



To: Members of the Cabinet

Notice of a Meeting of the Cabinet

Tuesday, 14 May 2024 at 2.00 pm

Room 2&3 - County Hall, New Road, Oxford OX1 1ND

If you wish to view proceedings online, please click on this [Live Stream Link](#).

Martin Reeves
Chief Executive

May 2024

Committee Officer: Chris Reynolds

Tel: 07542 029441; E-Mail: chris.reynolds@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Membership

Councillors

Liz Leffman	Leader of the Council
Dr Pete Sudbury	Deputy Leader of the Council with responsibility for Climate Change, Environment & Future Generations
Tim Bearder	Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care
Neil Fawcett	Cabinet Member for Community & Corporate Services
Andrew Gant	Cabinet Member for Transport Management
Kate Gregory	Cabinet Member for SEND Improvement
John Howson	Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Young People's Services
Dan Levy	Cabinet Member for Finance
Dr Nathan Ley	Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities & Community Safety
Judy Roberts	Cabinet Member for Infrastructure & Development Strategy

*The Agenda is attached. Decisions taken at the meeting
will become effective at the end of the working day on
unless called in by that date for review by the appropriate Scrutiny Committee.*

*Copies of this Notice, Agenda and supporting papers are circulated
to all Members of the County Council.*

Date of next meeting: 18 June 2024



AGENDA

1. Apologies for Absence

2. Declarations of Interest

- guidance note below

3. Minutes (Pages 1 - 8)

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 23 April 2024 (**CA3**) and to receive information arising from them.

4. Questions from County Councillors

Any county councillor may, by giving notice to the Proper Officer by 9 am two working days before the meeting, ask a question on any matter in respect of the Cabinet's delegated powers.

The number of questions which may be asked by any councillor at any one meeting is limited to two (or one question with notice and a supplementary question at the meeting) and the time for questions will be limited to 30 minutes in total. As with questions at Council, any questions which remain unanswered at the end of this item will receive a written response.

Questions submitted prior to the agenda being despatched are shown below and will be the subject of a response from the appropriate Cabinet Member or such other councillor or officer as is determined by the Cabinet Member, and shall not be the subject of further debate at this meeting. Questions received after the despatch of the agenda, but before the deadline, will be shown on the Schedule of Addenda circulated at the meeting, together with any written response which is available at that time.

5. Petitions and Public Address

Members of the public who wish to speak at this meeting can attend the meeting in person or 'virtually' through an online connection.

To facilitate 'hybrid' meetings we are asking that requests to speak or present a petition are submitted by no later than 9am four working days before the meeting i.e., 9am on Wednesday 8th May 2024. Requests to speak should be sent to chris.reynolds@oxfordshire.gov.uk

If you are speaking 'virtually', you may submit a written statement of your presentation to ensure that your views are taken into account. A written copy of your statement can be

provided no later than 9am 2 working days before the meeting. Written submissions should be no longer than 1 A4 sheet.

6. Appointments

7. Reports from Scrutiny Committees (Pages 9 - 18)

Cabinet will receive the following Scrutiny reports:-

Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee reports on

s.106 and Infrastructure Funding Update;
Circular Economy Strategy

8. Cost of Living programme for 2024/25 (Pages 19 - 50)

Cabinet Member: Public Health, Inequalities & Community Safety

Forward Plan Ref: 2024/069

Contact: Paul Wilding, Programme Manager (Cost of Living),

Report by Executive Director of People **(CA8)**

This item is not subject to Call-in. The Chair of the Council has agreed that in all the circumstances the decision should be treated as a matter of urgency. A decision will be urgent if any delay likely to be caused by the call in process would seriously prejudice the Council's or the public's interests. (Part 6.2 Overview & Scrutiny Committee Procedure Rules, paragraph 20(a)).

The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to

- a) Note the cost-of-living support measures delivered during 2023/24, as summarised in table 1;**
- b) Agree to the support package for 2024/25, as summarised in table 3;**
- c) Delegate authority to the Programme Director (Partnerships & Delivery) in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities and Community Safety, to amend the programme during the year in response to changing and emerging need, within the overall programme budget.**

9. Customer Experience Strategy (Pages 51 - 112)

Cabinet Member: Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services

Forward Plan Ref: 2024/029

Contact: Mark Haynes, Director of Customer and Cultural Services

(Mark.Haynes@oxfordshire.gov.uk), Susmita Dave, National Management Trainee

(Susmita.Dave@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

Report by Executive Director: People **(CA9)**

Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to:

- a) approve the council's new Customer Experience Strategy.
- b) endorse that the annual update of the strategy and the action plan should be overseen by the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

10. Oxfordshire Councils Charter (Pages 113 - 150)

Cabinet Member: Leader

Forward Plan Ref: 2023/351

Contact: Tannah Collier, Policy Officer, tannah.collier@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Report by Chief Executive **(CA10)**

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.**

11. Financial Monitoring Report (updates on funding and any other budget changes for 2024/25 since February 2024) (Pages 151 - 160)

Cabinet Member: Finance

Forward Plan Ref: 2024/060

Contact: Kathy Wilcox, Head of Financial Strategy

Kathy/wilcox@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Report by Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer **(CA11)**.

The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to

- a) **agree the virements in Annex 1a and note the virements in Annex 1b.**
- b) **note the anticipated reduction in business rates funding of £0.7m in 2024/25 compared to the assumptions in the budget, and the proposed use of additional business rates income notified in late 2023/24 to replace this.**

12. Workforce Report and Staffing Data - Quarter 4 2023-24 (Pages 161 - 166)

Cabinet Member: Corporate Services

Forward Plan Ref: 2023/279

Contact: Cherie Cuthbertson, Director of Workforce & Organisational Development,

Cherie.cuthbertson@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Report by Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer (**CA12**)

Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to note the report.

13. Forward Plan and Future Business (Pages 167 - 176)

Cabinet Member: All

Contact Officer: Chris Reynolds, Senior Democratic Services ,
chris.reynolds@oxfordshire.gov.uk

The Cabinet Procedure Rules provide that the business of each meeting at the Cabinet is to include “updating of the Forward Plan and proposals for business to be conducted at the following meeting”. Items from the Forward Plan for the immediately forthcoming meetings of the Cabinet appear in the Schedule at **CA13**. This includes any updated information relating to the business for those meetings that has already been identified for inclusion in the next Forward Plan update.

The Schedule is for noting, but Cabinet Members may also wish to take this opportunity to identify any further changes they would wish to be incorporated in the next Forward Plan update.

The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to note the items currently identified for forthcoming meetings.

14. For information only: Cabinet response to Scrutiny item (To Follow)

Infrastructure Funding Statement

Councillors declaring interests

General duty

You must declare any disclosable pecuniary interests when the meeting reaches the item on the agenda headed 'Declarations of Interest' or as soon as it becomes apparent to you.

What is a disclosable pecuniary interest?

Disclosable pecuniary interests relate to your employment; sponsorship (i.e. payment for expenses incurred by you in carrying out your duties as a councillor or towards your election expenses); contracts; land in the Council's area; licenses for land in the Council's area; corporate tenancies; and securities. These declarations must be recorded in each councillor's Register of Interests which is publicly available on the Council's website.

Disclosable pecuniary interests that must be declared are not only those of the member her or himself but also those member's spouse, civil partner or person they are living with as husband or wife or as if they were civil partners.

Declaring an interest

Where any matter disclosed in your Register of Interests is being considered at a meeting, you must declare that you have an interest. You should also disclose the nature as well as the existence of the interest. If you have a disclosable pecuniary interest, after having declared it at the meeting you must not participate in discussion or voting on the item and must withdraw from the meeting whilst the matter is discussed.

Members' Code of Conduct and public perception

Even if you do not have a disclosable pecuniary interest in a matter, the Members' Code of Conduct says that a member 'must serve only the public interest and must never improperly confer an advantage or disadvantage on any person including yourself' and that 'you must not place yourself in situations where your honesty and integrity may be questioned'.

Members Code – Other registrable interests

Where a matter arises at a meeting which directly relates to the financial interest or wellbeing of one of your other registerable interests then you must declare an interest. You must not participate in discussion or voting on the item and you must withdraw from the meeting whilst the matter is discussed.

Wellbeing can be described as a condition of contentedness, healthiness and happiness; anything that could be said to affect a person's quality of life, either positively or negatively, is likely to affect their wellbeing.

Other registrable interests include:

- a) Any unpaid directorships

- b) Any body of which you are a member or are in a position of general control or management and to which you are nominated or appointed by your authority.
- c) Any body (i) exercising functions of a public nature (ii) directed to charitable purposes or (iii) one of whose principal purposes includes the influence of public opinion or policy (including any political party or trade union) of which you are a member or in a position of general control or management.

Members Code – Non-registrable interests

Where a matter arises at a meeting which directly relates to your financial interest or wellbeing (and does not fall under disclosable pecuniary interests), or the financial interest or wellbeing of a relative or close associate, you must declare the interest.

Where a matter arises at a meeting which affects your own financial interest or wellbeing, a financial interest or wellbeing of a relative or close associate or a financial interest or wellbeing of a body included under other registrable interests, then you must declare the interest.

In order to determine whether you can remain in the meeting after disclosing your interest the following test should be applied:

Where a matter affects the financial interest or well-being:

- a) to a greater extent than it affects the financial interests of the majority of inhabitants of the ward affected by the decision and;
- b) a reasonable member of the public knowing all the facts would believe that it would affect your view of the wider public interest.

You may speak on the matter only if members of the public are also allowed to speak at the meeting. Otherwise you must not take part in any discussion or vote on the matter and must not remain in the room unless you have been granted a dispensation.

CABINET

MINUTES of the meeting held on Tuesday, 23 April 2024 commencing at 2.00 pm and finishing at 3.35pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liz Leffman – in the Chair
Councillor Dr Pete Sudbury (Deputy Chair)
Councillor Tim Bearder
Councillor Neil Fawcett
Councillor Andrew Gant
Councillor Kate Gregory
Councillor John Howson
Councillor Dr Nathan Ley
Councillor Judy Roberts

Other Members in Attendance:

Councillors Liz Brighthouse OBE, Donna Ford, Charlie Hicks and Kieron Mallon

Officers:

Whole of meeting

Martin Reeves (Chief Executive), Lorna Baxter (Executive Director of Resources & Section 151 Officer), Anita Bradley (Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer), Ansaf Azhar (Corporate Director Public Health & Community Safety), Bill Cotton (Corporate Director Environment & Place) Karen Fuller (Corporate Director Adult Social Care), Jean Kelly (Deputy Director Children's Social Care), Colm Ó Caomhánaigh (Democratic Services Manager)

The Cabinet considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting, together with a schedule of addenda tabled at the meeting, and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda, reports and schedule, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

48/24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

(Agenda Item. 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Dan Levy.

49/24 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

(Agenda Item. 2)

There were none.

50/24 MINUTES

(Agenda Item. 3)

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 March 2024 were approved as a correct record.

51/24 QUESTIONS FROM COUNTY COUNCILLORS

(Agenda Item. 4)

There were none received.

52/24 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS

(Agenda Item. 5)

8 Vision Zero Strategy

Danny Yee

Kate Fuller

Alison Hill

Alison Hill (on behalf of Robin Tucker, CoHSAT)

9 Future Generations Mission Statement

Cllr Charlie Hicks

53/24 APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda Item. 6)

There were none to report.

54/24 REPORTS FROM SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

(Agenda Item. 7)

Councillor Kieron Mallon, Chair of the Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee, presented the report on Visio Zero.

Councillor Liz Brighthouse, Deputy Chair of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, presented the report on Draft Action Plan.

Cabinet received the reports and will respond in due course.

55/24 VISION ZERO STRATEGY

(Agenda Item. 8)

Cabinet had before it a report on the Vision Zero strategy and action plan which set out how the Council aimed to achieve its target of a reduction in collisions to zero fatalities and life changing injuries from road traffic collisions by 2050: with an interim target of 25% reduction by 2026 and 50% reduction by 2030. It ensured the highway network was safely designed,

implemented, and maintained with Vision Zero at the heart of the Council's decision making.

Councillor Andrew Gant, Cabinet Member for Transport Management, presented the report. He thanked the speakers for their contributions to the meeting and referred to the valuable role played by the Council's co-production partners in the development of these strategies.

During discussion, members made the following points:-

- The large number of requests from parish councils for 20mph speed restrictions
- The need for the Council to be ambitious in seeking to meet the targets set out in the strategy and to implement measures that would result in a reduction in the number of car journeys
- The section on education should be enhanced to emphasise the need for cycle safety to be promoted in schools and for all schools, including those in the independent sector, to take on board initiatives on road safety.
- The need to address problems caused by overweight vehicles and for heavy vehicles to keep to their designated routes.
- The importance of adequate communication on the need for the Vision Zero strategy in view of the results of the consultation exercise and concerns that the consultation appeared to be geared towards older sections of the community.

The Chair expressed the Council's thanks to all those who had been involved in the development of the strategy.

Councillor Gant moved and Councillor Ley seconded the recommendations, and they were approved.

RESOLVED to approve the Vision Zero Strategy and Action Plan 'Oxfordshire – Safe Roads through Vision Zero to 2030' as set out in the report.

56/24 FUTURE GENERATIONS MISSION STATEMENT

(Agenda Item. 9)

Cabinet had before it a report on a proposed mission statement on Future Generations. The Council had passed a motion setting out a commitment to considering Future Generations in decision-making, and as part of this there has been the appointment of a Future Generations Member Champion and Future Generations included in a Cabinet portfolio.

The next steps were to set out the approach and ambition to be one of the leading English councils in this space. A mission statement had been developed to set out the scale of the Council's goals, along with some initial actions of where to start work in this space.

Councillor Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment & Future Generations, presented the report. He thanked Councillor Hicks for bringing forward the proposal on Future Generations to the Council and looked forward to working with him in his new role as Member Champion.

During discussion members welcomed the mission statement and expressed the hope that schools would participate in the Council's initiatives in this area of policy.

Councillor Sudbury moved and Councillor Leffman seconded the recommendation, and it was approved.

RESOLVED to agree the principle of Future Generations, and the mission statement that sets the direction of Oxfordshire County Council's work in this space.

57/24 CLIMATE ACTION PROGRAMME UPDATE

(Agenda Item. 10)

Cabinet had before it a report which provided an update on work to address the Climate Emergency, including delivery of the 2023/24 Climate Action Programme workstreams.

The report noted the council's success in becoming the highest ranked county council in the UK for its Climate Action in Climate Emergency UK's Climate Scorecard and receiving an A- score in a shadow submission to the industry-leading CDP (formerly Carbon Disclosure Project) reporting framework.

The report provided an update on delivery of the council's Carbon Management Plan for 2023/24. An emissions reduction will be achieved due to the imminent completion of the street lighting LED replacement programme. Whilst preparatory work has taken place, delivery of works planned for property, fleet, and staff business travel in 23/24 had been pushed back into 24/25. Property projects for 2023/24 would now complete alongside the 2024/25 programme.

The report also noted that 21 of 27 workstreams in the climate programme agreed in 23/24 were rated as green.

Councillor Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of the Council with responsibility for Climate Change, Environment and Future Generations, presented the report.

He thanked all those who had contributed to the significant progress with the Council's climate agenda and, in particular, the team of officers for all their hard work.

The Chair also welcomed the progress detailed in the report and that the Council was being recognised, nationally, for its performance on climate change initiatives.

Councillor Sudbury moved, and Councillor Howson seconded the recommendations, and they were approved.

RESOLVED to

- a) **note the biannual update on the delivery of the workstreams in the Climate Action Programme (Annex 1).**
- b) **approve adjustments to the programme for 2024/25 (Annex 2).**
- c) **approve the draft outcome measures for monitoring progress to a net zero Oxfordshire (Annex 3).**

58/24 CAPITAL PROGRAMME APPROVALS - APRIL 2024

(Agenda Item. 11)

Cabinet had before it a report which set out changes to the Capital Programme requiring Cabinet approval that would be incorporated into the agreed programme and included in the next update to the Capital Programme in June 2024.

The Chair presented the report on behalf of the Cabinet Member for Finance.

Councillor Andrew Gant, Cabinet Member for Transport Management and Councillor John Howson, Cabinet Member for Children, Education and Young People's Services, explained details of the additional schemes within their respective portfolios.

Councillor Leffman moved and Councillor Howson seconded the recommendations, and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:

- a) **approve the inclusion of the £2.384m Active Travel Fund 4 Extension (ATF4e) Grant into the capital programme to deliver active travel schemes across Oxfordshire.**
- b) **approve the inclusion of £1.260m grant funding from the Department for Transport Safer Roads Funds to carry out a specific package of road safety works.**

- c) **approve the drawdown of £2.000m of funds from the Parking Account to reinvest into three Park and Ride sites requiring maintenance work.**
- d) **approve the inclusion of Faringdon Community College, a scheme to replace temporary buildings with permanent accommodation, into the Capital Programme with an indicative budget of £6.006m to be fully funded from held & secure s106 contributions**

59/24 APPROVAL OF NEW MANAGED SERVICE RECRUITMENT CONTRACT

(Agenda Item. 12)

It was agreed that there was no requirement to exclude the public as there was no request to discuss the information in the exempt annex.

Cabinet had before it a report on the award of a managed service recruitment contract to a strategic supplier for the Council's contingent labour workforce.

Councillor Neil Fawcett, Cabinet Member for Community and Corporate Services, presented the report.

Councillor Fawcett moved and Councillor Sudbury seconded the recommendations, and they were approved.

RESOLVED to:

- a) **approve the award of the managed service recruitment contract as Oxfordshire County Council's (OCCs) strategic supplier for our contingent labour workforce as set out in Exempt Annex 1. The aim is to award the contract by 1 June 2024 and the contract duration will be three years plus the option for a one-year extension; and**
- b) **delegate the finalisation of terms and conditions to the Director of Workforce and Organisational Development in consultation with the Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer and Head of Procurement.**

60/24 FORWARD PLAN AND FUTURE BUSINESS

(Agenda Item. 13)

The Cabinet considered a list of items for the immediately forthcoming meetings of the Cabinet together with changes and additions set out in the schedule of addenda.

RESOLVED to note the items currently identified for forthcoming meetings.

61/24 FOR INFORMATION ONLY: CABINET RESPONSE TO SCRUTINY ITEM

(Agenda Item. 14)

Cabinet noted the following response to the Scrutiny report:-

Oxfordshire Education Commission

.....in the Chair

Date of signing

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Divisions Affected – All

CABINET **14 May 2024**

Infrastructure Funding and s.106 Contributions Update **Report of Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Agree to respond to the recommendations contained in the body of this report, and
 - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. The Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the Council's Infrastructure Funding and s.106 Contributions Update at its meeting on 17 April 2024.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Infrastructure and Development Strategy, and Bill Cotton, Corporate Director for Environment and Place, Rachel Wileman, Director of Planning, Environment and Climate Change, and Nicholas Perrins, Head of Strategic Planning, for attending the Committee and answering its questions.
5. The Infrastructure Funding Statement had been considered by the Committee at its meeting on 06 December 2023 before being submitted to Cabinet. The large sums of money unspent had also been explored at the Performance

Overview & Scrutiny Committee in December and in the latter's scrutiny of the Cabinet's proposed budget.

6. The Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been advised that a sprint piece of work into the matter was to be undertaken and so the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee (the Committee) requested an update.

SUMMARY

7. The report set out the progress made against the recommendations made by the Committee in December 2023, including the ongoing review of s.106 collection and expenditure procedures which had been established, as the update report set out, "to review all aspects of the developer contributions process, governance, and expenditure to increase the rate of delivery where practicable to do so." Developer contributions have been secured mainly through section 106 (s.106) of the Town and County Planning Act 1990 (as amended). The Committee was reminded that the Council had highly effective processes for negotiating and securing development contributions. However, the expenditure of these funds in a timely fashion was more challenging.
8. The Committee had a wide-ranging discussion with the Cabinet member and with the officers and, notwithstanding that it wishes to receive further updates on the recommendations it made in December, the Committee made another series of recommendations. Some of these build on ones made previously but these eight further recommendations broadly concern communications with members, flexibilities to allow speedier delivery, and the presentation of data. Fundamentally and collectively, they are about the need for the Council to spend the money it has received efficiently and effectively for the benefit of residents, taking account of the local knowledge of an area's elected member.

RECOMMENDATIONS

9. One of the factors that results in infrastructure funded money not being spent is that it can be earmarked for projects so specific that it is difficult to bring them to fruition. The Committee recognises that conditions must be attached to the agreements and recognises that those conditions must not be so loose as to make the conditions meaningless. However, the Committee calls upon the Council to ensure that, when drafting agreements and in negotiations with developers and district councils, the conditions attached to particular projects have some flexibility built into them insofar as is possible.
10. Particularly where the projects have not been provided at the initial stages of development, it may well be that the needs of a particular community have changed. An example was given in Committee of money being earmarked for books for a particular public library. The library did not need money towards its book stock but it did need refurbishment. Having such specific commitments impacts negatively on communities rather than providing the benefits intended. Agreements should be such that the community would

benefit, and the Committee is clear that flexibility should not enable the contributions earmarked for a community to be spent outside that locality, but it is of key importance that there is flexibility built in.

11. The Committee made a similar recommendation in December but expands on it slightly here.

Recommendation 1: That the Council should ensure that the conditions attached to future s.106 contributions are wherever possible sufficiently flexible to ensure that they can be used to meet the actual needs of residents whilst ensuring that flexibility does not enable them to be spent in differing localities.

12. There are many reasons why the Council has, as the report to the Committee sets out, almost £278m in s.106 moneys held. The Committee notes that just over £108m is held for specific use where no scheme has yet been proposed with a further £28.6m held for schemes that have been proposed but not yet actioned. The Committee recognises that many of them are rational and coherent reasons for still being held. One example given in Committee was of it being unwise to implement multiple road projects simultaneously because, counterintuitively, improving roads at the same time has the potential to make the network less efficient in the meantime.
13. However, the Committee is keen to impress upon Cabinet the force of feeling on the part of both members and residents that their divisions have money committed to improving the infrastructure, and thus the lives, of those who live there and yet the money is not spent and the projects have not been delivered. Residents have experienced the pain of development works but, in too many cases, are yet to receive the gain of the conditions which have been agreed. The report received by the Committee notes that some funds have been “held for over 20 years without any movement other than accruing of interest.” This cannot continue. Whilst the Committee was reassured that no funds had been clawed back in recent years, the value of money resting in a bank account will depreciate and will be able to meet less of the need than was initially intended.
14. The Committee was recommended to acknowledge and endorse the progress made. It did so and it recognises that work is being undertaken and is pleased at the progress on it. However, time is of the essence and the Committee calls on Cabinet to make clear its commitment to the funds being used swiftly for the purposes intended.

Recommendation 2: That the Cabinet should accept and acknowledge the frustrations and dismay of members and residents at the sheer scale of the funding received and yet to be spent and should commit to that money being used for the infrastructure projects for which it has been provided as speedily as practicable.

15. During its meeting, agreements made under section 278 of the Highways Act 1980 (s.278 agreements) were suggested as a means of ensuring physical

infrastructure was ready and complete at an earlier stage than was sometimes the case with agreements pursuant to s.106. The Council had used such agreements on occasion and they were acknowledged as a practical solution in some cases. The Committee recognises that such agreements would relate to modifications to the existing highway network and so would not be an appropriate vehicle for all planning obligations or relevant to all developments. However, it considers that it would be sensible for the Council to consider its approach and to explore whether it might be feasible and beneficial to enter into agreements under s.278 rather than under s.106 more than is currently the case.

***Recommendation 3:* That the Council should explore whether it would be better to enter s.278 agreements which could ensure that physical infrastructure is provided by developers at the early stages of development rather than primarily relying on s.106 contributions being earmarked for such infrastructure at a later date.**

16. The Committee recognises that significant proportions of the unspent money are earmarked for future expenditure and that it is not the case that the money is simply unallocated or unspent. The Committee considers that it would be better, both for the Council's processes and in the interests of openness and transparency, for that to be made clearer.

***Recommendation 4:* That the Council should ensure that information makes clear where unspent moneys have already been earmarked for future expenditure.**

17. One of the major frustrations expressed by members was that they are rarely engaged in any discussions about potential developments in the early stages. Indeed, too often, they are not engaged in any discussions about them at all. Councillors representing a division in which development is proposed should at the very least be informed about it. The Committee considers that it would be even better if they were not simply informed but actually involved in discussions and engaged with the practicalities of the proposals and the impact on the local area. It is members who are elected to represent the people of their divisions and it is members who know the complexities and the needs of their divisions.
18. The Committee is pleased that there will be more engagement with members about s.106 contributions at Locality level and agrees with the suggestion that Locality Meetings should include a more forward looking update so that members can provide input into the process. Members noted that, in some areas, they had been receiving more information but that was always retrospective. Far better would be for the Council to go further in order to ensure it engages proactively with members.

***Recommendation 5:* That the Council should ensure that local members are informed about, involved in, and engaged with regarding any and all new developments from the beginning of proposals being discussed.**

19. Allied to the concern about engagement with elected representatives, the Committee also raised the issue of whether, to ensure democratic responsibility and accountability, one or more Cabinet members should sit on the Strategic Capital Board. This is currently an officer-led board which, the Committee was advised, is an operational structure which oversees delivery of those capital programmes which have been approved by Full Council or by Cabinet. Members of the Committee gave examples of where similar boards at district level include Cabinet members. Cabinet members are able to take advice from the relevant ward councillors and feed that into discussions on the board.
20. Whilst it would not wish to interfere in operational matters, the Committee sees merit in the Council giving serious consideration to arranging for Cabinet members to sit on the Strategic Capital Board. Ultimately, the overall efficiency of the process is the responsibility of members. The Committee believes that there is a place for politicians on the Board and calls on the Council to arrange for Cabinet members to do so.

Recommendation 6: That the Council should arrange for Cabinet members to sit on the Strategic Capital Board to ensure democratic responsibility.

21. The dashboard being developed to give an overview of infrastructure projects and the funds attached to them is a development the Committee supports. Members look forward to seeing the current iteration during Locality Meetings and to providing feedback. The Committee heard that the intention is to launch it by the autumn and looks forward to being able to use it. However, the Committee is keen to ensure that members can engage with officers who are dealing with the particular projects in their divisions. The Committee cautions strongly against too generic contact details that can result in enquiries disappearing into the ether and members feeling the need to follow up by contacting Directors in order to get answers to their questions. Rather, contact details should be provided for the team or officers engaged with that particular project so that members and residents can have some confidence that they will be able to receive an informed response.

Recommendation 7: That the Council should, when its dashboard goes live, ensure that contact details for appropriate officers are attached to each infrastructure project.

22. The Committee recognises that there is a large number of teams which are involved with s.106 contributions and agreements. There is therefore a large number of officers too, each of whom will have their own knowledge. The Committee was pleased to hear that the sharing of data and information will result in knowledge being available across the Council rather than there being the potential for single points of failure. The Committee is glad that an absence of silo working should enable a more efficient system which will result in the substantial funds the Council holds being spent.
23. Linked to the concerns about member engagement, though, and the challenges of communication on occasion, the Committee would welcome

consideration being given as to whether each Locality should have a dedicated s.106 officer who would be aware of the projects in that Locality and who would be able to advise and engage with local members.

Recommendation 8: That the Council should avoid silo working and consider whether each Locality should have a s.106 officer attached to it.

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

24. The Committee expects to consider the subject again during the 2024/25 municipal year.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

25. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power: 'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
26. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley
Director of Law and Governance

Annex:	Pro-forma Response Template
Background papers:	None
Other Documents:	None
Contact Officer:	Richard Doney Scrutiny Officer richard.doney@oxfordshire.gov.uk Tel: 07791 494285

May 2024

Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

Under section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, Overview and Scrutiny Committees must require the Cabinet or local authority to respond to a report or recommendations made thereto by an Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Such a response must be provided within two months from the date on which it is requested¹ and, if the report or recommendations in questions were published, the response also must be so.

This template provides a structure which respondents are encouraged to use. However, respondents are welcome to depart from the suggested structure provided the same information is included in a response. The usual way to publish a response is to include it in the agenda of a meeting of the body to which the report or recommendations were addressed.

Issue: Infrastructure Funding and s.106 Contributions Update

Lead Cabinet Member(s): Cllr Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Infrastructure & Development Strategy

Date response requested:² 14 May 2024

Response to report:

Enter text here.

Response to recommendations:

Recommendation	Accepted, rejected or partially accepted	Proposed action (if different to that recommended) and indicative timescale (unless rejected)
1. That the Council should ensure that the conditions attached to future s.106		

¹ Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

² Date of the meeting at which report/recommendations were received

Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

contributions are wherever possible sufficiently flexible to ensure that they can be used to meet the actual needs of residents whilst ensuring that flexibility does not enable them to be spent in differing localities.		
2. That the Cabinet should accept and acknowledge the frustrations and dismay of members and residents at the sheer scale of the funding received and yet to be spent and should commit to that money being used for the infrastructure projects for which it has been provided as speedily as practicable.		
3. That the Council should explore whether it would be better to enter s.278 agreements which could ensure that physical infrastructure is provided by developers at the early stages of development rather than primarily relying on s.106 contributions being earmarked for such infrastructure at a later date.		
4. That the Council should ensure that information makes clear where unspent moneys have already been earmarked for future expenditure.		
5. That the Council should ensure that local members are informed about, involved in, and engaged with regarding any and all new developments from the beginning of proposals being discussed.		

