

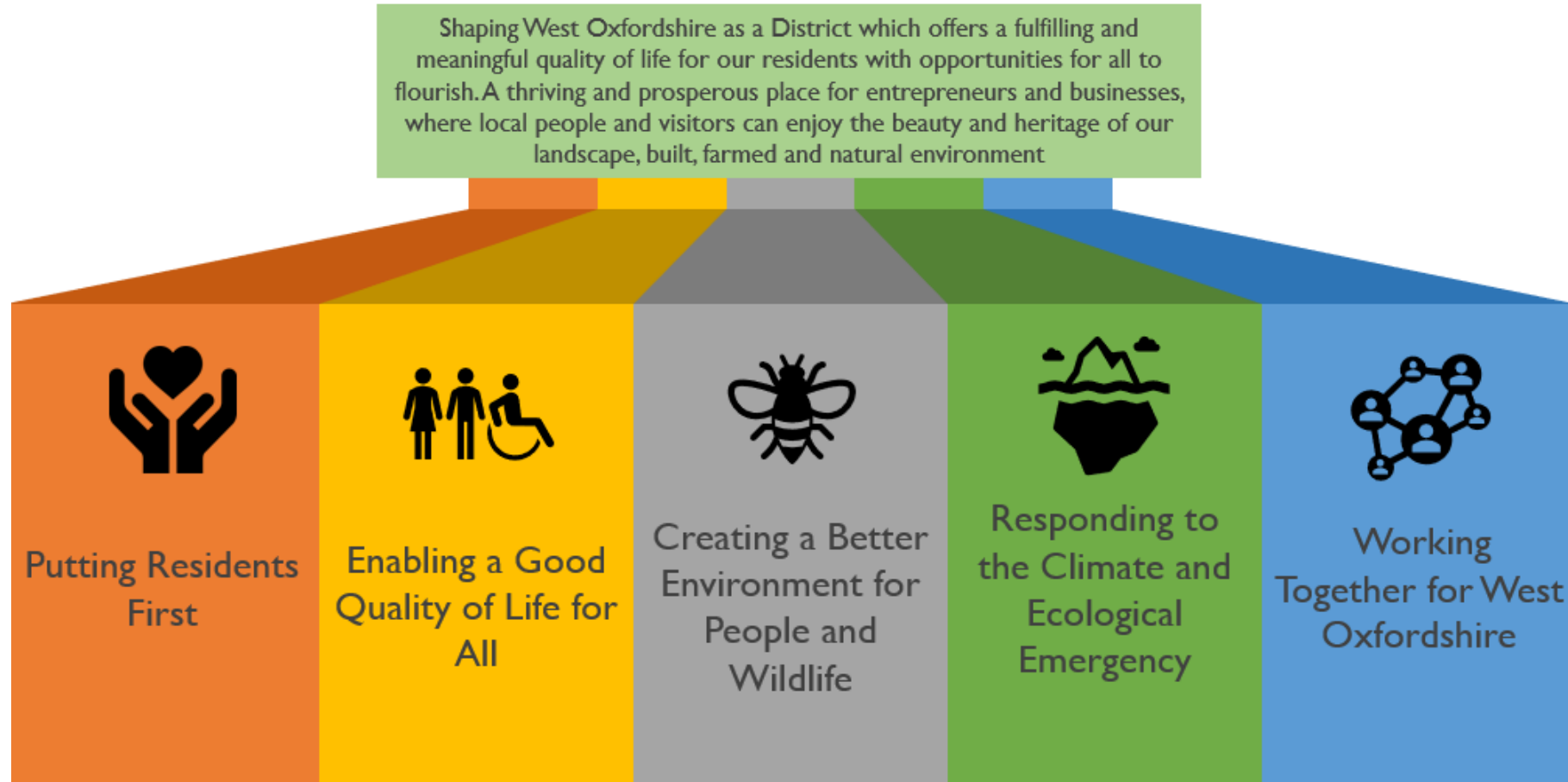


WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT
October – December 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, the first of its kind in the UK, brought 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 empowered 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, launched in 2018 by West Oxfordshire District Council in collaboration with Cottsway Housing and Aspire Oxfordshire, is an innovative initiative aimed at addressing the housing needs of local young people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. The project provides shared accommodation for single individuals under 35 who are on out-of-work benefits in West Oxfordshire, offering housing and support for up to 12 young people across three shared houses. In July 2024, the Executive approved an extension of funding for the project, ensuring its continued support until October 2026.

