

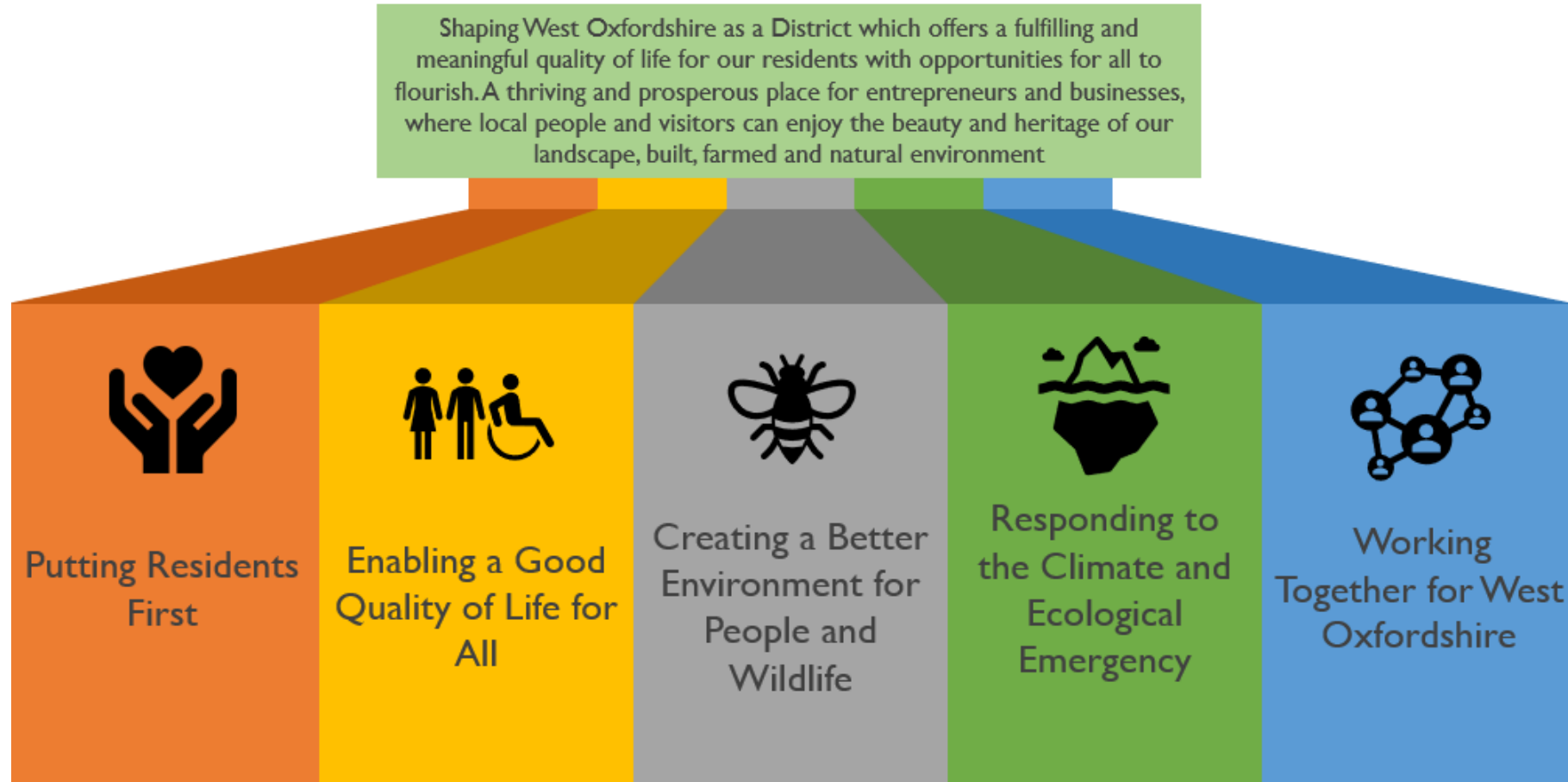


WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT
July 2024 – September 2024

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

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

The 'Our House' Project is an innovative initiative launched in 2018 by West Oxfordshire District Council in collaboration with Cottsway Housing and Aspire Oxfordshire. This community housing project aims to address the needs of local young people who are either experiencing homelessness, at risk of becoming homeless, or unable to remain with family or friends. The project provides shared accommodation for single individuals under 35 who are on out-of-work benefits in West Oxfordshire. Currently, it offers housing and support for up to 12 young people, referred to as 'trainees,' across three shared houses located within the district. In July 2024, the Executive granted a funding extension for the project, extending its support for an additional two years, until October 2026.

