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WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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COUNCIL PRIORITIES REPORT  
**April – June 2025**

# Background

The Executive Action Plan was created to outline the steps needed to carry out the vision of the Executive after the new Council Plan was adopted in February 2023. In the Council Plan, the Executive looks to the district's future and establishes a vision for West Oxfordshire. In addition to updating the public on the status of each priority at regular meetings across the plan's four-year duration, a new performance framework has been created to offer timely updates for actions taken in relation to the priorities.



# Putting Residents First



## Actions we are taking

In early 2022, West Oxfordshire District Council conducted its first Youth Needs Assessment, engaging nearly 4,000 young people aged 11 to 25 through paper surveys and focus groups, alongside feedback from 177 parents. The assessment revealed significant challenges faced by young residents, including the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, social lives, and access to essential services. Following a review of the findings at the Executive meeting on 11 October 2023, the Council committed to strengthening youth engagement and instructed officers to work with Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) to develop a proposal for a dedicated youth specialist role. This role would lead on youth-related matters and implement the assessment's recommendations. At its meeting in February 2024, the Executive approved the recruitment of a full-time Youth Development Officer for a two-year period. This senior role is designed to build local capacity, influence external partners, and address barriers such as access, affordability, isolation, and limited service availability. The officer will collaborate with local providers, engage directly with young people, support internal youth engagement—including Local Plan consultation and communications—and work closely with OCC to ensure joined-up delivery. In addition, the Council allocated £20,000 from its COMF budget to support youth-led initiatives through Westhive, enabling test-and-learn opportunities that tackle the barriers identified in the assessment.

To further empower young voices, the Council launched a community crowdfunding platform via Westhive, encouraging youth-led projects and pledging up to £12,000 toward ideas that matter most to young people. This initiative ensures that young residents are actively involved in shaping the future of their communities and are recognised in key strategic decisions, including climate action and the Council Plan.

The Council's commitment to youth and housing is also reflected in the 'Our House' Project, launched in 2018 in partnership with Cottsway Housing and Aspire Oxfordshire. This innovative initiative provides shared accommodation and tailored support for single individuals under 35 who are on out-of-work benefits and at risk of homelessness. With capacity for up to 12 young people across three shared houses, the project continues to offer stability and opportunity. In July 2024, the Executive approved funding to extend the programme until October 2026.

In parallel with these initiatives, the Council is actively engaged in shaping the future of local government through the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) process. The government plans to replace the current two-tier system of district and county councils with new unitary authorities, and has encouraged councils to collaborate on proposals that meet national criteria. In response, five councils—including West Oxfordshire—have joined forces to propose the creation of two new unitary authorities: Oxford and Shires Council and Ridgeway Council.

Under this proposal:

- Oxford and Shires Council would include Cherwell, Oxford City, and West Oxfordshire.
- Ridgeway Council would encompass West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire, and the Vale of White Horse.

The aim is to create financially stable, locally accountable councils that deliver high-quality services while maintaining strong community connections. Existing social care services from OCC and West Berkshire would continue under the new arrangements, avoiding costly disaggregation. The proposal also focuses on economic development, infrastructure improvements, environmental protection, and addressing local priorities such as housing and flooding.

A public engagement exercise ran from 4 June to 16 July 2025, inviting residents to share their views via [twocouncils.org](https://twocouncils.org) and attend local events. Council leaders have emphasised the importance of community input in shaping the final proposal, which represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redesign local government around the needs and identities of the people it serves.

# Enabling a Good Quality of Life for All



## Actions we are taking

The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), introduced by the Government in 2008, ensures that new developments contribute fairly and transparently to vital infrastructure such as schools, roads, and community facilities. In March 2023, the Council's Executive commissioned new viability evidence to support an updated CIL charging schedule. Following an eight-week public consultation in August and September 2024, the draft schedule was formally submitted for independent examination in March 2025. A public hearing was held on 10 June 2025, and the independent examiner has now approved the Council's Draft Charging Schedule, subject to one modification: a reduction in the proposed rate for larger residential developments (250+ homes) from £225 to £150 per square metre, excluding strategic development areas. CIL will apply as a fixed charge on certain types of new development, including new homes and extensions, calculated based on floor area. It will operate alongside existing Section 106 (S106) planning obligations to help fund essential infrastructure across the district. With the examiner's final report received, the Council will now move to formally adopt the schedule, with implementation to follow. Once in place, CIL will enhance the Council's ability to secure and deliver the infrastructure needed to support sustainable growth across West Oxfordshire.