Overview & Scrutiny Recommendation Response Pro forma

6. That the Council should arrange for Cabinet members to sit on the Strategic Capital Board to ensure democratic responsibility.		
7. That the Council should, when its dashboard goes live, ensure that contact details for appropriate officers are attached to each infrastructure project.		
8. That the Council should avoid silo working and consider whether each Locality should have a s.106 officer attached to it.		

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Divisions Affected - All

CABINET

14 May 2023

Outline allocation of cost of living and associated community wealth building funding for 2024/25

Report by Executive Director of People

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to

- a) Note the cost-of-living support measures delivered during 2023/24, as summarised in Table 1;
- b) Agree to the support package for 2024/25, as summarised in Table 3;
- c) Delegate authority to the Programme Director (Partnerships & Delivery) in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities and Community Safety, to amend the programme during the year in response to changing and emerging need, within the overall programme budget

Executive Summary

2. This report sets out the intended approach to support those residents who are most negatively impacted by cost-of-living pressures over the current financial year, assigning additional funding provided by national government after local 2024/25 budget setting processes, in the context of locally assigned funding. It provides the latest position on the impact of the cost of living, as well as providing a summary outturn report on the 2023/24 support programme.

Background

3. In March 2024 the government announced a fifth round of the Household Support Fund running for the first six months of 2024/25. Oxfordshire's allocation is £3,361,256. Cabinet approval will be sought for allocation of the grant which will need to be applied in the context of locally sourced cost of living and related financial inequality funding. This includes:
 - Emergency welfare fund - £500,000
 - Advice services budget amendment - £300,000
 - Community wealth building budget amendment - £60,000
 - Carry forward of funds from 23/24 to support sustainable financial inequality measures* - £171,000

*The prospect of an end to the Household Support Fund led to funds being identified towards the end of 2023/24 that could be carried forward to mitigate the cliff edge of support that would have been created.

4. This report set out the proposed categories of programme spend. Given the tight timescales for HSF 5 spend in particular, which was confirmed on 26 March 2024, broad categories of spend are being prepared for approval by Cabinet, with detail being developed into business cases and delivery plans under officer delegation.

Cost of Living

5. Although the headline rate of inflation has reduced, the impact of a period of high inflation has locked in higher costs for food and household bills. Critically for low-income households, the inflation rate for food and non-alcoholic drinks continues to be higher than the headline rate (5% compared to 3.8% for February 2024).
6. In positive news for low-income households, national benefit rates have risen by 6.7% for 2024/25 and the state pension has increased by 8.5%. Local Housing Allowance rates (which is the support paid for private sector housing costs) has been restored to the 30th percentile of local rents, which should increase the number of properties that are affordable to people on low incomes.
7. In April the Financial Conduct Authority published the results of their annual survey on the Cost of Living from a national perspective. This found the following:
 - 7.4m (14%) felt heavily burdened by their domestic bills and credit commitments
 - 5.5m (11%) had missed any of these bills in the previous 6 months
 - 14.6m (28%) were not coping financially or finding it difficult to cope
 - 5.9m (11%) had no disposable income
8. These results represented an improvement on the situation from 12 months ago but were worse than the last survey carried out before the pandemic. In 2020, 11% or 5.8m people felt heavily burdened by their domestic bills or credit commitments.
9. A higher proportion of adults in certain groups were struggling financially in January 2024, compared with the UK average. These included:
 - adults from low-income households
 - unemployed adults
 - others not in work such as the long-term sick and full-time carers
 - renters
 - single adults with financially dependent children

10. HealthWatch Oxfordshire have recently conducted a survey of 166 people accessing a community larder in East Oxford. Whilst this report is not yet ready for publication, they have shared initial findings which we are permitted to include in this report. People said that the cost of living was impacting on their ability to access and afford healthy food, and pay bills, as well as affecting physical and mental health. For many, food provision was a lifeline, meaning that they were able to make ends meet from week to week. The reasons for using food services indicated both financial, issues of access, including saving money, as well as a strong indication of the value of such schemes to reducing isolation, loneliness and building community. When asked about support to help manage the cost of living, respondents indicated interest in financial, housing and other advice, more information on health and care support, and food related support.

Review of 2023/24 programme

11. In 2023/24 the Council received £6.7m from the fourth round of the government's Household Support Fund. The Council also made £2.3 million available to support Cost of Living measures through the 2023/24 revenue budget process. This was in addition to the £500,000 previously agreed in the form of the Emergency Welfare fund. Table 1 below shows how the total of £9.52 million was spent, as agreed in a Cabinet report in March 2023.
12. Annex One to this report provides a breakdown of expenditure from the Residents Support Scheme and includes a case study. Annex Two contains a report from the Oxfordshire Community Foundation detailing their Cost of Living grants programme. Other highlights from the 23/24 programme include:
- Providing £15 per week in respect of each child entitled to Free School Meals, and equivalent support for early years settings. Benchmarking with other authorities shows Oxfordshire as having (jointly with six other authorities) the most generous scheme for this type of support.
 - 3,670 people in receipt of Housing Benefit and no other benefit received a cost-of-living payment of £450. This is because they were not eligible for the national cost-of-living payment made by government to people on other state benefits. Most people in this group were pensioners living in social housing.
 - The City and District ran a number of projects in their areas which focussed on providing support for food and energy costs over winter, and providing additional funding for advice services. Delegated funding of £500,000 benefitted 14,276 households.

Table 1.

Scheme	Description	Value	#Recipients
Free School Meal support in holidays	£15 per eligible child per week of school holiday with equivalent support for Early Years Providers	£3,500,000	15,000 children
Education Welfare Grant	Discretionary support to be given by schools to cover costs such as warm clothing and breakfast club fees	£200,000	4,000 children
Residents Support Scheme	Application based scheme to provide crisis support for food costs, energy prepayment costs and essential household items	£750,000	3,600 households
Housing Benefit Cost of Living payments	£450 for people (mainly pensioners) who receive Housing Benefit and no other benefits (this group were ineligible for national Cost of Living payments)	£1,650,000	3650 households
Oxfordshire Community Foundation grants	Funding to support a £273,000 Cost of Living grants programme	£110,000	35 local charities
Hospital discharge	Funding to support patient discharge where Cost of Living issues are a factor	£15,000	46 people supported to leave hospital
Advice Services	Funding for the provision of advice in respect of Cost of Living issues	£300,000	8 local advice centres
Community Larders	Funding to purchase essentials of infants and young children (e.g. baby milk, nappies)	£10,000	36 community larders
Better Housing Better Health	Additional funding for the Public Health commissioned service to support residents with energy advice and efficiency measures	£240,000	1067 residents
Warm Spaces	Funding to libraries to cover costs for providing food and drink to people accessing them as Warm Spaces over winter	£2,288	All council libraries
Council Tax Support	Funding to city and districts to provide additional Council Tax support to households on low incomes	£780,000	15,208 households
Discretionary Housing Payment Support	Funding to city and districts to provide additional support for housing costs for those on low incomes	£810,000	Awaiting reporting
Delegated Funding	Delegated funding to city and districts to provide support to low income households in their area	£500,000	14,276 households
Administration Costs		£652,712	
	Total	£9,520,000	

Cost of Living support proposals for 2024/25

13. National Government has announced funding from the Household Support Fund for six months. In constructing a package of support for the year, it is necessary to ensure that HSF funding is spent by 30 September 2024. The priorities in developing this programme have been as follows:
- To ensure that Free School Meal support in the holidays continues
 - Maintaining the Residents Support Scheme at the same level as 23/24
 - Working in partnership with City & District Councils
 - Developing sustainable solutions to cost-of-living related issues
14. On 10 November 2023, a cost-of-living update was provided to the Performance and Corporate Services Scrutiny Committee. The committee provided feedback on the report including:
- The development of the Council's approach to social value and community wealth building
 - The approach to measuring poverty and targeting support
 - The role of the Council in providing a secure framework to residents on low incomes
 - The importance of multi-agency working
 - The necessity of delivering support in a sustainable and effective manner

These approaches all feature in some elements of the proposed programme described below.

Funding

15. The Partnership & Delivery team have brought together a number of pieces of related work in putting together this programme. The main funding is from the government's Household Support Fund, the scope of which is the same as for 2023/24 with the addition of housing costs as a new form of eligible support. The Council also has an existing budget provision in respect of emergency welfare support of £500,000. Some new areas of funding included in the Council's budget for 2024/25 are also included within the income streams for this programme. The full list of income streams to fund this program are set out in Table 2 below.

Table2.

Income Source	£'000
Household Support Fund 5	3,361
Emergency Welfare Fund	500
Budget provision for Advice Services	300
Budget provision for Community Wealth building	60
Carry forward from 23/24	171
Total:	4,392

16. To secure HSF5 funding, the Council must demonstrate compliance with detailed requirements. Therefore, the specific use of HSF is limited. These requirements can be summarised as being to meet immediate needs and help

those who are struggling to afford household essentials including energy and water bills, food, and wider essentials. Locally, available funding provides the Council with the flexibility to meet locally met need that is not HSF compliant. To ensure the maximum funding is accessed with most impact, there will be movement between funding sources through the year. However, for transparency, support proposals can be broadly split into HSF and locally funded schemes. These schemes are summarised in Table 3. And then outlined in the following narrative.

Table 3.

Cost of Living expenditure	Amount £'000	HSF or Locally funded
FSM Holiday Support	2,130	HSF
Residents Support Scheme	1,000	Both
Delegations to City & Districts	250	HSF
Community Wealth building	350	Local
Advice Services	300	Local
Data led solution to target benefit take-up	140	Local
Sustainable access to food	40	Local
Support for low income families with a child with a disability	20	Local
Period Poverty	10	HSF
Administration	165	HSF
Total:	4,390	

Cost of Living Support proposals

17. *FSM Holiday Support*

Free School Meal (FSM) equivalent support for school holiday periods has been provided as part of HSF 1-4 and their predecessors through a payment of £15 per benefits-related FSM-eligible child and young person attending any state-funded school and college in Oxfordshire, per week of school holiday.

Equivalent funding was provided to Early Years settings. In addition, school leaders use their discretion to provide funding beyond FSM eligibility. This scheme is well understood and has come to be relied amongst recipient families. While taking a large percentage of the available HSF funds, it has very high take-up and avoids additional application-based approaches meaning that regular support is delivered directly to parents. It is therefore recommended that this support continues through the HSF 5 period. (It should be noted that given the timing of this report, funding has already been provided for the Easter 2024 holiday under existing officer delegations for the administration of HSF 4).

Residents Support Scheme

18. The RSS was launched on 1 June 2023 and has resulted in 3,600 successful applications receiving £760,000. The costs of administering the scheme have been £197,000. The council have previously made £500,000 available to fund this scheme in 2024/25 and HSF5 provides an opportunity to ensure the scheme is funded at least to the same level as 2023/24. All expenditure within the scheme up to 30 September 2024 will be allocated to HSF to provide flexibility within the programme for the second half of the year.
19. There are 28 partners signed up to the scheme who help to promote it. These are mainly VCS organisations but include local authorities and housing associations as well. Partners are updated regularly on scheme expenditure and proposed changes. A scheme review was conducted in conjunction with partners during the year, and this will be repeated in 2024/25.

Delegations to City & Districts

20. In previous funding rounds, the County Council has delegated funding to the City and District Councils to establish local emergency welfare schemes and provide related community support. Funding is allocated against a formula that takes into account population and relative deprivation. These schemes work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector. Local intelligence enables flexible support to be delivered that aligns with existing local provision, avoiding duplication and maximising impact. The flexibility of City and District Councils and our VCS partners has allowed the rapid delivery of short-notice schemes and significant funding has been delivered to residents directly through VCS advisory services. The development of the Residents Support Scheme has meant that direct delivery schemes are no longer required at the local level. However, to maintain the impact of local intelligence on the overall package, it is proposed to continue delegating HSF funding to the City and Districts but without the requirement to deliver an application-based emergency welfare fund. This will give the City and District Councils new flexibility to target HSF as makes most sense locally, within the requirements of the fund. The expansion of the scope of HSF to include Housing support means that the councils could allocate some of this funding to increase their Discretionary Housing Payment provision.

Community Wealth Building (CWB)

21. Last autumn the Centre for Local Economic Studies (CLES) were commissioned to identify the opportunities in Oxfordshire of Community

Wealth Building and the impact that could be achieved. CLES have now completed their work and a CWB working group will take their recommendations forward. This work comprises a critical element of the Council's place shaping agenda. A work programme will be developed which will include increasing the role of anchor institutions within the County, and consideration of approaches to asset disposal, partnership working and economic development and will be the subject of a separate Cabinet report. Funding was reserved from the 2023/24 cost of living programme in anticipation of a 'hard' national cut-off of deprivation funding to provide for an element of longer-term sustainable work. This planned funding will be added to the additional budget of £60,000 agreed through the opposition amendment process to support the development and delivery of a Social Value and Community Wealth Building Strategy, subject to future business case.

Advice services

22. Support for debt and benefits advice has formed part of previous Cost of Living programmes. This was previously paid for by a contribution from the Budget Priorities Reserve to supplement Household Support Fund money from Government in 2022/23 and 2023/24. Funding has been used to support the four Citizens Advice offices in Oxfordshire as well as four independent advice providers. The £300,000 allocation in the Council's budget to this area will enable advice services to continue to be supported.

Data led solution to target benefit take-up

23. The Partnerships & Delivery team have been exploring opportunities for using data led solutions to target benefit take up and other forms of income maximisation. Publicly available datasets can provide useful insight into local areas, but the actionable opportunities for this are limited to generic take-up campaigns. Solutions are available which provide for aggregating all relevant data held by both County, and City and District councils. This provides detailed insight into households which may have an unclaimed entitlement to benefits or Free School meals, or who may be struggling with household bills and need a supportive intervention. Approaches using this model elsewhere in the country have operated very successful, highly targeted take-up campaigns. It is estimated that this approach in Oxfordshire could realise £1.2m in income for residents as well as serving as a prevention tool for services such as Adult Social Care and Housing. The model would require the involvement of the City and District councils. Early conversations with them have shown a desire to work with us on this. The funding represents the anticipated Year One costs. During this year, the proof of concept and economic benefits would enable all participating councils to submit spend to save bids for funding from Year Two onwards. Participating districts will need to demonstrate their commitment to using the tool and agree in-principle to take forward a future business case for consideration if the tool is successful.

Sustainable access to food

24. Previous cost-of-living programmes have seen significant amounts of money committed to ensuring residents have access to food. FSM support in the

holidays cost £3.5 million last year and 45% of expenditure in the RSS is in relation to food. The Oxfordshire Food Strategy seeks to develop sustainable approaches to helping people on low incomes access affordable, healthy food and this work should be supported from the cost-of-living programme. The Partnership & Delivery team have been working with internal policy colleagues and Good Food Oxford to agree some pilot activity in this area in 2024/25. The final options are yet to be selected but are intended to build on existing initiatives.

Support for low-income families with a child who has a disability

25. This funding will be used to help low-income families access Short Break Activities for disabled children. These activities are commissioned by the Council but costs need to be contributed by the parents of children attending. In particular the transport costs can often be prohibitively high. This funding will allow approximately 100 children to attend these activities.

Period poverty

26. This funding will help to ensure access to period products for people on low incomes. The issue was the subject of a motion to Full Council in September 2023. One-off funding in 2024/25 will allow services to assess demand during this year ahead of future resource decisions. A separate report including recommendations will be brought to Cabinet in June.

Monitoring

27. As with previous years programme delivery will be reported through Business Management and Monitoring report (BMMR)s. The work in respect of Community Wealth Building is expected to be the subject of a report to the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This committee has also received reports on cost-of-living expenditure beyond the BMMR and is expected to do so again in the future.
28. Quarterly management information is required by DWP, and this will be reported by the Partnerships & Delivery team who will manage review programme expenditure on a monthly basis.

Flexibility and additional support measures

29. The support package summarised in Table 3 represents current planning for the year ahead. However, there is significant uncertainty for example, in the number of FSM eligible students in the next academic year and in the take up of the RSS. In order to fully commit the available funding and to meet new needs and those needs not directly supported in the current package, the overall programme and spend will remain under review throughout the year with significant changes reported through business management reporting.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

30. The cost-of-living programme and the Community Wealth building work both directly address the Council's priority of tackling inequality in Oxfordshire. They

also indirectly address the prioritising of residents' health and wellbeing. This is achieved by targeting financial support at the most vulnerable residents in the county whilst also ensuring the council's assets are used in a way which maximises the return to Oxfordshire residents.

Financial Implications

31. There are no new budgetary implications from these recommendations although it should be noted that the report addresses expenditure of two budget changes agreed by Council in February 2024. These are £60,000 for Community Wealth Building and £300,000 for advice services.
32. The programme's administration costs were 6.9% of the budget. This funding includes the costs of staff employed to work on programme delivery. However it also covers central costs incurred by the Council in supporting programme delivery. This includes support provided by Finance, Customer Services, ICT and Childrens Services. As such there are no hidden costs incurred by the Council in delivery of the cost-of-living programme.

Comments checked by:

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

Legal Implications

33. Where any grant constitutes a subsidy, the Council must comply with the Subsidy Control Act 2022 and, where necessary, carry out a subsidy control assessment to ensure that the grant is compliant with the subsidy control principles. In providing the support detailed in this report the Council will rely on the general power of competence under the Localism Act 2011.

Comments checked by:

Paul Grant, Head of Legal, paul.grant@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Staff Implications

34. The programme expenditure detailed in Table 3 includes £165,000 for administration. This will fund three existing members of staff on fixed term contracts.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

35. The cost-of-living programme represents a continuation of support rather than being a new proposal and so a new Equality Impact Assessment has not been completed. The programme aims to tackle some of the most egregious areas of inequality in Oxfordshire by ensuring everyone can access food, energy and essential household items. The overall support package is designed to meet the needs of the most economically disadvantaged residents in Oxfordshire,

and to ensure that no-one is digitally excluded as a result of the design of the programme.

36. The RSS ensures that anyone experiencing financial crisis can request support. Data on access to the scheme is used to target take-up work. Low take-up by pensioners resulted in work undertaken with Age UK to promote the scheme, and a social media campaign to target relatives of pensioners who may need support.

Sustainability Implications

37. There are no significant impacts in respect of environmental sustainability in this programme. If the Household Support Fund is extended beyond September then consideration will be given to supporting the Better Housing Better Health programme which provides advice and financial support to residents on energy use, and energy efficiency measures.

Risk Management

38. The main risks related to the cost-of-living programme are as follows:
 - Overspend of funding – The majority of funding is demand led (FSM holiday support and RSS). The FSM support for the summer holiday will be paid prior to the May half term, which allows funding for the remainder of the programme to be prudently managed. The RSS has a number of mechanisms for increasing or reducing support to ensure expenditure remains within budget.
 - End of HSF from October – The main impact of this event would be the loss of FSM support in the holidays. The RSS could be amended to prioritise help for people affected by the loss of FSM support. The council has also budgeted for RSS funding to continue until the end of 2025/26. Any future funding should prioritise FSM support and the RSS and funding should be carried forward where possible in order to cushion potential cliff edges in funding
 - Low take-up of RSS either generally, or in relation to specific groups – Ongoing work to communicate the availability of the RSS is required in order to ensure it supports the most economically disadvantaged groups in the County. Monthly monitoring will be undertaken to identify any groups or areas where take-up is lower than expected. Where low take-up is identified work will be undertaken with relevant organisations and community groups to promote the scheme

Consultations

39. Although no formal consultation has been undertaken, in developing proposals for support, officers have engaged with the City and District Councils and relevant elements of the voluntary and community sector, including through regular briefings with advice agencies. Through implementation, further engagement will seek to ensure that the County Council's support schemes

are aligned to those of others and that we continue to work with partners to identify those elements of the community most impacted.

40. In the Autumn of 2023 a review of the RSS was conducted together with partners to the scheme, which saw 20 organisations feedback on how the scheme was operating and any changes that were needed. This exercise will be repeated this year to ensure the scheme is meeting the needs of those who need to access it.

Robin Rogers

Annex:	Annex 1 – Summary of Residents Support Scheme Annex 2 – Oxfordshire Community Foundation – Cost of Living Fund Donor Report
Background papers:	Nil
Other Documents:	Cost of Living Cabinet report March 2023: https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s65163/CA_MAR2123R13%20Cost%20of%20Living.pdf
Contact Officer:	Paul Wilding, Programme Manager (Cost of Living), 07756 772085, paul.wilding@oxfordshire.gov.uk

May 2024

Annex One – Summary of Residents Support Scheme including a case study

1. The Residents Support Scheme was launched on 1 June 2023. During the first 10 months of the scheme 5,238 applications were received with 3,620 of those resulting in an award being made. The tables below provide a breakdown of the annual application figures and awards. The number of awards in Table 2 is higher than the number of successful applications because most applications contain multiple requests (e.g. support for food and energy costs). Tangible items in Table 2 refers to essential household items such as white goods and furniture.

Table 1.

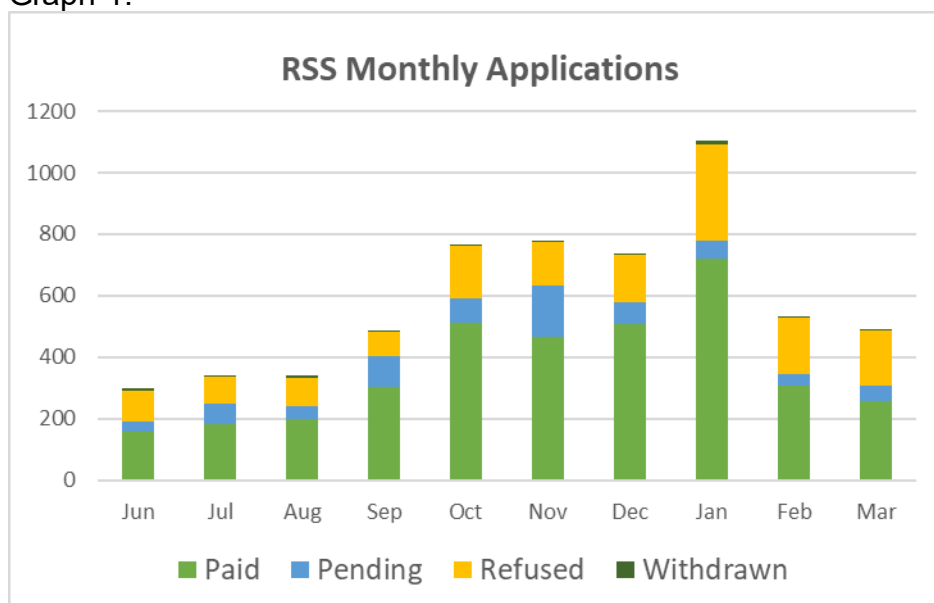
APPLICATIONS	
Paid	3620
Pending	49
Refused	1508
Withdrawn	61
Total:	5238

Table 2.

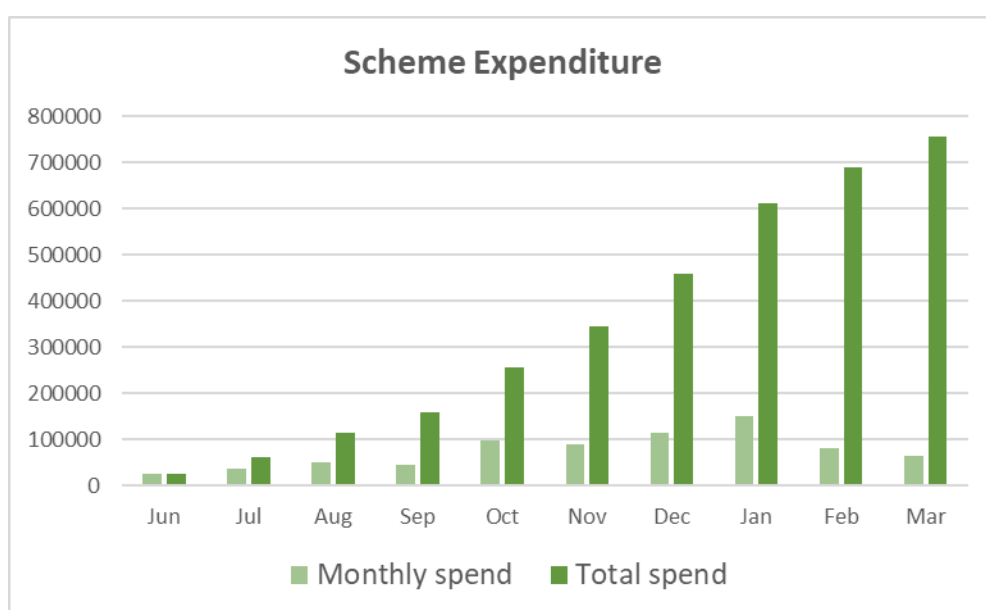
Items Category	#awards	Award value
Cancelled	94	-£5,723.00
Clothing	145	£7,350.00
Food	4403	£340,940.00
Energy	2585	£137,427.86
Sanitary	5	£50.00
Public Transport	6	£270.00
Paypoint Voucher	5	£500.00
Tangible items	1438	£277,891.01
Total:	8681	£758,705.87

2. Graph 1 below provides a monthly breakdown of expenditure, and Graph 2 shows expenditure by month. Application numbers were low to begin with as the scheme bedded in and awareness of it grew. The scheme was mainly promoted through partners such as advice organisations, the city and district councils, housing associations and other voluntary and community sector organisations.
3. Applications increased from October which is likely to be a result of greater awareness of the scheme, and the colder weather resulting in people spending more money on heating. A peak of applications after Christmas was expected but the drop off from February was unexpected. It is thought that this is likely due to the national cost of living payment made by government. This was a payment of £300 made to people in receipt of state benefits, in early February.

Graph 1.



Graph 2.



Unsuccessful Applications and Appeals

- Graph 3 below provides a breakdown of reasons applications are turned down. The main reason for refusal is where the application is determined to be a result of a budgeting issue. This is where the decision maker is of the view that the requested support would have been affordable if the applicant had budgeted for it. This is normally in circumstances where there is an equivalent or greater level of non-essential expenditure in the same period. It is recognised that there is a subjective element to such decisions, and an appeal process enables the applicant to challenge this.

The second most common reason for declining an application is where it is not possible to verify someone's information. This is where an application is received which is incomplete or where additional information is requested. Three attempts at contact will be made before declining the application. Where an application is declined for this reason, the resident is able to make a new approach at another time.

Table 3 below provides a breakdown of appeals received since the scheme began. Please note that the numbers do not balance due to a number of first stage appeals waiting to be determined at the end of March.

Graph 3.

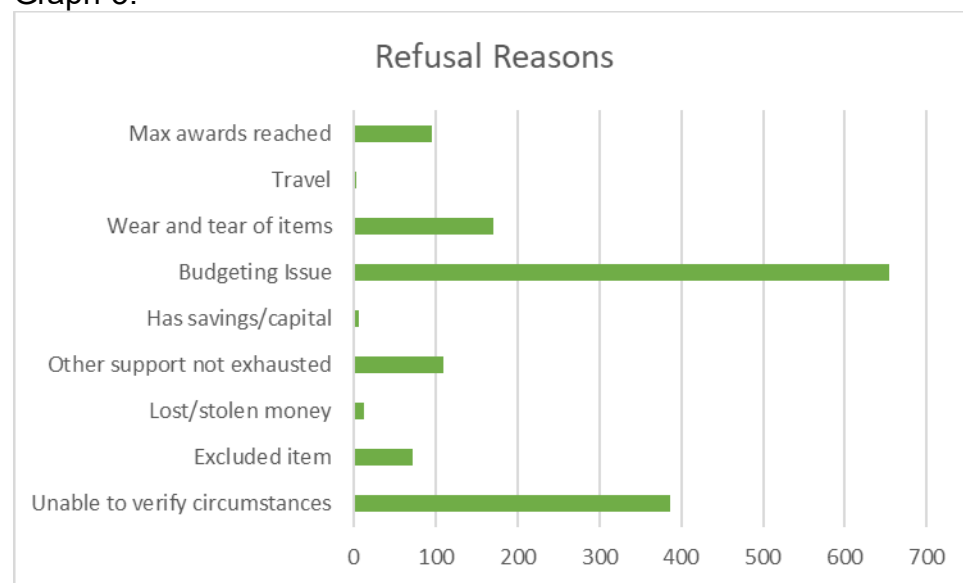


Table 3.

	Appeals	Overtured	Refused
First Stage	361	189	146
Second Stage	40	23	17

Case Study

- The following case study was provided by a member of the Council's Moving Into Adulthood team, and has been anonymised.

"I supported a young person to access the Residents Support Scheme. They were homeless and because they were vulnerable, social housing were able to provide a flat for them quite quickly, but it was empty of furniture and white goods.