Residents and visitors who frequent the Guildenford car park in Burford and Hensington Road car park in Woodstock were encouraged to share their feedback as part of the Council's Car Parking Strategy Consultation, which took place from January 15 to February 12. This consultation aimed to gather insights from regular users, prioritizing an understanding of their experiences and ensuring that the facilities meet both present and future needs. Comprehensive studies, including the use of counters at Guildenford car park, are planned to gather detailed usage data. The Council's overarching strategy for car parking in Woodstock and Burford aims to align provisions with the evolving needs of users, ultimately outlining improvements to enhance the usability of these facilities for all stakeholders. A review of the consultation responses is currently underway, with a Mid-Point Review of the Car Parking Strategy anticipated to go to the Executive in December.

Finally, the Council is dedicated to maintaining outstanding levels of transparency and accountability, emphasising high standards of governance and trustworthiness. As part of these efforts, the Council is preparing to launch a review of the enforcement process under the Development Management Improvement Plan. This review will introduce ten feedback points designed to keep Members, complainants, contraveners, and town and parish councils informed about the progress of investigations and future timeframes. These initiatives reflect the Council's ongoing dedication to strengthening governance and building trust within the community, ensuring that all stakeholders remain informed and engaged in the decision-making process.

Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All



Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), introduced by the Government in 2008, aimed to ensure fair and transparent contributions from developments towards essential infrastructure, such as schools and roads. In March 2023, the Council's Executive commissioned new viability evidence for a revised CIL charging schedule. Progress was made as the Council moved towards adopting and implementing the CIL. Additional information was provided to the Dixon Searle Partnership, the appointed consultants, and discussions were held regarding the development typologies to assess and the best approach for consulting with key stakeholders, including landowners and developers. Following the completion of the viability study, the draft CIL charging schedule was prepared and approved by the Executive in July. A public consultation on the draft charging schedule took place between August 2 and September 27, 2024. The responses from this consultation are currently being summarised and analysed, with plans for submission for independent examination in late October or early November.

The Weavers Fold development in Chipping Norton features eight 2- and 3-bedroom zero-carbon homes available through a discounted market sale, offering buyers the unique opportunity to custom-build their homes and influence design and specifications. Despite some delays in the project, the Executive approved a new delivery model proposal in November, jointly developed by Green Axis and Homes England. Legal agreements, reviewed and agreed upon by Legal Services, the housing team, and the developers, were exchanged in August. Developers are now working to secure funding to complete the project, anticipated by next quarter, and a delivery plan is being drawn up as contractors prepare to mobilise.

The Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) is an innovative capital fund that supports local authorities in England to obtain housing for those who are unable to find settled accommodation on resettlement schemes. The Council were successful in their bid for funding to relieve pressures on short-term accommodation, with a longer-term objective of seeing the housing used for more general affordable purposes. Collaborating with Cottsway and Miller Homes, the Council facilitated the construction of 23 additional affordable units within the district. With a successful bid in LAHF Round 3, the Council will now acquire an additional 4 properties in partnership with Soha HA, bringing the total to 27 affordable units.

Salt Cross Garden Village is a proposed new standalone settlement, self-contained with its own village facilities, such as schools, community resources and employment opportunities. The initial garden village proposals set out in the Local Plan include 2,200 new homes and a new science business park which will give local people an alternative to driving to work in Oxford. Nearby Hanborough railway station together with a new Park and Ride facility to the north of Eynsham will give people an alternative to using their cars. The Area Action Plan (AAP) has undergone a thorough revision, encompassing modifications identified during the examination process in preparation for its adoption. After the Inspector's report was received, a legal challenge was submitted focusing on the conclusions reached by the Inspector in relation to the soundness of AAP Policy 2 – Net Zero Carbon Development. The High Court ruled in favor of the community group in a hearing held on 14-15 November 2023. Subsequently, additional clarity on Net Zero was provided through a Ministerial Statement on 23 December 2023. Following the High Court ruling, the Planning Inspectorate has set a timeline for hearings based on the Council's submission of the revised Policy 2 (Net Zero) and related evidence. The Council has appointed consultants to assist with a revised viability assessment and sustainability appraisal, expected to be delivered by mid-September 2024. As a result, the Council plans to submit the documents to the Planning Inspectorate in October 2024, with hearings scheduled for February 2025.

A Market Towns Study was commissioned as part of the government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund Levelling Up scheme to help identify issues to be addressed through the fund. The study recommended establishing town partnerships in order to identify detailed projects in each of the towns, for which £158,000 has been allocated to Witney Town Partnership has been established as the first of the Town Partnerships with the priorities for the Witney Town Partnership agreed as:

- Develop a long term strategic plan for the Town
- Promote the town to increase footfall
- Improve wayfinding and signage

A recent review of Charter Markets in Witney and Chipping Norton received positive feedback. Plans are underway to align this work with Marriotts Walk events and support smaller retailers and start-ups. Wayfinding improvements are also progressing, with new information boards planned for Chipping Norton Town Centre.

Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife



Actions we are taking

The Council has committed to preparing a new Local Plan covering the period up to 2041. The emerging plan is currently at the 'Regulation 18' stage of preparation, where views are sought on the content of the plan, and different options and alternatives are considered and tested. An initial public consultation, 'Your Voice Counts,' took place from August to October 2022, seeking general views on what issues the new plan should focus on. More recently, a further public consultation occurred from 30 August to 25 October 2023, which sought specific feedback on potential draft objectives for the new plan, various scenarios for future growth, and ideas for land use across the District. Additionally, a call for sites was included, which Officers are currently assessing for suitability. The consultation was primarily held online via the Council's digital engagement platform, CitizenLab, but also included several in-person events. A total of 225 individuals and stakeholder organisations responded through CitizenLab, along with another 180 representations received via email or letter. The Local Plan process has been paused to allow for reflection on the changes likely to arise from the Government's proposed amendments to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and housing requirements for the District. These changes to the NPPF are now anticipated to be delayed from late this year to early next year due to the volume of responses received by the Government. Further public consultation will take place in the new year as the Local Plan progresses through additional Regulation 18 consultation. This is expected to include a series of preferred policy approaches, building on the feedback received so far and emerging technical evidence related to housing needs. The Environment Agency's 'Spheres of Influence' project, which the Council has completed as one of three national pilot areas, will influence local plan policies related to the water environment. The Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) and Phase 1 Water Cycle Study have now been commissioned as part of the Local Plan evidence base. The Council is also working closely with the Environment Agency to develop a more integrated approach to water management, which will be reflected in the emerging draft Local Plan, including a strategic policy option on integrated water management.

The Council is collaborating with the Wychwood Forest Trust on a funding bid for the Windrush in Witney project. This initiative aims to implement landscape-scale enhancements across the Witney Floodplains area. Partnering with Oxfordshire County Council (OCC), Witney Town Council (WTC), and the Wychwood Forest Trust, the project will focus on introducing grazing, enhancing floral diversity, pollarding willow trees, establishing a new volunteer group, and organizing a series of community engagement and rural skills training events.

The Coronation Community Orchard Scheme aims to plant trees in non-woodland areas near residential communities as a lasting tribute to King Charles III's coronation. The Council has secured £50,000 from the DEFRA Coronation Living Heritage Fund to support this initiative. Following the closure of the first round of applications in January 2024, six community groups received grants to start planting fruit trees, with grant claim submissions currently underway. Although applications for the second round of funding were originally set to close at the end of July, they remain open due to the availability of remaining funds. The Council is actively engaging with stakeholders to encourage submissions.

The Deer Park South Access Project is progressing with infrastructure enhancements aimed at improving public access to the adjacent woodland. Key developments include the installation of two new bridges over Colwell Brook and completed footpath upgrades, including a new bench offering a scenic view of the site's balancing ponds. Local artist-collaborated nature trail brass rubbing posts, crafted with Windrush CofE Primary School students, have been installed by Ubico, adding to the trail's immersive experience. Interpretation panels, now installed, are designed to enhance visitors' understanding of the area's natural features and heritage. Additionally, surfacing improvements have been made to the bridleway along the southern boundary of Deer Park South. A land management review and access to Deer Park Wood are currently underway, involving nature recovery officers and Witney Woodland volunteers.



Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency

Actions we are taking

In June 2019, the Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency and pledged to become a carbon-neutral council by 2030. In January 2020, the Council published a report on Climate Action for West Oxfordshire, which set out a proposed framework for developing a Carbon Action Plan to deliver the Council's carbon-neutral commitment and develop a Climate Change Strategy for West Oxfordshire.

The decarbonisation of Council-owned buildings is progressing with various initiatives. Funding from the Local Carbon Skills Fund has been secured for heat decarbonisation plans at Elmfield Council Offices and Welch Way. The Windrush Leisure Centre has received £1.6 million from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme Phase 3c (PSDS 3c), with Council approval granted on March 11, 2024, and work commencing on April 1, 2024. Additionally, a successful bid to the Swimming Pool Support Fund will finance the installation of solar PV panels and shower flow restrictors at Windrush Leisure Centre. Solar PV panels and heat recovery systems will also be added to the air handling units at Chipping Norton Lido to boost energy efficiency. Heat decarbonisation plans for Elmfield, Welch Way, and Old Court House were finalised in March 2024, advancing the Council's sustainability efforts.

The project to install Solar PV panels at Elmfield is progressing well, with the first installation taking place during the quarter. This decarbonisation project means tenants will be using green energy and the Council's capital investment is repaid through recharges or power purchasing agreements with tenants.

