

Oxfordshire Councils Charter

Engagement report

April 2024

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Introduction

1. Oxfordshire County Council has been working in partnership with the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC), district and city councils, town and parish councils, and parish meetings to strengthen partnership working across local councils in Oxfordshire. The Oxfordshire Councils Charter aims to be a mutually agreed set of aims, principles and commitments for all Oxfordshire councils, which underpin how we work together and deliver outcomes for residents.
2. This report accompanies the Cabinet Report for the Oxfordshire Councils Charter, and outlines the findings from the three-stage engagement process to develop a charter for Oxfordshire's councils. The findings from stages one and two informed the themes and development of the draft charter, which then went out for consultation in January 2024 for six weeks.
3. A cross-council working group was set up in summer 2023 with officers from county, district and city councils, as well as representatives from Oxfordshire Association of Locals Councils (OALC), who represent 97 per cent of Oxfordshire's town and parish councils. The working group designed a three-stage engagement process to develop the charter:
 - 1) Oxfordshire Town and Parish Council Charter Roundtable Event 26 October 2023
 - 2) A six week online survey for those who could not attend the roundtable from 27 October 2023.
 - 3) A six week online consultation on the draft charter, from 3 January 2024.
4. Town and parish councils were invited to participate in all engagement activities across a number of channels, as well as district, city and county councillors.
5. Following the engagement activity, the charter working group analysed the feedback on specific sections of the draft charter and identified areas for consideration and redrafting. The contents of the final charter remain broadly the same as the draft, but elements have been reworded to provide greater clarity, avoid duplication and ensure that the charter wording captures and communicates the original intention of the charter.

Response rate and demographics

6. Overall 135 Oxfordshire councils engaged with the charter development activities, including 11 town councils, 7 parish meetings and 117 parish councils. This figure does not include town and parish councils who engaged with the charter through district parish liaison meetings.

Total Engagement (across all three engagement activities) by District:

	Total No. of town and parish councils engaged (excl unknowns)	No. of Town Councils	No. of Parish Councils	No. of Parish Meetings	Total T&P Councils in the District	% Engagement
Cherwell	28	1	27	0	74	38%
Oxford City	4	0	4	0	4	100%
South Oxfordshire	45	3	39	3	85	53%
Vale of White Horse	25	1	22	2	68	37%
West Oxfordshire	32	6	24	2	80	40%
Total	134	11	116	7	318	42%

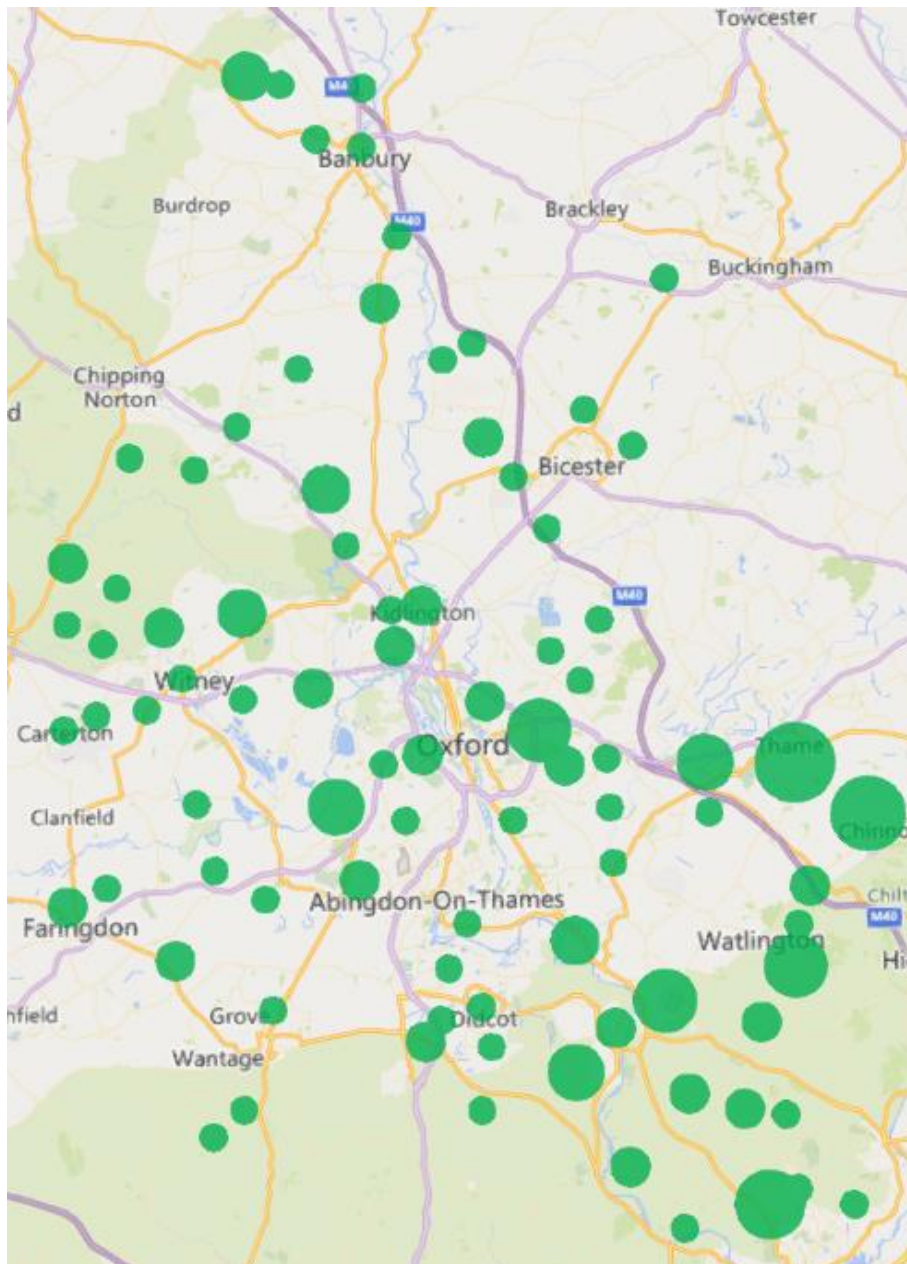
Town and Parish Council Charter Roundtable