I supported them with the application to the scheme, and after an initial problem in proving their identity, their application was successful. I went to see them last week, and the sofa and pots and pans had just arrived. We put the sofa together, and with the coffee table and TV stand I picked up for free, and with a kindly donated TV, their empty lounge is starting to look like a home. They were so grateful and asked me to pass on their thanks. Fortunately, they managed to get a bed and mattress, and with some free bedside tables, they are feeling more comfortable, and their new white

goods from the support scheme are arriving this week. When I left, they were more cheerful than they have been and said they are thinking about going back to college."



Cost of Living Fund Donor Report

March 2024

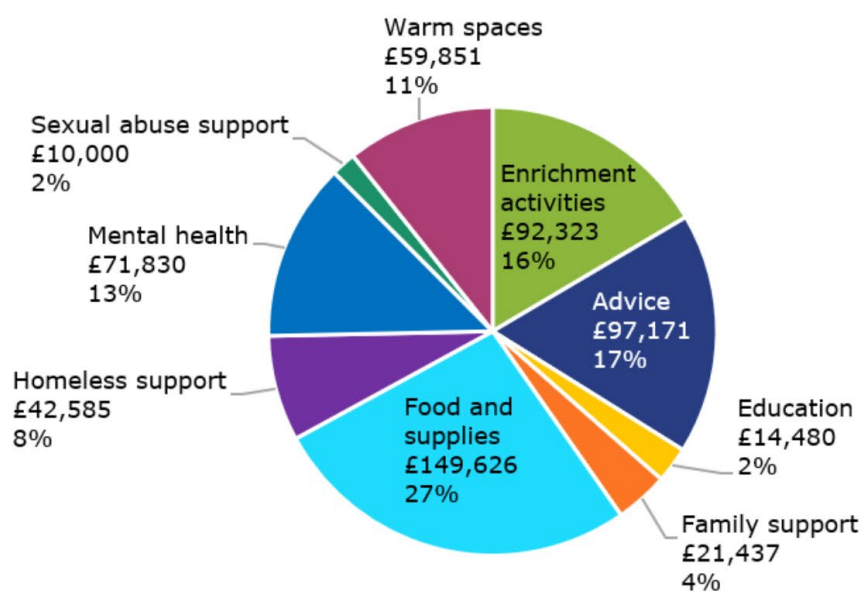
2022 and 2023 overview



£559k in all-time grants awarded to **77** organisations



49k direct beneficiaries



9* all-time themes funded

*Based on the one main theme supported by each grantee. The majority supported additional themes.



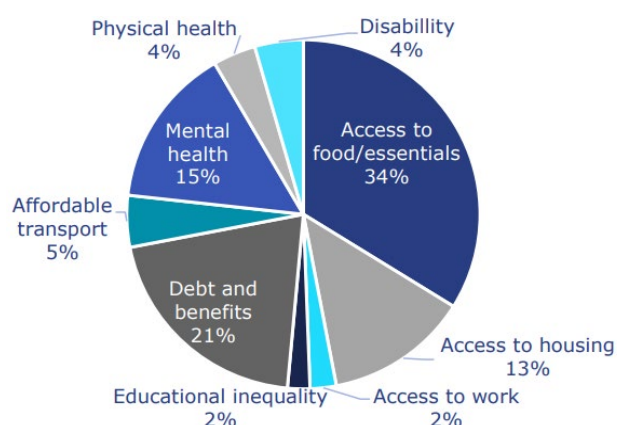
Introduction

In July 2023, the Cost of Living Fund awarded £273,000 in its second round of grants, reaching 35 local charitable organisations.

Building on the first round of funding in September 2022, this round focused on continued support to help community organisations tackle the cost of living and build more resilience. These grants were funded by OCF and a further £100,000 from Oxfordshire County Council, as well as a pool of other generous local trusts, businesses, Oxford colleges and members of the public.

In order to design this second round, we went back to our network for an update about the current critical challenges and [published a report](#) in May 2023 with our conclusions. The consultation showed that some charities were struggling to survive, let alone thrive. However, by continuing to support urgent needs, we wanted our grants to also offer ways to build more resilience in communities, by empowering the grassroots organisations that people really trust to offer additional services or make cross-referrals.

Biggest issues for Oxfordshire communities (OCF Sector Consultation, September 2022)



The continued need

In October 2022, inflation was at 11.1%, the highest rate in 40 years. Although it eventually [fell to 3.8%](#) by February 2024, years of increased costs have eroded individual and charity reserves. With state provision continuing to shrink, charities play a pivotal role in delivering vital services, but are finding it increasingly difficult to continue supporting vulnerable people. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) [revealed in November 2023](#) that with the funding they receive and the effect of inflation, **73% of charities can't meet current demand for the services they deliver**, putting many of them at crisis point.

Despite a new price cap from April 2024, energy bills still [remain 49% higher](#) than pre-energy crisis levels. Those on the lowest incomes are struggling with a burden of debt built up during the toughest times, and continue to be unable to pay for basic standard of living costs such as food or heating.

Persistent debt and poverty also have a knock-on effect on other issues, such as wellbeing and education. In March 2024 the [Department for Education](#) revealed that more than one in three pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were persistently absent last year, and that absence levels are still more than double the level seen before COVID.

The stats and stories in this report offer some hope for communities in Oxfordshire, showcasing the absolutely crucial work of our dynamic and resourceful local charitable sector.

This is why OCF remains dedicated to raising awareness and funds around the cost of the essentials needed for living locally, and is committed to another round of grant funding towards winter 2024. This report shares details of what has been achieved so far through our Cost of Living Fund with the support of our generous donors and funders, and what we plan next.

**The same goods and services costing
£10,000 in 2021
now cost £11,856
in February 2024**



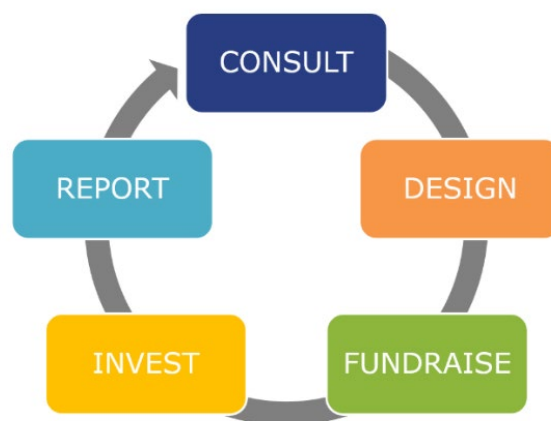
The process

As with our first round of funding in 2022, we **consulted** the charity sector again for an update on the current issues affecting Oxfordshire communities and the support charities needed.

Secondly, after listening to the views of stakeholders, we **designed** our 2023 grants round that met those needs. This round had a particular focus on:

- Urgent work to provide essentials such as food, clothing and accommodation
- Support for mental and physical health
- Building employment and financial capability such as debt advice and digital skills support
- Funding running costs and adjustment/extension of services for the delivery organisations to help them continue to build resilience in the long term.

We used our knowledge to **fundraise** from multiple sources, equipping us to **invest** £273k in the second round of funding to charitable organisations. Funded organisations are asked to **report** back on the outcomes of their grants six months to a year after payment, enabling us to monitor the impact of each grant, as well as begin a new cycle of learning and consulting for the next round of grant funding in 2024.



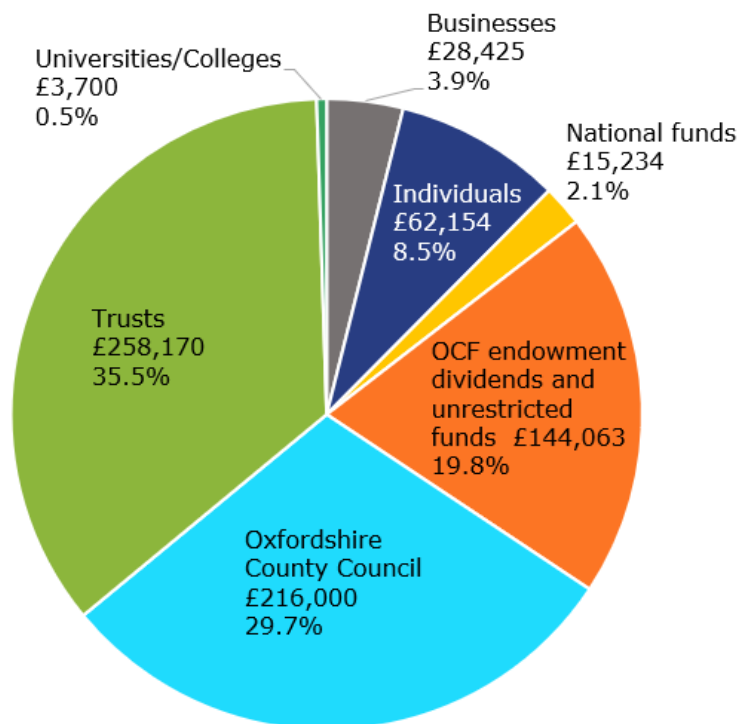
Fundraising

In 2023, **Oxfordshire County Council** provided a second donation of £100k from their own cost-of-living response budget. We are very grateful to them for their significant contributions.

OCF also worked with existing donors, businesses and local trusts to leverage further funding, and contributed a portion of our own unrestricted funds. By pooling these funds together, donors were able to have a larger, targeted impact.

We would like thank the following funders in particular:

- The Tambour Foundation
- HDH Wills Charitable Trust
- The John Laing Charitable Trust
- The Ian Mactaggart Trust
- The Beeching Trust
- Champriss Charitable Trust
- UK Community Foundations
- Donors to OCF's [Collective Business Fund](#) (RWK Goodman, Prodrive, Wise Funds, Allen Associates, Olamalu, Mills & Reeve and Oxford Pharmagenesis)
- The Barnsbury Charitable Trust
- The Bristol & West '97 Endowment Fund (via Quartet Community Foundation)
- The Brethertons Community Fund
- Saunders Family Fund
- Sovereign Network Group
- All Souls College
- Exeter College
- New College
- Brasenose College
- Christ Church
- Several significant individual donors who wish to remain anonymous.



Investment and results

During the second round of cost-of-living grants, OCF proactively reached out to charitable organisations that were less well known to us, and simplified the application process to increase accessibility. As a result, grant applications were made by a highly diverse group of charitable organisations, including grassroots community hubs, advice centres, food banks and churches.

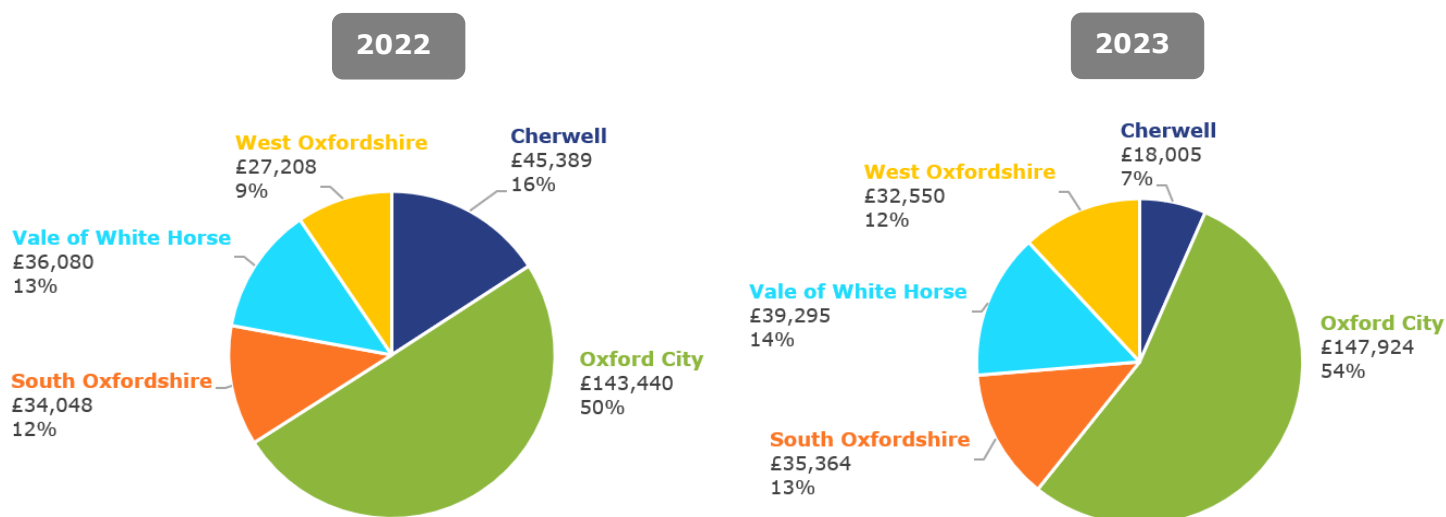
Since December 2022, £559k in grants have been awarded to 77 organisations, reaching nearly 50,000 direct beneficiaries across the county. A full list of the grants made in each round can be found in the appendix.



Once again, we would like to thank our volunteer Grants Panel. The panel is a diverse group of people with long experience of the charity sector, either as beneficiaries, staff or volunteers, and they bring financial rigour, subject-matter expertise and sheer hard work to the assessment and decision-making around OCF's grants. This creates a level of due diligence that individual donors and funders may not have capacity for.

Geographical spread

The pie charts below show grants awarded by local authority for 2022 and 2023.



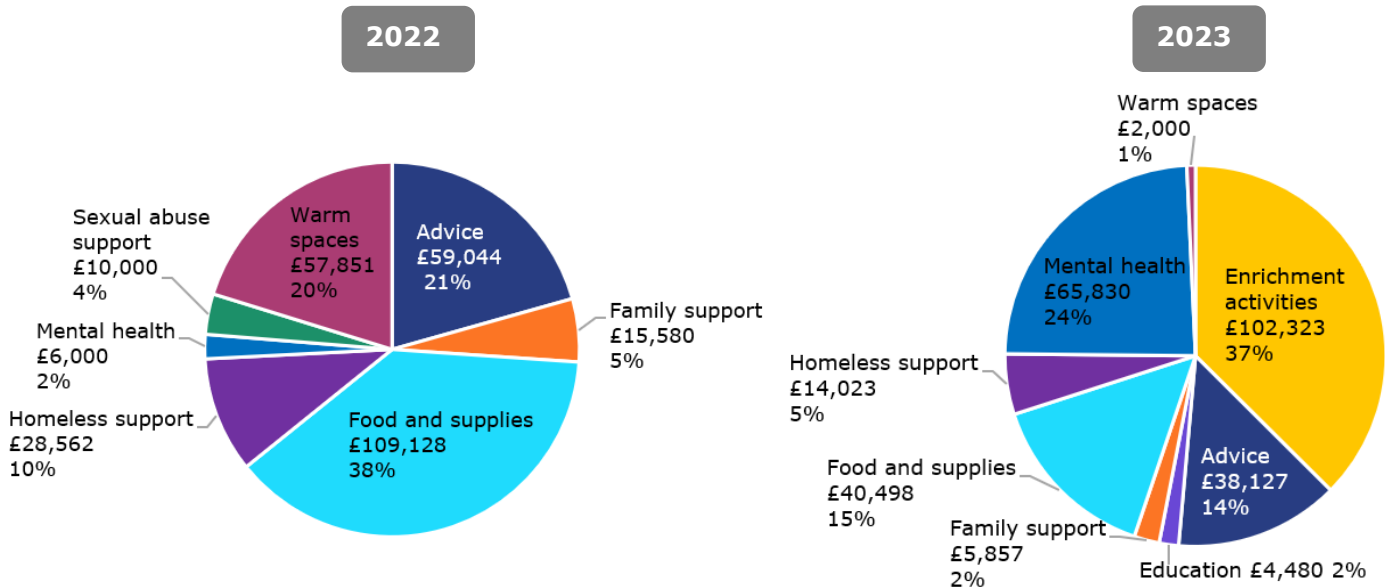
Oxford City contains 24 wards within its boundary, and has the largest concentration of charities. This area includes six of the most deprived wards in the county. The most deprived areas on the [Income Deprivation Affecting Children measure](#) (IMD 2019) are in parts of Blackbird Leys, Littlemore and Rose Hill, and Iffley wards, which are all within the Oxford City boundary.



Key activities supported

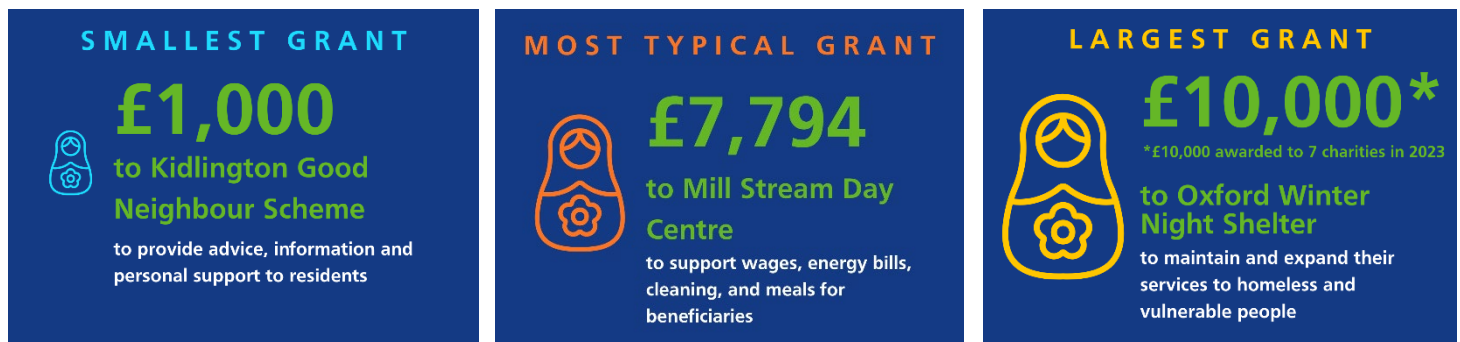
Grants from our Cost of Living Fund went towards food and supplies, warm spaces, homeless support, sexual abuse support, family support hubs, mental health groups, education, enrichment activities, and many other services that people are relying on.

Funding in 2022 focused on grantees providing immediate, practical support for essentials such as food and clothing. Funding in 2023 had a greater focus on long-term wellbeing, with grantees helping people to not only survive but thrive by building more sustainable habits. Round 2 of funding was delivered at the start of summer 2023, compared to round 1 in December 2022, so the need for warm spaces was less, but enrichment activities for the holidays were essential (including sports and physical activity, arts and crafts, clubs, training courses, and workshops). The pie charts show the main themes supported in 2022 and 2023.



It is important to note that the majority of the 77 charities that received funding aimed to tackle more than one of these issues. For example, many food and supplies services were signposting to other support, such as mental health or debt advice. Charities are not just looking to manage their short-term crisis response, but are also thinking about long-term impacts and issues that are interrelated. The activity being funded acknowledges the longevity of this crisis.

More preventative solutions will take longer to create, and charities need investment to continue. Currently they need to offer heavily discounted or free services; their own costs are rising; there are fewer volunteers (as they cannot afford to help); and charities struggle to offer competitive salaried roles. Charitable organisations offer a lifeline to individuals and communities every single day and must be able to continue doing so.



2023 case studies

SYRCOX

Food and supplies

Syrian Community in Oxfordshire (SYRCOX) are using their grant of £10,000 to deliver emergency food parcels every Thursday to disadvantaged people in Oxfordshire. The food parcels contain ingredients and recipe cards for specific dishes around the world, with different cuisines introduced regularly. The parcels teach families how to cook healthy and nutritious meals that are affordable and help break them out of a cycle of bad health and reliance on expensive ready-made meals. The food parcels give families hope for a better future by alleviating hunger and poverty, leading to improved mental health. They also help build relationships between people in the community.



The Living Room

Homeless support

The Living Room is a day centre where people experiencing homelessness in Oxford receive hospitality and compassion. As the cost of living has increased, there has been a higher demand for this service, with more and more people struggling to make ends meet. A grant of £4,023 from OCF is being used to continue to provide a safe space for everyone who needs it. Facilities include a hot shower, the ability to wash clothes, use of laptops and supportive company. Since its inception in 2021 the Living Room has served 70 rough sleepers and vulnerable people, of which 46 have subsequently been housed. Many of these guests are coming in to have support with things that build resilience such as combatting loneliness, receiving help with life administration like bills and forms, as well as having food if they are short on money.



Didcot Community Partnership

Advice/education

Didcot Community Partnership brings together local voluntary groups and helps them build their capacity, whilst filling gaps in provision of services that benefit children, young people and families in Didcot and the wider community. The charity's Our Patch family centre acts as a community hub, offering a diverse range of activities such as first aid courses, activities and hot food for families in school holidays, workshops on mental health, and monthly networking meetings and hosted events. Didcot Community Partnership is using their grant of £8,960 to increase opening hours, range of services and communications, building towards a centre that provides open access drop-ins in the mornings, more formal learning activities in the afternoon and is available for other community groups to use in the evenings. Having the capacity to open the family centre more frequently will provide a space for people struggling with anxiety, isolation and/or mental health concerns to come on a regular basis.



Mental Health Natters CIC

Mental health

Mental Health Natters CIC are using their £9,980 grant from OCF to develop specialised support of vulnerable children and young people in Abingdon who are struggling with their mental health in the fallout of the cost-of-living crisis. In many cases, children have missed years of school due to ill health, have no friendship groups and are also likely to have undiagnosed special educational needs. The grant will enable consistent morning and afternoon 121 sessions, developing positive relationships with both the young people and their parents and carers. An expert practitioner helps young people therapeutically, restoring their self-belief and trust, so that they can gradually implement a return to class.

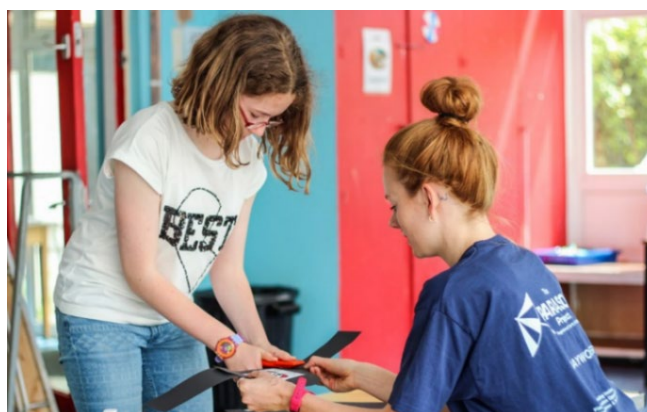
The Parasol Project

Enrichment activities

The Parasol Project supports disabled and disadvantaged children and young people experiencing, or at risk of, social exclusion, which has become more acute as cost-of-living pressures rise. The charity is using their grant of £7,608 to upgrade their kitchen to ensure they can continue to effectively support the children that visit them.

They run a children's holiday play scheme in Northway with hard-to-access activities that give children the opportunity to develop through free play, such as bushcraft, arts and crafts, sports, sensory play and fancy dress.

The Parasol Project also runs a teenage activity programme where teenagers can get involved in activities like film-making, cooking sessions and kayaking. These inclusive activities have huge benefits for disabled and non-disabled children and young people to build long-term resilience – new friendships are formed, social skills are developed and a level of sensitivity and awareness surrounding disability is established.



Next steps

Our recently published research [Oxfordshire Uncovered](#) reveals that too many of Oxfordshire's residents are facing a daily struggle to provide the basics for living a stable and safe life – or what we have called in the report **unaffordable essentials**.

Rental prices in the county are 31% higher than the national average, and 8% of households are living with fuel poverty. On any one night in Oxfordshire, it is estimated that there are over 400 homeless people across the county, including 160 children. Not being able to afford the essentials can lead to a spiral of instability, debt, ill-health, isolation and lack of opportunity.

In addition, OCF could only award grants to 26% of the total 300 charitable organisations that applied to the Cost of Living Fund in 2023. The need is clearly still great, and Oxfordshire's communities still need our help to build resilience to these pressures and to and future crises.

This is why OCF is committed to giving ongoing support to grassroots charitable organisations that are providing practical support to individuals in the short term, but combining this with robust support structures and preventative solutions for them to thrive in the long term.

To reflect this focus, we have decided to refresh the name of our Cost of Living Fund to be called the **Living Essentials Fund** as we move forward.

What you can do

Thank you so much to every one of the donors and funders who has supported our work in this area since 2022.

As we take forward our Living Essentials Fund, the number one action you can take to support us is to give again to the fund. Donations of every type and level help, as it is through the combined power of local authorities, philanthropists, businesses and trusts that we can make bigger difference.

We would also be incredibly grateful if you, our generous donors, would share the fact that you have supported this work, and encourage your own networks to join you by giving what they can to OCF's Living Essentials Fund.

**GIVE ONLINE
NOW >>**

**MORE ABOUT
THE FUND >>**



Appendix: Grants awarded from the Cost of Living Fund

December 2022

Organisation funded	Amount awarded	Type of activity funded	No of direct beneficiaries	Local authority
Banbury Community Church	£5,160	Warm spaces	40	Cherwell
Banbury Muslim Mosque Society	£6,199	Food and supplies	215	Cherwell
Barracks Lane Community Garden	£7,950	Warm spaces Food and supplies	80	Oxford
BeFree Young Carers	£10,000	Food and supplies Mental health	430	Vale of White Horse
Berin Centre	£9,618	Food and supplies Advice	183	South Oxfordshire
Bicester Foodbank	£3,333	Food and supplies	50	Cherwell
Blackbird Leys Adventure Playground	£10,000	Warm spaces Mental health	210	Oxford
Blackbird Leys Neighbourhood Support Scheme Ltd	£10,000	Advice	1,000	Oxford
Charlbury Parochial Church Council (PCC) St Mary's Church, Charlbury	£4,470	Food and supplies Mental health	25	West Oxfordshire
Cherwell Collective, CIC	£10,000	Food and supplies Warm spaces	9,442	Cherwell
Cholsey Day Centre Trust	£7,500	Advice Mental health	40	South Oxfordshire
Citizens Advice North Oxfordshire and South Northamptonshire (Banbury CA Bureau)	£5,000	Advice	438	Cherwell
Citizens Advice Oxfordshire South and Vale	£5,000	Advice	659	Vale of White Horse
Community Cupboard, Rose Hill Methodist Church	£8,000	Food and supplies	125	Oxford
DAMASCUS P.C.C.	£8,130	Warm spaces	300	Vale of White Horse
Didcot Community Partnership	£5,180	Warm spaces Food and supplies	820	South Oxfordshire
Donnington Doorstep Family Centre	£9,674	Warm spaces Food and supplies	300	Oxford

Organisation funded	Amount awarded	Type of activity funded	No of direct beneficiaries	Local authority
Down to Earth Community Cafe CIC	£2,480	Warm spaces Food and supplies	500	Vale of White Horse
Emmaus	£8,562	Homeless support	40	Oxford
Food for Charities / Oxford City Council	£2,780	Food and supplies	350	Vale of White Horse
Gatehouse	£10,000	Homeless support	147	Oxford
Grove Parochial Church Council, St John the Baptist Grove - GroW Families	£7,000	Food and supplies	985	Vale of White Horse
Home-Start Oxford	£10,000	Family support	789	Oxford
Leys CDI	£7,500	Food and supplies Warm spaces	156	Oxford
NOMAD	£5,000	Food and supplies	1,303	South Oxfordshire
Oxford Mutual Aid	£9,980	Food and supplies Advice	1,879	Oxford
Oxford Sexual Abuse & Rape Crisis Centre	£10,000	Sexual abuse support	1,886	Oxford
Oxfordshire Breastfeeding Support	£7,110	Advice Mental health	267	Cherwell
Red Kite Family Centre	£750	Food and supplies	234	South Oxfordshire
Refugee Resource	£7,684	Advice Mental health	60	Oxford
Riverside Counselling Service	£6,000	Mental health	95	South Oxfordshire
Rose Hill Junior Youth Club	£8,300	Food and supplies	362	Oxford
Sunshine Centre	£8,587	Warm spaces Food and supplies	4,235	Cherwell
Syrian Sisters	£630	Food and supplies	76	Oxford
The Branch Trust	£6,750	Advice Warm spaces	361	West Oxfordshire
The Parasol Project	£5,580	Family support	200	Oxford
The Porch	£10,000	Homeless support	474	Oxford
The Wychwoods Day Centre Ltd	£988	Food and supplies	30	West Oxfordshire
Thomas Hughes Memorial Hall	£690	Warm spaces	50	Vale of White Horse
Waste2taste, Ltd	£9,580	Food and supplies	368	Oxford
West Oxfordshire Citizens Advice Bureau	£10,000	Advice	40	West Oxfordshire



Organisation funded	Amount awarded	Type of activity funded	No of direct beneficiaries	Local authority
Wychwood Baptist Church (outreach work now run through the 'Life Centre')	£5,000	Food and supplies Warm spaces	120	West Oxfordshire
TOTAL	£286,165		29,364	

July 2023

Organisation funded	Amount awarded	Type of activity funded	No of direct beneficiaries	Local authority
Blackbird Leys Adventure Playground	£9,610	Activities	200	Oxford
Citizens Advice North Oxfordshire and South Northamptonshire	£7,537	Advice	560	Cherwell
Citizens Advice Oxford	£9,735	Advice	320	Oxford
Collinwood Road United Reformed Church	£2,000	Warm spaces Activities	50	Oxford
Dance Creative	£8,910	Activities Mental health	150	Oxford
Didcot Community Partnership	£8,960	Mental health Activities Education	250	South Oxfordshire
Didcot TRAIN Youth Project	£8,776	Mental health Activities Education	45	South Oxfordshire
Donnington Tenants and Residents Association	£4,456	Activities	80	Oxford
Grandpont Nursery School and Childcare	£7,900	Activities Education Advice	2,000	Oxford
Grove Parochial Church Council, St John the Baptist Grove - GroW Families	£9,222	Activities Education	400	Vale of White Horse
Ikkaido	£4,480	Education	100	Oxford
International Teams (operating as One Collective UK)	£10,000	Activities	3,500	Oxford
Kidlington Good Neighbour Scheme and Information Centre	£1,000	Advice	167	Cherwell



Organisation funded	Amount awarded	Type of activity funded	No of direct beneficiaries	Local authority
Marston Community Gardening	£9,963	Activities	1,000	Oxford
MEET in Oxford	£9,680	Mental health	50	Oxford
Mental Health Natters CIC	£9,980	Mental health	500	Vale of White Horse
Mill Stream Day Centre	£7,794	Activities	100	South Oxfordshire
MyVision Oxfordshire	£9,955.47	Advice	956	Oxford
Oxfordshire Breastfeeding Support	£5,857	Family support Mental health	429	Oxford
Oxfordshire Discovery College	£9,834.12	Mental health	60	South Oxfordshire
Oxford Winter Night Shelter	£4,023	Homeless support Activities	70	Oxford
Restore	£10,000	Mental health Activities	202	Oxford
Root and Branch	£8,600	Mental health Activities	65	Vale of White Horse
South Oxford Community Association	£3,747	Food and supplies Warm spaces Activities	150	Oxford
Stonesfield Village Hall	£5,000	Activities	200	West Oxfordshire
Sunshine Centre	£9,467.50	Activities	5,400	Cherwell
Syrian Community in Oxfordshire SYRCOX	£10,000	Food and supplies	800	Oxford
Syrian Sisters	£10,000	Activities Food and supplies	200	Oxford
The Cedar Community Club	£1,592.51	Food and supplies Activities	50	Vale of White Horse
The Parasol Project	£7,608	Food and supplies Activities	500	Oxford
The Porch	£10,000	Homeless support Activities	248	Oxford
Transition Chipping Norton	£10,000	Activities	250	West Oxfordshire
Vale Community Impact	£9,900	Advice	750	Vale of White Horse
Witney Baby Bank	£7,550	Food and supplies	100	West Oxfordshire



Organisation funded	Amount awarded	Type of activity funded	No of direct beneficiaries	Local authority
Wychwood Baptist Church (outreach work now run through the 'Life Centre')	£10,000	Food and supplies Activities	200	West Oxfordshire
TOTAL	£273,138		20,102	



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CABINET

14 May 2024

Customer Experience Strategy Report by Executive Director of People

RECOMMENDATION

The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to:

- a) Approve the council's new Customer Experience Strategy.
- b) Endorse that the annual update of the strategy and the action plan should be overseen by the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Executive Summary

1. Improving customer experience is a key area of focus for the organisation. A wide-ranging programme of work is in place to ensure interactions with customers are of a consistently high standard and a customer-first approach is at the heart of everything the council does.
2. One of the key elements of the programme is the development of a new Customer Experience Strategy. The strategy sets the direction for how the council wants its employees to interact with customers and colleagues as well as emphasising the importance of council values and behaviours.
3. The aim of this strategy is to demonstrate to customers that the council is putting them first and to ensure everyone across the council understands the importance of good and consistent customer service regardless of their role. The strategy applies to all council employees and not just the Customer Service Centre.

