



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL PLAN ANNUAL STATEMENT
April 2020 - March 2021

Our vision is to support West Oxfordshire to be fit for the future through:



1. Climate Action

Leading the way in protecting and enhancing the environment by taking action locally on climate change and biodiversity.



2. Healthy Towns and Villages

Facilitating healthy lifestyles and better wellbeing for everyone.



3. A Vibrant District Economy

Securing future economic success through supporting existing local businesses and attracting new businesses to deliver the economic ambitions of the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy.



4. Strong Local Communities

Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive local communities.



5. Meeting the Housing Needs of our Changing Population

Securing the provision of market and affordable housing of a high quality for the wide range of householders making their home in West Oxfordshire.



6. Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance

Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council.

Introduction

Following the launch of the [West Oxfordshire Council Plan 2020 – 24](#) in January 2020, Officers have embarked on delivering the projects defined as a means of achieving the Council Plan vision to support West Oxfordshire to be fit for the future through delivery of its priorities.

The context for delivering the Council Plan has changed significantly given the Coronavirus pandemic that required the Council to pivot its focus towards responding to the sudden challenges posed by the pandemic, principally supporting West Oxfordshire residents, its business and economy, and community and voluntary sector during the series of lockdowns experienced over the first year of the Council Plan. This involved redeployment of 100+ staff and in so doing enabled support for vulnerable members of the community at the same time as continued delivery of key public services. Whilst focus shifted to the pandemic, work has continued to progress against each of the priorities, albeit perhaps in a different way to that anticipated during the creation of the Council Plan. This agility and ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and indeed the unprecedented situation, reflects well on the Council and its staff and demonstrates that they have remained true to the vision in the Council Plan to be 'fit for the future'.

This Annual Statement details progress against each of the 6 Council Plan priorities and should be read in conjunction with the [WODC Annual Monitoring Report \(AMR\)](#) for the period 1st April 2019 – 31st March 2020. The AMR is structured around the 6 Council Plan priorities, setting out progress against the Local Plan as the strategic development framework for the District. By priority, an outline of the current district context in terms of background/contextual information and what has happened during the AMR period is provided. Facts and figures are used to illustrate the Council's progress/patterns of change against a number of indicators – such as carbon emission reductions, amount of recycling, visitor numbers to leisure centres, and local workforce structure. This detailed overview also highlights what is on the horizon by way of activity, which aligns with the actions that underpin the 6 Council Plan priorities and delivery of the Council's vision to be 'fit for the future'.

Covid-19 Response and Recovery Planning

A short summary of the Council's response to the pandemic is provided below which illustrates the far reaching impact of the pandemic and efforts to meet the needs of West Oxfordshire's local economy, the voluntary and community sector and local residents.

WODC Covid-19 Response Summary:

Given the Council's responsibility for delivering services to over 100,000 residents, Covid-19 has been an unprecedented challenge which required us to react quickly to changing circumstances in order to support local business and economy, the voluntary and community sector and local residents. We have maintained essential services whilst redeploying staff to new areas of work to help deal with the crisis.

There has been a dynamic and inspiring community sector response across West Oxfordshire to the challenges introduced through the pandemic. Local groups, towns and villages have mobilised to support their communities and the Council has developed a Community Hub team to work effectively with voluntary sector partners and volunteers.

Collaboration with our partners at a County-wide level was required in order to respond to the crisis. In particular, close coordination and good communication between the County, City and District Councils, with the NHS and OxLEP, to support vulnerable people and align programmes to support local businesses.

The following statistics for the 2020/2021 financial year outline some of what the Council has achieved during the Covid-19 lockdown period working with key partners:

- 1,430 residents have been given support with complex needs
- 1,017 vulnerable residents have been contacted by Councillors
- Grants totalling £39,595,446 paid to businesses in West Oxfordshire
- 6,217 shielded residents called during lockdown.

In tandem with supporting local business and economy, the voluntary and community sector and local residents through the pandemic, considerable effort was invested in planning for recovery from the impacts of the pandemic and in the longer term, the District's renewal. It was recognised that the joint work with local communities, and with Oxfordshire's partners, undertaken in the early months of the pandemic provided strong foundations from which to develop a recovery plan.

A cross-party Covid-19 Advisory Group was established comprising Councillors working with Officers to consider how we will address challenges and opportunities arising from the pandemic through support to enable communities and businesses to thrive in a post-Covid world. A series of workshops were held to devise four Covid-19 Recovery Themes of Economy, Community, Climate and Council, Service Delivery and Finance. These are closely aligned

with the 6 Council Plan priorities as a means of ensuring that actions prioritised as part of the District's Covid-19 recovery effort and investment in this will also positively contribute to achieving the vision of the Council Plan. Full Council considered the [West Oxfordshire Covid-19 Recovery Plan](#) in October 2020 and this provides the Council with a helpful framework for ensuring that the wide ranging impacts of the pandemic are mitigated against and adapted to.

Whilst this Annual Statement focuses on progress against the Council Plan, activity underway and what is on the horizon in relation to achieving the Covid-19 Recovery Themes is also referenced due to the close alignment of these two areas of activity.