7. Over 100 attendees attended the roundtable event on 26 October 2023, representing 78 local councils:
- 28 of the attendees were council clerks. The remaining attendees were town or parish councillors.
 - Eight town councils attended, along with one parish meeting and 69 parish councils.

Survey October – December 2023

8. 164 responses to the survey representing 90+ local councils:
- Six responses did not indicate which council they represent.
 - 42 responses were from clerks (26 per cent) and 116 responses came from councillors (73 per cent). Seven respondents did not indicate their role.
 - We had one response from Oxfordshire Neighbourhood Plans Alliance (ONPA)

9. Geographic spread of survey responses – bigger spots indicate multiple responses from that location.



10. Survey responses by type of council that the respondent represents:

Type of council	District	Town	Parish Council or Parish Meeting	County
No. of respondents	1	17	139	7

11. Survey responses by district:

	No. of Individual Responses	No. of councils (all-levels) Represented
Cherwell	25	19
Oxford City	9	3
South Oxfordshire	71	30
Vale of White Horse	26	18
West Oxfordshire	27	20
Unknown	6	Unknown

Consultation on the Draft Charter, January-February 2024

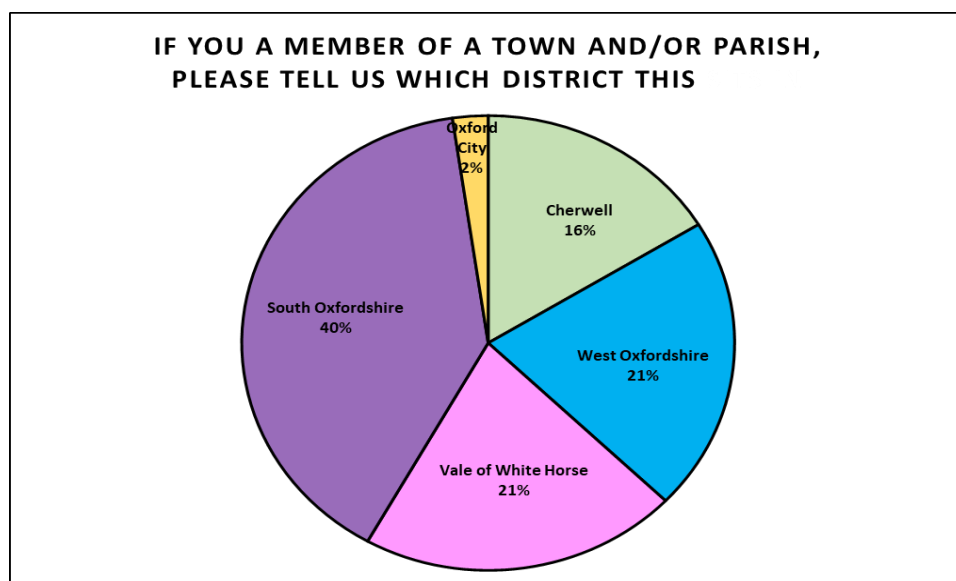
12. There were 96 responses to the consultation on the draft charter, representing at least 58 local councils.