Background

4. This is the council's first Customer Experience Strategy. It supplements the existing Customer Service Charter and Standards and aims to formalise with employees the positive vision the council has for its customer experience and its commitment to continuously improve.
5. The strategy has been developed with input from a range of stakeholders, including through 1:1 conversation, an online survey, and ideas boards. This

insight has enabled the council to build a detailed picture of the changing needs and expectations of its customers and how the council can best support them. A full report of the engagement can be found in Annex 2.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

6. The Customer Experience Strategy supports many of the Council's Strategic Priorities, in particular:
 - Tackling inequalities in Oxfordshire
 - Prioritise the health and wellbeing of our residents.
 - Support carers and the social care system.
 - Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.
 - Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economy, and social benefit.

Financial Implications

7. There are no direct budgetary implications associated with the strategy. The expectation is that any budgetary implications that arise from actions will be managed within existing service area budgets.

Comments checked by: Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance and Deputy Section 151 Officer, Kathy.Wilcox@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Legal Implications

8. There are no legal implications associated with the strategy.

Comments checked by: Paul Grant, Head of Legal, Paul.grant@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Staff Implications

9. The delivery of actions within the strategy will be delivered within existing council resources.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

10. The development of the strategy will have a positive impact on equality, diversity, and inclusion for people with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and more widely. This is because the plan will take a data driven approach to understand the needs of the council's customers better and equip employees with relevant training. The plan also sets out to better understand the various channels different groups need to access our services and where the council can automate in some areas to spend more time on

complex matters that require face to face or phone calls, so no one is digitally excluded.

11. As the strategy is put into action, the council will ensure people from different backgrounds, languages and access needs can make contact easily and feed into this work. Therefore, this strategy does not have any negative impacts on equalities.

Sustainability Implications

12. The action plan may have a positive impact on sustainability as there is a more appropriate and considered use of physical and digital resources when contacting customers which might support less resource wastage. There is also the potential that, through linking this work with strategies such as digital inclusion, the council can support the use of reusable technology. Finally, through improving customer interactions, for example through better partnership working, the council can work more effectively to complete sustainability initiatives as set out in the council plan.

Annexes

- Annex 1: Customer Experience Strategy
- Annex 2: Engagement Report
- Annex 3: High Level Action Plan Feedback

Report by	Stephen Chandler, Executive Director of People
Contact Officer	Susmita Dave, National Management Trainee

May 2024

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Customer Experience Strategy

Our customer service is your experience...



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Foreword

I'm really pleased to introduce Oxfordshire County Council's new Customer Experience Strategy.

Supporting our customers lies at the heart of our work. Whether you're applying for a parking permit, registering a birth, visiting a waste recycling centre, accessing social care, or using any other of our wide range of services, we want to provide you with the best possible experience.

We have a clear commitment to foster an environment where every interaction, whether big or small, leaves a positive and lasting impression on our customers. It provides an opportunity to deliver support, build trust, foster collaboration, and drive positive and lasting change.

The development of this strategy has been a collaborative effort, reflecting our determination to listen, learn and respond to the needs of our diverse communities. I'd like to thank everyone who has contributed to this important piece of work and shared their experiences with us. Your insight has enabled us to build a detailed picture of the changing needs and expectations of our customers and how we can work together to make a real difference.



Councillor Neil Fawcett
Cabinet Member for Community
& Corporate Services

Introduction

“Customer service is not just a department, it’s an attitude”

The secret lies in building a culture focussed on creating an amazing customer experience every day for every customer – [Shep Hyken](#)

In creating a Customer Experience Strategy, our motivation is simple: we want our customers to have an excellent experience in every interaction they have with us and to feel listened to and supported.

This is our first customer experience strategy. It aims to build on our existing set of customer standards and draw on the valuable insight we have gathered to improve your experience with us. We want to ensure a customer-first approach lies at the heart of everything we do in the council and is not just seen as the responsibility of the customer service or frontline teams. This strategy is about putting the customer front and centre of our work every day.

Why do we need a strategy?

Oxfordshire is a diverse county, and we have a mix of customers that need or want to use our services. We know that people’s expectations and needs are changing as new technology emerges. The pandemic and cost of living crisis has also affected the demand on our services and the support our customers need. We want your access to council services to be easy and quick. When you connect with us directly, we want you to feel valued and confident that we will get it right first time.

We are committed to understanding what you want from us now and in the future, and to change the way we work to respond to our customers’ expectations. This strategy is designed to ensure all our customers receive an excellent experience, no matter who you are and what you need from the council.

Introduction

What does customer experience mean?

Customer experience is the way that people feel at all stages of interacting with an organisation. As a council, it is vital that we treat our customers well when they are trying to access and receive our services.

This means you feel listened to, supported, and have genuinely positive interactions with us. This also means going above and beyond to understand what you need from us and to find a solution for you quickly and helpfully.

This could be whether you are calling our customer service centre as a resident, interacting with us as a business, or visiting one of our services like a library or a household waste recycling centre.

National context around customer experience

Our strategy aims to ensure a consistently excellent customer experience, no matter who you are and what you need from the council. We also want our employees to provide an excellent customer experience in line with nationally recognised standards.

[The Institute of Customer Service](#) defines an organisation which provides excellent customer services as:

“Honest, gives good value for money, has a high reputation, meets deadlines, has quality products and services, has easy to understand processes, responds to criticism, encourages complaints and handles them well, and demonstrates that it is passionate about customers.”

In addition, the [Customer Contact Association](#) highlights some of the skills needed by professionals across a range of sectors to support excellent customer experience:

These are employees who are knowledgeable about a range of issues and who are emotionally supportive.

Introduction

Polling across the UK, Spain, Germany and France by **Twilio** showed that there are three key building blocks to good customer service:

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1. **Efficiency:** Particularly in today's fast changing world, it is important that good customer service is not just transactional or about speed but builds trust through being more personalised, responsive, and flexible.
2. **Expertise:** Providing expertise is not just about employees being knowledgeable but also requires the use of customer data behind the scenes. Employees can access real-time, data-driven insights and recommendations from analytics as they speak to you.
3. **Emotional connection:** Showing emotion demonstrates a "human touch" in an increasingly digitalised world.

Our strategy sets out to achieve these various aspects, expanding and improving our services and frameworks to support customer experience as well as upskilling our employees to be prompt as well as knowledgeable and emotionally connected.

Challenges

Our Customer Experience Strategy acknowledges the many challenges involved in delivering exceptional service to our diverse communities.

From navigating complex processes to addressing varying levels of digital literacy, we recognise the barriers that may affect customers' access to, and satisfaction with, our services.

Moreover, technological advancements and shifting demographics mean we need to continuously adapt and innovate. By confronting these challenges head on, we can create a more inclusive, responsive and effective customer experience.

1. Decreased customer satisfaction nationally and locally

Across the UK we have seen a decline in customer satisfaction levels, particularly as customers expect more with new technology. The 2024 UK Customer Satisfaction Index currently stands at 76.0 (out of 100), which is a decline of 1.7 points compared to a year ago and 2.4 points below its 2022 level.

21 per cent of customers who rated an organisation 1 – 4 for customer satisfaction said the experience had made them trust other organisations less, while 45 per cent of customers say poor use of technology has made them avoid an organisation.

Our local residents' survey has also given us an insight into how our customers feel.

Over the last two years we have seen a reduction in satisfaction levels with Oxfordshire County Council.

In 2023, 40 per cent of respondents said they were satisfied with the way that the council runs things compared to 49 per cent in 2021. Fewer residents were satisfied with the services provided by the council (39 per cent in 2023, down from 53 per cent in 2021), while the number of residents who felt the council provides value for money dropped from 30 per cent to 25 per cent. The percentage of residents who felt the council did not act on residents' concerns increased from 48 per cent to 57 per cent.

To improve customer satisfaction we need to work on being responsive, acting on residents' concerns, creating value for money services, and keeping our residents well informed.

Understanding what's important to our residents means we can better anticipate their needs and how to support them.

Challenges

2. The COVID-19 pandemic

We know our communities have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and their needs have become more complex. The means of contacting organisations and the ways to access and deliver services have also changed - flexible and online interactions have become the norm.

Oxfordshire's health and wellbeing strategy reflects that some services are still recovering from the impacts of COVID-19, while the impact of COVID-19 continues to affect the health and wellbeing of our communities. For example, 44 per cent of children and young people in west Oxfordshire said COVID-19 impacted their mental health.

We need to ensure that we are delivering in the way that our customers expect in this post-pandemic world and that all customers are supported during changing circumstances.

3. The cost-of-living crisis

In this period of severe financial challenge, we need to deliver extra support to those who are struggling financially while making sure we provide value for money for council taxpayers.

We are therefore looking at different ways in which we can deliver services as flexibly and cost effectively as possible.

For example, we are increasing our range of online channels to provide greater choice for customers, while reducing the costs pressures on the council.

Online transactions often cost less than 50p whereas a telephone call can cost more than £2 and an in-person conversation can cost £8+.

Through this strategy we aim to make our online services quicker and easier, thereby giving customers more choice and flexibility while reducing costs for the council.

4. Digital exclusion

Technology is developing at a rapid pace and there are a range of new ways of interacting online with customers. However, some of our customers still face barriers to accessing online resources and support – whether it's a lack of internet connectivity, limited digital literacy or financial constraints.

We aim to ensure everyone has the same access and consistent service when contacting us whether they are using technology or not and our recent digital inclusion strategy reflects this. We are also committed as a council to supporting people with improving their digital literacy, including upskilling our employees on new technology.

Challenges

5. Increased demand for services

Demand for services is increasing across councils in the UK and Oxfordshire is no exception. Whether it's healthcare or social care, the demand for essential services continues to rise, while the funding available simply cannot keep pace.

Meeting this increased demand requires a strategic approach, which enables customers to self-serve or use partner services where appropriate while allowing the council to focus on more complex cases where greater support is required.

By reducing overall demand in this way, we can ensure we deliver consistent customer service and support those who need us most.

We acknowledge this shift will take time and this strategy will be the first step in supporting that transition.

Identify and minimise cases where contact with the council is not needed

Early intervention, preventative techniques and signposting

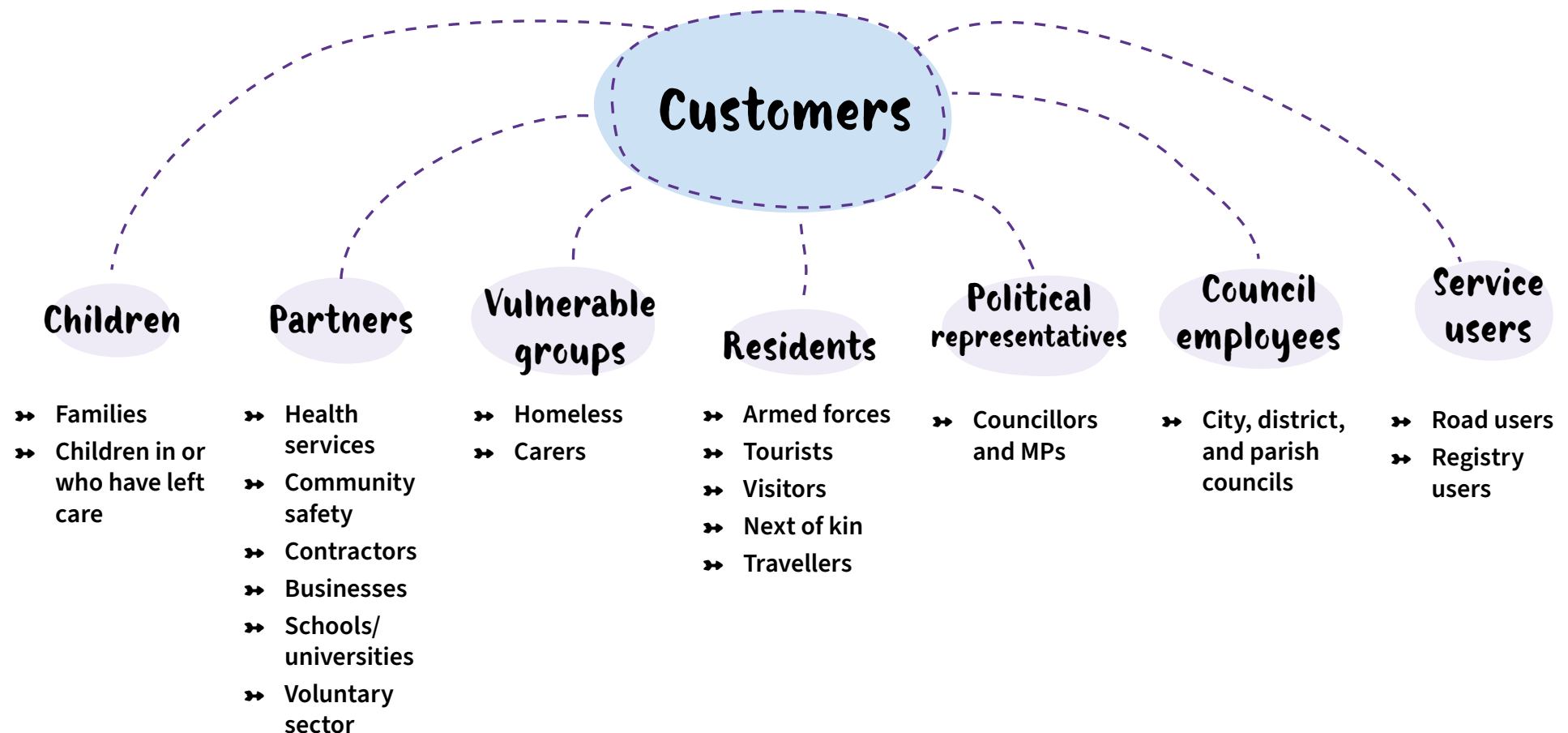
Community empowerment and involvement of partners

Customer self-service options

Consistent customer service delivery

Our county, our customers

We asked our employees who their customers are.
This graphic shows what they said:



Our county, our customers

The below graphic showcases a high-level overview of our customers in Oxfordshire

Our county

Population
725,300

40%
Live in rural
communities

83.8%
Households
have 1+ cars

60%
Live in main
towns

288,100
Households

34,500
Trading
companies

Our customers

17%
Age 0-15

18%
Age 65+

22%
Have
hearing loss

**Over
120**
Languages
spoken

65%
Age 16-64

14.5%
Have a
disability

8.7%
English not first
language

A customer refers to any individual, group or organisation that interacts with or receives assistance, support or guidance from the council.

This includes residents, businesses, community groups, and other stakeholders who engage with the council to access services, seek information, or address concerns related to various aspects of community life.

The experiences, needs and feedback from customers are integral to shaping the quality, accessibility, and responsiveness of the services provided by the council.

We support customers over their lifetime, from birth to death and everything in between.

Many people may not know this support comes from the council as some customers interact with us more directly than others.

Understanding our customers better

In this section, we explore how we develop greater knowledge and insight about our customers.

We do this in many ways, from census data and insight to real-life case studies.

By examining customer interaction data, we discover valuable insights into the needs, preferences and challenges faced by our customers.

Complementing these statistics are conversations from our engagement with customers, highlighting the impact of our services on people's lives and the diverse experiences of individuals and groups that rely on our support.

Understanding our customer data

The profile of our county is changing, particularly as we have a growing and an ageing population.

We need to be aware of these changes and continuously update and refine our services to keep up with those changes.

Identifying the diverse range of groups across the county helps us tailor our services to meet the needs of those separate groups.

The images on the following page show some of the key facts about our county and our customers including a breakdown of income and rurality, provided by a tool called Acorn.

Our customers also include the most vulnerable within our society, those that need extra support and those that use our council services day in day out.

Gaining a good understanding of who our customers are and what they need is vital.

One way we have done this is through our community insight profiles, which provide qualitative and quantitative data on our ten most deprived ward areas.

To find out more, visit [community insight profiles](#).

Our aim is to use a number of different data sources to build a rich picture of our customers and use this information to tailor our services.

Understanding our customers better

Page 67



A breakdown of Acorn's general categories for Oxfordshire

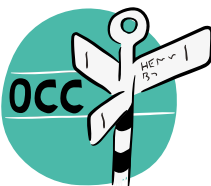
Learn more about the groupings [here](#).

How do our customers contact us?

As a county council we deliver a range of services, including adult and children's social care, some education services, public health, fire and rescue, libraries and museums, roads, trading standards, and waste disposal and recycling.

Our customers therefore request information and advice from us on a wide range of topics, from applying for a blue badge to requesting social care.

Figures from:
January to December 2023



County Hall

1,555 visits to County Hall reception of which **1,025** were enquiries from members of the public



Bus pass

18,089 contacts across email, telephony and webchat

8,803 bus pass applications processed

School admissions

29,906 contacts across email and telephony



Adult social care

67,969 contacts across email and telephony

25,278 referrals made into adult social care



Blue badge

19,874 contacts across email, telephony and webchat

17,315 blue badge applications processed



Registration

14,520 calls across births, death and certificates plus **100** webchats

How do our customers contact us?



Children's social care

17,847 calls received

2,817 requests for
information checks
completed



Household support fund

4,295 household
support fund enquiries
across email and
telephony



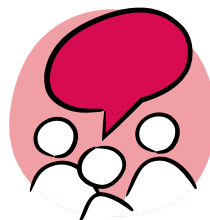
Visitors to Union Street

1,265 customers
since October 2022

Voice of the customer

1,803 complaints
handled

1,633 FOIs received



Parking

20,693 contacts across
email, telephony and
webchat

26,749 residential and
visitor permit applications
processed



Highways

27,551 highway enquiries across email
and telephony

1,368 street lighting enquiries across
telephony and webchat

3,016 waste and permit enquiries across
telephony, email, and webchat

10,489 waste recycling centre permits
processed



Community safety

8,701 trading standards
enquiries across email
and telephony

4,583 fire and rescue
enquiries across email
and telephony



Ukraine response programme

17,158 Homes for
Ukraine enquiries
across email and
telephony

Our performance data and complaints

As the figures on this page demonstrate, we know customers are satisfied with their contacts across all channels in the customer service centre (CSC) in the council, but customer experience is wider than just the contact centre.

To enhance wider service delivery performance, our strategy focuses on improving council-wide processes and systems. By implementing better mechanisms and technology we aim to have a higher standard of quality. Continuous monitoring of performance measurements will enable us to identify areas for improvement.

Additionally, investing in employees' training and development will empower our teams to deliver exceptional service consistently, further contributing to improved performance and customer satisfaction.

In March 2024:

The number of corporate complaints (stage 1 and 2) responded to within timescales



The overall customer satisfaction rate for the customer service centre (telephony)



First contact resolution for customer enquiries received by the customer service centre



The percentage of customer telephone calls abandoned at the customer service centre



The number of Freedom of Information requests responded to within timescales



Complaints trends

Lengthy response times, lack of clarity in communication, and inconsistent outcomes are trends we see in complaints. To address these challenges, our strategy emphasises proactive measures aimed at prevention and resolution.

This includes implementing robust communication channels to provide timely updates and clear guidance to customers, thereby reducing frustration. Additionally, we will enhance employee training around policies and procedures, enabling more effective problem-solving and quicker resolution of complaints. By fostering a culture of accountability and continuous improvement, we aim to not only address current complaint trends but also anticipate future issues and implement pre-emptive measures to mitigate them, ultimately fostering greater resident satisfaction in council services.

The Customer Experience Strategy

Our strategy is built around three key elements: our values, our customer commitments, and our principles.

Values: Our actions align with the five corporate values of the council.

Customer commitments: We have eight key commitments to ensure our standards are consistently high.

Principles: Our five principles set the direction for council-wide improvement when interacting with customers.

Customer commitments:

- **Inclusivity:** We welcome all customers without discrimination.
- **Continuous improvement:** We work hard to improve our services for you.
- **Expertise:** We have the skills needed to support your needs.
- **Personalised care:** We cater to specific requirements you may need and swiftly address any barriers you face.
- **Accuracy:** Our material is up to date and accurate.
- **Transparency and accountability:** We are transparent in our decision-making processes and accountable for the outcomes and we are honest with you.
- **Feedback-driven:** We welcome feedback and learn from it.
- **Positive experience:** We ensure you are supported and want you to have a positive experience.

Our values

Delivering the Future Together is the council's programme which underpins everything we do: how we work together; how we make decisions; how we manage organisational change and development; and how we serve our customers.

We have five organisational values, which apply to how we interact with both our customers and colleagues:

Be kind and caring: e.g. colleagues are highly trained and take an empathetic approach.

Always learning e.g. we join up our data and channels, so customers only need to tell us things once.

Taking responsibility: e.g. we follow up promptly on customers' concerns until they have a solution.

Daring to do things differently: e.g. colleagues are empowered to make changes to their processes and try new technologies.

Equality and integrity in all we do: e.g. we understand the needs of our vulnerable customers.

Our principles

Our five key principles have been developed following engagement with our customers and are designed to help us deliver our customer vision.

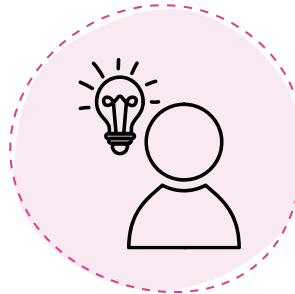
For each of these principles we have identified what we want to change for the future and how we are going to do it.

Our values,
our commitment



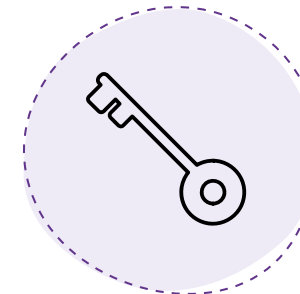
Principle 1

Having a 'customer first' approach across the council



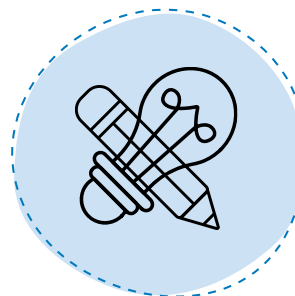
Principle 2

Having a better understanding of our customers and what they want from us



Principle 3

Improving customers' access to our services



Principle 4

Designing an excellent customer experience, from beginning to end



Principle 5

Listening to and learning from customer feedback

Principle 1



Having a 'customer first' approach across the council

Delivering excellent customer service shouldn't just be a goal, but our guiding principle. It needs to be woven into the fabric of our services and the approach of all our employees. We're committed to going above and beyond to meet the needs of our communities, ensuring that the customer lies at the heart of every interaction.

Objective

We will ensure that delivering customer excellence is at the heart of our services and our approach.

How we will do it

Be clear about what customers need to do, and what they can expect from us.

Create a workplace culture where giving customers a good experience is part of everyone's job.

Give our employees the support and confidence to make changes that will improve customer experience.

Train our employees so they know how to do this, including giving people the opportunity to get qualifications in customer experience.

Learn from our employees about what stops them from delivering excellent customer experience so we can continuously improve.

Principle 2



Having a better understanding of our customers and what they want from us

Our customers have different needs and preferences in what they want from the council and how they want to interact with us. We want to develop the way we deliver our services to ensure that we understand and cater for the needs of our different customer groups.

Objective

We will use data and insight effectively and innovatively to better understand and support our customers' needs.

How we will do it

Use information from lots of sources to help us understand who our customers are.

Make sure that we understand the needs of vulnerable people in Oxfordshire.

Listen to our customers to understand how and when they access our services, and what gets in the way.

Use this knowledge to inform improvements, and make sure our services are accessible to everybody that needs them.

Principle 3



Improving customers' access to our services

The rapid increase in new technologies means that customers now engage with services and products in new ways. We are embracing these changes to enhance customers' access to our services to deliver a consistent experience.

Objective

We will ensure that all customers are able to contact the council and access services quickly and easily across a range of channels and receive consistently excellent service.

How we will do it

Have a range of ways for customers to contact us or find information, including digital channels that can be used 24 hours a day.

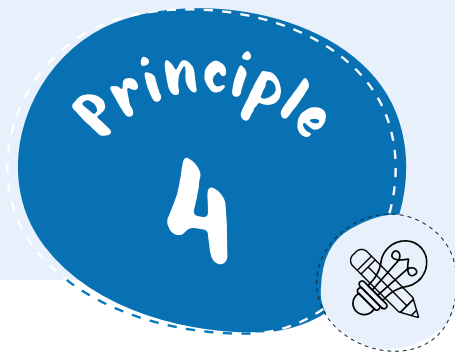
Work in a more joined-up way so that customers only need to tell us things once.

Make it easier for customers to find information, while making sure that we keep private data safe and protected.

Be consistent so that all customers receive excellent service.

Make transactions simple and easy.

Keep our phone and face to face services, whilst making it easier for customers to find our contact phone numbers.



Designing an excellent customer experience, from beginning to end

We want to ensure that our customers have a great experience, from the first point of contact to when they receive services.



Use what we learn about customers to make sure their needs are at the heart of how we work.

Focus on 'getting it right first time', and where we can't solve things right away, getting all the information needed to help.

Make sure our ways of working are clear, straightforward and don't leave anyone out.



Improve the way our services communicate, including keeping in touch regularly when needed.

Develop resources to help us answer queries at the first point of contact.

Principle 5



Listening to and learning from customer feedback

We want to actively seek feedback from our customers. Whether it's through surveys, reviews, or social media, we encourage them to share their thoughts and where we can improve our customer interactions. As Bill Gates wisely said, "Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning." We value their insights and use them to improve.