The Salt Cross Garden Village continues to progress as a flagship sustainable development for West Oxfordshire. Designed to include schools, community facilities, employment opportunities, and 2,200 homes, the development is guided by the Salt Cross Area Action Plan (AAP). A key component of the AAP is the Council's Net Zero Carbon Development policy, which aims to ensure that Salt Cross is net zero in operation. The original version of this policy was rejected in 2022, but following a successful High Court challenge by Rights Community Action in 2023, the Council was permitted to resubmit a revised version. The updated policy is both ambitious and deliverable, supported by strong technical and financial evidence. A public hearing to examine the revised policy was held virtually on Monday 30 June 2025, led by Planning Inspector Helen Hockenhull, with a reserve session scheduled for 4 July. The hearing was live-streamed on the Council's website and forms part of the formal examination of the AAP. It assessed whether the revised Net Zero policy can now be formally included in the plan. A short report outlining the Inspector's findings is expected later in the summer. Depending on the outcome, the next steps may include further public consultation if changes are recommended, or the policy may be approved or rejected as submitted. The Council will provide a formal update once the Inspector's findings are received. In the meantime, the Council remains committed to delivering a truly sustainable and future-ready community at Salt Cross.

To support thriving towns and villages, the Council has prioritised market town regeneration through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). A new commercial operator has been appointed to manage the Charter Markets in Witney and Chipping Norton, with operations beginning 1 August 2025. Specialist markets will continue at Marriotts Walk, and a Christmas market and other themed events are planned for 2025. In response to earlier feedback, the tender brief was revised to better reflect local needs.

Complementing this, wayfinding improvements are underway, including the installation of new information boards in Chipping Norton town centre. The Council is also supporting Oxfordshire Art Weeks, linking cultural activity with local retailers to boost footfall and support independent businesses. These efforts are part of a broader strategy to enhance public realm spaces and promote economic vitality across the district.

The Council is actively exploring opportunities for green investment in strategic development areas, particularly through the Carterton Masterplan. In collaboration with Enterprise Oxfordshire and the Oxford–Cambridge Growth Corridor, the Council is identifying ways to align local economic growth with sustainability goals. This includes mapping nature-based solutions, engaging with the Low Carbon Hub, and seeking funding streams to support innovation and infrastructure. The Carterton Strategic Study has been completed and is now under review, with next steps to be shaped through stakeholder engagement and Executive discussion.

Improving access to sustainable transport remains a key priority. The Council is working with Oxfordshire County Council to deliver Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs) across the district. In Q1 2025, public consultation for the Carterton LCWIP closed, and the plan is now being revised based on feedback, with formal approval expected in October. Drafting of the Eynsham LCWIP is also underway, with consultation planned for September. These plans aim to reduce car dependency, improve health outcomes, and support the Council's climate goals.

# Creating a Better Environment for People and Wildlife



## Actions we are taking

West Oxfordshire District Council has launched its latest public consultation on its emerging Local Plan, inviting residents, businesses, community groups and stakeholders to help shape the policies that will guide how the district grows and develops up to 2041. The Local Plan is the Council's key strategic document for managing development. It will influence how and where new homes, jobs, services, and infrastructure come forward in the years ahead, and how the district responds to major challenges including the climate emergency, housing affordability and nature recovery.

This consultation, known as the 'Preferred Policy Options' stage, sets out the Council's proposed direction, including a new vision for West Oxfordshire in 2041, updated objectives, and preferred policy approaches on housing, transport, the economy, climate, infrastructure, health and wellbeing, and more. This stage of the consultation does not include details of specific individual development sites. Instead, it focuses on the overall strategy and direction of the plan – the preferred policy options. A further consultation specifically focused on potential future development locations will follow later in the year. The consultation will run from 26 June to 8 August and can be accessed online at: <https://yourvoice.westoxon.gov.uk/en-GB/folders/your-plan-for-the-future>. The consultation platform provides a breakdown of each chapter of the Preferred Policy Options paper, with a chance to leave feedback throughout the document. Hard copies of the consultation paper will be made available at Council offices. Public drop-in events will also be held in towns and villages across the district, as well as online sessions, giving residents the chance to speak with planning officers, ask questions and share their views.

Alongside this, the Council continues to develop the evidence base for the plan. The site assessment process is underway, evaluating key factors such as 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, in which the Council participated as one of three national pilot areas. The Council has commissioned the Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) and Phase 1 Water Cycle Study to support this work.

The Preferred Options paper is being discussed with Members through the Local Plan Working Group, with the intention to report to the Executive in mid-May. The evidence base is continually being developed, with draft reports from consultants now being received, and further evidence likely to be commissioned during the next stage of plan preparation leading to Regulation 19 publication. The Council has successfully secured additional central government funding to assist with the Regulation 18 stage, ensuring the timely allocation of funding for key projects. Infrastructure challenges, including transport, sewage systems, and community services, are being addressed to support sustainable growth. The Council is also actively securing developer contributions through the Infrastructure Funding Statement (IFS) to ensure all new developments are supported by the necessary infrastructure for both current and future needs.