- a. 12 respondents did not indicate which council they represent.
- b. 88 respondents let us know if they were responding as a councillor (56.8 per cent) or clerk (43.2 per cent). Eight respondents skipped this question.

13. Respondents by type of council (eight respondents skipped this question)

Type of council	District	Town	Parish	Parish Meeting	County
No. of respondents	4	10	74	2	0
% of respondents	4.5%	11.4%	84.1%	2.3%	0%

14. 86 respondents were from a town or parish council, or parish meeting, and indicated which district their council is based in:



Methodology and Findings

Oxfordshire Town and Parish Charter Roundtable Findings

15. Attendees were split into groups, with clerks in a separate group of their own.

Attendees were given two questions to discuss:

- a. What does better partnership working look like?
- b. How can we enhance local democracy in our communities?

16. Q1: What does better partnership working look like?

- a. 242 comments were captured in relation to this question.
 - i. *'Need to get the culture right - more human, a bit less 'them and us''*
 - ii. *'Partnership - everyone needs to turn up to that - responsibility of leaders'*
 - iii. *'Partnership working will be stronger if all the partners are focused on our local communities'*
 - iv. *'Need to build sense of working together'*
 - v. *'Improving how we share best practice'*
 - vi. *'Can't meet community's needs without better engagement'*
 - vii. *'Would like to see OCC (Oxfordshire County Council) and DCs (District Councils) sharing their plans e.g at biannual meetings'*
 - viii. *'Approach us for conversations about projects that will affect our areas'*
 - ix. *'Respect for us as elected representatives'*
- b. 74 were in relation to **relationships**.
 - i. *'Email updates don't build relationships'*
 - ii. *'Knowing who the officers are, not just councillors is important'*
 - iii. *'Proactive not reactive'*
 - iv. *'Greater clarification between County and District council'*
 - v. *'Doesn't feel like a two-way relationship'*
 - vi. *'OCC (Oxfordshire County Council) needs to invest time to building relationships'*
- c. 57 were in relation to **communication**.
 - i. *'Would like single point of contact'*
 - ii. *'Face to face communication is always best'*
 - iii. *'More listening'*
 - iv. *'Constant communication - recognise parishes as knowledge of their community'*
 - v. *'Dialogue not monologue'*
- d. 40 were in relation to **transparency and accountability**.
 - i. *'Local plan is really inaccessible - 600 pages of closely typed, very legal and wide-reaching paper - less is more - hard to find relevant sections'*
 - ii. *'Inclusion of towns and parishes in big strategic decisions'*
 - iii. *'Understanding role in strategic decisions'*
 - iv. *'Better shared understanding of the planning process'*

- e. 32 were in relation to **resources**.
 - i. *'Help with grant funding with signposting to various grants available'*
 - ii. *'Directory of contacts for clerks'*
 - iii. *'Clarity about what can be used for s106 or CIL'*
 - iv. *'Support with ability to work in a more modern, digital way e.g google workspaces'*
 - v. *'Support for new councillors'*

- f. 30 were in relation to **consultation and engagement**.
 - i. *'Engage stakeholders at earliest point and explain the why behind decisions'*
 - ii. *'Consultations - too lengthy - make shorter and more relevant'*
 - iii. *'Discouraged from doing consultations as don't feel views are taken into account'*
 - iv. *'Consultations - too many 'tick box' exercises'*

- g. Clerks made more comments in relation to communication, resources, and relationships. Councillors commented more on consultation and engagement, relationships, and transparency.