Climate Action: Leading the way in protecting and enhancing the environment by taking action locally on climate change and biodiversity

Covid-19 Recovery Theme: Climate

Over the last year Full Council approved two commitments in the Council Plan:-

- The Carbon Action Plan (October 2020), incorporating the Pathway to Achieving Carbon Neutral by 2030
- Climate Change Strategy (February 2021), focussing on climate action.

Together these set out a comprehensive, clear and robust strategy for the Council's response to the climate and ecological emergency.

[The Carbon Action Plan](#) defines 'The Pathway to Achieving Carbon Neutral by 2030'. It:

- Presents extensive data on WODC's Green House Gas (GHG) emissions
- Presents the GHG account as a baseline and measure of WODC's current impact on climate change, thus calibrating the success of future action taken to reduce/remove emissions
- Defines a set of Guiding Principles for planning future activity by WODC towards its target
- Sets out a process for the monitoring and review of action in progress and planned, keeping the Plan live and responsive to external influences, technological changes and innovation
- Leads by example, establishing an assessment methodology and Guiding Principles that other partners working across the District can apply to their own projects.

[The Climate Change Strategy](#) provides a framework for achieving the Council's clear and robust strategic priorities for climate action. Informed by extensive consultation, the Strategy enables the targeting of resources in a structured way. It enables WODC to contribute strategically to climate action for Oxfordshire and the South East whilst also taking local, grassroots action on five core themes of activity: 1) Protect and restore natural ecosystems, 2) Energy, 3) Active travel and low carbon transport, 4) Standards in new development, and 5) Engage, support and educate.

With the Strategy in place, the Council has the means to:

- Influence and shape strategy and policy for climate at County and Regional level
- Communicate its local response for the purposes of sharing best practice
- Contribute positively to the national effort – channelling any funding to achieve local outcomes

- Listen and respond to community views on climate action.

The Council has focussed on producing planning policy to achieve net-zero carbon development of 2,200 homes at Salt Cross Garden Village. The [Salt Cross Garden Village Area Action Plan](#) (SCG VAAP) has been submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for hearing in Summer 2021. If the policies for the Salt Cross Garden Village remain intact then this will provide a template for other developments within the District.

In addition to the SCGV AAP, a Sustainability Standards Checklist has been developed by an internal working group with input from planning policy, development management, biodiversity, landscape, climate and conservation heritage specialists. This was approved by Full Council in February 2021. The Checklist incorporates all elements of environmental sustainability for consideration in planning, including an expectation on applicants to consider tree planting and biodiversity. A commitment to securing the benefits of the Checklist has been made by the Council through the funding of a Sustainability Planning Specialist for 12 months to ensure that these are applied to development proposals going forward. The Standards relate to Water use and flood risk; Biodiversity; Green and Active Travel; Aligning with net-zero carbon; Sustainable construction; and Materials and waste.

Planning permission has recently been granted for a Solar Farm on land to the west of Eynsham, within proximity to the Strategic Development Area West Eynsham and the Salt Cross Garden Village.

Turning to the Council's overarching goal to enhance our natural environment and boost biodiversity through the establishment of robust, resilient, and well-functioning ecological networks several strands of activity have been underway over the last year.

WODC has played a proactive role as a District partner of the Oxfordshire Growth Board which has recently engaged in a draft Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire which commits specifically to protecting and enhancing our natural environment, whilst pursuing a zero-carbon future. The Environment Advisory Group, on which the District lead executive member sits, exists to embed critical environmental thinking across the Growth Board's programmes (e.g. Healthy Place Shaping) and link closely with other existing partnerships such as the Local Nature Partnership which is currently in formation.

The establishment of an Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership is particularly relevant to the Council achieving its ambition to safeguard West Oxfordshire's natural environment. This strategic forum will exist to guide nature recovery in an integrated way to produce multiple benefits for local people, the economy and the environment. Stakeholder engagement in December 2020 and March 2021 confirmed strong support for an Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership and detailed work is now underway on its Governance arrangements with its formal launch anticipated in September 2021.

A further Oxfordshire-wide partnership approach towards biodiversity enhancements is the Nature Recovery Network of which WODC is a contributor. The Nature Recovery Network is working to produce a Nature Recovery Strategy (a statutory requirement of the Environment Bill) that will endeavour to protect and enhance the natural environment as well as guiding the development of planning policies. An overarching aim of the NRN is to double the extent of land of high value for nature by 2050. The [Oxfordshire Plan 2050](#) provides an opportunity to use the [draft Nature Recovery Map](#) and [recommended associated policies](#) to help plan for nature's recovery at a county-wide level and to set the framework for future Local Plans. WODC sits on the NRN and actively supports the maintenance of Oxfordshire's Conservation Target Areas and Local Wildlife Sites Projects through their consideration via the planning process. Recent examples include delegation of authority to Woodstock Town Council to take forward an application via Natural England to

designate the Local Wildlife Site 'Woodstock Water Meadows' as a Local Nature Reserve and additionally has provide £4,000 grant funding to the Local Wildlife Trust and Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre who run the Local Wildlife Sites project.