The Council is actively supporting the government's Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) policy, which requires developers to deliver a minimum 10% net gain in biodiversity. A flagship initiative is the creation of a habitat bank at Pudlicote Farm near Chipping Norton, where low-productivity farmland is being transformed into wildflower meadows, wetlands, and native woodlands. This project will generate biodiversity units that developers can purchase to meet their BNG obligations, while also supporting local farmers and contributing to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy. The Pudlicote Farm project exemplifies a successful partnership between the Council, local landowners, and environmental charities such as the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, and aligns with the national '30-by-30' biodiversity target. The Council is also working to streamline the process for future habitat banks to expand this model across the district.

The Council continues to support grassroots environmental action through initiatives such as the Coronation Community Orchard Scheme, which commemorates the coronation of King Charles III. With £50,000 secured from DEFRA's Coronation Living Heritage Fund, the Council has funded 17 community orchards to date, with grants covering both planting and long-term maintenance. The scheme has been extended to March 2026, and applications remain open to encourage further community participation.

Another successful project is the Deer Park South Access Project, which has delivered significant improvements to public access and environmental education. Enhancements include new bridges, upgraded footpaths, and a nature trail co-designed with local schoolchildren and a local artist. Interpretation panels and brass rubbing posts have been installed to enrich the visitor experience, while a habitat survey and land management review are underway to guide future stewardship of the site.

The Council is also collaborating with the Wychwood Forest Trust, Oxfordshire County Council, and Witney Town Council on the Windrush in Witney project. This landscape-scale initiative aims to restore the Witney floodplains through grazing, floral enhancement, willow pollarding, and community engagement. A funding bid is being prepared for submission in August 2025, with plans to establish a new volunteer group and deliver rural skills training events.



# Responding to the Climate and Ecological Emergency

## Actions we are taking

West Oxfordshire District Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency in June 2019, committing to become a carbon-neutral council by 2030. This was followed by the publication of the Climate Action for West Oxfordshire report in January 2020, which laid the foundation for the Council's Carbon Action Plan and Climate Change Strategy. Since then, the Council has made significant progress in reducing emissions from its operations and supporting district-wide decarbonisation.

A major focus has been the decarbonisation of Council-owned buildings, with several projects now underway or completed. Funding from the Local Carbon Skills Fund supported the development of heat decarbonisation plans for Elmfield Council Offices, Welch Way, and the Old Court House, all of which were finalised in March 2024. The installation of solar PV panels at Elmfield has been successfully completed, enabling tenants to benefit from renewable energy while allowing the Council to recover its investment through recharges or power purchase agreements.

The Windrush Leisure Centre has received £1.6 million from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme Phase 3c (PSDS 3c). Council approval was granted in March 2024, and work began on 1 April. A detailed decarbonisation scheme, including cost analysis, has been completed, with a formal request to progress to the construction phase presented at the June Executive meeting. In parallel, PSDS 4 funding has been secured for the Chipping Norton Leisure Centre, with procurement of a design and build contract now underway. Additional funding from the Swimming Pool Support Fund will enable the installation of solar PV panels and shower flow restrictors at Windrush Leisure Centre, and solar PV and heat recovery systems at Chipping Norton Lido.

To support the transition to low-carbon transport, the Council has expanded its electric vehicle charging infrastructure. The Woolgate car park now features 12 charging bays, including 7.4kW Type 2 and 75kW rapid chargers. Across the district, Council-owned car parks now host 42 charging units across 74 bays, helping to reduce emissions and support residents without access to off-street parking.

The Council is also a key partner in the Community Action Plan for Zero-Carbon Energy (CAPZero), developed by Low Carbon Hub and GreenTEA (Transition Eynsham Area). CAPZero is the first plan of its kind in the UK, focusing on the Eynsham Primary Substation Area, which includes eight parishes. It translates county-wide net zero targets into local actions, including energy efficiency, renewable energy, zero-carbon housing, electric transport, and environmental restoration. To support CAPZero's implementation, the Council has entered into a three-year Service Level Agreement and continues to work closely with the project team. Consultants have been appointed to conduct preliminary retrofit research, and work is now underway to accelerate both domestic and commercial retrofitting.

To embed climate considerations into everyday decision-making, the Council has introduced a Sustainability Impact Assessment Tool (SIAT), which became mandatory for all Executive reports from June 2025. Staff and members have received training, and the tool is now being used to ensure that climate and nature impacts are considered across all projects and policies.

The Council's Greenlight online hub continues to support community-led climate action and nature recovery. Recent updates include a retrofit competition, new funding information, and a library of community resources. The platform is helping to build local capacity and awareness around sustainability.