The bid submitted under the Public Sector Low Carbon Skills Fund Phase 5 (LCSF 5) for initial design work for the decarbonisation of Chipping Norton Leisure Centre and additional Council-owned buildings in Chipping Norton, Witney, and Oxford was ultimately unsuccessful. Although the bid met all the necessary criteria for the fund, the selection process for Phase 5 LCSF introduced a new randomised assessment approach. Under this new system, all eligible applications that met the fund's criteria were sorted into a random order prior to assessment. This change was implemented to address feedback from previous phases where the first-come-first-served approach led to rushed applications and potential mistakes.

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

The Executive approved the updated Carbon Action Plan for 2030 in March 2024. A tender process has been initiated for establishing the carbon baseline, which will serve as the foundation for the new Climate Change Strategy. The scope of work for the carbon baseline has been revised, and consultants have been asked to submit revised costs. Meanwhile, work on the delivery of the Carbon Action Plan continues, establishing the carbon baseline and continuing to draft the new Climate Change Strategy.

The Home Upgrade Grant (HUG) is a countywide initiative focused on improving energy efficiency and promoting low-carbon heating solutions, especially for low-income households in the least energy-efficient, off-gas grid homes. In partnership with Oxfordshire County Council, the District Council is raising awareness of Phase 2 of the Home Upgrade Grant (HUG2) through communications with residents under the Welcome the Warmth Oxfordshire Scheme. By the end of Year 1, 15 homes in the district had received grant funding for energy-saving upgrades. Applications for Year 2 of the HUG2 scheme are now open until October.

Ubico, the District Council's waste partner, recently tested a zero-emission Dennis Eagle eCollect vehicle in West Oxfordshire, collecting over 94 tonnes of rubbish in a two-week period to assess its effectiveness in a large rural district. With transport emissions from the Council's waste services contributing approximately 40% of its greenhouse gases, reducing this figure is essential to achieving the Council's goal of carbon neutrality by 2030. The eCollect test vehicle, on loan from Dennis Eagle, is equipped with five lithium-ion battery packs to optimise payload efficiency. The District Council's fleet already includes three electric supervisor vans, three electric sweepers, and an electric car. The Council's updated Carbon Action Plan, aligned with the Climate Change Strategy 2021-25, prioritises energy efficiency across buildings, vehicles, and waste services to achieve net-zero by 2030. A member-led steering group is also meeting regularly to support this mission. A proposal is currently being drafted for the Executive's review, seeking approval to acquire three fully electric supervisor vehicles. The proposal further requests delegated authority to facilitate future procurement of electric heavy goods vehicles (eHGVs) and electric food waste vehicles, reinforcing the Council's commitment to its net-zero goals.



Working Together for West Oxfordshire

Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Fund, hosted on the Westhive platform (<https://www.spacehive.com/movement/westhive/>), aims to revitalise and grow local infrastructure as part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund Levelling Up scheme. It offers capital grants of up to £20,000 or 50% of the project's crowdfunding target. With a generous budget of £40,000 for this financial year and a total of £226,000 over two years, the fund supports projects fostering community restoration, local pride, belonging, and positive contributions to health and wellbeing. The Council encourages submissions emphasising environmental sustainability, aiding vulnerable communities, and addressing exclusion due to mental health, physical or mental disability, or financial hardship. There's a particular focus on projects for or by young people, aligning with the Council's commitment to empower young voices.

The Spacehive team hosted a well-attended project creators workshop to guide potential applicants in developing and securing funds for project delivery. The Council pledges up to £10,000 for eligible projects, in addition to public contributions via the platform. The initiative has had eight projects crowdfunding, with four fully funded: Food Surplus Redistribution in Witney, Cotswolds Arts Through Schools, Get Set Gagingwell - The MAP Garden, and Cycles of Good. Round 3 of Westhive is underway, with a further creator workshop to be held on July 22.

Funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Wild Oxfordshire, a charity dedicated to fostering a more natural, resilient, and biodiverse Oxfordshire, is collaborating with Officers to update a Biodiversity Toolkit. This toolkit aims to guide Town and Parish Councils in managing their land in nature-friendly ways. Three pilot projects in Asthall, Eynsham, and Filkins & Broughton Poggs will serve as demonstrations of the toolkit's efficacy, producing case studies to assist other parishes in their nature recovery endeavours. The recently updated Community Town and Parish Guide to Nature Recovery provides valuable insights and resources for local communities to enhance biodiversity and promote nature conservation. An in-person launch event held at Woodgreen Offices on March 21, 2024, featured demonstrators showcasing practical examples to representatives from various town and parish councils, fostering knowledge sharing and collaboration. The guidance was also launched online on April 16, 2024, providing a broader audience with access to the resources virtually. The grand opening of Water Close in Asthall Leigh on May 23, 2024, marked another milestone in the initiative. Additionally, £2,000 was transferred to parish councils for long-term maintenance, using the underspend to further support sustained nature recovery efforts across the region.

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

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

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

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

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