

West Oxfordshire Covid-19 Recovery Plan

October 2020



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL



West Oxfordshire Covid-19 Recovery Plan (October 2020)

In June 2020 Council moved to prepare a Local Recovery Plan to complement the delivery of the Council Plan 2020-24 through the Covid-19 Recovery Themes of Economy, Community, Climate and Council, Service Delivery and Finance. These are closely aligned with the six Council Plan priorities to ensure that actions prioritised as part of the Covid recovery will also positively contribute to the achievement of the Council Plan (see Table 1).

The 'live' status of the Recovery Plan reflects the agile approach required of the Council to be able to target its efforts and resources to achieve the Council Plan Vision to be 'fit for the future' through being proactive at addressing new challenges as the Council and District recovers from the impacts of the pandemic. It enables us to be flexible to take up opportunities to work with other partners as they arise and not be constrained by delivering a set of rigid prescriptive targets. Our recovery work will need to flex and adapt as the activity of our partner organisations (Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership and others) forms and we shape what our role is in this collaborative effort. The task of recovering from the pandemic will be iterative and a 'dynamic' Covid-19 Recovery Plan will assist the Council to focus resources and effort to those opportunities as they arise over the years it will take to support a district wide recovery from the pandemic.

The Recovery Plan sets out how the Council will invest resources in achieving the aims identified for each Covid-19 Recovery Theme. The programme of work outlined across the themes can be divided into two parts. Firstly, work that has been given "recommended priority" ranking through Councillor engagement will be commenced at this early phase of the recovery as funding is in place. Secondly, "areas of ambition" where initiatives will be progressed when further finance can be assembled or alternative avenues for resourcing these initiatives are secured. See Appendix 1 – Covid-19 Recovery Delivery and Project Investment Schedule.

<i>Table 1 – Covid-19 Recovery Theme</i>	Related Council Plan Priorities
<i>Economy</i>	<i>A Vibrant District Economy - Securing future economic success through supporting existing local businesses and attracting new businesses to deliver the economic ambitions of the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy.</i>
<i>Community</i>	<i>Healthy Towns and Villages - Facilitating healthy lifestyles and better well being for everyone. Strong Local Communities - Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive local communities. Meeting the Housing Needs of our Changing Population - Securing the provision of market and affordable housing of a high quality for the wide range of householders making their home in West Oxfordshire.</i>
<i>Climate</i>	<i>Climate Action - Leading the way in protecting and enhancing the environment by taking action locally on climate change and biodiversity.</i>
<i>Council, Service Delivery and Finance</i>	<i>Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance - Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council.</i>

Covid-19 Recovery Theme - Economy



Related Council Plan Priority:

Securing future economic success through supporting existing local business and attracting new business to deliver the economic ambitions of the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy.

West Oxfordshire benefits from a diverse economy that is represented by many sectors ranging from high tech and advanced manufacturing to retail and the visitor economy. The COVID-19 lockdown has impacted different sectors to varying degrees and in different ways. The Council acknowledges that the economic recovery from the pandemic will require an equally varied and nuanced response to reflect this diversity. The Council also recognises the challenges ahead in terms of recovery to pre-Covid turnover; how the economy will fare once Government support for businesses and individuals ceases and the impact of the uncertainty surrounding the unknown outcome of the Government's Brexit negotiations with the EU on a trade deal. Equally, the Council is acutely aware of the impact this economic turmoil has had on rising unemployment rates and the impact that this has on individuals, their families and the communities they are part of.

In response to the challenges outlined above, the Council is an active partner of the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership who is developing a County wide Economic Recovery Plan. Supplementary to this involvement, the Council identifies the following Economic Covid-19 Recovery Aims which will guide its proactive response to the specific economic recovery needs for the District.

Economy – Covid-19 Recovery Aims:

The following are proposed as high-level economic objectives for the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis:

- Recover to better than before.
- Re-imagine our town centres and high streets so they remain vibrant service centres for the local population and visitors alike.
- Ensure there is a robust support structure for all stages of business but particularly for those people setting up a business or going self-employed for the first time.
- Ensure training is available to re-skill those who have lost jobs and to help growing businesses recruit local people.
- Ensure that the district plays a full part in Oxfordshire's 'Innovation Ecosystem' as part of the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy, and as part of the wider Oxford to Cambridge Arc.
- Be clear about the Council's role in different parts of the economic recovery process, whether this be to lead, partner with others or influence initiatives.
- Ensure that adequate resources are available so the Council can achieve what it sets out to do.
- Ensure that every decision and initiative takes into account and tries to minimise its environmental impact.

Economy – Covid-19 Recovery Delivery and Investment

The Council is committed to ensuring that West Oxfordshire's economy recovers from the pandemic and associated lockdowns. The Council aspires to an economy which is stronger than it was before the pandemic, ensuring relevant initiatives contribute to the delivery of the Council's climate ambitions and recognises that to do this investment is needed to bring this economic progress to fruition.