As part of the Council's Car Parking Strategy Consultation, residents and visitors of Guildenford car park in Burford and Hensington Road car park in Woodstock were encouraged to share their feedback between January 15 and February 12. The consultation aimed to gather insights from regular users to better understand their experiences and ensure the facilities meet both current and future needs. Studies, including the use of counters at Guildenford car park, were planned to collect detailed usage data. The strategy sought to align provisions with the evolving needs of users and improve the usability of these facilities. A Mid-Point Review presented to the Executive in December highlighted that both car parks were fully occupied during peak times, with limited capacity. The review also detailed improvement works undertaken in response to the consultation, including the installation of 64 new, larger signs, a flood risk assessment at Guildenford car park, and the repainting of faded give way markings. Additionally, a line painting programme was initiated following customer feedback on bay visibility, with further reports expected later in the year.

The Council also sought residents' views on how to allocate its budget for the next financial year through a consultation that opened on November 18. The consultation asked residents to prioritise spending as the Council worked to improve the district while addressing the financial challenges faced by local government. Despite funding cuts and high inflation, the Council remained committed to maintaining service quality and supporting communities. Efficiencies had been achieved, such as saving £125,000 in customer services and increasing recycling revenue by £300,000 through renewed contracts. Despite receiving only 10% of residents' council tax, the Council provided over 50 services, from waste collection to homelessness support. The consultation invited residents to help shape budget plans for 2025/26, with the opportunity to participate through an online survey or paper copies available at Council offices. The consultation ran until December 15.

Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All



Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), introduced by the Government in 2008, was designed 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, making progress towards its adoption and implementation. 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 from August 2 to September 27, 2024. Due to the large number of responses, there was a slight delay in submission, as it took longer than anticipated to analyse and summarise the feedback. However, a consultation summary report has now been prepared, and the intention is to submit the charging schedule along with other relevant supporting information by the end of January or shortly thereafter.

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. Despite community support and legal backing, the Ministerial Statement effectively blocked the policy from moving forward. The Council has written to the Planning Inspectorate to pause the planning process while seeking clarification from the Government and questioning why similar plans have been approved elsewhere. The process will resume once the Council has clear guidance from the Government on national policy and how to proceed.

The Strategic Outcomes Planning Model (SOPM), commissioned through Sport England and delivered by Max Associates, has been approved and adopted by the Executive. This SOPM will inform the development of a West Oxfordshire Leisure, Health, and Wellbeing Strategy, aimed at defining a more holistic leisure provision that encompasses arts, culture, entertainment, and sport. Additionally, the SOPM will guide the Infrastructure Delivery Plan, including the Local Plan Review and Town Centre regeneration plans. An action plan is currently being formalised, with thematic steering groups to be established to drive its implementation.

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. A strategy to revitalise the District's Charter Markets has been developed through extensive collaboration, with a tender brief now under legal review, focusing on managing traditional markets in Witney and Chipping Norton (Lot 1) and innovative formats at Marriotts Walk (Lot 2) to modernize while preserving their historical appeal.

Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife



Actions we are taking

West Oxfordshire District Council is committed to preparing a new Local Plan covering the period up to 2041. The plan's preparation is ongoing, with a focus on long-term maintenance of green infrastructure and community assets, which will be addressed through emerging policy options. The site assessment process for the Local Plan is currently underway, including the evaluation of key factors like flood risk and foul water capacity, to inform potential site allocations. The Local Plan will also incorporate an integrated approach to water management, building on the work completed with the Environment Agency's 'Spheres of Influence' project, which the Council participated in as one of three national pilot areas. Additionally, the Council has commissioned the Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) and Phase 1 Water Cycle Study as part of the evidence base for the new Local Plan. The aim is to develop coordinated water management policies, reflected in the emerging draft plan, ensuring that all new developments are supported by the necessary infrastructure to meet both current and future needs. As part of the broader Local Plan, infrastructure challenges—including transport, sewage systems, and community services—are being addressed to support sustainable growth. The Council is actively securing developer contributions through the Infrastructure Funding Statement (IFS) and developing strategies to ensure the timely allocation of funding to key projects. The Council has also prioritised community engagement, using innovative consultations and AI tools to streamline the Local Plan process. The updated timeline for the Local Plan is as follows:

- Preferred Options Consultation (Regulation 18): May 2025
- Publication of Pre-Submission Draft (Regulation 19): October 2025
- Submission for Examination: March 2026

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 final bid submission is due to be submitted to the National Lottery Community Fund in February.

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.