Objective

We will commit to learning from the feedback of our customers and resolving their queries quickly and helpfully.

How we will do it

Put in place a new and better way of managing complaints.

Learn from customers' feedback so we can find ways of working that give everyone an excellent customer experience.

Encourage customers to share their experience in a range of different ways.

Work with our customers to design and develop services with them.

Learn from the complaints, comments and compliments we receive so that we understand what is working well and what needs to improve.

How will we know if we've got it right?

Our customers will:

- » Tell us and others about their excellent experiences. They will say that our staff listen to them and are empathetic.
- » Find it quick and easy to access council services. They will say that they could do what they wanted, when they wanted to do it.
- » Feel empowered to tell us about any problems they have and be confident that we will listen and respond.

Our employees will:

- » Tell us that delivering a good customer experience is 'just part of the job'.
- » Feel empowered to tell us if something stops them delivering a good customer experience and feel able to do something about it.

The data will show:

- » Customer satisfaction with services has increased.
- » More people are accessing council services in the ways that they told us they wanted to.
- » Services are easier for our customers to access and the council can deliver them at good value.
- » We receive fewer complaints about customer experience.
- » We get regular feedback from lots of customers.

Feedback on this strategy:

We welcome feedback on any part of this strategy. Please email **customer.feedback@oxfordshire.gov.uk** with any comments you may have. We are very grateful to all the customers and employees who have helped contribute to and shape this strategy.

[Find out more in our video.](#)

Alternative formats:

If you require this document in an alternative format, e.g. easy read, large text, audio, Braille, or a community language, please get in touch.

Customer Experience Strategy Engagement Summary report of key findings

Date: 2 April 2024

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Responses and feedback – internal engagement	15 - 17

Introduction

We are developing a new customer experience strategy for the whole council, which has a clear goal of putting our customers at the heart of our service delivery.

Oxfordshire is a diverse county, and we have a mix of customers that need, or want, to connect with our services. We know that customers' expectations and needs are evolving, as they experience new ways of requesting and receiving services, and as new technology emerges. The pandemic and cost of living crisis has also affected the demand on services and the support customers need today.

Our new customer experience strategy which has been informed by extensive desk research and data gathering, is built on the following five key principles:

- Having a 'customer first' approach across the council
- Having a better understanding of our customers and what they want from us
- Improving customers' access to our services
- Designing an excellent customer experience from beginning to end
- Listening to, and learning from customer feedback and complaints

It strives to improve customer experience and ensure everyone's access to council services is easy and quick. And when people connect with us directly, they feel valued, and confident that we will get it right first time.

This report brings together the key findings from wide ranging internal and external engagement activity, which was carried out between November 2023 and March 2024.

Whilst there were two distinct audiences, the purpose of the engagement activity was the same for both internal and external stakeholders:

- to inform people of the new customer experience strategy and what it means to them
- to seek their views as experts by experience.

The focus of the questions was however different. Externally, residents and stakeholders were asked to provide feedback against three key questions:

- What does excellent customer service experience mean to you?
- How can we make it easy, simple and quick for you to contact the county council?
- Accessibility and inclusion are important. What can we do to make sure that everyone is able to contact the county council and its services?

Feedback and messages from the engagement activities are contained within this report and will influence the final strategy due for adoption in May 2024.

Whereas internally, employees and councillors were asked:

- their opinions on the wording of the principles in the draft strategy
- whether there are any key areas missing
- what a good customer experience journey looks like in their service area
- suggestions for a more innovative vision statement.

Some cohorts of employees were also asked to contribute to stakeholder mapping of the council's customers. All internal stakeholders were invited to share examples of ways of working which showcase good customer experience.

External engagement

Approach

Between 4 March and 1 April 2024, we engaged residents and external stakeholders through:

- An online survey hosted on Let's Talk Oxfordshire (47 responses)
- Ideas boards hosted online on Let's Talk Oxfordshire and physically in Woodstock library (31 ideas)
- 1-2-1 interviews in Oxford, Witney and Banbury

The 1-2-1 interviews were delivered by colleagues from the consultation and engagement team, and project team. They visited nine venues altogether, and also arranged for paper surveys to be completed by two other self-facilitated groups.

Altogether colleagues engaged with a diverse range of people, as show in the table below. In total 101 surveys were completed, with 109 different people:

Date of session or date venue visited:	Venue/group:	Total no. of completed surveys (and total no. of people engaged with):
Tuesday 12 March	My Life, My Choice, Oxford (self-facilitated group)	2 surveys (2 people)
Wednesday 13 March	Donnington Doorstep, Oxford	10 surveys (11 people)
Wednesday 13 March	Rosehill Hill Community Centre, Oxford	11 surveys (11 people)
Wednesday 13 March	Westgate library, Oxford	11 surveys (11 people)
Wednesday 13 March	Blackbird Leys Library, Oxford	6 surveys (6 people)
Thursday 14 March	Witney library	14 surveys (16 people)
Thursday 14 March	Windrush leisure centre, Witney	8 surveys (11 people)
Friday 15 March	Banbury library	16 surveys (18 people)
Friday 15 March	Spiceball leisure centre, Banbury	5 surveys (5 people)
Wednesday 20 March	Parish councillors session at County Hall, Oxford	8 surveys (8 people)
Friday 15 March	The Hill Community Centre, Bretch Hill, Banbury (3 self-facilitated sessions: men's breakfast club, bingo 50+, & ladies ceramics group)	10 surveys (10 people)

Key themes

Everyone who took part in the external engagement activity, was asked for feedback against three key questions:

- What does excellent customer service experience mean to you?
- How can we make it easy, simple and quick for you to contact the county council?
- Accessibility and inclusion are important. What can we do to make sure that everyone is able to contact the county council and its services?

All the feedback was qualitative, and a coding framework was created to analyse people's responses. All comments were recorded, read and coded against this. More detailed analysis has been undertaken for codes which received 10 per cent or more comments in any section.

Question 1: What does excellent customer service experience mean to you?

156 people responded to this question, which included 291 different comments.

The most frequently mentioned themes were:

- Employee attitude (89 mentions)
- Being quick and efficient (46 mentions)
- Employees have the knowledge to resolve the query (34 mentions)

Over thirty per cent of comments focused on the importance of employee attitude in creating a positive customer experience, with an emphasis on taking the time to listen and understand the customer's needs as well as being friendly and approachable.

"Really being listened to. Helpful, friendly informed good advice."

The efficiency of the service was also highlighted as a key factor in an excellent customer experience, with many of these comments referencing long waiting times for replies to emails and waiting on hold during phone calls as markers of a negative experience.

"Quick and efficient - time is important."

Many responses also spoke about the importance of employees being knowledgeable and having up to date information so that they are able to resolve queries. A number of these comments linked this to not being 'passed around' departments.

"Not being passed around - dealing with people who know what they're talking about."

Other themes mentioned at least 10 times were:

- My query is resolved / I can get what I need (27 mentions) "Efficient and effective, so if there's an issue, it gets resolved."
- Good communication from organisation to individual (19 mentions) "Being recontacted if I've been in touch, in a timely manner."

- Being able to talk to a real person (17 mentions) “Being able to speak to a person - not a machine, and someone who knows what they are doing.”
- I am valued as an individual (11 mentions) “Have to come across as if you're treating each customer as an individual, and not as a generic.”
- Have a variety of options (e.g. online, in person) to suit different people (10 mentions) “Easy to access customer service in a variety of ways.”

Other comments:

- Having direct access to the service I need (8 mentions)
- Easy to find accurate information (8 mentions)
- Speaking to the right person first time / not being passed around departments (7 mentions)
- Organisation does what it says it will (7 mentions)
- Organisation can do what I need (3 mentions)
- I feel satisfied after the interaction (3 mentions)
- Employees do not express or physically represent (e.g. through badges or lanyards) "ideologies" (2 mentions)
- Longer opening hours (1 mention)
- No background noise on calls (1 mention)
- Accessible information (1 mention)

Question 2: How can we make it easy, simple and quick for you to contact the county council?

140 people responded to this question, which included 199 different comments.

The most frequently mentioned themes were:

- Being able to talk to a real person (41 mentions)
- Quick and efficient (26 mentions)
- Having direct access to the service I need (22 mentions)

The most significant theme with 40 comments was the desire to be able to speak to a person, with comments reflecting a dissatisfaction with services only being available online. Several comments also spoke negatively of numerical phone menus, with people finding them confusing and inaccessible.

“Talk to a person - not having to listen to a menu selection
and wait and be able to talk to a person.”

Related to this, people also expressed a preference for being able to contact services directly, rather than having to go through a central phone or email service and be re-directed.

“Direct phone numbers and email addresses
not a phone number to an automated machine.”

Another theme of note was the desire for a quick and efficient service, with short waiting times and quick responses.

“Have more people on phones, so not so long waiting on phone.
Main thing is to avoid being in a queue.”

“In the end you just don't bother if no one answers.”

Other themes mentioned at least 10 times were:

- Have a variety of options (e.g. online, in person) to suit different people (21 mentions) “I suppose a range of ways – eg drop in places, phone and e-mail. Not everyone can use the same method.”
- Website, web chat or app contact (19 mentions)
“Apps, that are simple, quick and easy to use”
- Easy to use website (18 mentions) “Change the website - make it more user friendly.”
- Speaking to the right person first time / not being passed around departments (13 mentions) “Phone - transfer - transfer - transfer before I can speak to someone. Stop passing my call on.”
- Employees have the knowledge to resolve the query (12 mentions) “Have knowledgeable employees who can promptly solve”
- Easy to find accurate information (11 mentions) “Need to know how to find things easily”
- No numerical phone menus (11 mentions) “Lose the menu system on the phone - have real people who can answer basic questions or who can quickly transfer the call to the right place. The voice menu system says you believe your time is more valuable than your customers.”
- Good communication from organisation to individual (10 mentions) “Call back if you say you will.”

Other comments:

- Employee attitude (5 mentions)
- Easy to understand information (5 mentions)
- Easy to find how to contact the council (5 mentions)
- Negative about use of AI in customer service (2 mentions)
- Being clear and honest about what you can provide (1 mention)
- My query is resolved / I can get what I need (1 mention)
- Longer opening hours (1 mention)
- Have a single point of contact for all councils and all councils' services in Oxfordshire (1 mention)

Question 3: Accessibility and inclusion are important. What can we do to make sure that everyone is able to contact the county council and its services?

126 people responded to this question, which included 162 different comments.

The most frequently mentioned themes were:

- Have a variety of options (e.g. online, in person) to suit different people (29 mentions)
- Easily available translation services (21 mentions)
- Have non-digital alternatives (21 mentions)

Respondents emphasised the importance of having a range of ways for people to contact and interact with the council, to accommodate people's different needs.

"Don't make me talk to someone, it makes me anxious."

"Having a variety of contacts means to suit people, means having phone, website, people."

In particular, the need to have options which did not require digital connection or skills was highlighted both due to a lack of familiarity with computers and digital poverty.

"The more digital a process is, the more excluded they feel
e.g. electronic display or sign-in vs speaking to a receptionist."

The need to improve accessibility for people who do not have English as a first language was also emphasised, with respondents commenting on easy availability of translation services, sufficient notice of appointments/meetings to arrange for a translator to attend and the provision of key information in other languages as standard would all be key factors in providing an excellent and inclusive service.

"For a lot of people translation is a big issue. Translation into the main community languages is needed."

"Provide Braille for those who need it. Important to think about people with hearing problems."

Other themes mentioned at least 10 times were:

- Being able to talk to a real person (11 mentions) "Not everyone likes computers etc so having humans + real people to talk too."
- Have drop-in centres (11 mentions) "A drop-in centre where anyone can come would be really helpful."

Other comments:

- Employees speak clearly (8 mentions)
- Information in multiple languages as standard (7 mentions)
- Longer opening hours (7 mentions)
- Employees trained to understand and respond to individual needs (e.g. talking to someone who lip reads) (7 mentions)
- Contact details easy to find (7 mentions)
- Easy to understand information (6 mentions)
- Make sure that buildings are accessible (5 mentions)
- No phone menus (5 mentions)
- Make OCC provision/offer more visible (5 mentions)
- Easy to use website (5 mentions)
- Publicise departmental contact details (5 mentions)
- Speaking to the right person first time / not being passed around departments (4 mentions)

- Accessible information (3 mentions)
- Have a phone-free contact option (3 mentions)
- Have a freephone number (3 mentions)
- Use video calling (3 mentions)
- Employee attitude (3 mentions)
- Good communication from organisation to individual (2 mentions)
- Use community leaders to disseminate information (1 mention)
- Employees able to support people experiencing poor mental health (1 mention)
- Stop employees working from home (1 mention)

Respondent profile

We asked a range of demographic questions to better understand whose views had been captured. People were under no obligation to answer any of these questions and could reply 'prefer not to say' or skip the question.

We received 162 responses in relation to how people were responding to the survey. Of these:

- 81% of people we had feedback from said they were responding as a county resident.

I am responding to this survey as: (Choose one option)	No.	%
an Oxfordshire resident	132	81%
a member of the public living outside of Oxfordshire	3	2%
a business	5	3%
a representative of a group or organisation	7	4%
a parish, town, district, or county councillor	13	8%
Other	2	1%

The five people who responded as a business were:

- 2 childminders
- 2 HSBC workers
- 1 coach operator (and county council contractor)

The seven people who responded as a representative of a group or organisation, gave the following additional information:

- Residents Association member and school governor
- Donnington Doorstep
- Charity Director in Rose Hill
- Oxford Hub
- Yellow Submarine (learning disability charity) employee
- Yellow Submarine (learning disability charity) member
- Oxfordshire County Council - Banbury Library

11 of the 13 people who responded as a parish, town, district, or county councillor, gave the following additional information:

- 2 from Horton-Cum-Studley Parish Council
- East Challow Parish Council

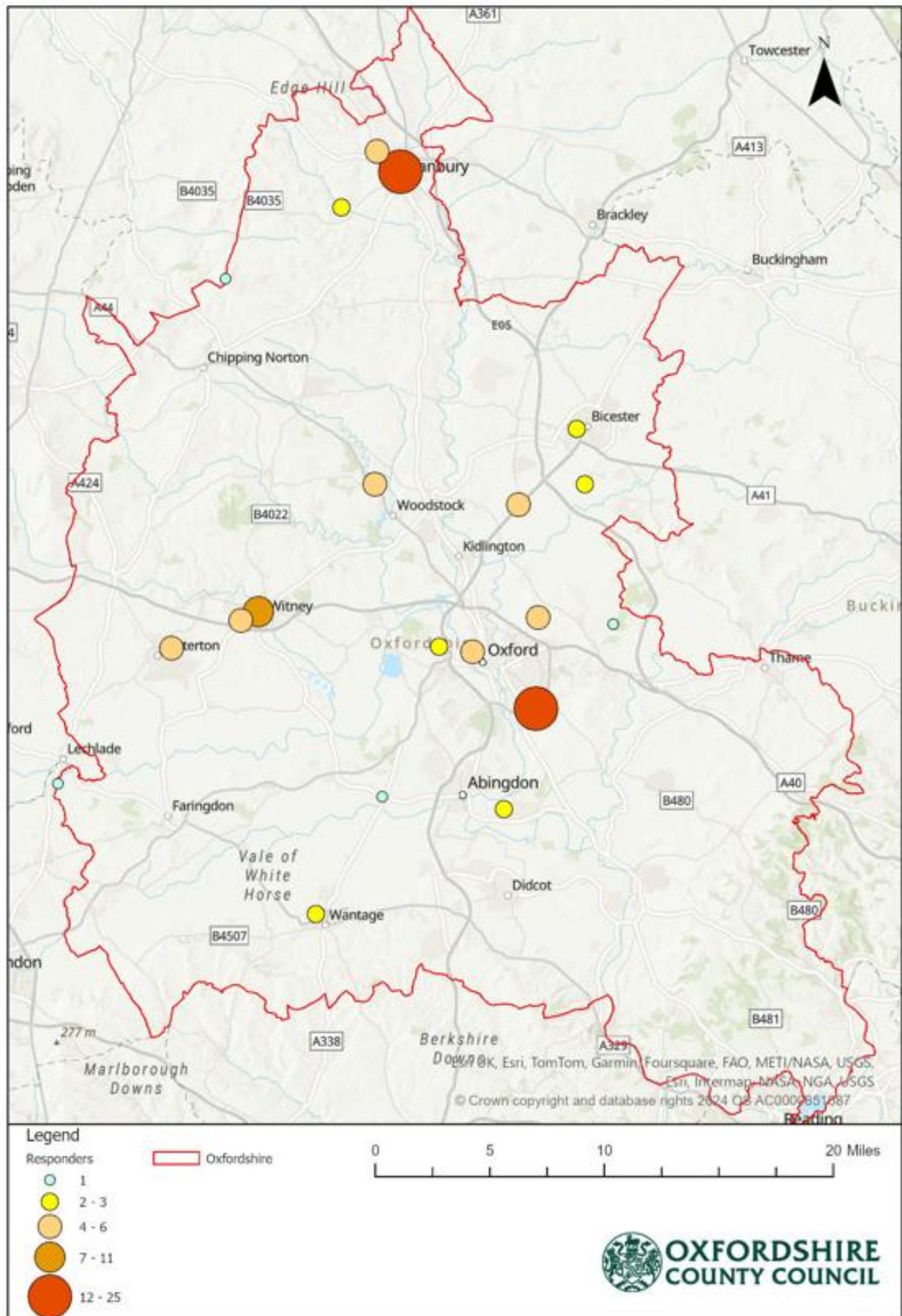
- Abingdon Town Council
- Somerton Parish Council
- Wootton (Abingdon)
- Asthal
- Watlington Parish Council
- Swinbrook and Widford
- Fyfield and Tubney Parish Council
- East Challow Parish Council and Vale of the White Horse

Two people also responded with 'other', and they were both parish clerks.

For the remaining demographic questions, we received information from 116 people, who either providing some or all of their demographic details. For those who provided information, overall:

- Respondents were from a range of places across the county. The 3 postcode areas we received most feedback from, were: OX16 - Banbury area (22%), OX4 - East Oxford area, including Cowley, Blackbird Leys, Rose Hill (19%), and OX28 – Witney area (9%), which coincide with where we carried out in person engagement. (See map on next page showing where Oxfordshire respondents live.)
- We had feedback from a good spread of ages. The most represented age group was people aged 35 – 44 age (25%).
- More women (62%) than men (36%) had their say.
- The majority of people interviewed self-identified their ethnic group as 'white' (72%).
- A fifth of people interviewed (20%) stated that they had a long-term illness or disability, which impacted them either a little or a lot.
- Just under two in five people (39%) said they had children up to the age of 18 currently living in their household. Of these, 53% said they were of primary school age, 40% said they were babies/very young children, 33% said secondary school age, and 11% said they were aged post 16.
- 16% of people we had feedback from identified as a carer.

Customer experience engagement – postcode mapping



What is your postcode? Please provide the first four or five digits of your postcode (but not the letters at the end). e.g. OX1 1 or OX14 5 (Choose one option)	No.	%
Postcode provided Postcodes were from 20 different Oxfordshire areas (OX1, OX2, OX3, OX4, OX5, OX7, OX12, OX13, OX14, OX15, OX16, OX17, OX18, OX20, OX25, OX26, OX28, OX29, OX33, SN6), and 1 postcode was from outside of Oxfordshire (CV22 – Rugby area)	110	95%
Unknown	6	5%

What is your age? (Choose one option)	No.	%
16 – 24	9	8%
25 – 34	10	9%
35 – 44	29	25%
45 – 54	12	10%
55 – 64	19	16%
65 – 74	20	17%
75 – 84	11	9%
85 or over	2	2%
Prefer not to say	1	1%
Unknown	3	3%

What is your sex? (Choose one option)	No.	%
Female	72	62%
Male	42	36%
I use another term (please state here)	0	0%
Prefer not to say	0	0%
Unknown	2	1%

What is your ethnic group or background? (Choose one option)	No.	%
Asian or Asian British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or any other Asian background)	10	9%
Black or Black British (Caribbean, African, or any other Black background)	8	7%
Chinese	3	3%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, and any other mixed background)	0	0%
White (British, Irish, or any other white background)	83	72%
Other ethnic group or background (please specify)	5	4%
Prefer not to say	0	0%

Unknown	7	4%
Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a long-term illness, health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months? (Choose one option)	No.	%
Yes - a lot	13	11%
Yes – a little	11	9%
No	88	76%
Prefer not to say	1	1%
Unknown	3	3%

Do you have children up to 18 currently living in your household? (Choose one option)	No.	%
Yes	45	39%
No	63	54%
Prefer not to say	0	0%
Unknown	8	7%

Those who answered 'yes' to the previous question, then answered this follow up question:		
Base: people who have children up to 18 currently living in your household (45) (Choose all that apply)	No.	%
Babies and very young children	18	40%
Primary school age (Reception to Year 6)	24	53%
Secondary school age (Year 7 – 11)	15	33%
Post 16 (Year 12 – 13 or at college/in training)	5	11%
Prefer not to say	0	0%

Are you a carer? A carer is anyone who cares, unpaid, for a friend or family member who, due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction, cannot cope without their support. Both children and adults can be carers. (Choose one option)	No.	%
Yes	18	16%
No	93	80%
Prefer not to say	0	0%
Unknown	5	4%

Approach

Between November 2023 and February 2024 colleagues across the council and councillors were engaged through a wide range of different channels. This included:

- Communications shared widely with all senior managers and through governance boards.
- Internal communications using the intranet, employee newsletters and Viva Engage, where colleagues could provide feedback.
- Direct engagement with over 200 Delivering the Future Together (DtFT) Champions at a monthly network meeting
- Structured discussions at networks and team meetings, led by the project team or DtFT champions including with customer service teams, children's social care, strategic commissioning, corporate policy and the Oxfordshire Museum
- A lunch and learn session for colleagues in the environment and place directorate
- Two whole-council drop-in workshops (one online and one in person)
- Councillors were engaged through an all members briefing session and through Informal Cabinet and Performance Scrutiny.

Some cohorts of employees were also asked to contribute to stakeholder mapping of the council's customers, and this is reflected in the main strategy. All employees were invited to share examples of ways of working which showcase good customer experience that we can use for communications and training purposes going forward.

Key themes from our internal engagement

Most of the feedback from employees and councillors focussed on the customer service principles or aligned to these.

Principle 1: Having a 'customer first' approach across the council.

Feedback:

There was recognition from employees that 'we' are integral to creating a positive customer experience.

"Customers are what keeps us in a job"

"There is no one size fits all approach when it comes to customer service"

As a workforce we need to:

- demonstrate a human touch
- always have a can-do attitude
- live our values
- uphold a non-transactional view of the customer, focussing on the person first
- use language our customers understand when interacting with them.

Employees also shared that managing expectations is important, and a good customer experience is more than the final outcome, it includes the whole journey and how we treat people.

“Listen, be human, don’t hide behind complicated language and jargon”

“We should always retain the 'human' aspects of our interaction and don't turn ourselves into AI Bots”

Principle 2: Having a better understanding of our customers and what they want from us

Feedback

Employees discussed the importance of data and systems and that we need to be comfortable to safely use, share and access data to better support customers.

“Having a way to access all the data we have as an organisation in one central place could really benefit people in their day-to-day roles”

“We need to use data better to implement meaningful change.”

“Make less assumptions and work more with data!”

At least one team talked about the value of customer profiles and of data. How using such insight can help teams to signpost customers to other services that the customer might find useful/benefit from and thereby maximise their interaction with the council.

Principle 3: Improving customers’ access to our services

Feedback

Employees fed back that communication is key and recognised the importance of supporting the needs of all customers including those who speak English as a second language and those who are digitally excluded

“Ensuring customer voices are heard – how they can communicate with us is very important. We shouldn’t forget about the elderly who cannot manage everything online, bearing in mind a need to be inclusive.”

Technology was a key theme, including bringing in new technology whilst also having a range of non-digital options to meet the preferences of different customers.

“For our team - more investment in options for the customer to self-serve but also better options for customers to contact us by phone as we know some really value this.”

Principle 4: Designing an excellent customer experience from beginning to end

Feedback

“An end-to-end experience looks different for different types of customers, how are we going to determine what that looks like? This is also going to take time to perfect, how can we ensure it is done thoroughly and not rushed?”

Employees recognised the importance of being part of a team and business continuity including creating helpful handovers between employees, up to date case notes and centralised information on customer interactions.

Employees also identified training as a key theme, improving employee training programmes around customer experience and learning from best practice.

Some employees recognised the importance of putting the customer in control and others using systems to better understand our customers internally.

“Allow customers to track progress in system, CRM systems to give holistic view of customer”

Principle 5: Listening to and learning from customer feedback and complaints.

This Principle developed because of our internal engagement.

Employees recognised the importance of listening to people’s experiences, through consultation, engagement, co-design, and co-production.

Employees found they learnt best when directly hearing from customers insights.

They also cited the importance of acting on feedback and resolving complaints in a timely manner.

Due to this we included a new principle about feedback when we consulted externally, and this principle is now a key strand of our strategy.

Councillors Feedback:

In addition to the feedback above councillors also commented on the following points:

- Ensuring that the strategies principles are known and embedded by our subcontractors.
- Working to ensure clarity of contacts and clearly signpost these for customers.
- Auditing complaints and feedback regularly.
- Showcasing customer service successes internally and externally.
- Working closely with town, parish, and district councillors to implement the strategy.
- Further engagement with vulnerable groups as the strategy develops, including engaging with people who have English as a second language or come from a lower socio-economic background.

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A Selection of Feedback from our Extensive Consultation Exercise – (Internal to OCC and External Customers Views)

This insight from our customers will be reviewed by the Improving the Customer Experience board on the 16th May and a streamlined set of actions will be approved by Quarter 1 2024/2025.

An annual update will be provided to both the Council Management Team and the Performance and Corporate Services Overview Scrutiny Committee.

Having a 'customer first' approach across the council

How	Selection of Customer Feedback
<p>Create a culture where delivering a good customer experience is everyone's job.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the Customer Ethos and delivering an 'excellent' customer experience' is a key part of our Transformation programme. • Use this strategy as a live document and form teaching sessions, guidance, and conversations around with our value champions. • Collect and monitor key performance metrics across services to keep employees accountable for good customer service. • Train our managers to embed practical steps that enable their teams to deliver our standards of experience expected. • Display our customer principles and photos of customers across council buildings and our website. • Consider a designated Customer service centre contact/partner for each service area • Implement shadowing days where employees across the council can shadow frontline customer service teams
<p>Provide clear information that sets out what our customers need to do, and what they can expect from us.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become more visible to our customers through drops in and situating ourselves across Oxfordshire ensure opportunities to interact and signpost. • Develop more case studies around good and poor customer experience and communicate widely across the council. • Consider adding customer experience-based competencies in role descriptions and using these competencies to frame interview questions.
<p>Ensure our team members are highly trained and take</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train all our employees on how to deliver a world-class service. This could use a passport system where dependent on the role employees need to have proof of certain levels of training, such as role play based training.

<p>personal responsibility to meet customer needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear guidance to our employees on what we expect in delivering excellent customer service and a world-class experience and how handle customer inquiries effectively. • Provide our employees with the opportunity to achieve qualifications in Customer Excellence; and recognise this as a professional qualification. • Upskill our employees in the latest technology to deliver a better service. • Ensure our employees are happy and supported at work and have a strong wellbeing offer to improve retention and to deal with customer burdens.
<p>Provide an empathetic approach to more complex matters and listen to your issues and needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide our employees with the right knowledge, skills, tools, and technologies to be able to deliver that world-class service in more difficult cases. • Have specialist support in teams where needed to provide advice and expertise e.g. SEND specialist in the customer service centre. • Follow clear organisational values that embed what excellent customer experience means to us.
<p>Ensure that customer experience is at the forefront of our thoughts as we continue to evolve what we do and how we do it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly engage with our employees to understand how things are going from their perspective. • Learn from our employees about barriers or problems that stop them delivering that excellent customer experience; and remove those. • Empower our employees to amend their processes and ways of working to improve the customer experience, for example creating readily available forms and templates. • Sharing best practice and lessons learnt across the organisation around customer practice through an ongoing publication and reports tailored for each service area. • Achieve a Council wide Customer Excellence Industry Recognition through the CAA Accreditation

Having a better understanding of our customers and what they want from us.

How	Selection of Customer Feedback
<p>Develop a better understanding of our customers; their diversity, and their differing expectations, needs and preferences.</p>	<p>Gather Data:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in comprehensive research that encompasses a wide range of demographics, including age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and abilities. Use surveys, focus groups, and interviews to gather insights as well as data across the council. • Develop a Framework to capture and share our customer insight across the council. • Engage with our Customers, including households, individuals, businesses, and visitors to understand. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ how and when you want to access our services ◦ if you have any specific requirements or need any support that would make requesting or receiving services from us easier. ◦ if you have any barriers to accessing services ◦ What your preferences are; and what you expect from us • Consult with you to understand which services you are interested in, and what you are not. (rather than those imposed on you) • Listen Actively and encourage open dialogue with customers. Actively listen to their feedback, concerns, and suggestions. Use multiple channels (online, in-person, phone) to capture diverse perspectives. • Partner with local organisations, community leaders, and advocacy groups. Their insights can provide valuable context and help bridge gaps. • Train employees to empathise with diverse customer experiences. Foster cultural competence and sensitivity.
<p>Ensure that we understand the needs of our more vulnerable customers, those that rely heavily on our services, or</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach out directly to vulnerable customers through phone calls, home visits, or personalised letters. Understand their specific challenges. • Signpost to community networks/ groups for vulnerable individuals and training sessions that empower vulnerable individuals to navigate services independently e.g. around digital inclusion. • Invest in multilingual support and translation software, clear signage, and accessible technology. • Partner with local social service agencies, nonprofits, and shelters. Leverage their expertise to address and signpost complex requirements.