The Windrush in Witney and Lower Windrush Valley Project are a key policy consideration for the development of the East Witney Strategic Development Area, informing new access arrangements between the new built area of Witney and the landscape surrounding it. Of particular note is the landscape and ecological value within the Windrush Valley just north of the A40 which forms part of the East Witney SDA area.

A Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Mechanism for securing a positive contribution to biodiversity is required of major (and some minor) applications for compliance with Local Plan Policy H3 'Bio-diversity and Geo-diversity'. The [Interim Biodiversity Net Gain Guidance for Developers and Ecological Consultants](#) has been in operation since April 2020, providing guidance to developers to ensure that sufficient information is submitted to demonstrate Biodiversity Net Gain. Furthermore, the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre has supported WODC to screen biodiversity metric calculations submitted to ensure that they achieve a Net Gain for Biodiversity. The first Biodiversity Net Gain payment has been made to fund off-site BNG provision arising from development of the Windrush Industrial Park. The payment of £112,290 was secured for the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment to deliver 9.41 biodiversity units which represents a significant step for the financial contribution towards nature's recovery within West Oxfordshire.

At March 2021, 15 planning applications were applying the BNG approach. This progress is being fed into a [national research project](#) at the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology to identify how BNG is contributing towards nature's recovery at the UK level and inform what happens when BNG becomes mandatory.

Work has also progressed on a draft Green Infrastructure Strategy Supplementary Planning Document which would guide where investment is required for people and wildlife e.g. BNG payments could be used in specific locations. This will incorporate [Building with Nature](#) principles to provide planners and developers with evidence-based, how-to, guidance on delivering high-quality green infrastructure. In support of this approach, a Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund (NEIRF) bid has been submitted by WODC in March 2021 to fund a Natural Capital Investment Strategy for West Oxfordshire. This Strategy will develop investment and revenue-stream opportunities for Green Infrastructure, natural capital, biodiversity net gain, and carbon balance within key strategic opportunity areas for the district. The £99,000 bid (outcome due in June 2021) is supported by the Council's partners Oxfordshire County Council, District/City Council partners, BBOWT, Lower Windrush Valley Project, The Wychwood Project, Evenlode Catchment Project and the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment. This collaborative effort between climate and planning Officers demonstrates an understanding of revenue stream models for natural capital with benefits for habitat creation for both biodiversity and natural flood risk management.

Finally, early work has commenced on a WODC Biodiversity Plan. This will define a biodiversity work programme to include development of Land Management Plans for land within the Council's stewardship, with ecological enhancement a key priority identified in the Covid-19 Recovery Plan. A Biodiversity and Countryside and Land Management Officer has been funded as part of the Council's investment in the recovery to deliver these benefits for the Council's estate.

What's on the Horizon?

- Continued partnership work to further develop the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, including further exploration of how the Draft Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Map can be used to inform the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 and the proposed review of the West Oxfordshire Local Plan due to commence in autumn 2021.
- Continued development of land management plans and ecological appraisal to conserve and enhance the ecological condition of Council's own land.
- Implementation of the Sustainability Standards Checklist to planning applications.
- Appointment of an Energy Projects Specialist to assist in realising the ambition of the Carbon Action Plan.
- Sustainability assessment of Council offices, involving modelling of energy performance and assessment of waste, water and cycle storage facilities undertaken. Recommendations for retrofit to be considered.
- Launch of the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership.
- Consultation on draft Green Infrastructure Strategy Supplementary Planning Document.

Healthy Towns and Villages: Facilitating healthy lifestyles and better wellbeing for everyone

Recovery Theme: Communities

The value in adopting a 'healthy place shaping' approach in new and existing developments is highlighted in the Council Plan. A [Health Impact Assessment \(HIA\) toolkit](#) and methodology has been approved by the Oxfordshire Growth Board in January 2021 and is now to be applied to the delivery of the local plan and major developments. HIA is a practical approach used to judge the effects a proposed development may have on the health and wellbeing of different groups of people. It is a tool used to identify the health impacts of a plan or project and to develop recommendations to maximise the positive impacts and minimise the negative impacts, while maintaining a focus on addressing health inequalities. By bringing such health considerations to the fore, HIAs add value to the planning process. The findings of HIAs are used to make recommendations to decision makers as to how any negative health impacts of a development can be reduced, and any positive health impacts maximised.

It is intended that this methodology will be used by developers and consultants when preparing major development proposals to help shape and inform design choices. The Council has recently requested HIAs for major development applications in Witney and Woodstock which were submitted and are currently being assessed against the Toolkit and Methodology for conformity. Further efforts to augment healthy place-shaping in the District through development is evident in the draft Supplementary Planning Document for the East Chipping Norton Strategic Development Area. This new development of 1,200 homes, along with around 5 hectares of business floorspace and a range of supporting services and facilities and green space and biodiversity enhancements, presents a further opportunity to create an area which puts the health and well-being of its residents (incoming and existing) at its heart.