17. Q2: How can we enhance local democracy in our communities?

- a. 206 comments were captured in relation to this question.
 - i. *'Put residents first, not political agendas'*
 - ii. *'Encourage people to represent their communities - and to do so without needing to be a party member'*
 - iii. *'Amplify our voice by working with neighbouring parishes'*
 - iv. *'Combatting misinformation together'*
 - v. *'Larger councils meeting with smaller councils to discuss how to generate candidates'*
 - vi. *'Elections are difficult - nomination forms - why can't it be emailed rather than printed and submitted?'*
 - vii. *'People often only engage when they're really upset - need more engagement and a better cascade to create broader engagement'*

- b. 55 were in relation to **relationships and politics**.
 - i. *'Parish work is very different - politics aren't appropriate'*
 - ii. *'Go beyond party politics'*
 - iii. *'Feel scared to speak up due to reactions on social media'*
 - iv. *'Collaborative creation of policy'*
 - v. *'Mistrust of councils by the public'*
 - vi. *'Councillors want to put something back into community - not get involved in politics'*

- c. 53 were in relation to **accessibility and participation** in local democracy.
 - i. *'Need to break barriers down and get people coming and interested'*
 - ii. *'Support and information for people to stand as independents at parish / town level'*
 - iii. *'Use clarity on language - avoid council speak, be clear and concise'*
 - iv. *'Having accessible meeting venues is vital'*
 - v. *'Hybrid increases inclusivity'*

- vi. *'Holding 'open days' so the public can meet their councillors informally'*
- vii. *'Can employers allow time for local democracy (e.g being a councillor, volunteering)'*

d. 45 were in relation to **community engagement**.

- i. *'Work across areas - people might live in one area but shop in another'*
- ii. *'Informal engagement - coffee cake and cuppa events for free'*
- iii. *'Share what is being done and how we are listening to concerns'*
- iv. *'Urban area issues often dominate over rural issues - more engagement with rural communities'*

e. 27 were in relation to **resources and practical support**.

- i. *'Parish councils have limited resources and need help'*
- ii. *'Training for engaging communities / breaking down barriers'*
- iii. *'FixMyStreet - needs better signposting between councils'*
- iv. *'Access to mediation when groups are at odds'*
- v. *'How can we reduce burdens on parish councillors and their time'*

f. 20 were in relation to **young people**.

- i. *'Go to young people, don't expect them to come to us'*
- ii. *'Youth councils'*
- iii. *'Improve education on how local government works and how to get involved'*
- iv. *'Engaging with young people needs to be done differently - it's not enough just to invite them - structure doesn't work'*
- v. *'How to attract young people when meetings are so dry with so many rules and regulations'*

g. Clerks commented more in relation to accessibility and diversity, and community engagement. Councillors commented more in relation to community engagement, young people and relationships.

18. In addition to the above questions, attendees were also invited to take part in a sli.do word cloud question before their discussions and following their discussions.

19. **'In one or two words, what are your priorities?'**

a. Responses when asked before roundtable discussions:



b. Responses when asked after roundtable discussions:



Survey Findings

20. The survey asked the same questions as the roundtable event on 26 October, as well as an additional question inviting any other comments on the proposed charter.
21. Initial analysis of the feedback from the roundtable and survey led to the identification of five key themes, which survey responses were then sorted into. Many responses come under multiple themes. (findings by theme further below).
 - a. Relationships
 - b. Resources
 - c. Consultation and Engagement
 - d. Communication
 - e. Communities

22. Q1: What does stronger partnership working between the Oxfordshire councils look like?

- a. 56 respondents answered this question.
- b. The top two themes in response to this question, across all districts, were relationships and communication.

23. Responses by theme:

Theme	No. of responses in relation to theme.	% of responses in relation to theme.
Relationships	94	60.3%
Resources	27	17.3%
Consultation and Engagement	23	14.7%
Communication	93	59.6%
Communities	20	12.8%

24. Themes in order of priority for each district (in considering what stronger partnership working looks like):

District	Themes
Cherwell	1. Communication (56.5%)
	2. Relationships (52.2%)
	3. Resources and Communities (13%)
	4. Consultation and Engagement (8.7%)
Oxford City	1. Relationships (66.7%)
	2. Communication (55.6%)
	3. Communities and, Consultation and Engagement (11.1%)
South Oxfordshire	1. Relationships (63.8%)
	2. Communication (55.1%)
	3. Consultation and Engagement (17.4%)
	4. Resources and Communities (13%)
Vale of White Horse	1. Communication (72%)
	2. Relationships (52%)
	3. Resources (28%)
	4. Consultation and Engagement (20%)
	5. Communities (16%)
West Oxfordshire	1. Relationships (65.4%)
	2. Communication (61.5%)
	3. Resources (29.6%)
	4. Consultation and Engagement (11.5%)
	5. Communities (7.7%)

25. Q2: How can we enhance local democracy in our communities together?

- a. 145 respondents answered this question.