The Council commits to ongoing investment in the coordination, facilitation and delivery of action in the following key priority areas:

- To support the recovery and longer term vitality and viability of the market towns – including, for example, the development of individual plans for each town to protect and enhance their commercial hearts; support for the establishment of town recovery groups; securing external investment into the District; maximising the commercial benefit of the Council's own property and supporting town centre businesses.
- To ensure that business support is available to all stages and sectors of business, delivered either directly or in partnership with other organisations, both local and national, and including Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership.
- To ensure that the right skills training opportunities are available locally to match local people to jobs and to support those organisations, including Job Centre Plus, Abingdon and Witney College and the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership skills team that are delivering this.
- To support the recovery of the visitor economy – including, for example, working with the sector to repurpose it for the domestic market and driving the projects which will have a significant impact on the visitor economy including The Mullin Automotive Park and redevelopment of Eynsham Hall.
- To ensure that the Council plays its part in delivering the ambition of the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy to be a 'top 3 global innovation ecosystem' by 2040. This will require the Council to actively build on its strengths and pursue local economic development opportunities including the Garden Village Science Park and a potential Carterton Technology Hub.

Covid-19 Recovery Theme - Communities

Related Council Plan Priority:



Healthy Towns and Villages

Facilitating healthy lifestyles and better wellbeing for everyone.



Strong Local Communities

Supporting and building prosperous and inclusive local communities



Meeting the Housing Needs of our Changing Population

Securing the provision of market and affordable housing of a high quality for the wide range of householders making their home in West Oxfordshire

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on our District at the individual, household and community level. The ongoing and unpredictable nature of this public health emergency and its impacts on the health and wellbeing of communities present challenges for recovery. The emergency has seen an inspiring grassroots level response which together with the Council's own Response Hub supported many individuals and households through this extremely difficult period. There are opportunities to build on these collaborative efforts with the Voluntary and Community Sector.

The health and wellbeing of our communities are impacted by a wide range of factors including housing, environment, employment and education and the work of the Council touches many of these determinants. This is reflected in the themes of this Recovery Plan and the following set of community recovery aims which will steer its efforts towards improved health and wellbeing locally as we recover from Covid-19.

Communities - Covid-19 Recovery Aims

- Build on increased opportunities to listen to, involve and engage residents in the Council's work.
- Prevent decline and reduce isolation by connecting people to places and each other.
- Establish strengths based approaches as a mode of operation across Council services.
- Work locally to find sustainable ways to retain and further develop new neighbourhood responses.
- Improve the way we invest our resources to make the biggest difference to areas and people in greatest need.
- Work hard to increase external investment into the district and increase capacity.
- Work to develop a more connected system so that people have better physical access to services and awareness of them.
- Co-produce and collaborate with the Voluntary and Community sector (VCS) locally more effectively to improve services and better manage resources.
- Improve local visibility and achieve greater contact with communities.
- Innovate and use existing resources and influence to shape places to best meet the needs of the community.

Communities – Covid-19 Recovery Delivery and Investment

The Council is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of the communities it serves and pledges to invest in taking an active role in this effort. An initial phase of investment will bring forward two strands of activity:

- Explore the scope for the development of a network of Wellbeing hubs across the District. It is hoped that this could result in a range of providers, including other Councils, working together to provide a mix of services including advice, housing and welfare support in a variety of formats and locations across the district.
- Focus on helping people, especially those who are alone or who have long term health conditions, to improve levels of physical activity and build up their confidence. Movement amongst these individuals has been particularly restricted by the pandemic and they are at particular risk of physical decline. The Council recognises that this physical decline may lead to complications associated with frailty and demands on the NHS and wishes to mitigate against this.

In addition to these two strands of activity, a further set of five initiatives have been identified which will be progressed should external finance, or alternative means to resource these, be found:

- *Youth support & district-wide needs analysis* - to develop a comprehensive understanding of the priorities that young people identify as important to them in order to ensure that services and infrastructure provision meets their needs. Covid-19 has had a significant impact on young people in terms of their education, employment options, development opportunities and social skills. Engaging with young people directly and working with other youth organisations will make a positive contribution at a critical time.
- *Homelessness Prevention* - to engage with and provide early assistance to those at risk of homelessness in a bid to avoid the damaging and costly consequences of homelessness. The Council recognises that the risk of homelessness on individuals, and therefore the Council in associated costs, will be significant over the short to medium term as Government support for employees ends, unemployment rates increase, debt levels increase and eviction suspensions end which may put an increased number of people at risk of homelessness.
- *Community Building* - To work directly with communities facing particular challenges and work with residents to develop solutions to those challenges and build confidence.
- *Organisational Development Support* - To provide dedicated support for community groups in West Oxfordshire to secure their long term sustainability and so that the Council and its communities can benefit from the groups activity.
- *Centralised Grants Function (including Grants Review)* - To better coordinate the Council's grants process in order to achieve improved efficiency, consistency and impact. The review should give consideration to lessons learnt through Covid-19 and test whether funding priorities are correct in light of this or if other needs have emerged that require grant support as a priority.

Covid-19 Recovery Theme - Climate

Related Council Plan Priority:



Climate Action

Leading the way in protecting and enhancing the environment by taking action locally on climate change and biodiversity.