Healthy Place Shaping has been further augmented by Policy 4 in the Salt Cross Garden Village Area Action Plan which requires a 'Rapid Health Impact Assessment' to accompany any planning application for major development at the garden village. This must demonstrate alignment with the emerging Oxfordshire HIA methodology, to fully identify the needs of everyone in how they live and work, access and use all types of infrastructure, services and networks.

Consultants were commissioned to undertake a Built Indoor Leisure Facilities Strategy for the District in March 2020 and significant steps have been taken towards achieving this key action identified in the Council Plan. Initial work involved an audit of current indoor leisure facilities stock across the District. Sport England are modelling leisure facility need against projected population growth for the District (due April 2021). In addition to this preparatory work towards the Built Indoor Leisure Facility Strategy, a Focus Group to consider need in the Witney area and scope for a relocated Windrush Leisure Centre ('Windrush 2') is imminent and the outcomes of this will be supplemented by a resident's online survey to help inform the required facility mix for any new Windrush 2.

Collectively the outputs of the initial audit, modelling against population growth and stakeholder consultation will inform a needs analysis of indoor Leisure facilities – addressing current, latent and unmet need for built leisure facilities across West Oxfordshire. This will form the basis of the Built Indoor Leisure Strategy & associated Action Plan.

Turning to measures of health and well-being across the District, the March 2021 [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment \(JSNA\)](#) provides information about Oxfordshire's population and the factors affecting health, wellbeing, and social care needs. A strong feature of the JSNA is a consideration of the wider determinants of health which is valuable to the District in planning its support to local health and well being. It is informed by research undertaken between November 2020 – February 2021 and is endorsed by the Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board.

Community profiles for West Oxfordshire are provided on the [places page of Oxfordshire Insight](#), presenting a range of population and health and wellbeing statistics including:

- Population by age
- Deprivation and children in poverty
- Public Health indicators
- Physical activity and child obesity
- Unpaid care and care homes
- GP practice data for selected health conditions (diabetes, dementia and depression)
- House prices and commuting

Of particular note is a February 2021 updated community profile for [Witney](#).

What's on the Horizon?

- Deployment of a Healthy Place Shaping Partner funded by Sport England via Oxfordshire County Council's Public Health Team to WODC to support the adoption of a Healthy Place Shaping approach.
- Built Indoor Sports Facility Strategy (including proposals for relocation of Windrush Leisure Centre) to Cabinet for Adoption in Summer 2021.
- New Playing Pitch Strategy for the District to provide an assessment of the need for playing pitches and recommendations for improving provision, informed by consultation with user group representatives.
- Developing, with partners, a masterplan for the redevelopment of Hanborough Station.

A Vibrant District Economy: Securing future economic success through supporting existing local businesses and attracting new businesses to deliver the economic ambitions of the Local Industrial Strategy

Recovery Theme: Economy

The Council Plan identified two strategic areas for economic growth which the Council is also committed to delivering through their inclusion in the Local Industrial Strategy: the Carterton Technology Hub and the Garden Village Science Park. Progress has been made on each.

The Carterton Technology Hub seeks to unleash the economic role, potential and value of Carterton through a new Technology Hub. Local market strengths include many small businesses with specialisms in high-tech manufacturing and engineering in addition to RAF Brize Norton. There is a local imbalance of jobs to workers leading to around 60% out-commuting (including to nearby Witney), indicating both the need and opportunity to diversify the local economy. A strategic outline case has been developed which has informed a proposition paper to the OxLEP, thus further evolving the business case for the project which was successfully made through its inclusion in the adopted Local Plan. Next steps include a detailed feasibility study and SWOT analysis informed by input from a wide range of stakeholders previously engaged in the concept through the Local Plan process. Carterton Town Council is identified as a potential lead partner – supported by WODC and involving the MOD, RAF, OxLEP, local businesses and residents. This endeavour will be further supported through Oxfordshire County Council's 'Access to Carterton Strategy'. Work on this to date has identified a 'preferred options package' comprising three distinct schemes to improve Carterton's strategic connectivity: B4477 Carriageway Improvement Scheme; West Facing Slips at B4477/A40 Junction and wider benefits schemes and; Witney to Carterton cycleway along Witney Road.

The Salt Cross Science and Technology Park allocated as part of the new 'Garden Village' strategic development area in the adopted Local Plan, includes a 40 hectare science and technology park that will attract high growth businesses giving them the space to grow and create high value jobs in line with the ambitions of the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy. The Area Action Plan includes a policy detailing the requirements of the park which will deliver, within an extensive network of green and blue infrastructure, 80,000m² of science, technology, engineering and high tech related business floor space. Concurrently an Outline Planning Application has been received by site promoter, Grosvenor Estates, which proposes 57,000m² of B-Class land uses as part of an employment area with the proposed uses to be determined at the Reserved Matters Application stage of the planning process. Once the Area Action Plan has been adopted this will be used to set the policy context against which the planning application for Salt Cross will be determined, of which the Science and Technology Park is part.