Wild Oxfordshire, in collaboration with West Oxfordshire District Council, hosted the Local Environment Groups Conference in Burford on 9 November, attracting over 70 participants from 47 local environmental organisations. The conference brought together community groups, parish councils, and individuals to explore ways to support nature recovery in the district. The event included presentations from local groups such as the Burford BEAgles, who shared their initiatives on tree planting, wildlife conservation, and energy saving. Updates were provided by Wild Oxfordshire on its community ecology work, part-funded by the District Council, and by the Wychwood Forest Trust on their rewilding project at Gibbets Close Hill. The Evenlode Catchment Partnership discussed river restoration, and the North East Cotswold Farmer Cluster shared efforts on landscape-scale regeneration. Oxfordshire County Council introduced the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy, which is currently under public consultation. The day concluded with a tour of the Windrush floodplain meadows restoration project, where participants discussed best practices for meadow management.



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 installation of Solar PV panels at Elmfield has been successfully completed as part of the decarbonisation project. This initiative ensures tenants will benefit from renewable, green energy, while the Council's capital investment is recouped through recharges or power purchase agreements with tenants.

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 Community Action Plan for Zero-Carbon Energy (CAPZero), developed by Low Carbon Hub in partnership with the community group GreenTEA (Transition Eynsham Area), is the first of its kind in the UK. The plan outlines the steps needed to achieve a net zero energy system in West Oxfordshire by 2050, focusing on the Eynsham Primary Substation Area (PSA), which includes parts or all of eight parishes: Cassington, Eynsham, Freeland, Farmoor in Cumnor, Hanborough, North Leigh, South Leigh, and Stanton Harcourt & Sutton. CAPZero translates county-wide net zero targets into specific goals for this smaller area, with an emphasis on actions that can be taken by local residents, businesses, and authorities, including West Oxfordshire District Council, to help create a sustainable future. The plan includes strategies for reducing energy consumption, transitioning to renewable energy sources such as solar power, replacing gas boilers with heat pumps, and building new homes to zero-carbon standards. It also advocates for electric bus services and environmental restoration initiatives like tree planting, agroforestry, and the restoration of natural habitats. West Oxfordshire District Council has contributed funding through a three-year Service Level Agreement to support the implementation of these actions, working alongside Low Carbon Hub, community groups, and parish councils to facilitate the plan's goals.

Ubico, the Council's waste partner, recently trialled a zero-emission Dennis Eagle eCollect vehicle, which collected over 94 tonnes of rubbish in two weeks to evaluate its performance across the district's large rural area. Transport emissions from the Council's waste services account for approximately 40% of its greenhouse gas emissions, making reductions in this area vital to achieving carbon neutrality by 2030. The eCollect vehicle, equipped with five lithium-ion battery packs to optimise payload efficiency, was loaned by Dennis Eagle. This trial complements the Council's existing electric fleet, which includes three electric supervisor vans, three electric sweepers, and an electric car. As outlined in the Council's updated Carbon Action Plan, aligned with the Climate Change Strategy 2021–25, energy efficiency in buildings, vehicles, and waste services remains a priority for reaching net-zero by 2030. At October's Executive meeting, councillors approved the purchase of three fully electric utility vans for Ubico. This brings the total number of electric vans across waste, street cleansing, and grounds maintenance to six, all powered by green electricity at the Council's depot. The Council also plans to invest in an ultra-narrow vehicle to improve kerbside collections in hard-to-access areas and upgrade charging infrastructure to support additional electric vehicles. Further plans include procuring or leasing six more vehicles, including four electric food waste vehicles and two electric heavy vehicles as part of its fleet replacement strategy.

Working Together for West Oxfordshire



Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Fund, part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund Levelling Up scheme, supports local infrastructure with capital grants of up to £20,000 or 50% of a project's crowdfunding target. With a £40,000 budget for this financial year and £226,000 over two years, the fund focuses on fostering community restoration, local pride, and wellbeing. Emphasis is placed on environmental sustainability, supporting vulnerable communities, and empowering young voices. Since its 2023 launch, the Westhive platform has raised over £612,367 for community projects, with £276,939 pledged by the Council to 14 initiatives. Previously funded projects include Cycles of Good (providing bikes for families), Get Set Gagingwell (outdoor mental health support), and Food Surplus Redistribution in Witney (reducing food waste). Witney Vikings Youth Football Club: Expanding facilities, creating new teams, and offering sessions for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

In the latest funding round, £218,809 was pledged to nine projects, including:

- Witney Vikings Youth Football Club: Expanding facilities and creating inclusive opportunities.
- Eynsham Allotment Association: Adding accessible features like a composting toilet and wheelchair-friendly paths.
- Long Mead Foundation & Nature Recovery Network: Developing meadows to protect biodiversity and involve the community.

Several projects are still crowdfunding to unlock additional funding, including West Oxfordshire Playdays 2025, Stonesfield Scout Woodland Community Hub, and Witney Mills Cricket Nets & Fence.

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 21 March 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 16th April 2024, providing a broader audience with access to the resources virtually. The grand opening of Water Close in Asthall Leigh on 23 May 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.