

CABINET
21 APRIL 2026

COMMUNITY COHESION ACTION PLAN

Report by Director of Public Affairs, Policy and Partnerships

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to

Note the progress being made by the Council to strengthen community cohesion across the county in response to the motion approved at Council on 9 December 2025.

Executive Summary

2. This paper sets out progress being made by the Council to strengthen community cohesion across the county amid growing challenges such as misinformation, declining institutional trust, cost-of-living pressures, social isolation, and localised tensions.
3. It provides contextual information, which identify the key evidence-based drivers of community cohesion, including shared identity, trust, strong community sectors, social mixing, inclusive engagement, and effective tension-reduction approaches
4. Specifically, it provides updates on:
 - the establishment of a new cross-party Members Advisory Group for community cohesion;
 - the first in a series of member engagement opportunities, reflecting the fact that community cohesion cuts across all councillor divisions and responsibilities;
 - a small-scale Listening Exchanges pilot led by researchers from the University of Oxford's Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation .

Background

5. Community cohesion describes the conditions in which people from different backgrounds - across ethnicity, faith, age, gender, socio-economic status, migration history and more - feel a strong sense of belonging, mutual trust, and shared stake in their local area. Where cohesion is strong, communities are more resilient, safer and better able to weather crises without division.

6. Across UK evidence, it has been identified that the key threats to community cohesion cluster around:

- Information harms: misinformation, online extremism
- Institutional harms: falling trust, weak democratic norms
- Economic harms: cost-of-living stress, perceived competition
- Social harms: isolation, lack of mixing, prejudice
- Political harms: polarisation, harassment, extremist mobilisation
- Structural harms: lack of participation and early intervention
- Tension triggers: rumours, conflicts, unsafe or contested spaces

These factors interact: economic stress fuels mistrust, misinformation intensifies prejudice, and low contact makes communities more vulnerable to division.

7. Across the county, there is a broad spectrum of factors currently impacting community cohesion. These range from rising misinformation about migration and the visibility of flags or symbols that can become flashpoints, to pressures from the cost-of-living crisis, as well as differing opinions on topics such as low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) and the temporary congestion charge.
8. On [9 December 2025](#) Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers raised a motion on community cohesion at Council, which was rooted in her understanding of the impact of misinformation and intolerance on Oxfordshire communities. The motion was carried, with 49 votes in favour.
9. At the 10 February 2026 Council meeting, the responsibilities of Cllr Kate Gregory, Cabinet Member for Public Health & Inequalities, were formally expanded to include community cohesion.
10. The Council's 2026/7 budget includes a Green Party amendment of one-off funding of £100,000 to support the development of a Community Cohesion Action Plan and activity arising from it.
11. On 27 January 2026 the government published new community cohesion guidance for local authorities called '[Common ground: Building cohesive communities](#)'. This guidance was commissioned by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and developed by Belong – The Cohesion and Integration Network in partnership with the Local Government Association. It has been endorsed on a cross-party basis.
12. The guidance provides the first updated national framework in many years to help councils:
- Respond to community tensions, polarisation and division
 - Embed community cohesion across all council services
 - Tackle misinformation, hate crime and emerging threats
 - Strengthen local resilience and a shared sense of belonging
13. The guidance covers the clear statutory footing for local authorities, a shared national framework, practical tools for councils and around 70 case studies

and good practice examples of evidence-based interventions that have worked locally from councils across England. The Council's lead officer for equalities has now completed the accompanying training to this guidance led by the Belong Network.

14. On 9 March 2026 the government launched its new cohesion action plan, ["Protecting What Matters,"](#) with the aim of building stronger, more cohesive communities across the country. The plan sets out a comprehensive approach to addressing issues such as immigration, integration, tackling extremism, education, and local investment.
15. Overall, the government's strategy frames social cohesion as a national security issue and details the first government-wide plan to rebuild community bonds following years of declining trust. In summary, three pillars structure the response: i) confident communities, ii) cohesive communities, and iii) resilient communities, supported by a new Social Cohesion Taskforce. The government is adopting a non-statutory definition of anti-Muslim hostility for the first time and will appoint a Special Representative to oversee its implementation.
16. In the strategy, new powers are set out to strengthen the Charity Commission's ability to shut down charities found to be promoting extremism, with automatic trustee disqualification for certain hate crime convictions.
17. In addition, the strategy includes a further expansion of the Pride in Place programme – a long-term regeneration initiative designed to support some of the country's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods through sustained, community-led investment. Under the programme, Greater Leys – including Blackbird Leys – has been selected to receive up to £20 million over ten years, with funding focused on strengthening communities, improving local places and amenities, and empowering residents to shape priorities for their area through a neighbourhood board and local partnerships.