In close proximity to the Salt Cross Science and Technology Park is Hanborough Station and this is identified within the Council Plan as a focus for partnership effort to secure new and upgraded infrastructure, including short and long-term enhancements to the Cotswold railway line. The Hanborough Station Sub-Group of the North Cotswold Line Task Force has been established, bringing together the five county councils and Local Enterprise Partnerships covering the 86-mile route between Hereford, Worcester and Oxford, together with the Cotswold Line Promotion Group, Network Rail and the Great Western Railway.

In January 2020, the Task Force submitted its case to the government for a doubled two trains per hour North Cotswold Line service between Worcestershire, Oxford and London and we are awaiting the assessment of the case by the Department for Transport and Network Rail. In parallel, the Task Force set out its aspirations for additional local trains as a metro-style service between Hanborough and Oxford to support West Oxfordshire housing growth, the visitor economy and to encourage a shift from road to rail for journeys to Oxford or London. The Sub-Group will develop the case for these local services, plans for expanded passenger facilities at Hanborough Station, and engage with local stakeholders and communities.

On the theme of lower carbon transportation, the value of provision of Electric Vehicle Charging Points (EVCP) as a means of improving the public realm in our town centres was identified as an action towards achieving a vibrant district economy, in addition to meeting zero carbon ambitions. Two approaches to this are underway:

1. WODC direct procurement of Electric Vehicle Charging Point (EVCP) in Council-owned car parks: Viability assessments of car parks within the Council's stewardship for installation of EVCP have been undertaken in partnership with the Oxfordshire Park and Charge team. Six car parks have been selected as part of Tranche One for EVCP during Spring and Summer 2021: Hensington Road, Woodstock; Back Lane, Eynsham; Woodford Way, Witney; Woodgreen Offices, Witney; Black Bourton, Carterton; and New Street, Chipping Norton.
2. An Oxfordshire Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy (OEVIS) is being developed to set a consistent design and technical standard for EV infrastructure across the County. WODC is inputting to the strategy which is being coordinated by the iHub Innovation Team at Oxfordshire County Council.

The Covid-19 pandemic has expedited the need to target efforts to support the vitality and viability of our market towns and this is captured in the West Oxfordshire Covid-19 Recovery Plan. The Council has funded a dedicated Market Towns Officer to work with Witney, Chipping Norton and Carterton to develop Town Covid-19 Recovery Plans which respond to the specific needs of each. Town Centre Covid-19 Recovery Groups have been established to engage key stakeholders to identify the unique impacts of the pandemic on their town, the (short and longer term) opportunities that have arisen, and identify a set of initiatives that will help realise the potential of the town. This activity will inform the Covid-19 Recovery Plan for each town, aiming to support local businesses and strengthen the visitor economy.

In addition to the Town Covid-19 Recovery Plans, the Council is procuring a place promotion app to support local business, with the predicted impact being an increase in footfall across the town centres by encouraging repeat purchases and attracting new visitors to West Oxfordshire. The loyalty app will list events and interactive trails in addition to presenting users with discounts and offers at local businesses. The Council has also partnered with Makespace Oxford as part of a launch of a £1.7 million programme to breathe life back into high streets through the [Meanwhile in Oxfordshire Project](#). This initiative is designed to encourage selected vacant units in our high streets to be filled with a variety of offerings, from retail to creative and co-working spaces as a means of mitigating the negative impact of empty units on the high street.

The Council has submitted in January 2021 a representation to a Government consultation on proposals to allow all uses falling within the Use Class E to be converted to residential use under permitted development (i.e. no planning permission required for change to residential use), irrespective of scale and

location. The Council has advised Government that whilst fully supportive of housing delivery where need is evidenced, key uses in town centres including currently occupied commercial properties, will be lost to residential creating an imbalance of uses that harms town centre vitality and viability and that beyond town centres, key uses in rural areas will be lost to the detriment of local communities (leading to unsustainable patterns of development and commuting). The Council will continue to seek to protect the vitality and viability of town centres and rural economic sustainability through its role as Local Planning Authority.

The Council is continuing to support local businesses who are having to adapt to changing Covid-19 restrictions, and multiple lockdowns through the distribution of a large range of business grants made available by central government. A total of £39,595,446 has been paid over the 2020 - 21 financial year. Financial support has also been made available to those individuals having to self-isolate under the Test and Trace support payment. Since 5 November 2020, a number of grants has been made available to businesses that have been required to close under the Tier system or national lockdowns, or were able to remain open but were severely affected by Tier restrictions:

- Local Restrictions Support Grant (Closed, Mandatory) – a total of £5,690,759 was paid out to 3214 businesses in retail, leisure, hospitality, accommodation and events which were mandated to close between 5 November 2020 and 31 March 2021;
- Additional Restrictions Grant (Discretionary) – a total of £1,310,902 was paid out to 834 businesses from November to the 4 April 2021. This grant is available for businesses that do not have a business rate assessment of their own as well as other businesses with a rateable value that have remained open but have been severely impacted by the pandemic. This category includes charity properties and regular market traders;
- Local Restrictions Support Grant (Open) - a total of £ 769,273 was paid to 1,515 businesses that remained open but were severely impacted by restrictions;
- Christmas Support Payment for wet-led pubs scheme – one-off grants of £1,000 were paid to 37 businesses between December 2020 and February 2021;
- Closed Businesses Lockdown payment – 779 businesses were supported with a one-off payment. A total of £3,821,000 was paid out between 5 January 2021 and 4 April 2021.