<p>have more complex requirements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scope options for flexible service, such as extended hours, home delivery, or virtual consultations. Accommodate health limitations. • Train employees to recognise signs of vulnerability and respond compassionately. Provide guidance on handling sensitive situations. • Regularly check in with vulnerable customers to assess their well-being and address any emerging needs. • Use plain language and visual aids to communicate valuable information. Ensure that instructions are clear and easy to follow. • Develop contingency plans for emergencies (e.g., extreme weather, power outages) for vulnerable customers.
<p>Develop customer insight which sets out the profiles of our differing customer groups and support us in designing an excellent customer experience.</p>	<p>Analyse the Data:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly analyse qualitative and quantitative data on customer interactions, behaviour, and preferences. Identify patterns and trends. • Examine our complaints, comments, and compliments to identify what is working well, and what is not so good, and address those areas. • Create Personas: Develop detailed customer personas representing different archetypes within your audience. Understand their motivations, pain points, and goals to inform decision-making. <p>Use the data to improve your experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use this insight to redesign the way that we work, to meet your needs and expectations, and ensure that we are not exclusionary • Keep our customer profile information up to date to ensure we can adapt to the changing needs of our customers in the future. • Create a Single View of the Customer Concept, which is where all information about a customer is stored in one place. • Create and use customer video avatars as an educational tool.
<p>Keep abreast of changing expectations, to ensure that we</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay informed about customer shifts, technological advancements, and emerging customer preferences through conferences and publications. • Anticipate potential changes (e.g., economic shifts, policy updates) and create contingency plans.

continue to meet our customer's needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Benchmark our services to other local authorities and learn from their strategies to gain best practice.• Continuously analyse customer interactions across the council and identify opportunities for improvement.• Embrace an agile approach to service design.• Equip teams with the autonomy to adapt to evolving customer expectations and encourage a culture of innovation. Recognise and reward teams that proactively respond to evolving needs• Consider a centralised data hub that reflects the work happening across the council to improve joint working and better outcomes for customers.• Ensure customer service centre colleagues are informed of the latest policy and strategy changes happening across the council.
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Improving customers' access to our services

How	Selection of Customer Feedback
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Provide a modern range of access channels that meet the needs of our diverse customers, and through which our customers can either:

- **serve themselves, or**
- **gain assisted service by interacting directly with our frontline service teams.**

- Provide a **choice of access channels** that our customers want to use, whilst ensuring a seamless transition between channels.
- Provide a **range of digital channels** that allow convenient access to information and request services including virtual assistants.
- **Continue to provide phone and face to face services** during normal office hours, through our libraries, receptions, and other locations.
- **Focus our resources on the more complex enquiries**, for those customers who are unable to use digital channels.
- **Reduce the number of contact telephone numbers** that we have.
- **Make use of automated technology and Self-Service Options** where customers can find answers independently.
- **Make our channels simple and accessible** so everyone can access them no matter your skills or abilities.
- **Focus on improving website functionality** as a fast, accurate and user-friendly website is essential.
- Use **visual content, such as videos, infographics**, and interactive elements, to convey information effectively.
- Regularly **seek feedback from you** about how easy it is to access services and where automation would be most beneficial.

Have a joint up approach across channels so, no matter how many access methods are used, and how often contact is made, all relevant information is available to assist resolution of the contact.

- **Join up our contact channels; into one omni-channel experience**; so that all contacts and interactions are known when you interact with us.
- Define **clear escalation paths** for complex issues. If a chatbot cannot resolve a problem, they should seamlessly transfer the case to a specialised team. The customer should not have to repeat their issue.
- **Tag interactions based on topics, issues, or customer segments**. These tags help quickly locate relevant information when handling similar queries across channels.
- Integrate our **customer relationship management (CRM)** system with all communication channels. This allows agents to retrieve customer previous interactions seamlessly.
- **Implement a robust case management system** that tracks customer inquiries, complaints, and requests. When a customer contacts you through different channels, the system should link related cases.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain an up-to-date knowledge base accessible across channels, for standardised answers, troubleshooting steps, and frequently asked questions. Consistency in responses improves customer satisfaction. • Train employees to navigate multiple channels proficiently. They should understand how to retrieve information from various sources. • Periodically audit our channels to ensure consistency and accuracy.
Join up our data, so you only need to tell us things or send up documentation once.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a centralised database where all customer information is stored. When a customer provides information once, it should be accessible across all touchpoints. • Standardise data collection processes across channels. Ensure that the same fields are captured regardless of the touchpoint. • Provide self-service portals where customers can update their information directly. If they change their phone number or marital status, they can make the update themselves. • Periodically review and clean up the database. Remove duplicate records, outdated information, or irrelevant data. • Train employees on accessing and utilising customer data efficiently. They should know where to find and interpret information. • Join up information about our customers, their requests and services (to provide a single view of the customer (SVOC)) • Provide open access to personal and service data (SVOC) to our customers; whilst ensuring that we keep their information protected. • Ensure that updates made in one channel reflect instantly in others.

<p>Focus our resources on supporting and maintaining the channels our customers want to use; and reducing resources on channels that are either no longer wanted, causing excessive effort from customers and employees, or are ineffective and costly.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a consistent approach to ensure that no matter which channel you use, you receive the same level of service. • Streamline processes within existing channels to reduce effort. • Improve the technology that supports our employees, ensuring they have the tools to fully support customers. • Evaluate each communication channel based on usage, customer feedback, and cost-effectiveness. Allocate more resources (employees, technology, training) to the preferred channels. • If certain channels are rarely used, consider phasing them out. • Assess the cost of maintaining each channel against its benefits. If a channel is costly and ineffective, explore alternatives.
<p>Significantly improve our first contact resolution rates (FCR), by ensuring comprehensive information is available to resolve the query. This means we resolve a customer's issue during their initial contact, eliminating the need for follow-up interactions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track how many calls or inquiries come from the same customer within a specific time frame. Use feedback to gauge whether issues were resolved during the first contact. • Identify internal issues causing customers to return repeatedly and address broken processes that stop FCR. • Enhance self-serve options to reduce support requests. • Route tickets based on employee expertise. Assign complex issues to experienced employees. • Proactively reach out to customers who expressed dissatisfaction. Ensure their issues are fully resolved. • Use employee and customer insights to refine processes.

Designing an excellent customer experience, from beginning to end

How	Selection of Customer Feedback
Change the way we design our processes and systems to put our customers' needs and expectations at the heart of how we operate and work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Map the end-to-end customer experience from simple to complex cases. Identify touchpoints, interactions, and pain points.• Design our simple processes in a way that uses a 'standard format', which reduces the need for costly bespoke processes and systems and makes it easier for you to use.• Understand our customers' preferences, and goals through engagement.• Work with customers/partners to co-design services ensuring that we maximise the skills available, supporting people to help themselves.• Design services to focus on prevention and early intervention to reduce costs while improving outcomes for individuals and families.• Have clear roles and responsibilities to avoid duplication particularly around complaints processes.• Work with districts and town and parish Councillors to effectively signpost to services <p>Learn from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• best practise in public/private sector to deliver world-class customer experience.• Keep abreast of emerging initiatives and technology that we can adopt.• Regularly use process improvement methodologies, to be more effective

Appendix 1: High Level Action Plan

<p>Ensure that our processes and ways of working do not exclude anyone from receiving our services.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct an assessment of existing processes and systems. Identify barriers that might exclude certain groups (e.g., people with disabilities, non-native speakers, elderly individuals). • Involve diverse user groups in the design process. • Use plain language in all communications. Provide information in multiple formats (text, audio, visual). • Train employees on inclusive practices and encourage empathy and understanding. • Establish channels for feedback from users. Actively listen to concerns and suggestions to improve processes.
<p>Resolve queries and provide information at the first point of contact and focus our service delivery on getting it right first time,' (for the customer).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get the Customer to the best person who can help making best use of the Councils resources, and individual employee's skills, experience, and knowledge. • Develop a knowledgebase of information and integrate that with AI or bot technology for self-service queries. • Improve liaison between council services and across the council to signpost effectively. • Provide employees them with the necessary tools and knowledge to address queries promptly and learn active listening. Avoid assumptions and seek clarification when needed. • Optimise self-service options (websites, chatbots, FAQs). Prioritise real-time communication channels (phone, live chat). Minimise wait times for customers. • Investigate recurring issues. Identify patterns and underlying causes. • Regularly assess service interactions. Monitor call recordings, chat logs, and email exchanges. Provide constructive feedback to employees.
<p>For those that cannot be resolved at point of contact, ensure that we gather everything we need from you at the point, so you need to do no more.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train employees to ask relevant questions during the initial interaction. Gather essential details related to the query. Ensure completeness to avoid follow-up. • Create standardised checklists or templates for different types of queries. Use these tools to systematically collect necessary information. • Maintain detailed records of interactions. Capture relevant data, timestamps, and customer preferences. Use a centralised system for these documents.

Appendix 1: High Level Action Plan

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuously improve the intake process based on feedback. Regularly review and update checklists.
<p>Maximise the use of information we collect from you, so you don't need to keep providing it to different departments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Design processes to maximise information we have previously gathered. ◦ Build a rich and comprehensive database of Customer data, interactions, and requests (SVOC), ◦ Only collect personal information when it's proportionated to solving the specific ◦ Limit the retention period for personal information based on its purpose and do not unnecessarily store data.
<p>Streamline our more complex processes to make it as easy as we can for you to access that service and make the whole process as quick and efficient as possible.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take advantage of emerging tools and digital technologies, which can improve the way we process information, so we can make decisions more quickly and easily. • Invest in and join up enabling technology to identify where we are with processing your request and make that information readily available to you. • Understand customer needs and frustration points. Conduct user research, usability testing, and gather feedback. • Design processes with the end user in mind. Simplify steps, reduce jargon, and provide clear instructions. • Map out existing processes to identify inefficiencies. • Provide concise and relevant information at each stage of the process. • Integrate data across departments to avoid redundant data entry and have robust data sharing agreements. • Monitor performance metrics (e.g., completion time, error rates) and iterate based on data.
<p>Improve the content of correspondence sent to you during the process, so customers are clear on what we are communicating, and don't</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure we build regular communication points into our processes to let you know what we are doing and when you will get your service, decision, or update. • Work within set timeframes. • Ensure employees who are away have proper handovers, so customers do not get lost between teams. • Use simple to understand, non-technical language in our communication.

need to contact us to ask questions, or clarify things.

- **Break down information** into digestible chunks. Use short sentences and bullet points.
- **Organise content logically**. Start with a summary or introduction, followed by relevant details. Use headings, subheadings, and numbered steps.
- **Provide context for each communication**. Explain why the customer is receiving the correspondence and what action they need to take.
- **Use visuals** (such as diagrams, screenshots, or infographics) to illustrate complex processes.
- **Anticipate frequent questions** and address them in the correspondence.
- Clearly state the desired next steps. **Use actionable language** (e.g., “Click here,” “Complete the form,” “Reply with...”).
- **Provide contact information** (phone, email) for further assistance

Listening to and learning from customer feedback

How	Selection of Customer Feedback
Implementing a better complaints management system	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Begin by mapping out existing complaints handling process. Identify bottlenecks, gaps, and areas for improvement.• Engage relevant teams (customer service, operations, legal, etc.) to gain insights on the process and collaborate on resolving complaints.• Create a streamlined process that ensures timely acknowledgment, investigation, resolution, and follow-up.• Implement a centralised platform (such as a CRM) to track all complaints.• Collect essential information—customer details, complaint type, severity, date, and resolution status.• Minimise manual data entry by integrating systems.• Define clear escalation paths based on complaint severity. Ensure that frontline employees know when and how to escalate.• Provide guidelines for handling common complaints. Equip them with decision-making authority to resolve issues promptly. Regularly train employees on complaint handling techniques, active listening, and empathy.• Send an immediate acknowledgment to the complainant for transparency.• Keep customers informed throughout the resolution process.• Notify customers when their complaint is resolved. Seek feedback on their experience.• Investigate the underlying causes of recurring complaints.

Appendix 1: High Level Action Plan

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use data analytics to identify patterns of specific services, or processes consistently causing dissatisfaction. • Close the loop by sharing insights from resolved complaints with relevant teams. • Encourage innovative solutions based on customer feedback. • Establish and monitor key performance indicators (KPIs) related to complaint resolution time, customer satisfaction, and resolution rates. • Understand legal requirements related to complaints handling (e.g., GDPR). • Maintain detailed records of complaints, investigations, and resolutions and use as a learning tool.
Encouraging feedback more proactively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer multiple avenues for feedback—online surveys, email, social media, and in-person interactions and ensure that feedback options are visible. • Request feedback immediately after a customer interaction (e.g., purchase, support call, or service completion). • Explain how customer feedback directly influences improvements. Show examples of changes made based on past feedback. • Encourage two-way communication rather than one-sided requests. Respond promptly to feedback. • Train employees on handling feedback positively. Teach active listening skills. • Organise special sessions where customers can provide input in person or virtually and consider how to reach those seldom heard. • Be honest and clear with customers on where to feedback if they are unhappy. • Guidance for colleagues on what to do when you can't help a customer
Collaborating with customers to jointly create, design,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify interested Customers with user experience: • Involve customers in early stages of product development e.g new technology. • Equip customers with the right tools and spaces to communicate their ideas. • Continuously refine our approach based on feedback and insights.

<p>and develop products, services, or solutions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage involvement across the organisation, not just within the customer service team
<p>Learning from feedback and insight to design better processes for our customers.</p>	<p>Use our customer insight and feedback to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design service processes around the needs and preference of the customers that utilise that service, rather than a generic approach. • Use your feedback and our data to continuously review our services. • Review our approach to complaints management to ensure that lessons learnt are widely shared across the organisation. • Enhance our processes to be able to offer you services from ourselves or our partners, that you may be interested in or will benefit you. • Trial a panel comprising diverse customers. Seek their input on service improvements and future directions. • Conduct surveys to gauge satisfaction levels and identify areas for improvement. • Mystery shop and review our processes from a customer's perspective, to understand what it is like to be our customers. <p>Use our service data and performance measurements to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Identify when we are not meeting our service standards, review why that is the case, and make changes to address those issues. ○ Identify where improvements are needed; and make the required changes. ○ Recognise when service take-up is increasing or decreasing; and match our resources appropriately. ○ Benchmark against other public sectors to see how we compare

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.

Consultations

30. 135 local councils were engaged with the charter's development.
31. The charter was developed through a three-stage engagement process:
 - (a) Roundtable event with town and parish councils, 26 October 2023 – 100 attendees representing 88 local councils.
 - (b) Six week survey, October – December 2023 – 164 responses from 85 local councils.
 - (c) Six week consultation on the draft charter, 3 January – 11 February 2024 – 96 responses.
32. See Annex 2 for the full engagement findings report.
33. The consultation questions and responses can be viewed on Let's Talk Oxfordshire: [Oxfordshire Councils Charter - You said, we did | Let's Talk Oxfordshire](#)
34. Oxfordshire leaders and chief executive officers have also provided oversight throughout this work.

MARTIN REEVES
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Annex: Annex 1 Oxfordshire Councils Charter
Annex 2 Engagement Findings Report

Background papers: Nil.

Contact Officer: Emily Schofield, Head of Strategy
Emily.schofield@oxfordshire.gov.uk

May 2024

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Oxfordshire Councils Charter



Foreword by Cllr Leffman


– Leader, Oxfordshire County Council

Our county of Oxfordshire is a rich tapestry of diverse communities, from our thriving market towns and picturesque rural villages to our urban centres of learning, innovation and business – all represented by over 300 local councils.

Our vision is that this charter enhances partnership working across councils to empower a vibrant democracy across Oxfordshire. Working in partnership with our local councils is essential for responding to the needs of our residents, understanding our diverse communities, and providing effective services.

This charter recognises the importance of Oxfordshire’s town councils, parish councils and parish meetings in representing and delivering for the residents of Oxfordshire. We have developed the charter in consultation with town and parish councils from across the county together with the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC) and our district and city council partners. We have listened carefully to the many councillors and clerks, who have helped identify the opportunities we can explore through the commitments in this charter and we are very grateful for their contributions.

I am excited about the ambitions of this charter and the changes that are already underway to improve how we work and communicate with our local councils. I invite all Oxfordshire councils to become signatories to the charter to demonstrate our mutual ambition to working better together through shared principles and commitments. I hope you will want to join us in this endeavour.



Foreword by Lucy Dalby, County Officer, Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC)

As representatives of Oxfordshire's town and parish councils we are delighted to welcome this charter, which is a positive step to achieving better partnership working between Oxfordshire councils.

Since OALC instigated the idea of a charter, we have ensured local councils have been consulted directly and we have advocated for councils' needs and concerns throughout its development. We are proud to have created this charter in collaboration with Oxfordshire County Council and our city and district council partners.

It has been extremely positive to see so many councils engaging enthusiastically with this process and we want to thank every councillor, clerk and officer who has contributed.

This work does not end with the launching of the charter – we will remain involved as this work moves forward, and the real and impactful changes needed for partnership working to reach its full potential. Councils will also continue to have the opportunity to feed in to how the charter is implemented. We hope individual councils will want to become signatories too in demonstrating their commitment to better partnership working and enhancing local democracy for their communities.

Introduction

This charter has been developed by a cross-council working group in collaboration with Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC), to set out a framework for better partnership working in Oxfordshire. The contents of the charter have been shaped by feedback from town and parish councils across the county through a number of consultation and engagement activities.

The intention for the charter is that it is a voluntary framework that will help shape how Oxfordshire councils can work together in partnership to support better service delivery and outcomes, and to work together to ensure thriving local democracy across the county. This charter is not designed to replace or override existing frameworks, such as codes of conduct or councils' individual ways of working, but to enhance them, with a particular focus on cross-council working and recognising the role of local councils in supporting a thriving local democracy.



Strategic aims for the charter

These aims represent our shared long-term goals as signatories to the charter. The charter's performance will be measured against these aims over time.

1. Stronger partnership working between Oxfordshire councils.

Taking a cooperative, collaborative and collective approach when working together for the wellbeing of our diverse communities, improving service delivery and supporting the needs of our residents.

Success looks like:

- Councils share best practice with each other, consistently working to improve how services are delivered and experienced by residents.
- Councils can identify opportunities where there is value in working collaboratively in partnership to deliver better outcomes for residents and communities.
- Councils are breaking down barriers to better partnership working.

2. Enhancing local democracy.

Working to empower resident and community participation in local democracy at all levels, recognizing that local democracy goes wider than the election cycle.

Success looks like:

- Councils use the tools and resources at their disposal to advocate for their communities and residents.
- Councils can identify barriers to resident and community participation in local democratic processes and take steps to break down those barriers.
- Councils can identify and build on opportunities to engage with their communities, particularly with underrepresented groups.



Our shared principles

Our shared principles are the ‘golden thread’ of values that underpin how we aim to meet the charter’s commitments and achieve the charter’s strategic aims. These principles guide how we implement and integrate the charter, how we work together and how we treat each other as partners.

Mutual respect

- We recognise and acknowledge what unites us – representing and delivering for our communities and residents.
- We treat each other with respect, civility, and dignity, abiding by our respective codes of conduct.
- We understand that different types of council operate differently – we respect our differences and act on good faith.

Relationship building

- We foster constructive and collaborative relationships and connections between councils, councillors, clerks, officers, partners, and communities.
- We remove barriers to building effective relationships.

Transparency and accountability

- We share information and communicate transparently.
- We are transparent with processes and how councils make decisions.
- We signpost appropriately.



Our shared commitments

These are our shared commitments that will help to achieve our strategic aims: stronger partnership working and enhance local democracy. The commitments are purposely kept at a high-level to enable each council to apply them to their own priorities and ways of working, providing a framework for councils to shape how they work together.

Communication

Councils will:

- Enhance how we listen and respond to one another. Availability and accessibility will be central to how we interact.
- Communicate with respect and civility, maintaining an open dialogue.
- Communicate openly and transparently, explaining processes and decision-making.

Consultation and engagement

Councils will:

- Engage with one another at the earliest opportunity, recognizing the diverse perspectives and challenges faced by various stakeholders and communities.
- Ensure that consultation and engagement processes are as accessible as possible.
- Actively follow-up on consultations and feedback in an appropriate manner.

Resources

Councils will:

- Share relevant and appropriate information to empower each other to best support our residents and communities.
- Optimise access and signposting to resources and practical support.
- Identify opportunities where resources and support can be effectively shared between councils to improve outcomes for residents.

Local democracy

Councils will:

- Empower our residents and communities to participate in local democracy, including young people and underrepresented groups.
- Put residents and communities at the heart of what we do.
- Respect the democratic mandate of all councillors.

Implementation

All Oxfordshire councils will be invited to be a signatory of the charter. The intention is that this charter remains a 'living' document, with the charter being the beginning and not the end of this work to improve partnership working.

Once the charter has been agreed by councils, each council will be responsible for their own implementation of the charter's principles and commitments. The working group will support councils to capture the progress and successes of the charter to enable sharing best practice and positive communications (e.g 'you said, we did' pieces).

April 2024

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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%

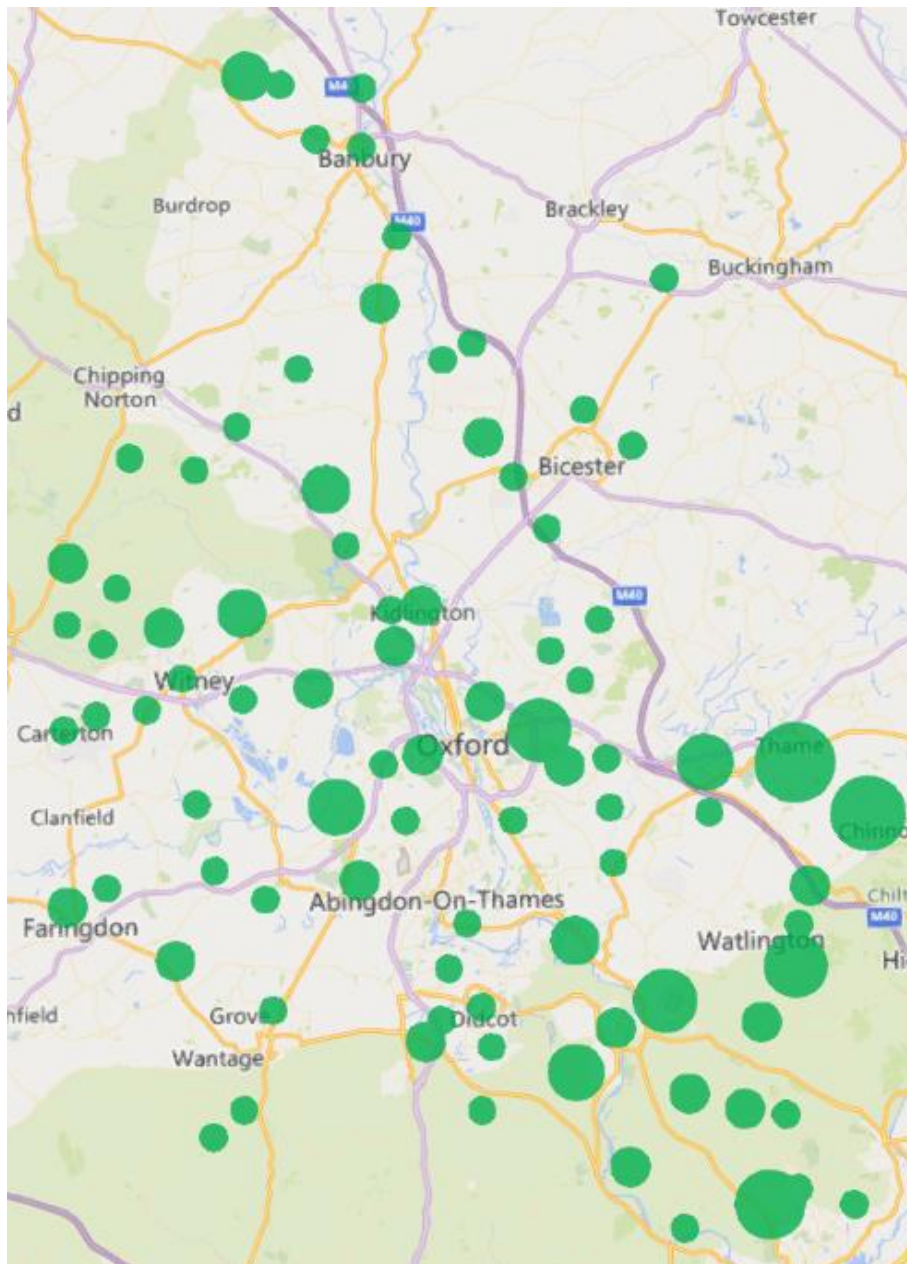
Town and Parish Council Charter Roundtable

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:

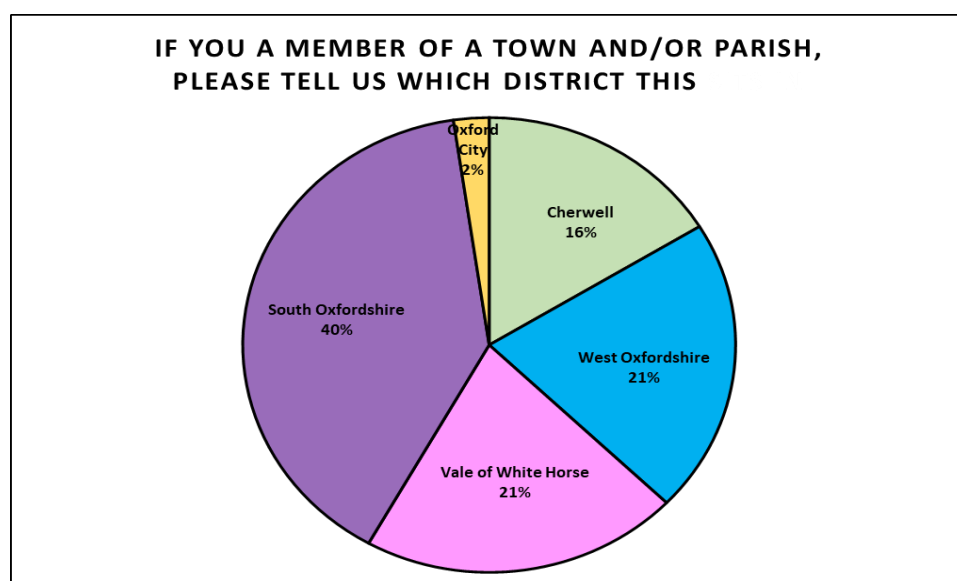
	No. of Individual Responses	No. of councils (all-levels) Represented
Cherwell	25	19
Oxford City	9	3
South Oxfordshire	71	30
Vale of White Horse	26	18
West Oxfordshire	27	20
Unknown	6	Unknown

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.
- 12 respondents did not indicate which council they represent.
 - 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?"**

-
- What we heard
- Communication
- Support and communication
- Listening
- Respect
- Responsiveness
- Robust planning
- Collaboration
- Understanding clarity roles
- transparency
- Accountability
- infrastructure
- public interest
- direct
- right
- transport
- village
- Value
- Prompt responses
- speeding
- residents
- fit
- concern
- people
- live
- parish
- contact
- new
- ways
- point
- planning support
- place

-
- Understanding local issues
- actions not words
- neighbourhood
- to be heard
- Still relevant
- Mutual respect
- way
- feed
- representation
- Dialogue
- Action
- engagement
- Communication
- occ
- Location
- Collaboration
- Transparency
- Accountability
- plan
- Responsiveness
- respect
- Participation
- Effective Communication
- 2-way communication
- planning, infrastructure and well publicised pu...

