

**CABINET**  
**14 MAY 2024**

**OXFORDSHIRE COUNCILS CHARTER**

**Report by Chief Executive**

**RECOMMENDATION**

1. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to**
  - a) Endorse the Oxfordshire Councils Charter attached at Annex 1 to the report
  - b) Agree to be a signatory to the Oxfordshire Councils Charter.

**Executive Summary**

2. 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.
3. Through a multi-organisational working group, we have worked collaboratively to develop an Oxfordshire Councils Charter which sets out our principles and commitments to achieve two aims: stronger partnership working and enhancing local democracy.
4. The charter has been developed through an extensive three-stage engagement process in which 135 (nearly half) of Oxfordshire's local councils have engaged. It is annexed to this report at Annex 1.
5. A number of clear themes emerged from the engagement process, which have been translated into a flexible framework.
6. This work is of strategic significance to OCC, aligning with the council's strategic priorities of playing our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy and working with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.

**Background**

7. Oxfordshire has 235 parish councils, 15 town councils, and 68 parish meetings. Relationships and ways of working with local councils have been inconsistent in recent years, particularly as a result of the COVID pandemic, and the findings from our recent engagement with town and parish councils demonstrate a desire to improve relationships and partnership working.
8. 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.
9. The charter has been developed by a multi-organisational working group of officers from the county council, each of the city and district councils, and officers and executive members from the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC) - a membership organisation that represent 97 per cent of Oxfordshire's local councils. Oxfordshire Chief Executive Officers and Council Leaders have also provided oversight throughout this work.

## Development of The Charter

10. The charter has been developed through an extensive three-stage engagement process with town and parish councils, beginning with a roundtable event in October 2023, attended by 100 people representing 88 local councils.
11. A six-week survey was launched following the roundtable, asking the same questions to enable all local councils to input into this work. There were 164 responses to the survey, representing 85 local councils.
12. Through the roundtable event and initial survey, a total of 119 local councils engaged in the early development stage. The outputs from this engagement were qualitatively analysed and five key themes for improvement were identified: relationships, communication, communities, consultation and engagement, and resources.
13. A draft charter was developed based on these themes, which all town and parish councils were invited to feedback on. This consultation was held on the council's consultation and engagement platform Let's Talk Oxfordshire and ran over a six week period between January and February 2024. District, city and county councillors were also invited to respond to the consultation.
14. 96 consultation responses were submitted, with broad overall support for the aims, principles and commitments of the draft charter:
  - 78 per cent responded that they think the aims meet the needs of Oxfordshire councils.
  - 86 per cent responded that they think the principles are the right principles for the charter.
  - 90 per cent responded that they think the commitments are the right commitments to include in the charter.
15. The charter working group analysed the qualitative feedback and identified areas for further consideration and redrafting. The contents of the charter

remained broadly the same, but elements were reworded to provide greater clarity, avoid duplication and ensure that the wording captured and communicated the ambitions of those who shaped the intention of the charter.

16. The responses from the consultation indicate that the engagement activities effectively captured the needs and concerns of Oxfordshire councils, which have been translated into a flexible framework for better partnership working.

## **Next Steps**

17. The charter will remain a 'living document', a flexible framework that enables councils to work to the principles and commitments in a way that aligns with their own ways of working and priorities.
18. The charter will be taken through the individual democratic processes in all five district and city councils in June 2024.
19. The charter will be launched at OALC's AGM on 1 July 2024, and local councils will be invited to endorse and become a signatory to the charter.
20. Each council will be responsible for their own implementation of the charter and how they wish to apply it to their ways of working. It is anticipated that the cross-council working group will continue to meet to share best practice and maintain open communication channels in line with the ethos of the charter.
21. A number of areas where the charter can support actionable improvements by Oxfordshire County Council have already been identified and an action plan will be developed in the summer.

## **Corporate Policies and Priorities**

22. The aims of the charter - to improve partnership working with local councils and enhance local democracy - directly align with our strategic priorities:
  - To play our part in a vibrant and participatory local democracy
  - To work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.
23. Other current strategic work that may be relevant to the charter and its implementation include the Customer Experience Strategy, the Including Everyone strategy refresh and the work on Future Generations.

## **Financial Implications**

24. There are no immediate financial implications resulting from the charter, the charter has a high-level approach with an action plan to follow. It is possible that

some of the resulting actions will have budgetary implications. However, any future project or programme proposals to support the delivery of the charter that requires budget or funding will be developed by the lead service and taken through the relevant sign off process.

Comments checked by:

Prem Salhan, Interim Strategic Finance Business Partner,  
prem.salhan@oxfordshire.gov.uk

## **Legal Implications**

25. There are no legal implications arising from the charter. The charter is not a legal agreement and not designed to override any legal agreements between partners or any codes of conduct of individual councils.

Comments checked by:

Paul Grant, Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer  
paul.grant@oxfordshire.gov.uk (Legal)

## **Staff Implications**

26. There are no staffing implications resulting from adoption of the charter.

## **Equality & Inclusion Implications**

27. Equalities have been considered at every stage of this process including in making the survey and consultation as accessible as possible. The charter aims to improve local democracy, which includes making local democracy more accessible to underrepresented groups and increasing diversity in participating in local democracy, such as for young people, parents, and ethnically diverse communities. Many local councils are in rural areas so there is an anticipated positive impact on rural communities. No negative impacts are anticipated towards protected groups.

## **Sustainability Implications**

28. There are no anticipated climate implications with this report.

## **Risk Management**

29. There are no risks anticipated in signing the Oxfordshire Councils Charter. There are potentially reputational risks associated with not taking action to improve partnership working between Oxfordshire councils.