What's on the Horizon

- 'Access to Carterton' – public consultation on 'preferred options package'
- Installation of Electric Vehicle Charging Points in the aforementioned six WODC owned car parks across the District
- Development and implementation of Town Centre Covid-19 Recovery Plans for Carterton, Chipping Norton and Witney
- Launch and roll out of Loyal Free place promotion app
- Development of Masterplan for Hanborough Station

Strong Local Communities: Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive local communities

Recovery Theme: Communities

The response to the pandemic has really shone a spotlight on the importance of this priority – we have witnessed a dynamic and inspiring community sector response across West Oxfordshire to the challenges introduced by the pandemic. Local Groups, towns and villages have mobilised to support their communities and the Council established a Community Response Hub to further augment these efforts and work effectively with voluntary sector partners and volunteers. There has also been a strong collaborative effort to tackle the crisis, where the Council has sought, together with the County, City and District Councils, the NHS and OxLEP to support vulnerable people and align programmes to support local businesses.

These collaborative efforts between ourselves and partners, and the communities we serve must continue and be built upon in order to respond to any local Covid-19 outbreaks, address any local food security issues (£59k of funding has been awarded to Food Banks and community food projects), and meet any duties to support those who are vulnerable. This work will complement delivery of other aspects of the Council Plan identified under this priority, as described further below. Examples of efforts include:

- Recruitment of staff to work with new Mutual Aid groups to sustain them as an invaluable resource to tackle loneliness and isolation in our communities
- Research into the establishment of Wellbeing Hubs is underway, as committed to in the Covid-19 Recovery Plan. This model would see the co-location of statutory and Voluntary/Community sector partners alongside housing associations to deliver easy to access services. Early conversations are underway, and current and planned provision has been mapped so that gaps in provision can inform where there is opportunity to complement and support existing service delivery to residents.
- West Oxfordshire Citizens Advice working on behalf of the Council to provide £63,655 to those struggling to afford food under the Covid-19 Winter Grants Scheme (funded by Oxfordshire County Council)
- Recruitment of additional staff to allow the Community Response Hub to continue to support residents with significant wellbeing challenges
- Approval of funding for Oxfordshire ‘[Reducing the Risk](#)’ charity to provide Domestic Abuse Champion training in addition to securing a two year extension to the Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse contract
- Approval of funding for two local West Oxfordshire charities, the [Witney Hub](#) and the [APCAM Group](#), to deliver mental health services for young people and their families
- The Go Active Get Healthy Diabetes service has moved online and provides help for residents to become more active as a means to manage their diabetes.

A commitment in the Council Plan to direct our management of property assets through a new Asset Management Plan to achieve improvements in the joint use of sites through the [One Public Estate](#) programme has moved a step forward with completion of a series of feasibility reviews of sites in Welch Way, Witney. Following this scope for feasibility work on partnership owned sites to consider options for development that suit all partner’s needs is to be

assessed – in accordance with the principles of the One Public Estate programme. The next action will be to undertake a draft scoping exercise to which input will be invited from all partner organisations.

Further to the focus on assets at Welch Way, Witney, a number of public sector partners (District and Oxfordshire County Council and the NHS) with offices in Witney are assessing the scope for co-location of office space as a means to reduce office space requirements. This conversation has been expedited by the disruption to established ways of working by the Covid-19 pandemic. The next step is to undertake an appraisal for the repurposing of local authority office space in Witney in order to enable and promote flexible working across agencies. Careful consideration will be given to how we can work more efficiently on a smaller footprint whilst garnering the benefit of a significant reduction in town centre office footprint and a reduction in travel time for staff through the facilitation of greater home working.

A further commitment to working with partners to promote West Oxfordshire as a visitor attraction (whilst protecting its essential character) is made in the Council Plan and the pandemic has placed a new emphasis on the visitor economy as tourism patterns have changed with a drop in international visitors to the District (and the wider Cotswolds) against a backdrop of greater domestic tourism demand.

A grant of £90k was secured from the Discover England Fund which will contribute to the roll out of the [Uncover the Cotswolds](#) project, increasing exposure of new/little known experiences to a wider market. Engagement with local tourism businesses provided an overview of some of the challenges faced by the visitor economy in the wake of the pandemic and this continues to inform the Council's approach to supporting the visitor economy to recover and renew post-Covid. Given the significant contribution the visitor economy makes to West Oxfordshire it is evident that there is a particularly acute need for support.