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:
- Cherwell: Communities (47.8%) and Communication (34.8%)
 - Oxford City: Communication (57.1%) and, Consultation and Engagement (57.1%)
 - South Oxfordshire: Relationships (47.5%)
 - Vale of White Horse: Relationships (52%) and Communication (52%)
 - 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%)

28. Q3: Is there anything else you would like to say to inform the development of the charter?

- a. 107 respondents answered this question.
- b. Many responses to this question reiterated relationships and communication as key themes (47.5% and 30.8% respectively)
- c. 13.1% of responses were categorised as 'other' – with a number of responses in relation to how the charter should be formatted, implemented and its performance measured.
- d. A few responses cited being unsure of the benefits of a charter or its impact.
- e. There were also a number of positive and welcoming remarks on the news of the charter, with many calling for the charter to drive real action and change.
 - i. *'don't just write it, live it.'*
 - ii. *'I was very pleased to learn of this charter. PLEASE take away that PCs [parish councils] are there to enhance the experience for residents which can in turn help OCC [Oxfordshire County Council] and the DCs [district councils] achieve their goals.'*
 - iii. *'Excited at possibility of joined up democracy so thank you.'*
 - iv. *'only that the charter must mean just that. The County must work with PCs [parish councils] not dictate to them.'*
 - v. *'The Charter appears to set out some very good intentions of actions by County and District to communicate with towns and parishes. I need to be convinced that towns and parishes will find it easy to start conversations with relevant councillors and officers. The Charter must be a two-way process.'*
 - vi. *'The whole thing would need to have a simple process, to support understanding and help those with time constraints.'*
 - vii. *'The charter seems like a waste of time. What is the real reason this is being pursued? Is it to retain County Council dominance or head off new legislation?'*

Identified Themes

29. Relationships

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



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 in responses in relation to resources shows the most frequent terms used



- b. In considering stronger partnership working, 27 responses (17.3%) to this question were in relation to resources and practical examples of the sorts of things that could better equip local councils.
- c. A bigger proportion of clerks (28.6%) referenced resources than councillors (13.2%)
- d. In considering how to enhance local democracy, resources were referenced by 7.6% of respondents.
- e. There are some clear themes and areas where better resource sharing, signposting and support between councils could support the aims of the charter. For example, access to Section 106 (s106) and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds, information sharing, training, pooled resources between councils.
 - i. *'Shared resources, good use and distribution on monies whether small or big'*
 - ii. *'training at all levels and experience'*
 - iii. *'Clearer understanding of council's powers to spend'*
 - iv. *'More appropriate press releases and images'*
 - v. *'Sharing information'*
 - vi. *'shared solutions for common problems / economies of scale'*

32. Consultation and Engagement

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



- b. Across all three questions, 87 comments were captured in relation to consultation and engagement (40.3%).
- c. More respondents referenced consultation and engagement in question two (41) than question one (23).
- d. Consultation and Engagement was a higher priority for councillors than clerks across both questions.
- e. Some respondents wanted more consultation and engagement opportunities, whereas others wanted less, with a focus on more relevant consultation and engagement opportunities.
- f. Many smaller councils had the perception that they are not listened to in county or district consultations. Some respondents also wanted more notice for consultations and for consultations to be simpler and shorter.
 - i. *'giving plenty of time for group consultation by the full Parish Council, rather than informing us at the 11th hour that there is yet another last minute consultation to respond to'*
 - ii. *'Comprehensive consultation processes to include an option to object to, or request amendments to, County or District Council proposals.'*
 - iii. *'Allow longer time to engage with community over consultations that specifically affect them. not all councils have a full time clerk.'*
 - iv. *'Consultations should be properly advertised and the outcomes taken seriously. Currently the views of Parish Councils and the residents are ignored.'*
 - v. *'OCC [Oxfordshire County Council] consultation documents are too long, filled with jargon, and have unrealistically short deadlines'*
 - vi. *'More outreach needed, online consultations only reach a few people who are particularly interested. most residents completely unaware of consultations and council decisions'*

33. Communication

- 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'*

34. Communities

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



- b. More respondents referenced communities and community engagement in question two when considering local democracy (30%) that in partnership working as part of question one (13%).
- c. Communities came up almost equally between clerks and councillors across both questions (31% of clerks and 33.6% of councillors)
- d. Key themes under communities include councils' engagement with community projects/initiatives, engaging with underrepresented groups, empowering participation in voting and elections and support for targeted communities (such as rural communities and young people).
 - i. *'Create more opportunities for citizens to take agency for outcomes, giving under-represented segments a voice or channel that suits them better than the current ways in which we currently work'*
 - ii. *'We should all work to support all parts of our community but especially those that do not have a voice eg children, elderly deprived'*
 - iii. *'Parish council members are too often returned uncontested.'*
 - iv. *'Encourage a wide range of candidates to stand for all levels of council, ensuring that there should always be sufficient candidates to require people to vote in an election.'*
 - v. *'I think a focus on the council giving power to our communities and our residents feeling like they have a voice that will be listened to and cared about, rather than the council being seen as having power over the community and making decisions without listening to the community'*
 - vi. *'Alignment to shared outcomes that benefit the local communities we serve, as steered by the communities themselves.'*

- 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.

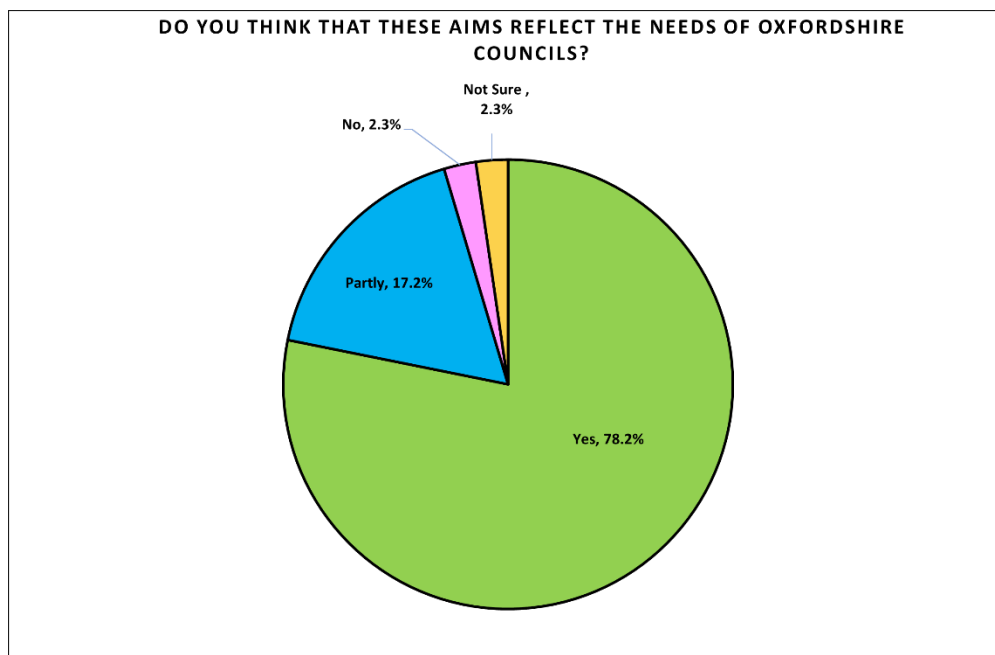
- i. *'Better engagement with younger families within the area. Better signposting.'*
- ii. *'Working together with all local groups encouraging younger people to get interested in local politics'*
- iii. *'Parish councils are made up primarily of individuals who have the interest and time. This often 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

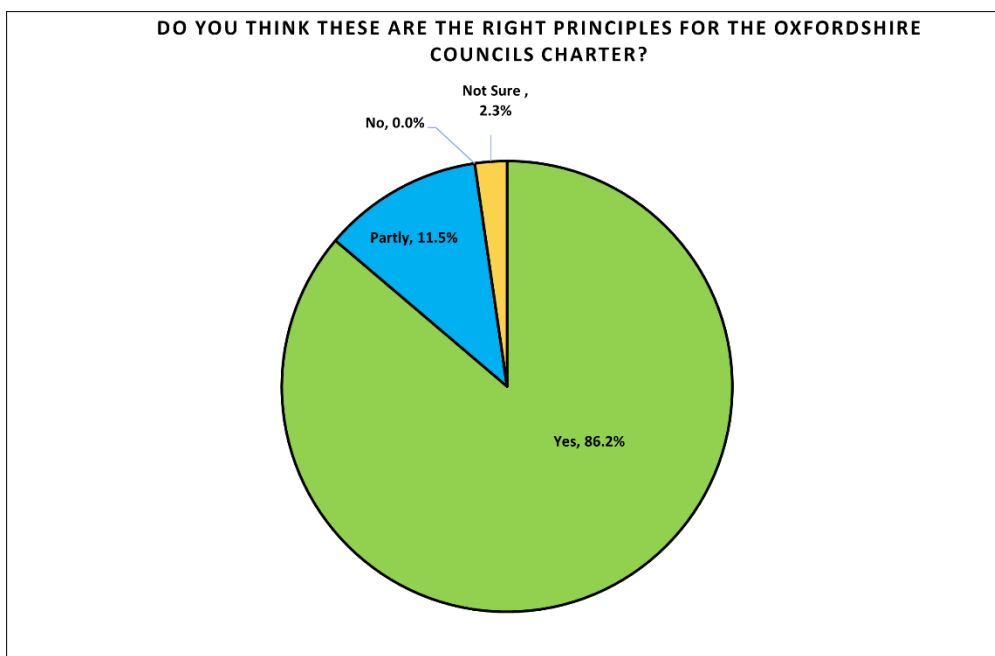
- a. Many respondents called for a single point of contact for town and parish councils when contacting county or district councils – such as through a named liaison officer, locality officer or a dedicated telephone number or helpdesk.
 - i. *'One point of contact at CC/DC [county council/district councils] 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 contact 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).

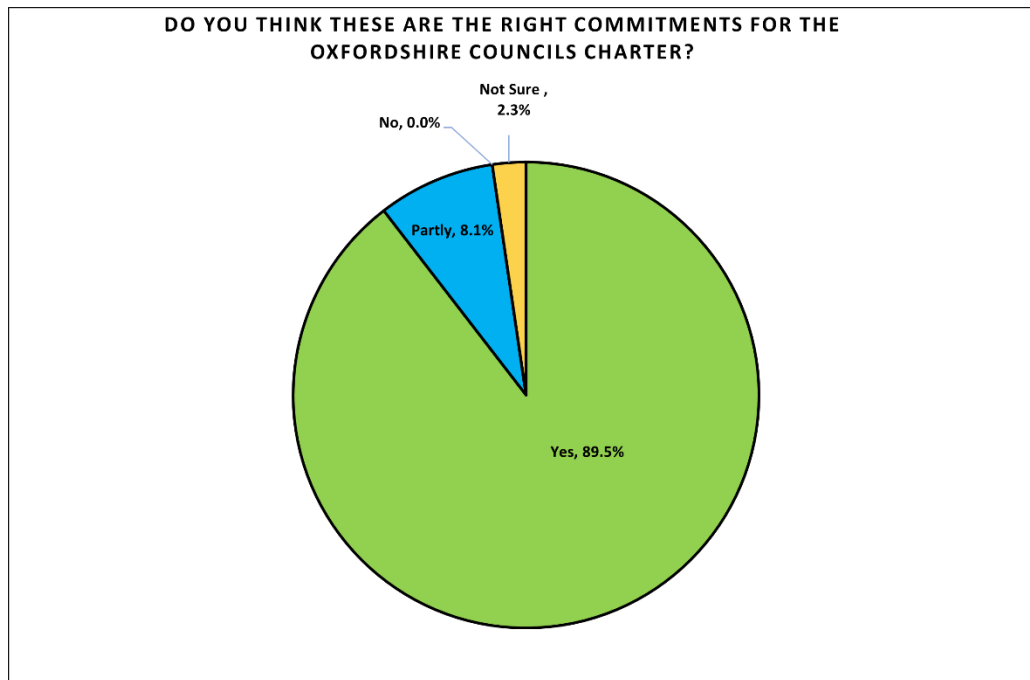


- b. 86% responded that they think the principles are the right principles for the charter (out of 87 respondents).



- 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.

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CABINET – 14 MAY 2024

FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT April 2024

Report by the Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to

- a) agree the virements in Annex 1a and note the virements in Annex 1b.
- b) note the anticipated reduction in business rates funding of £0.7m in 2024/25 compared to the assumptions in the budget, and the proposed use of additional business rates income notified in late 2023/24 to replace this.

Executive Summary

- 2. The budget for 2024/25 and Medium Term Financial Strategy to 2026/27 was agreed by Council on 20 February 2024. £27.1m new funding to meet inflationary and demand pressures is included as part of the budget for 2024/25 along with £10.6m investments and £13.9m savings.
- 3. The report to Council noted that where estimates had been made in relation to funding for 2024/25 due to confirmation of sums not being available any variations from the estimates would be reported through the Business Management and Monitoring Reports for 2024/25.
- 4. This report sets out updates to funding notified since the budget was agreed as well as updates and risks which will need to be managed in 2024/25 and the arrangements for monitoring progress with investments and the achievement of savings.

Introduction

- 5. This is the first financial monitoring update for the 2024/25 financial year. The report sets out updates to funding and the anticipated impact of inflation notified since the budget was agreed as well as risks that will need to be managed during the year. The first forecast, based on the position at the end of May 2024 will be reported to Cabinet in July.
- 6. Annexes are attached as follows:

Annex 1a
Annex 1b

Virements to approve
Virements to note

Funding Updates

Business Rates and Business Rates Collection Fund Surplus/Deficit

7. The agreed budget for 2024/25 includes estimated Business Rates funding of £99.5m. The total is made up of £79.8m relating to the Settlement Funding Assessment, estimated local growth of £4.1m and £15.0m estimated grant funding to offset the impact of business rates reliefs and indexation.
8. The actual funding for 2024/25 and surplus for 2023/24 notified by the district councils since the budget was agreed is incorporated into the updated budget set out in the table below. Confirmation of the Section 31 Grant for Business Rates Reliefs and Indexation by the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) is expected in May 2024.

	2024/25 Agreed Budget £m	2024/25 Updated Budget £m	Change £m
Settlement Funding Assessment	79.8	79.8	0.0
Local Growth	4.0*	-0.2	-4.2
Section 31 Grant for Business Rates Reliefs – Retail & Hospitality reliefs ¹	0.0*	3.6	3.6
Section 31 Grant – Indexation Element	13.2	13.2	0.0
Section 31 Grant for Business Rates Reliefs – on-going reliefs	1.8*	1.7	-0.1
Total Section 31 Grant for Business Rates Reliefs and Indexation	15.0	18.5	3.5
Business Rates Pooling Income	0.7	0.7	0.0
Collection Fund Surplus (+) or Deficit (-)	0.0	0.0	0.0
Total	99.5	98.8	-0.7

(*) the report to Cabinet in January 2024 noted that the council was awaiting updates from all the district councils in February 2024 to confirm these amounts.

9. Local authorities have been able to retain the growth in business rates from a baseline of April 2013 up until the point of a business rates reset which was originally planned for April 2020 but has yet to take place. The forecast for retained growth in 2024/25 was assumed to be £4.0m in the MTFS.
10. Business Rates reliefs for Retail, Leisure & Hospitality businesses were first put in place in 2020/21 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and were extended for a further year in the Autumn Statement 2024. Section 31 grant funding is then provided to replace local business rates income not collected as a result of these reliefs. It was not possible to estimate the effect of these reliefs or the collection

¹ These reliefs were extended until 31 March 2025 in the Autumn Statement 2023.

fund surplus until all of the district and city councils provided updates on estimated income and reliefs early in 2024.

11. Ahead of that information being available the agreed budget assumed local growth of £4.0m and noted that updates were awaited. Because of the on-going impact of the reliefs it is becoming increasingly difficult to assess what the underlying growth is. Based on updates from the district councils received since then grant funding to replace local business rates income that will not be collected as a result of the Retail, Leisure and Hospitality reliefs is expected to be £3.6m.
12. A mix of surpluses and deficits for 2023/24 notified by the district and city councils broadly offset so that there is no impact of those overall.
13. Pending confirmation of the grant totals by DLUHC the total anticipated reduction in business rates funding is £0.7m. It is proposed to use additional business rates income confirmed in late 2023/24 to replace this funding in 2024/25. The on-going impact will need to be considered through the Budget & Business Planning Process for 2025/26.

Government Grant Updates

Community drug and alcohol treatment Grant

14. £0.2m un-ringfenced grant funding for activity related to Individual Placement and Support in community drug and alcohol treatment was notified in early 2024. Annex 1b notes a virement to add the equivalent expenditure budget to Public Health.

Substance Misuse Treatment and Reform Grant

15. Local authorities (upper tier and unitary) are responsible for commissioning drug and alcohol treatment and recovery services as part of their public health responsibilities. Following notification of the grant Annex 1a includes a proposed virement to add £0.5m expenditure budget to Public Health and increases the grant funded total from £0.6m to £1.1m.

Extended Rights for Home to School Travel Grant

16. Confirmation of £0.985m un-ringfenced grant funding to support home to school travel was received in March 2024 and compares to £0.809m funding received in 2023/24. Annex 1a includes a request to approve a virement of to add the £0.707m increase in the expenditure budget compared to the agreed budget to Children's Services. As noted in the Business Management & Monitoring Report to Cabinet in March, home to school transport continues to be a high risk in terms of budget variance and is contributing to the forecast overspend for Children's Services in 2023/24. The expectation is that as in 2023/24 this funding will need to be used to support on-going risks and pressures in 2024/25.

Household Support Fund

17. As part of the Budget Statement on 6 March 2024 the government announced £0.500Bn funding nationally to extend the Household Support Fund (HSF5) from April to September 2024. Further details were announced by the Department for Work and Pensions on 26 March 2024.

18. Oxfordshire's allocation is £3.4m. The conditions attached to the funding are similar to the previous round and it will need to be used to meet immediate needs and to help those who are struggling to afford household essentials including energy and water bills, food, and wider essentials. Funding can also now be used to support residents with housing costs. A report elsewhere on the agenda sets out proposals for cost of living support in 2024/25 and incorporates the use of this funding.

Pay Inflation

19. The agreed budget includes funding for an estimated pay award equivalent to 5.0% for all staff. Each additional 1% above that would cost around £3.0m on-going and would need to be met from corporate contingency.
20. The claim lodged by UNISON, GMB and Unite on 29 February 2024 included a request to increase pay by at least £3,000 or 10% (whichever is greater) on all spinal column points.
21. Pay consultation briefings took place March 2024. National Employers subsequently met to discuss key themes and messages and are meeting again in May 2024. It is currently unclear when an offer will be made or when agreement is likely to be reached so updates will be provided in future reports.

Budget Management, Risks & Reporting in 2024/25

22. The budget for 2024/25 includes £27.1m new funding to meet inflationary and demand pressures is included as part of the budget for 2024/25 along with £10.6m investments and £13.9m savings. Taking account of all planned and new changes the net budget for Children's Services has increased by 15%, and Adult Services by 10% compared to 2023/24.
23. As noted in the Business Management & Monitoring Reports there is on-going action manage demand for Children's Social Care and Adult Services. This action, combined with the increase in the budget, and a risk adjustment included in the budget for Children's Services, should help to ensure that expenditure can be managed within the available funding in 2024/25. Budgeted corporate contingency of £7.3m is available to mitigate risks as well as any potential additional costs relating to the agreement of the pay award for 2024/25.
24. The Financial Strategy sets out a requirement to achieve at least 90% of savings overall by the end of the financial year. Updates on the achievement of savings and narrative updates on progress with investments agreed as part of the budget will be included as part of the Business Management & Monitoring Reports throughout 2024/25.

Virements

25. Annex 1a includes proposed virements to add funding relating to un-ringfenced grant for Extended Rights for Free Travel and the Substance Misuse Treatment and Reform 2024/25 Grant. Further virements are required to realign budgets with anticipated income.

26. There are also a number of virements to note set out in Annex 1b that have been actioned since the budget was agreed.

Financial Implications

27. This report includes an update on the budget agreed by Council in February 2024 and sets out both increases to funding and expenditure. The on-going impact of the 2024/25 pay award will need to be considered through the Budget & Business Planning Process for 2025/26. Strong financial management and oversight will continue to be required to ensure that services are managed within budgets for 2024/25.

Comments checked by: Lorna Baxter, Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer

Legal Implications

28. The Council's constitution at Part 3.2 (Budget and Policy Framework) sets out the obligations and responsibilities of both the Cabinet and the Full Council in approving, adopting and implementing the council's budget and policy framework.
29. The Council has a fiduciary duty to council taxpayers, which means it must consider the prudent use of resources, including control of expenditure, financial prudence in the short and long term and the need to act in good faith in relation to compliance with statutory duties and exercising statutory powers.

Comments checked by: Paul Grant, Head of Legal and Deputy Monitoring Officer

LORNA BAXTER	
Executive Director of Resources and Section 151 Officer	

Contact Officer: Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance

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Business Management Report
Position to the end of April 2024

CABINET IS RECOMMENDED TO APPROVE THE VIREMENTS AS DETAILED BELOW:

Directorate (CD = Cross Directorate)	Month of Cabinet meeting	Month of Directorate MMR	Narration	Budget Book Line	Service Area	Permanent / Temporary	Expenditure + increase / - decrease £000	Income - increase / + decrease £000
CD	May	Apr	Substance Misuse Treatment and Reform 2024/25 Grant (un-ringfenced) - increase total to £1.1m.	PH1 & 2	Public Health Functions	P	501	0
				VSMMGT	Strategic Measures	P	0	-501
CD	May	Apr	Extended Rights for Home to School Travel un- ringfenced Grant 2024/25	EP3-3	Supported Transport	T	707	0
				VSMMGT	Strategic Measures	T	0	-707
Grand Total							733	-733

Business Management Report
Position to the end of April 2024

CABINET IS RECOMMENDED TO NOTE THE VIREMENTS AS DETAILED BELOW:

Directorate (CD = Cross Directorate)	Month of Cabinet meeting	Month of Directorate MMR	Narration	Budget Book Line	Service Area	Permanent / Temporary	Expenditure + increase / - decrease £000	Income - increase / + decrease £000
CD	May	Mar	Green Book pay award 2023/24 adjustments	ATV2	Permanency Support Team	P	-3	0
				COD6	Finance & Procurement	P	-20	0
				COM4-2	Fire & Rescue	P	66	0
				VSMMGT	Strategic Measures	P	-43	0
CD	May	Mar	Gold Fire pay award 2024	COM4-2	Fire & Rescue	P	14	0
				VSMMGT	Strategic Measures	P	-14	0
CD	May	Mar	Agency savings £1.5m in 2023/24 - reallocate across directorates - repeat virement transacted in 2023/24 in 2024/25.	SCS1-1	Social Care Management & Practice	P	-317	0
				CEF5	Children's Services central costs	P	-468	0
				EP4-13	Business Support	P	-153	0
				COM4-2	Fire & Rescue	P	-186	0
				COD3	Comms, Strategy & Insight	P	-25	0
				COD4	IT Innovation & Digital	P	-57	0
				COD5	Culture & Customer Experience	P	-102	0
				COD6	Finance & Procurement	P	-47	0
				COD7	Property, Investment & FM	P	-71	0
				COD8	Law & Governance	P	-47	0
				COD2	Human Resources	P	1,473	0
CD	May	Mar	Substance Use Employment Individual Placement and Support Grant	PH1	Public Health Functions	P	228	0
				VSMMGT	Strategic Measures	P	0	-228
CD	May	Feb	Hard FM Planned Maintenance for ASPEN	CEF3-1	Provider Services	P	-24	0
				COD7	Property, Investment & FM	P	24	0
CD	May	Mar	Senior Leadership Team - allocate costs across directorates	SCS1-1	Social Care Management & Practice	P	191	0
				EP4-1	Data Intelligence & Business Support	P	214	0
				COD4	IT Innovation & Digital	P	-18	0
				COD8	Law & Governance	P	187	0
				COD1	Corporate Services	P	-574	0
CD	May	April	Garden Maintenance at Thornhill & Oxford Parkway 2024-2025	COD7	Property, Investment & FM	T	0	8
				EP3-2	Network Management	T	-8	0
CS	May	Mar	2025CS-HN707 Reallocate Saving	CEF1-2	SEND Service	P	-343	0
				CEF2-1	Early Help	P	343	0
			DSG Schools block 24-25 correction	CEF1-5	Learner Engagement	P	255	-255
				CEF4-3	Non-Delegated Schools Costs	P	-255	255
			Mind of my own	CEF3-2	QA Safeguarding + Recruit + Retention	P	11	0
				CEF5-1	Management & Admin	P	-11	0
	April		Family Time Tool - 24.25 staffing	CEF2-3	Childrens Social Care	T	30	0
				CEF2-9	Change	T	-30	0

Business Management Report
Position to the end of April 2024

CABINET IS RECOMMENDED TO NOTE THE VIREMENTS AS DETAILED BELOW:

Directorate (CD = Cross Directorate)	Month of Cabinet meeting	Month of Directorate MMR	Narration	Budget Book Line	Service Area	Permanent / Temporary	Expenditure + increase / - decrease £000	Income - increase / + decrease £000
			Enhancement re Thomas Potts - Foster placement	CEF2-3	Childrens Social Care	T	-4	0
				CEF3-1	Provider Services	T	4	0
			Re-instate / create recruitment budget	CEF2-9	Change	P	-100	0
				CEF3-2	QA Safeguarding + Recruit + Retention	P	100	0
AS	May	April	Transfer Budget For Assurance Lead Role	SCS1-2	Safeguarding & Mental Health	T	-65	0
				SCS2	Health Ed. & Social Care Commissioning	T	65	0
RES	May	Feb	Allocate corporate savings of contract/third party £2.0m 2024/25	COD4	IT, Innovation & Digital	P	-25	0
				COD5	Culture & Customer Experience	P	-11	0
				COD6	Finance & Procurement	P	106	0
				COD7	Property, Investment & FM	P	-70	0
		April	Reallocation of Corporate Savings to Customer & Culture services	COD5	Culture & Customer Experience	P	157	-157
FP	May	Mar	Fleet Management	EP2-3	Environment & Circular Economy	P	40	0
				EP3-1	Highway Maintenance	P	80	0
				EP3-2	Network Management	P	40	0
				EP3-4	Senior Management Team	P	-160	0
	April		Post budget build corrections and tidies	EP1-3	Infrastructure Delivery	P	0	0
				EP2-1	Strategic Planning	P	0	0
				EP2-3	Environment & Circular Economy	P	300	0
				EP3-1	Highway Maintenance	P	-50	0
				EP3-4	Senior Management Team	P	-250	0
			Highways Maintenance Budget Realignment 24/25	EP3-1	Highway Maintenance	P	-347	347
Grand Total							30	-30

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CABINET 14 MAY 2024

WORKFORCE REPORT & WORKFORCE DATA JANUARY – MARCH 2024 (Q4 2023/24) Report by Executive Director of Resources

RECOMMENDATION

1. Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to note the report.

Executive Summary

2. This report provides the workforce profile for quarter 4 2023/24 including an overview of headcount, agency spend, sickness, turnover and other relevant management information and performance indicators (Appendix A). This report also provides an update on the Council's Our People & Culture strategy which aims to address the trends identified in this report, but importantly help the Council's ambitions to become an Employer of Choice.

Workforce Profile

3. Appendix A of this report provides data and information about the Council's directly employed workforce. The highlights from this data and information are:
4. The Council's directly employed headcount (excluding agency workers) equates to 5378 people (4510 Full Time Equivalent (FTE)) at the end of Q4. This is an increase of 419 people over the past 5 years and an increase of 25 since Q3 2023/24.
5. Total agency spend in Q4 was £9.1m compared to £9.0m in Q3. Total spend for the 2023/24 financial year was £36.0m compared to £40.0m for 2022/23. A task force remains in place to review monthly spend and implement necessary interventions.
6. 5% of the Council's workforce is 25 or under which remains static from the previous quarter. The average age of our workforce is 46. Benchmarking data from across a pool of 71 other councils across England including County, City and District councils has been gathered. The average age across the sample group is 47.
7. The rolling 12 monthly voluntary turnover is 12.9%, up from 12.1% at the same time in 2022/23. The average voluntary turnover across the sample pool of 71 other councils is 13%.
8. For Q4 2023/24, sickness absence per FTE has increased by 0.1 days to 9 days in the 12 previous months. The average across our sample pool of 71 other councils is 11 days per FTE. The top reason for sickness absence remains as stress, anxiety

and depression at 28.4% and this has increased when compared to the same period in 2022/23 when it was 23%.

9. 10% of the workforce are recorded as non-white which remains static from the previous quarter. The data from the sample pool of 71 councils is difficult to compare due to the way in which the data is collated and reported. 7% of the workforce are recorded as having a disability, up from 6% since the last quarter (versus 8% across 71 other councils).
10. Workforce data and trends are published in more detail on the Council's intranet.

