme continues to enhance community access to green spaces:

- Carterton – Town Council permission has been granted for works and community events; delivery is being coordinated.
- Witney – collaboration with Witney Town Council, the Lower Windrush Valley Project and Wychwood Forest Trust to coordinate walks and green space use is progressing.
- Chipping Norton – engagement with the Town Council to approve activity is underway.

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 the decarbonisation of council-owned buildings, particularly leisure facilities, through the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme (PSDS). At Windrush Leisure Centre, the PSDS Phase 3c scheme is being delivered and includes the installation of Building Management System panels, buffer vessels, mechanical pipework, electrical containment and cabling, and a temporary meter. These works build on completed heat-decarbonisation planning and represent a significant step in reducing emissions from one of the Council's most energy-intensive operational buildings.

At Carterton Leisure Centre, earlier PSDS Phase 3b funding supported proposals to replace heating and hot water systems with a low-carbon alternative and increase on-site solar PV; however, further funding will now need to be identified and secured to proceed with full decarbonisation. While solar PV has already been installed at Carterton, additional upgrades will be required to deliver meaningful emissions reductions. Beyond the leisure estate, heat-decarbonisation plans have been completed for Elmfield, 3 Welch Way and the Old Court House, with budget provision identified for low-carbon heating and solar PV at 3 Welch Way in 2026–27. The Senior Leadership Team has confirmed there is no appetite for wider solar investment across council-owned properties ahead of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). The Council has also made progress in reducing emissions from waste and street-cleansing operations. A depot electrification capacity assessment is currently underway, reviewing both existing electrical infrastructure and future requirements. In Quarter 4, Four electric food-waste collection vehicles and one 3.5-tonne electric mechanical sweeper have been ordered, and a trial of a larger electric mechanical sweeper is currently in progress. In parallel, work continues to update the Waste Environmental Services Programme (WESP) business case, ensuring infrastructure requirements such as depot decarbonisation and EV charging are fully reflected. Strategic planning frameworks to support decarbonisation are now largely in place.

Updates to the Carbon Action Plan to 2030 and the Climate Change Strategy to 2050 have been completed, strengthening the Council's approach to include scope 3 emissions, district-wide carbon budgets, clear route maps to net zero and defined actions. The Climate Impact Assessment Tool (CIAT) has also been completed and is now embedded as a mandatory requirement for Council projects to ensure climate and nature considerations are systematically included in decision-making. The Sustainability Impact Assessment Tool (SIAT) is also mandatory for Council decisions.

In relation to renewable energy, a Publica-wide project to install solar PV on council-owned, tenanted buildings has been paused, with Senior Leadership Team confirming there is no appetite for direct solar investment in Council-owned properties prior to LGR. Looking ahead, the emerging West Oxfordshire Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP) will include actions to support renewable energy generation across the district.

The Nature Recovery Growth bid was successful, securing new budget to deliver actions within the Nature Recovery Plan and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) during 2026–27. The statutory biodiversity duty report was published on 25 March 2026, and continued support is being provided to catchment partnerships, community groups, farmers and other stakeholders delivering climate and nature recovery actions on the ground. Work to support retrofit and decarbonisation of homes and businesses is ongoing. Discussions continue with the Low Carbon Hub on the CAPZero model and the potential for a district-wide rollout targeting the “able to pay” market. Draft retrofit actions from the LAEP have been reviewed, with a revised version awaited before incorporation into the West Oxfordshire LAEP. The Council is also strengthening its approach to enforcing Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) in the privately rented sector, with reported breaches to be investigated and enforced. Delivery of Home Upgrade Grant Phase 2 (HUG2) has been completed, providing energy-efficiency and low-carbon heating upgrades for low-income, off-gas households, complementing support delivered through Better Housing Better Health.

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 Prosperity Fund programme into a fourth year and supporting local investment through March 2026. A celebration event is planned for June 2026 to recognise the achievements of UKSPF and REPF projects and the impact delivered 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 Council continues to support Town and Parish Councils to represent their communities and take action on locally important issues. The UKSPF-funded Towns and Parish Biodiversity Project has now been completed, providing practical case studies to support communities in enhancing biodiversity across a range of local habitats.

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 6 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. Executive approval has been secured to continue the Westhive programme for a further three years from April 2026. In 2024/25 alone, £273,682 in UKSPF support was channeled 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.

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.

Engagement with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) remains strong, supported through forums in key settlements and biannual Health and Wellbeing Alliance meetings. In 2025/26, a total of 25 awards were made through Westhive, while eight programmes continue to be supported through the SLA scheme. Further Household Support Funding has also been distributed to food groups and organisations supporting informal and formal carers. 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 Leisure Cards scheme, delivered through GLL, also continues to offer free leisure access for residents experiencing poor mental health.

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.