Early focus has been on improving the online capabilities of local tourism businesses, including to become bookable online (e.g. via Visit England's Tourism Exchange Great Britain platform). A partnership initiative '[The Real Cotswolds](#)' project has been launched (with Wake up to Woodstock for Woodstock and with the Witney Chamber of Trade for Witney) to enhance destination marketing. This project will continue to develop digital town guides for Burford, Chipping Norton, Witney and Woodstock. A suite of [free training modules](#) for local tourism businesses has also been commissioned.

What's on the Horizon?

- Roll out of scheme 'Move Together' from May 2021 which has been externally funded to improve mobility amongst the most frail and lonely residents
- West Oxfordshire Citizens Advice Bureau will continue to support the community through a dedicated funded role to provide guidance on benefits, welfare and debt advice.
- Roll out of Visit England funded promotion of businesses that are fully bookable online from May 2021.

Meeting the Housing Needs of our Changing Population: Securing the provision of market and affordable housing of a high quality for a wide range of householders making their home in West Oxfordshire

Recovery Theme: Communities

A significant step towards achieving this priority has been accomplished with the publication of the draft [Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document](#) (AH SPD) which has been subject to two rounds of consultation to address stakeholder representations. Once adopted, the detailed guidance it provides will steer the successful implementation of Local Plan Policy H3 on the delivery of affordable housing. At this stage the AH SPD will become a material planning consideration.

Local Plan Policy H3 requires the provision of on-site affordable housing as part of larger market housing schemes of 11 or more units varying by location from 35% - 50%. In addition, smaller market housing schemes of 6-10 units within the Cotswolds AONB are required to make a financial contribution towards the provision of affordable housing within the District. The policy also addresses the issue of housing mix and the provision of affordable housing in rural areas including through rural exception sites. By providing additional guidance on the implementation of these requirements, the AH SPD seeks to set out a range of options and requirements to secure delivery of successful affordable housing schemes across the District that meet the housing needs of our changing population.

Options for delivery are presented including criteria for identifying qualifying sites; the size of affordable homes needed, the preferred tenure mix, rural exception sites and self and custom build schemes. Delivery is addressed through requirements relating to design criteria, accessibility and adaptability, space standards, zero carbon homes and modern methods of construction. Specific delivery mechanisms are articulated including housing options for the Armed Forces and also Key Workers and Community Led Housing.

Finally, exploration of two new routes to affordable housing in the District are presented:

A) *The Blenheim Approach*: WODC is working closely with Blenheim Estate on an innovative model for delivering an increased level of affordable housing at between 60 – 80% of market rental costs. This model has been successfully implemented in Long Hanborough and will also be offered on their other sites for development at Woodstock East. It is the intention of Blenheim to retain ownership of the rental properties so they can be held in perpetuity for local people, especially those within the key worker categories.

B) *Partnerships with Legacy Landowners*: WODC is also interested in partnering with other legacy landowners to accelerate delivery of affordable housing in the district and the AH SPD invites those landowners (particularly in smaller rural settlements) who are considering development as part of their long term legacy planning to engage with them to explore the scope for delivering affordable housing through rural exception sites.

Further to the achievement of the AH SPD, progress towards the delivery of Shared Ownership of Affordable Housing in Witney has been made. In partnership with the Oxfordshire Growth Deal and Heylo Housing, WODC has been able to pursue the acquisition of 4 apartments of affordable housing

rather than them being sold on the open market as originally intended. As a partner on the Oxfordshire Growth Deal, the Council has benefited from their partnership with Registered Provider, Heylo Housing, who are able to negotiate bulk purchase of new homes from developers for use as shared ownership housing. Over the longer term the ambition is for 100 new affordable homes across all Growth Deal partner authorities to be acquired this way, of which it is anticipated 20% of these will be within West Oxfordshire.

In 2020-21 374 new affordable homes have been completed in the District, far greater than the Local Plan identified need of 274. It is anticipated that this target will again be exceeded in 2021-22. In addition to this the Council is exploring a range of housing products for existing and upcoming developments to broaden the range of Low Cost Home Ownership products available. These include [Discount Market Sale](#), [Build to Rent](#), and [Rent to Buy](#).

The Council is working directly with Blenheim Estates to bring forward strategic sites and rural exception schemes that propose low carbon development and additional affordable homes. It is also working with other landowning organisations who are seeking to develop and manage their own affordable housing stock and with specialists and co-housing groups to bring forward self-build co-housing on large strategic development sites. Also in partnership, the Council is collaborating with Parish Councils and Registered Providers to bring forward smaller schemes to help meet local need for affordable housing.

Within the West Oxfordshire Local Plan there is a requirement for sites of over 100 homes to provide suitable [self-build/custom finish plots](#). Self-build is also promoted through a Council maintained [self-build register](#) which can be accessed on the Council website and additional guidance is provided in the aforementioned Affordable Housing SPD.

In terms of fulfilling the Council's obligations to meet the accommodation needs of Gypsy and Travelling Communities, two planning consents have been given to intensify the use of two existing sites in Minster Lovell and Bampton to provide more accommodation for this group.