Our People and Culture Strategy progress update

11. In January 2024 the Council's Our People and Culture Strategy was presented to Cabinet. The vision for the strategy is that *'we develop and maintain a high performing, innovative, highly engaged, and agile teams, employing the best people, and reflecting the communities we serve. We nurture an environment that supports diversity, equality, and inclusion, and allows all our employees to bring their whole selves to work to deliver great services for our Oxfordshire residents'*.
12. The strategy focuses on 4 priorities:
 - **Attracting, recruiting and retaining talented People** - it is essential that the Council is able to attract, recruit and retain our talented People to deliver excellent services for the residents of Oxfordshire.
 - **Enabling Our People to thrive and perform** - creating a positive and inclusive work environment built on fairness, trust and transparency will allow the Council's People to thrive and perform.
 - **Enabling Our People to grow and evolve for the future** - providing growth opportunities both on and off the job to build our knowledge, skills and behaviours will help us all deliver the future together; and
 - **Enabling Our People to lead and transform for the future** - empowering our leaders to embrace the skills and behaviours needed to achieve high performance and effective outcomes.
13. Within the '**Attracting, recruiting and retaining talented people**' strand, significant progress has been made with the new Applicant Tracking System, which will speed up recruitment. Implementation has started with the Council's supplier and the system is scheduled to go live in October 2024. The majority of our new in-house Talent Acquisition and Resourcing team has now been recruited, which will enable the Council to move away from the Integrated Business Centre (IBC). Work has been progressing well to develop our Employer Value Proposition and developing our employer brand, which will raise our employer profile.
14. Within the '**Enabling our people to thrive and perform**' strand, a new policy framework has been created and all policy reviews for 23/24 have been completed including: agile working, sickness, domestic abuse, additions to pay guidance and numerous minor policy updates. Work has now started on change management policies and toolkits. The 2024 employee engagement survey was launched in February 2024 and results are now being communicated within the organisation. Work has also begun in scoping our wellbeing services and corporate initiatives.

15. Within the '**Enabling our people to grow and evolve for the future**' strand, a reciprocal mentoring scheme has been launched which focuses on equality, diversity and inclusion. The 12.3.2 managing for performance tool refresh has started. Work has begun to enhance the Council's early careers offer, training providers have been selected for our management trainee programme and candidates will start in September 2024; a work experience scheme is also in development.

16. Within the '**Enabling our people to lead and transform for the future**' strand, work is progressing to introduce a range of people management controls to enable the organisation to operate within the budget envelope. Further work will be scoped within this area when additional specialists are in post, funded through the transformation reserve.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

17. Equality and inclusion implications are considered across all our workstreams.

Sustainability Implications

18. There are no sustainability implications arising from this report.

Risk Management

19. There are no risk management issues arising from this report.

Financial Implications

20. The level of agency expenditure was a contributory factor in the year end directorate overspend for 2022/23 and has continued to impact on the level of directorate expenditure in 2023/24. On-going focus through the Our People and Culture Strategy is required to ensure that spend reduces further so that costs can be managed within agreed budgets for 2024/25.

Comments checked by:

Kathy Wilcox, Head of Corporate Finance

Legal Implications

21. There are no potential legal implications of any actions/outcomes detailed within this report. (TO BE CHECKED)

Comments checked by:

Paul Grant, Head of Legal

Lorna Baxter

Executive Director of Resources

Annex: Appendix A - Workforce Profile Q4

Background papers: Nil

Contact Officer: Michael Fletcher, Head of HR Business Partnering
Advisory

April 2024



Our workforce - Q4 23/24

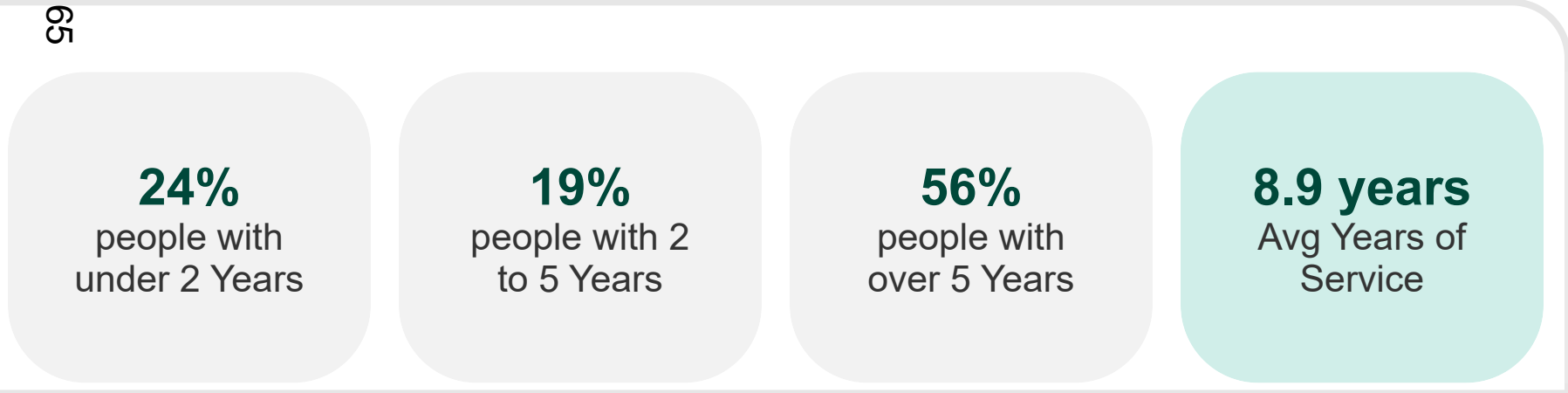
At the end of Q4 23/24, we had **5378** (4510.0 fte) people, an increase of **25** employees from last quarter. Of these **246** were apprentices, which accounted for **4.6%** of directorate workforce. During Q4 23/24, there were **446** agency workers, compared to **418** agency workers in last quarter.

Headcount as at 31 March in the past 5 years

2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
4959	5079	5087	5116	5310

Length of Service ✨

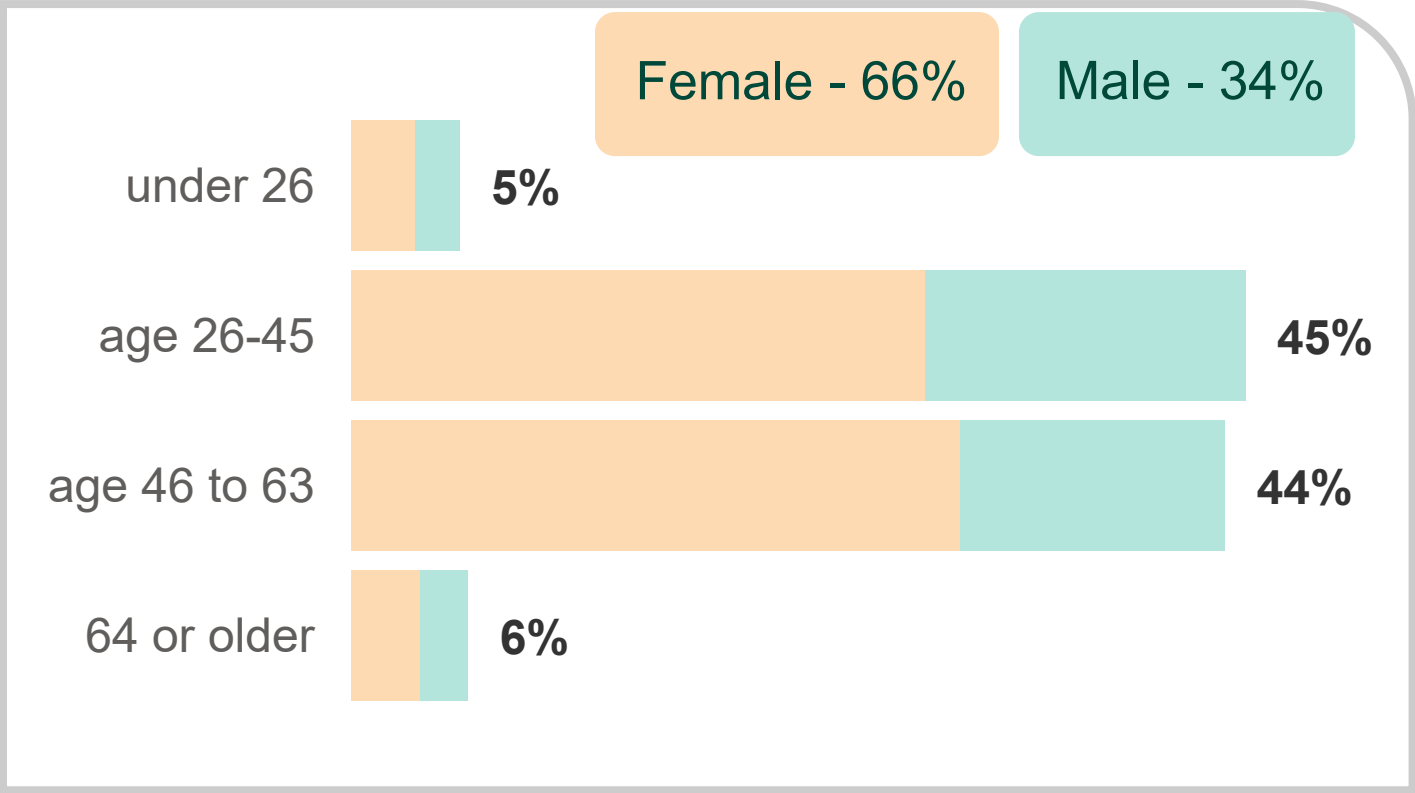
Page 165



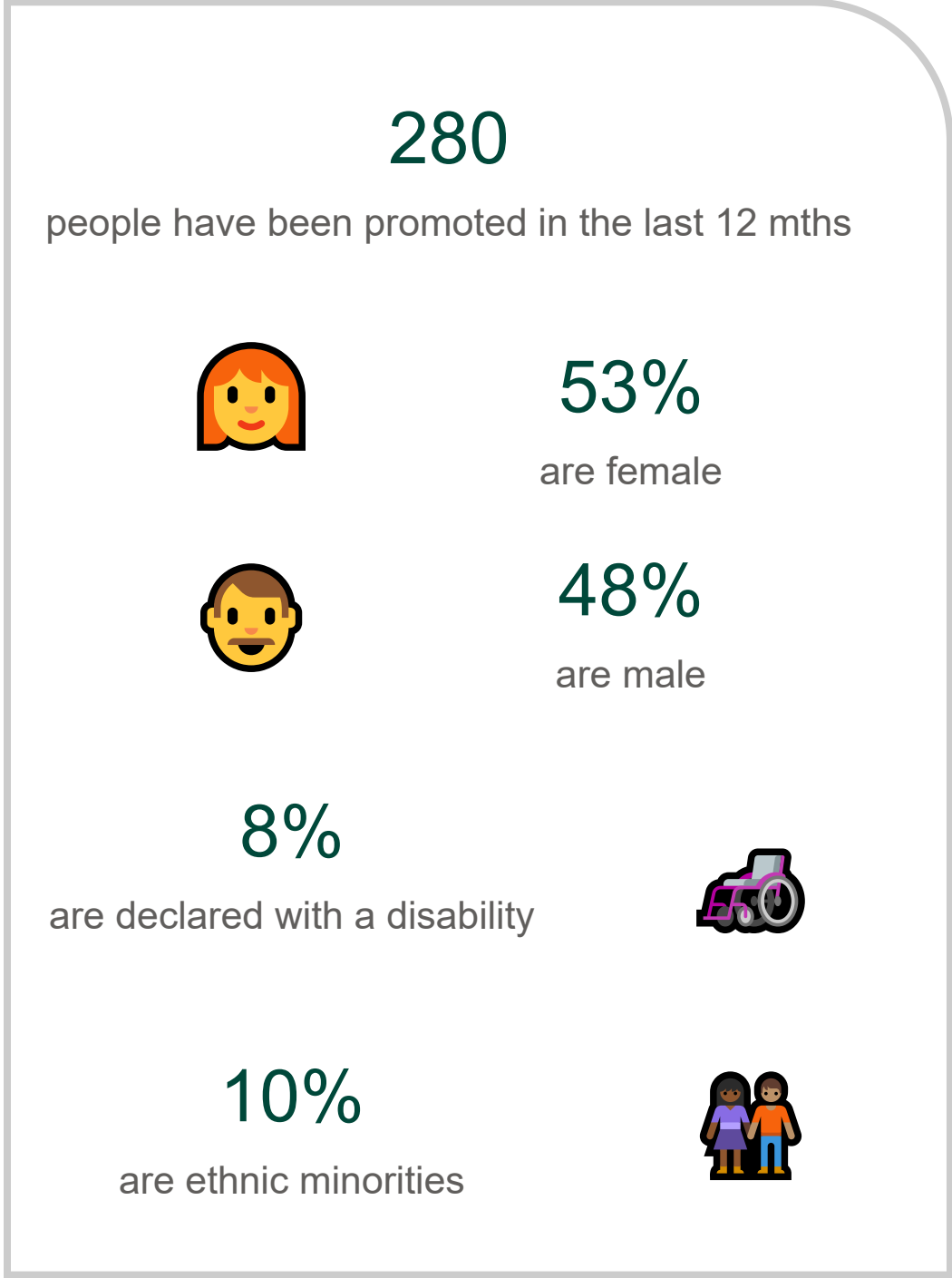
Annual Turnover Rate

9.6%	13.3%	12.1%	12.9%
2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Number of starters left within the first 6 months			
24	40	62	44
2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24

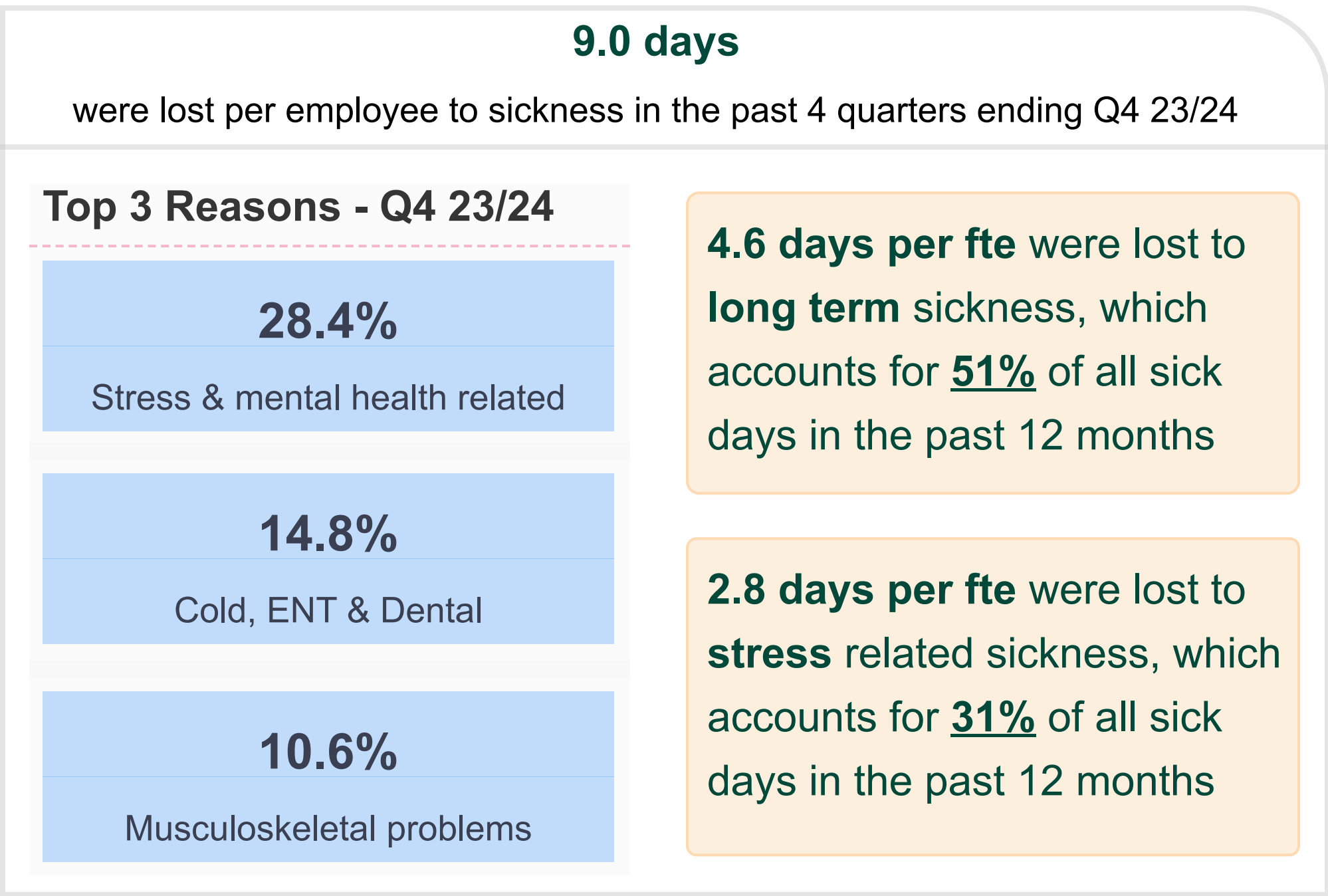
Gender and Age



Promotions 🧑🏫



Sickness



Starters

We had **217** starters in Q4 23/24. **11%** of these were under 26. New starters account for **4.0%** of total workforce.

Leavers

We had **198** leavers in Q4 23/24. **9%** of these were under 26. Leavers account for **3.7%** of our workforce.



Apprenticeship - celebrate our success

During Q4 there were a total of **59 new** apprenticeship enrolments. In the past 4 quarters we had a total of **71 completions** and with around 40% of these achieving the highest grade of a **Distinction**.



Plans for 10 new Social Work Apprenticeships in Childrens with 10 further positions in Adults is well underway. We had further good news that the Apprenticeship hub along with 3 of our apprentices are **finalists** in the recent annual OXLEP Apprenticeship awards

09/1/2025

No. of apprentices on programme - end of Q4 23/24

312

Split by new apprentices vs CPD

% new apprentice

20.2%

% doing CPD

79.8%

Number of new apprentices enrolled in Q4 23/24

59

Split by new apprentices vs CPD

% new apprentice

10.2%

% doing CPD

89.8%

In Q4 23/24 there were

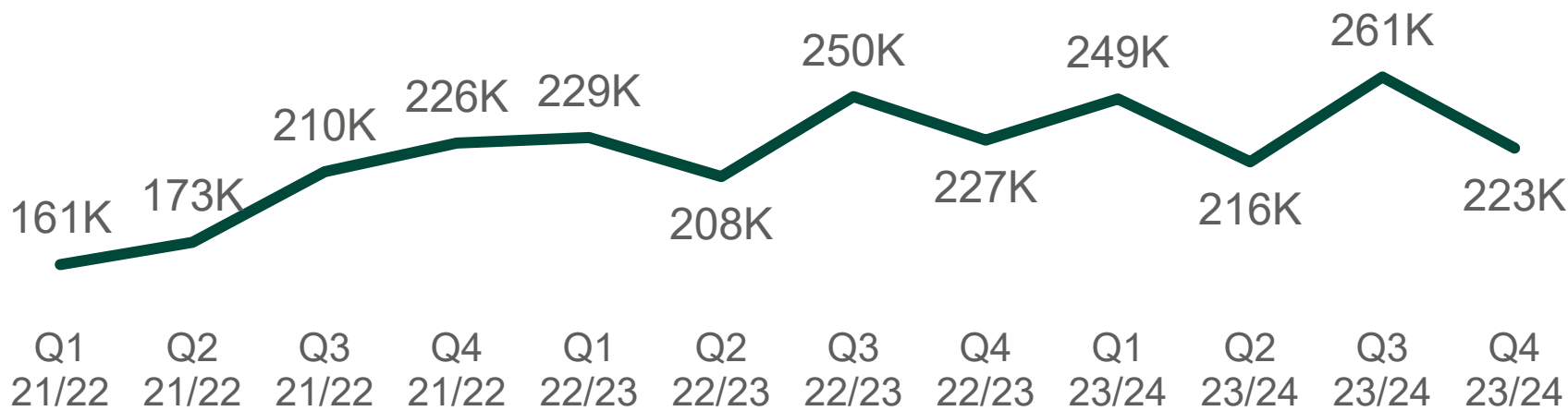
Completions

9

Withdrawals

3

actual spend on apprenticeship by quarter



Agency Spend

Total agency spend in Q4 23/24 was **£9,097,493**, which has gone up by **1.4%** compared to the spend in the last quarter at **£8,969,483**. Compared to that of the same period last year, the spend has decreased by **15.1%**

Agency spend for the previous 11 quarters and the latest quarter in Q4 23/24

Q1 21/22 6.14M	Q2 21/22 8.15M	Q3 21/22 7.59M	Q4 21/22 8.33M
Q1 22/23 8.98M	Q2 22/23 9.88M	Q3 22/23 10.47M	Q4 22/23 10.71M
Q1 23/24 8.40M	Q2 23/24 9.59M	Q3 23/24 8.97M	Q4 23/24 9.10M

Division(s): N/A

CABINET – 14 MAY 2024

FORWARD PLAN AND FUTURE BUSINESS

Items identified from the Forward Plan for Forthcoming Decision

Topic/Decision

Portfolio/Ref

Cabinet, 18 June 2024

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Business Management & Monitoring Report - Annual Report, Provisional Revenue Outturn 2023/24 Provisional Capital Outturn 2023/24 and Outcomes Framework 24/25 To note the report and agree the recommendations 	Cabinet, 2024/061 - Cabinet Member for Finance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Modern Slavery Statement Raising awareness and visibility of our newly-written Modern Slavery Policy. 	Cabinet, 2024/002 - Leader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Capital Programme Approvals - June 2024 Report on variation to the capital programme for approval (as required). 	Cabinet, 2024/062 - Cabinet Member for Finance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Period Poverty Scheme Trial To approve the trial of a Period Poverty Scheme following the motion at Full Council in September 2023. The trial will provide period products for those who need them, including reusable products. 	Cabinet, 2024/113 - Leader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appointments 2024-2025 To consider Member appointments to a variety of bodies which in different ways support the discharge of the Council's Executive functions. 	Cabinet, 2024/132 - Leader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Oxfordshire County Council's Productivity Plan The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has requested all councils to complete and submit a productivity plan by 19th July. Cabinet and Council are asked to approve Oxfordshire County Council's productivity plan ahead of submission 	Cabinet, 2024/137 - Leader
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) Update Approve adoption of the updated BSIP 	Cabinet, 2024/139 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provisional Capital Outturn 2023/24 To note the performance against the capital programme for 2023/24 as set out in the report. 	Cabinet, 2024/140 - Cabinet Member for Finance
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Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Young People's Services, 12 June 2024

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Didcot Special School - Education Specification and Approval to Start LA Presumption Process Whether to approve the education specification for a new special school, and move forward with identifying an academy sponsor 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Young People's Services, 2024/089 - Cabinet Member for Children, Education & Young People's Services
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Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Community & Corporate Services, 18 June 2024

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ DSIT 5G Innovation Regions project - England's Connected Heartland DSIT have grant funded OCC with £3.8m. OCC needs to procure two contracts, each estimated at c £1.5m, using the DSIT grant. Decision will be required for award of contracts 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Community & Corporate Services, 2024/050 - Cabinet Member for Community & Corporate Services
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Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 20 June 2024

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fulbrook: Proposed 20 Mph Speed Limits This proposal is part of the County-wide 20 Mph Speed Limit Project. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/084 -
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	Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<p>▪ Souldern: Proposed 20 Mph Speed Limits This proposal is part of the County wide 20 Mph Speed Limit Project (Phase 3).</p>	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/083 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<p>▪ Oxford City - Various Locations: Proposed New and Deleted Disabled Persons Parking Places To seek approval for the introduction and amendments to disabled persons parking places. Following requests from the public for the introduction of disabled parking places, the county council has consulted on new locations which have met our criteria. The report will present feedback on sites where there have been objections.</p>	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/058 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<p>▪ Charlton-on-Otmoor: Proposed 20 Mph Speed Limits Part of County-wide 20 Mph Speed Limit Project</p>	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/081 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<p>▪ Proposed No Waiting Restrictions: Newtown Road, Henley-on-Thames In response to planning permission to redevelop a vacant industrial building on Newtown Road, Henley there is a condition to make changes to parking in the area to ensure highway safety and access is maintained.</p>	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/108 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<p>▪ Moreton (Thame): Proposed 20mph Speed Limits Proposal is part of County-wide 20mph Speed Limit Project (Phase 3)</p>	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/106 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Goring Heath: Proposed 20mph Speed Limits Proposal part of County-wide 20mph Speed Limit Project (Phase 3) 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/105 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Crawley: Proposed 20mph Speed Limits This proposal is part of the County-wide 20mph Speed Limits Project (Phase 3) 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/104 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Middle Aston: 20mph Speed Limit Proposals Part of County-wide 20mph speed limit project. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/103 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Taynton: 20mph Speed Limit Proposals Part of County-wide 20mph speed limit project. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/102 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fencott & Murcott: Proposed 20mph Speed Limits Proposal is part of the County-wide 20mph speed limit projects. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/095 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rotherfield Greys: Proposed 20mph Speed Limits Proposal is part of the County-wide 20mph speed limit project. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport

	Management, 2024/094 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tetsworth: Proposed 20mph Speed Limits This proposal is part of the County-wide 20mph speed limit project. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/093 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Over Norton: 20mph Speed Limit Proposals Part of the County-wide 20mph Speed Limit Project. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/092 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cottisford: 20 Mph Speed Limit Proposals Part of County-wide 20 Mph Speed Limit Project 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/086 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Freeland: 20 Mph Speed Limit Proposals Part of the County-wide 20 Mph Speed Limit Project. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/085 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Benson: Preston Crowmarsh and RAF Benson - Proposed 20mph Speed Limits Part of County-wide 20mph Speed Limits Projects 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/116 - Cabinet Member

	for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ East Hagbourne: 20mph Speed Limit Proposals Part of Phase 3 of the County-wide 20mph Speed Limit Project. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/115 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Iffley Road, Oxford - Safer Roads Project A traffic calming consultation will be required to improve safety for active travel users at priority junctions where number of accidents and collisions are high. Traffic calming consultation is required for the implementation of raised tables at junctions which will act as a speed hump to slow drivers down when approaching the junctions. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/046 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Proposed two way cycling - Sheep Street, Bicester (experimental order) 2024 To seek approval to proceed with an experimental order which allows cyclists to proceed along Sheep Street, Bicester 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/070 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Woodeaton: Proposed 20 Mph Speed Limits To consider any objections raised at formal consultation and determine speed limits to be implemented 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/133 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Harwell: Milton Heights - Proposed 20mph Speed Limits Part of Phase 3 Countywide 20mph speed limits project 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/135 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management

<p>▪ CPZ Parking Permit Eligibility (Various Locations, Oxford) (March 2024)</p> <p>The County Council is promoting amendment to permit eligibility rules for permit zones in Oxford which are required as part of planning decisions to restrict allowances for permits to properties where use has changed.</p>	<p>Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/136 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management</p>
<p>▪ Additional £5m Investment in Highway Maintenance</p> <p>Paper to set out the proposed Highway Maintenance investment programmes, and the respective distribution across the same, for the additional £5m as proposed by the Labour & Co-Operative Group, which was approved at Council meeting on Feb 20th 2024</p>	<p>Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/138 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management</p>
<p>▪ Proposed 24hr Exemption for Hackney & Private Hire Vehicles through Westgate Bus Link, Oxford</p> <p>On completion of Westgate development, taxis and PHVs were originally not allowed in the bus link. Following lobbying by COLTA, an ETRO was agreed to allow HCVs and PHVs to use the bus link (without pick up/drop) off 7am-7pm. This was subsequently made permanent. COLTA have continued to lobby to allow access 24 hours a day. Cabinet Member is keen for us to consult on this proposal (permanent TRO).</p>	<p>Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/101 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management</p>
<p>▪ Proposed No waiting at anytime restrictions - Main Street, Tadmarton</p> <p>To seek approval for the introduction of proposals to introduce double yellow lines</p>	<p>Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/081 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management</p>
<p>▪ Kiddington with Asterleigh: Village 20mph Limit Proposals</p> <p>To consider any comments arising from consultation and determine amended limits accordingly</p>	<p>Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/037 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management</p>
<p>▪ Appleton with Eaton: 20mph Speed Limit Proposals</p> <p>Part of County-wide 20mph Speed Limit Project</p>	<p>Delegated Decisions by</p>

	Cabinet Member for Transport Management, 2024/020 - Cabinet Member for Transport Management
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Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Finance, 14 June 2024

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contract award for the supply of water and waste water services at all corporate properties. The existing contract for the supply of water and waste services for properties occupied by Oxfordshire County Council has come to an end and the service has been reprocured. Approval is required for the award of the new contract. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Finance, 2024/129 - Cabinet Member for Finance
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Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, 18 June 2024

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recommissioning of Learning Disability Respite Services Key Decision needed to proceed with the procurement of Learning Disability Respite services. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, 2023/234 - Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dementia Support Service To seek approval to increase the current contract value by £234,320 in 2024-25 so the provider can continue to extend work to meet increased capacity, work with people with Mild Cognitive Impairment and extend the education offer for carers and people living with dementia. 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, 2024/128 - Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care

Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities & Community Safety, 4 June 2024

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fire and Rescue Service Appliance Tender Due to a previous pause in purchasing new fire appliances, the existing fleet are now superceeding recommended lifespan periods, leading to increased expense for breakdowns, 	Delegated Decisions by Cabinet Member for Public Health,
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<p>maintenance and repairs and a risk of parts becoming obsolete. Approval is sought for an additional £1.3m in 25/26 and £1.46m from 26/27 onwards, alongside an initial investment of £2.1m in 2024 to ensure the minimum lifespan of appliances is met.</p>	<p>Inequalities & Community Safety, 2024/111 - Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities & Community Safety</p>
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