- b. The top themes in considering how we can enhance local democracy were more varied across districts:
- i. Cherwell: Communities (47.8%) and Communication (34.8%)
 - ii. Oxford City: Communication (57.1%) and, Consultation and Engagement (57.1%)
 - iii. South Oxfordshire: Relationships (47.5%)
 - iv. Vale of White Horse: Relationships (52%) and Communication (52%)
 - v. West Oxfordshire: Communication (40.7%) and Relationships (37%)

26. Responses by theme across all districts:

Theme	No. of responses in relation to theme.	% of responses in relation to theme.
Relationships	60	41.4%
Resources	11	7.6%
Consultation and Engagement	41	28.3%
Communication	54	37.2%
Communities	42	29%

27. Themes in order of priority for each district (in considering how to enhance local democracy):

District	Themes
Cherwell	1. Communities (47.8%)
	2. Communication (34.8%)
	3. Relationships and Consultation and Engagement (26.1%)
	4. Resources (8.7%)
Oxford City	1. Communication (57.1%), and Consultation and Engagement (57.1%)
	2. Communities (14.3%) and Relationships (14.3%)
South Oxfordshire	5. Relationships (47.5%)
	6. Communication (28.8%)
	7. Communities and Consultation and Engagement (27.1%)
	8. Resources (10.2%)
Vale of White Horse	6. Relationships and Communication (52%)
	7. Communities and Consultation and Engagement (28%)
	8. Resources (4%)
West Oxfordshire	1. Communication (40.7%)
	2. Relationships (37%)
	3. Consultation and Engagement (25.9%)
	4. Communities (18.5%)
	5. Resources (7.4%)

30.

- a. Relationships were the first (West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire and Oxford City) or second (Vale of White Horse and Cherwell) most common themes for respondents from each districts when asked what better partnership working looks like, indicating the importance of building and maintaining good working relationships between councils.
- b. Overall, 60.3% of responses to 'What does stronger partnership working look like between Oxfordshire councils?' were in relation to relationships.
- c. 64% of councillors responded in relation to relationships
 - i. *'Joined up strategic and operational plans'*
 - ii. *'Shared experiences, contact sharing, meetings with other parish councils. Best practices should be shared.'*
 - iii. *'The OCC councillor attending, or at least submitting reports to, Parish Council meetings.'*
 - iv. *'cross fertilisation of initiatives across different domains,'*
 - v. *'we would like to experience a stronger partnership ethos running through the whole County/District Council organisations.'*
 - vi. *'Experience indicates that district and county councillors and officers can have limited understanding of how parishes work, and vice versa.'*
- d. 50% of clerks responded in relation to relationships.
 - i. *'there should be more collaboration between councils.'*
 - ii. *'appreciation for each other's roles and limitations'*
 - iii. *'Focus on partnership'*
 - iv. *'Respect and acknowledgement from the County Council towards parish councils regardless of the size.'*
 - v. *'Working together for shared goals and on community projects.'*
- e. In considering how we can enhance local democracy, 41.4 per cent of responses referenced relationships and working in partnership to solve challenges and deliver better outcomes for residents:
 - i. *'It is essential that OCC [Oxfordshire County Council] and district councils understand the importance of working with parish councils in order to deliver the best possible service and experience for residents.'*
 - ii. *'Individual OCC [Oxfordshire County Council] officers engage well with us, but engagement with strategic and political leaders in OCC [Oxfordshire County Council] is patchy. Solving this issue could improve local democracy significantly.'*
 - iii. *'Joint Parish and District Council Meetings on directly relevant local issues (roads, maintenance, schools, developments etc)'*
 - iv. *'Knowledge of local issues to the parish/ community in question can improve relationship with all tiers in the district and County Council.'*

31. Resources

- a. A word cloud of key words used in responses related to communication shows the most frequent terms used:



- b. Nearly two thirds of respondents mentioned communication in considering what stronger partnership working looks like (59.3%), and a third referenced communication in response to question two.
- c. Clerks were more likely to prioritise communication than councillors (81% of clerks), but it was a top priority for both councillors and clerks overall and came through as a strong theme.
- d. Communication was the most (Vale of White Horse and Cherwell) or second-most Oxford City, West Oxfordshire, South Oxfordshire) frequent theme in all districts, indicating the value and importance of better communication between councils in stronger partnership working. This is particularly a priority for clerks who are often the conduit for local councils.
- e. Across both questions, Communication was overwhelmingly a priority for clerks (81% of responses), followed by 68.1% of councillor responses.
- f. Many respondents called for easier access to contact details (such as via a directory), more meaningful two-way communication, more telephone or face to face contact, and better response times from councillors and officers. Respondents also called for more open or transparent communication.
- i. *'Being able to identify who to speak to easily, possibly by providing a telephone/email directory.'*
 - ii. *'Clear, open and honest communication.'*
 - iii. *'Simple and responsive communication between all parties.'*
 - iv. *'Knowing who's who, who does what and how to contact them'*
 - v. *'having a contact point especially for parish councils (Parish Liaison Officer)'*
 - vi. *'Having less but better communication.'*
 - vii. *'Listening and talking positively, constructively and openly to further the aims of their councils and residents.'*
 - viii. *'Use plain English and avoid trendy buzzwords and jargon.'*
 - ix. *'Listen to the Parish - we are close to our community'*

- vii. *'It would be good if there was some sort of acknowledgement for community participation - perhaps an annual award night for volunteers or a scheme of acknowledgement of community activity online. We find it very hard to get the public involved with the PC [parish council] and to get them enthusiastic about engaging with local democracy and this leads to a difficulty in filling councillor vacancies.'*
- viii. *'Working together with all local groups encouraging younger people to get interested in local politics'*

Other Notable Themes

35. A number of specific themes have been identified that indicate some of the issues that the charter can help to address with targeted actions.

36. County and district councillor engagement with local councils.

- a. Multiple local councils shared that they would like better engagement and communication from their county and/or district councillor – with attendance at town and parish meetings being a particular area for concern and dissatisfaction.
 - i. *'The current County Councillor has been lacking in attendance, communication and general respect for the Clerk and Council.'*
 - ii. *'our district councillor has not attended the last 3 meetings'*
 - iii. *'have only been a councillor since May but in that time I am yet to read any report submitted by Councillor [Redacted] in that time. I would have thought liaison with his Parish Councils should be high on his list of priorities.'*
 - iv. *'County Councillors should be more proactive with liaising with their Parish/Town Councils'*
 - v. *'councillors just don't seem to take an interest at Parish level.'*
 - vi. *'While our County Councillor attends our PC [parish council] meetings and is visible to residents our District Councillor has only attended one meeting in the last two years. This has resulted in a lack of opportunity for residents to raise concerns with them.'*
 - vii. *'Appoint a cabinet member as the council's lead for relationships with parish and town councils and as the champion of local councils.'*
 - viii. *'Make sure councillors attend meetings and listen to the queries of parishes'*
 - ix. *'we are fortunate that one of our ward's district councillors and our county councillor regularly attend our parish council meetings. When I attended the meeting in Oxford about the charter I was at a table with two or three parish council chairs who never ever saw their district and OCC [Oxfordshire Council Council] councillors nor received reports. I think that is shocking.'*

37. Young people

- a. A few respondents expressed a desire to better engage with young people and to get younger communities more engaged in local government more widely, but many lack the resources or manpower to do so effectively.

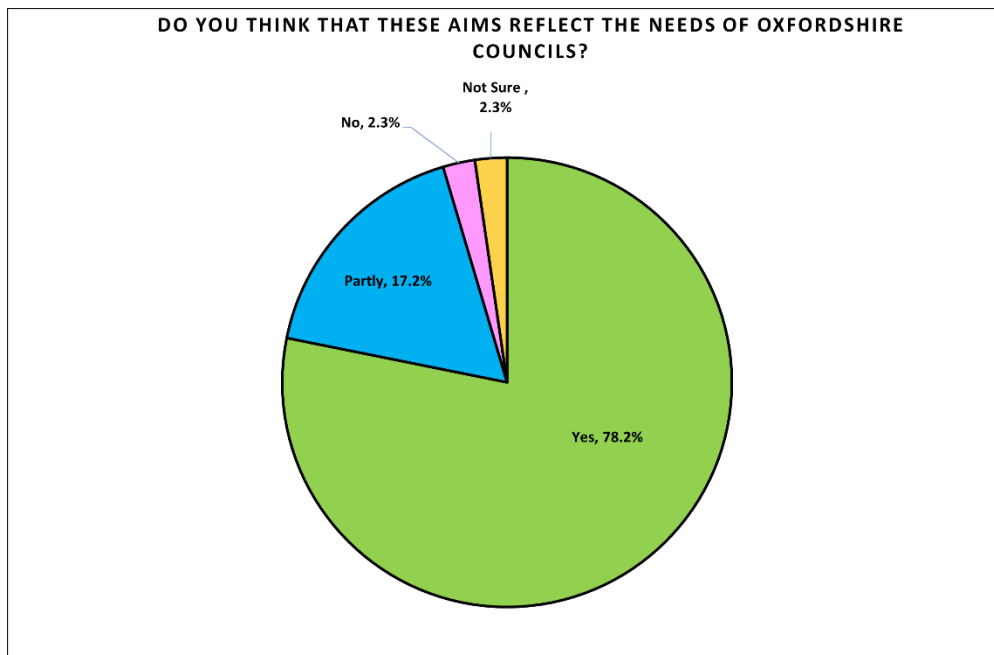
- i. *'Better engagement with younger families within the area. Better signposting.'*
- ii. *'Working together with all local groups encouraging younger people to get interested in local politics'*
- iii. *'Parish councils are made up primarily of individuals who have the interest and time. This often excludes younger people with families and or work commitments who, though interested, do not have the time. I don't have an answer to this key issue.'*
- iv. *'Interact with schools to encourage interest at a young stage.'*
- v. *'Focus on engaging a younger audience - from our schools to young parents.'*
- vi. *'Greater engagement between communities and councils that actively encourage participation of the community and all demographics of the community, particularly younger voices.'*