In the private housing sector, the Council is preparing to enforce Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards (MEES) for privately rented homes, once government requirements are confirmed. A report was submitted to the Executive in April 2025 to secure funding for an Asset Management Strategy that will include carbon efficiency assessments of tenanted buildings.

The Council also continues to support low-income households through the Home Upgrade Grant Phase 2 (HUG2). In Year 1, 15 homes in West Oxfordshire received funding to improve energy efficiency and reduce bills. The Council supported targeted outreach through Council Tax data and communications, helping ensure that support reached those most in need.

In recognition of its leadership on climate action, West Oxfordshire has been named the top-performing rural district in the UK in the 2025 national Council Climate Action Scorecards. This independent assessment, conducted between July 2024 and March 2025, evaluated councils across seven key areas, including buildings and heating, planning and land use, and waste reduction and food. Developed in consultation with over 90 organisations and individuals, the scorecard featured up to 93 questions showcasing best practice and local authority influence on emissions reduction. West Oxfordshire's success reflects not only strong strategic planning but also deep community involvement. Key initiatives contributing to this achievement include the Better Housing Better Health programme, retrofitting council-owned buildings, and the Coronation Community Orchard Scheme. The Council also continues to deliver carbon literacy training for staff and members and has introduced a Sustainability Impact Assessment Tool to embed climate considerations into decision-making. This national recognition underscores the district's commitment to building a greener, more resilient future.

# Working Together for West Oxfordshire



## Actions we are taking

As West Oxfordshire District Council enters the final year of UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) funding, its priority is to ensure a seamless transition and avoid a sudden drop-off in support for local communities and businesses. To sustain momentum, the Council is working to extend key projects into the 2025/26 funding year. New grant agreements are being carefully tailored to the specific needs of each intervention, aligning with long-term strategic goals. At the same time, final project reports are being completed to confirm delivery of agreed outcomes and outputs, reinforcing transparency and accountability.

A flagship initiative in this effort is the Westhive programme, which launched Round 4 with a 31 March deadline and will allocate an additional £48,000 in unspent UKSPF funding by March 2025. A recent review presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee was well received, reaffirming the programme's value. Westhive continues to support local businesses, entrepreneurs, and communities, with the introduction of a Youth Development role already inspiring more youth-led projects. Complementing this, a new small grants fund will launch in summer 2025 to support grassroots initiatives and smaller-scale community projects that may not meet traditional funding criteria.

The Council has committed £114,388 to community-driven projects through Westhive, which has now distributed over £423,000 since its launch in 2023—reflecting the district's strong culture of public participation and local pride. Recent supported initiatives include Let's Roll! Wheelchair Dancing for All, Carterton Family Centre, and Community Floodplain Restoration West Oxfordshire.

To further strengthen community development, the Council has established three-year Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for 2024–2027. These grants, totalling £188,500 for 2024/25, are structured around three thematic priorities: improving access to nature and wellbeing, addressing the climate and ecological emergency, and enhancing community resilience. Funded organisations submit biannual progress reports, and the Council continues to work closely with delivery partners to ensure projects are inclusive, impactful, and strategically aligned.

In addition to Westhive and SLAs, the Council has launched three new business support grants using capital funding from UKSPF and REPF. Developed in partnership with Cotswold Tourism, these schemes aim to boost local enterprise, enhance the visitor economy, and support rural innovation:

- Shop Front Improvement Grants – up to £1,000 to revitalise town centres and improve accessibility.
- Visitor Economy Grants – up to £10,000 for tourism-related sustainability improvements.
- Rural Enterprise Growth Grants – up to £20,000 to help rural and agricultural businesses diversify and grow.

Applications opened on 20 June and closed on 18 July 2025.

An additional £60,000 has been invested in the Westhive Community Infrastructure Fund, supporting community-led initiatives focused on inclusion, mental health, and youth engagement. Applicants are encouraged to prepare early to ensure deliverability by February 2026 and meet any match funding requirements.

The Council has also introduced the Carbon Action Fund to support local SMEs in reducing their carbon footprint. Despite tight deadlines, the fund has performed strongly and has been submitted for consideration for an LGC Award. Meanwhile, the Tools for Tomorrow initiative has been launched to support councillor priorities and address gaps in local construction trade provision.

Engagement with the voluntary and community sector (VCS) remains a priority, with ongoing collaboration through forums and the West Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Alliance. In 2024/25, £273,682 in UKSPF funding has been distributed to VCS groups via Westhive. The Council is also supporting cultural programmes in Carterton and Chipping Norton and delivering mental health support through COMF and OCC funding.

Looking ahead, a Community Insight report due in January 2025 will help shape future investment in local projects. Additionally, a Local Area Coordination pilot has been launched in Chipping Norton, funded by OCC, to support residents with complex needs and improve access to local services.