Strengthening community cohesion

18. Oxfordshire County Council is proud of its diverse communities and the many organisations that work tirelessly to support them. The Council recognises the importance of co-production and collaboration – from initiatives to ensure that services are accessible, to events that bring people together. The Council is proud to be recognised as the first county council to be awarded Local Authority of Sanctuary status. These efforts reflect the values of the Council and the resilience of its communities, even in the face of national challenges.
19. Under the stewardship of Cllr Gregory, who has assumed Cabinet responsibility for community cohesion, progress is being made to develop a community cohesion action plan in response to the motion raised at Council on 9 December 2025. The initial focus has been on engaging with county councillors, recognising that this work will, over time, extend to wider stakeholders and communities.

20. A cross-party Member Advisory Group on community cohesion has been established. Chaired by Cllr Gregory, the group provides a structured forum for members to share local insight, help shape the action plan, advise on engagement, and ensure that this work remains grounded in members' experience of their divisions.
21. All councillors have been invited to two workshops in late April / early May. The workshops will provide a confidential, politically neutral space to:
 - develop a shared understanding of community cohesion
 - share local intelligence from across the county, and
 - help identify priority areas and opportunities to inform the action plan.
22. The outputs from these workshops will contribute to the evidence base that officers are reviewing to understand the factors affecting community cohesion in Oxfordshire and to inform the development of the community cohesion action plan. This includes economic hardship, safety and security concerns, online harms, and declining trust in politics and public institutions.
23. As work progresses to develop the community cohesion action plan, the Council recognises a collaborative, inclusive approach is required involving public services, communities and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise sector. At this early stage in its development officers are engaging with key partners, including Thames Valley Police, and will identify opportunities to support shared experiences, civic pride and locally led initiatives.

Community cohesion and existing policy programmes

24. Several existing and emerging policy programmes across the county council already contribute to this agenda. These workstreams provide a strong foundation for strengthening community cohesion, most are identified in the Strategic Plan 2025–2028 and include:
 - Community wealth building
 - New cost of living programme
 - Marmot Place programme
 - Oxfordshire Way
 - Targeted activity within community insight profile areas, through the work of community health development officers and grants to enable local impact
 - Community hubs and family hubs programmes.

Listening Exchanges

25. Council officers have been working with researchers at the University of Oxford's Global Centre on Healthcare and Urbanisation, who have developed an approach known as Listening Exchanges.

26. A Listening Exchange is a method that brings two people together who have different views on an issue and helps them hear each other's perspective. It is about understanding the view of a fellow citizen with whom one disagrees, without an intention to change their mind. It aims to build understanding between citizens, with a view to disagreeing better.
27. The Council has commissioned the team to run a small pilot programme in Oxfordshire to explore whether the method can reduce polarisation on contentious issues, even when opinions remain different. It will use the method between citizens who disagree with one another and with individuals of particular influence e.g. community leaders. There will be an evaluation of its effectiveness in building understanding and reducing polarisation.
28. Subject to the outcomes of the pilot and the availability of future funding, there may be opportunities to work with the University to extend this approach in two directions. First, community capacity-building, including training local community facilitators and supporting a longer-term community of practice for Listening Exchanges. Second, the development of a listening and mediation offer for Oxfordshire's youth organisations and schools, to help young people build skills for constructive listening and dialogue.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

29. Community cohesion is central to the Council's vision as set out in the Strategic Plan 2025–2028, to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer and healthier county centred around strong and connected communities, healthy places to live, and a thriving local economy that benefits everyone.

Financial Implications

30. The Council's 2026/7 budget includes a Green Party amendment of one-off funding of £100,000 to support the development of a community cohesion action plan and activity arising from it. Where appropriate, Council officers will also look at applying for external grant funding for specific activity. The listening exchanges pilot is being funded from the existing service budget for consultation and engagement, which is sufficient to cover this activity.

Comments checked by:

Drew Hodgson, Strategic Finance Business Partner – Resources

Legal Implications

31. There are no direct legal implications arising from this update report. Where specific community cohesion activities are developed under the community cohesion action plan, any legal implications will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Comments checked by:

Jay Akbar, Head of Legal & Governance

Staff Implications

32. There are no new or additional staff implications arising from this report.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

33. There are no direct equality implications arising from this update report. Equality and inclusion impacts are at the core of the Council's approach to community cohesion. Where specific community cohesion activities are developed under the community cohesion action plan, equalities and inclusion impacts will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Sustainability Implications

34. There are no specific sustainability implications arising from this report.

Risk Management

35. This is an update report only. Where specific community cohesion activities are developed under the community cohesion action plan, risk assessments will be considered or will already have been considered related to specific planned pieces of work.

Consultations

36. Consultation has not informed the development of this paper.

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