38. Single point of contact

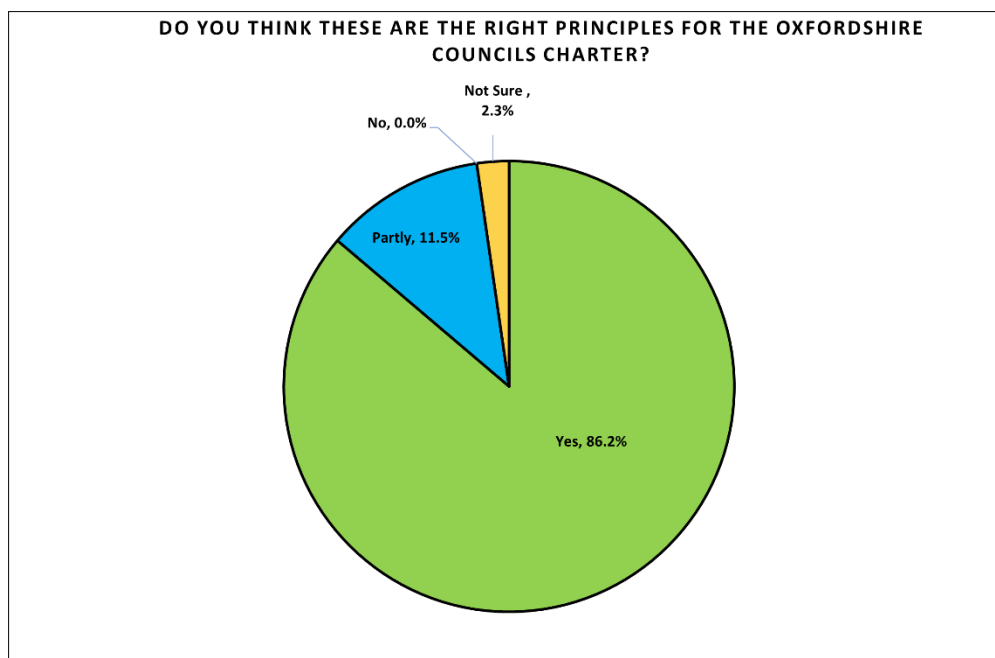
- a. Many respondents called for a single point of contact for town and parish councils when contacting county or district councils – such as through a named liaison officer, locality officer or a dedicated telephone number or helpdesk.
 - i. *'One point of contact at CC/DC [county council/district councils] for parish and town councils. (This worked in Milton Keynes)'*
 - ii. *'Help in identifying who to contact if we have a question, need expert advice or help with something. At the moment figuring out who to contact is difficult.'*
 - iii. *'I'd like to be able to access contact details of teams at OCC [Oxfordshire County Council], not necessarily a public page on the website but a Clerks' page which we have to log into to enable us to get to the right team quickly.'*
 - iv. *'having a contact point especially for parish councils (Parish Liaison Officer) or failing that a regularly updated list of names of who to contact in which department'*
 - v. *'More communication with parishes and easier access to Officers, Clerks should have contacts rather than go the same route as the public'*
 - vi. *'A single mapping for Parishes - as clerk I waste huge amounts of time working out which assets belong to which tier - trees, litter bins, responsibility for specific footways, paths, verges and green spaces etc. There are different and incomplete maps for different functions.'*
 - vii. *'Having something like a contract manager to support Town and Parishes - a go to who we can talk to about any of the services provided by councils.'*
 - viii. *'A dedicated access portal where a new contact and/or advice is being sought would be helpful.'*
 - ix. *'a directory of relevant team/officer, or a point of contact.'*
 - x. *'A PC [parish council] liaison officer - to be a contact point, to aid collaboration'*