What's on the Horizon?

- Adoption of Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Document late Summer 2021.
- The Council is working with Registered Providers to assist and also partner with a Registered Provider Housing Company planning for strategic sites that will provide 100% affordable schemes. Year 2021/22 will see delivery of additional affordable homes that have been funded using Oxfordshire Growth Deal funds (facilitated by WODC), and in some cases with S106 receipts. These will include Extra Care and General Needs apartments and houses for affordable rental and shared ownership at: Rockhill, Chipping Norton; Lavender Place, Bampton and additional shared ownership properties in Witney and Minster Lovell. Delivery will continue on further schemes beyond 2022.
- WODC has commissioned a study into the potential for a 'living rent' from Oxford Brookes University that will identify how it may benefit certain groups of people in need of affordable housing. Once these findings are known, Officers will work on incorporating these into guidance/policy.

Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance: Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council

Recovery Theme: Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance

Achievement of the aforementioned 5 Council Plan priorities are dependent on the Council having a sound financial footing. It has been the case for some time that local government finances have been constrained in part by local government finance grant cuts and increasing service costs pressures. These have been further amplified by the pandemic (greater draw on Council services, extraordinary service costs and lost revenue streams) and this, coupled with future limitations to incentive based funding such as the New Homes Bonus, present the Council with a challenge to match delivery ambitions to our revenue stream.

An [Investment Strategy](#) was approved by Full Council in October 2020 which sets out a range of tools and activities to help improve the general approach to matching income and expenditure across the activities of the District Council. The strategy starts from a premise that there is a significant funding gap that needs to be closed and capital investment is a major tool available to the Council to achieve this so long as it covers the revenue implications of that investment and makes an appropriate return. Capital Investment provides a route to delivering the ambitious programme of the Council set out in the Council Plan.

The priorities for the Investment Strategy were identified as:-

- Climate Change and Green Infrastructure
- Economic Development and Jobs Infrastructure
- Housing Infrastructure

The strategy identified the need to provide a revenue return in the order of 3.5% above borrowing costs in the long term to ensure that the investments were financially sustainable and helped bridge an emerging forecast budget gap. An amount of £15m was set aside in the 2021/22 capital programme to support the strategy.

To date two acquisitions have been completed in addition to an item that was approved prior to the investment programme.

- A property to provide emergency housing accommodation was purchased with a net cost to the Capital Programme of just over £1m. This will not only deliver 16 units of emergency accommodation but will also deliver a return on capital of in excess of 12%.
- An opportunity arose to marry the freehold of land the Council already owns with some industrial units on land in a growth area of the district. This provided a strategic opportunity for the Council to increase its control over the site which will provide future redevelopment opportunities. The investment of circa £2.5m will not only secure the site and support jobs in the district but also deliver a return on capital of approaching 10%.
- The Council invested £2m in a solar project within the district which delivers both renewable energy and local community benefits. The loan delivers a return on capital of 3.85% in addition to the climate and community benefits.

Taken together these three items deliver strongly on each of the Council priorities and also contribute almost £375,000 to closing the revenue funding gap set out in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Turning to modernisation of Council service delivery, provision of digital options for businesses and residents as a means of offering more choice for accessing services have been progressed in this first year of the Council Plan. Customers can access Council services more conveniently via a range of online self-serve tools, whilst still having access to an advisor on the phone or face to face if preferred.

Central to this digitalisation of Council services is the Salesforce platform which has enabled the following:

- Salesforce BOT available 24/7 to answer customer queries or signposts to necessary information. It can transfer the enquiry to Customer Services if unanswered. 80% of all enquiries have been answered by the BOT without any need for transfer to Customer Services demonstrating efficiency. The BOT's performance will be continually monitored and its configuration modified as new services are added to its functionality.
- Salesforce Live Chat capability launched on the Council's website allowing customers to interact in real time with Customer Services. This was particularly valuable in supporting the CS team to handle the Covid-19 demand as well as particular events such as the change to the waste contract.
- Support the administration of the Discretionary Business Grants under Covid-19. An online form/flow was built in less than 2 weeks to perform eligibility checks so we only received valid grant applications. Salesforce was used by both Customer Services and back office staff to process applications and create necessary payment files for progressing through the General Ledger and our BACS payment systems.

The Business Grants system built in Salesforce will continue to evolve to keep pace with Government changes to grants. Of particular note is the evolution from single payment functionality to allow multiple payments per application. In total £39,595,446 was paid out in the 2020-21 financial year to local businesses.

The roll out of Civica system has enabled modernisation of our Revenues and Benefits system. This will help to streamline processes and improve efficiency by having one annual billing and one benefit uprating process. Additionally, Civica has functionality for customers to be able to self-serve.

What's on the Horizon?

- Council to take a decision on integrating Salesforce with a new digital Waste Management System (Yotta) to enable monitoring of missed bin collections and a means for customer requests for replacement containers. Ubico (waste contractor) is able to via use of tablets in their service trucks to update progress of rounds and identify any exceptions, e.g. households who have not presented their bins for collection.