Draft Charter Consultation Findings

39. The consultation indicated strong support for the contents of the draft charter.
- a. 78% responded that they think the aims meet the needs of Oxfordshire councils (out of 87 respondents).

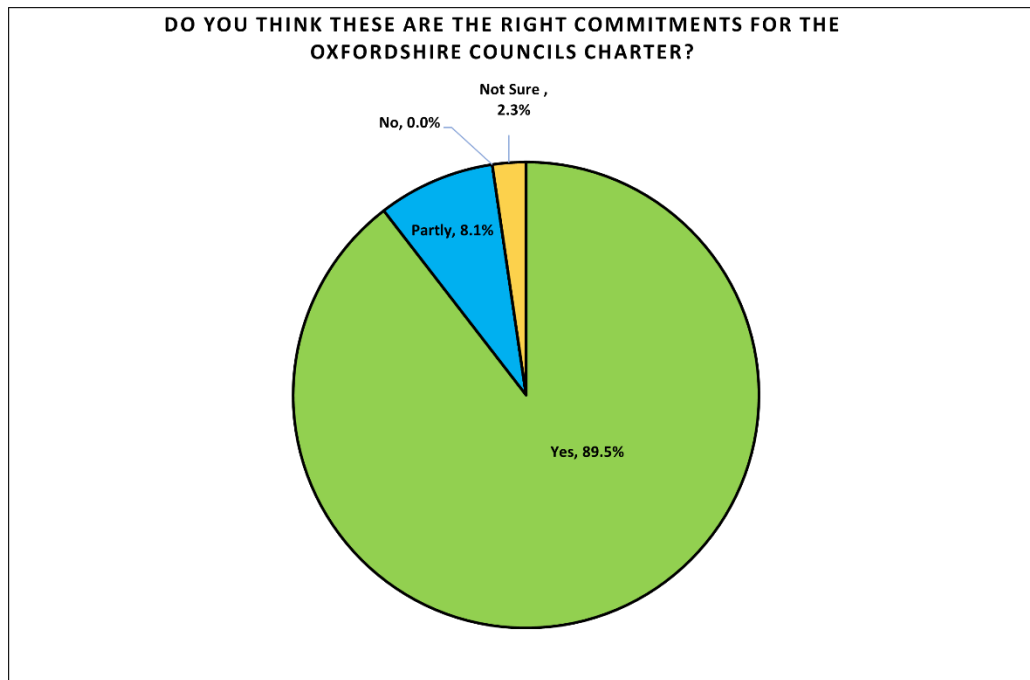


- b. 86% responded that they think the principles are the right principles for the charter (out of 87 respondents).



c. 90% responded that they think the

commitments are the right commitments to include in the charter. (out of 86 respondents).



40. Respondents were invited to comment on each specific aim, principle and commitment of the charter.
41. Most respondents supported the contents of the draft, with most comments in relation to clarity or the meaning of its contents, as well as comments in relation to implementation.
42. The results of the consultation demonstrate that the contents of the drafter charter were agreeable to respondents, and effectively captured the feedback and findings from the first two engagement activities.
43. As a result of the consultation, the contents of the charter remain broadly the same, but wording has been altered to ensure clarity and conciseness, whilst also removing any repetition and ensuring the intention of the charter is better communicated.

Conclusion

44. Overall, the engagement to develop an Oxfordshire Councils Charter was broadly positive from local councils. Over 135 of Oxfordshire's local councils inputted throughout the process.
45. Clear themes have emerged across all engagement activities, notably around communication and relationships between councils, indicating key areas where the charter can make meaningful change to improve partnership working across Oxfordshire.

46. The response and feedback to the draft charter indicate that the engagement activities throughout have effectively captured the needs and concerns of local councils, and that they have been effectively translated into a charter that Oxfordshire local councils support.
47. The engagement activities have also helped to identify specific examples of where the charter can tangibly make a difference and will help to shape the actions that come out of this work.