A Carbon Trust study using data from three million Lloyds customers noted a sharp decline in consumer spending between March and July as a consequence of lockdown. This resulted in a fall in carbon emissions equivalent to an estimated 4.3 million tonnes, 27% lower than in the same period in 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic also highlighted the value that local communities place on our natural environment, underlining the value of the Council's work following its declaration of a climate and ecological emergency in June 2019. This Recovery Plan sets out the following aims which seek to strengthen the Council's existing commitment to implementing its ambitions for climate by further reflecting the importance of a green recovery within them. These aims are not intended to replace the Council's current plans, but instead further those ambitions within the context of its plans for recovery from Covid-19 building upon the increased awareness and taking the opportunity to create a lower carbon future.

Climate – Covid-19 Recovery Aims:

- Aspire to achieving the highest environmental standards, embedding climate-conscious decisions, in everything we do.
- Reduce, replace and offset the Council's total CO₂e by delivering the Carbon Action Plan, working towards a target of carbon neutral by 2030.
- Facilitate partnership activities for widespread energy retrofit to reduce CO₂e as a District.
- Research and facilitate investment opportunities in green energy, supporting a Council and District transition across to low- and zero-emission energy.
- Deliver the highest sustainability standards in future development planning considerations.
- Contribute to the take up of green and active travel through partnerships across the District and County.
- Protect and enhance the value of existing open space and facilitate the creation of new natural landscapes that offer co-benefits for people and wildlife.
- Reduce waste at source and encourage recycling.
- Reduce water consumption through water efficiency and recycling measures across the Council's assets and portfolio.

The Council is committed to implementing its ambitions for climate through:

- A Carbon Action Plan for the Council, setting out the trajectory for how to become carbon neutral Council by 2030.
- A Climate Change Strategy setting out the Council's objectives and plans working across District in delivering climate action.
- A Biodiversity Plan defining the Council's next steps in facilitating a nature recovery.

Climate – Covid-19 Recovery Delivery and Investment

The Council is committed to ensuring that the strategies above will be translated into action to ensure that climate ambitions are met and that the value of our natural environment which has become so evident through the Covid-19 pandemic to our local communities is safeguarded and enhanced.

This commitment will be realised in the immediate term through:

- Investment in the coordination and delivery across service areas, departments and with external organisations and stakeholders of the Council's Carbon Action Plan, Climate Change Strategy and Biodiversity Plan.
- Implementation of the Sustainability Standards Checklist through which all planning applications will be required to demonstrate how exemplary standards of sustainability outlined within the checklist are being met in response to the following issues: Water use and flood risk; Biodiversity; Green and Active Travel; Aligning with Net-Zero Carbon; Sustainable Construction, Materials and Waste and Voluntary Standards for Sustainability.
- Investment in coordination and delivery of positive land management of Council owned sites for the benefit of people and wildlife in response to the ecological emergency. This will ensure that land management plans and ecological appraisal work currently underway delivers benefits that both conserve and enhance the ecological condition of the Council's own land, thus ensuring that our commitment to the ecological emergency is realised.

Covid-19 Recovery Theme - Council, Service Delivery and Finance



Related Council Plan Priority:

Modern Council Services and Sustainable Finance

Delivering excellent modern services whilst ensuring the financial sustainability of the Council

The Council views the significant period of change resulting from Covid-19 as an opportunity to reconsider how the Council is organised from a democratic/governance and service delivery perspective as well as to review the financial context within which the Council finds itself and how that will support or constrain the Council moving forward.

From a governance perspective the major issues facing the Council have been in respect of postponed elections and cancelled normal business meetings including Council and Scrutiny, use of technology to facilitate recovery and the impact of proposed government policies such as devolution and planning reforms.

From a service delivery perspective the issues facing the Council have been continuity of service delivery when face to face interaction and office bases were largely unavailable, reconfiguring the workforce to provide an immediate response to the lockdown emergency and responding to the increased demand from residents for alternative contact/access channels – telephone, website etc.

From a financial perspective the issues facing the Council have involved understanding the scale and length of the financial impact of the emergency on the Council, managing any projected shortfall in the short term and understanding any long term financial impacts of Covid-19.

In addition, careful consideration has been given to how the Council can invest to realise the aims identified under each of the Covid-19 Recovery Themes and ensure that the Council takes a catalytic role to help the District recover from the pandemic so that it is 'fit for the future' over the longer term.

Council, Service Delivery and Finance – Covid-19 Recovery Aims:

Through consideration of the Council's governance, service delivery challenges and financial context, a set of Covid-19 recovery aims for each of these issues have been identified:

Council Aims

- Scope for future webcasting of Meetings.
- Review of future use of the Council Chamber including consideration of more multi-functional use of the asset to support hybrid meetings.
- Increase cross-agency working to deliver benefits for the District.
- Review of Council constitution and committee structure (less immediate priority).

Service Delivery Aims

- Explore how the Council can embed the benefits of home / agile working benefits for staff.
- Improve the Council's understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on employee welfare.
- Audit and review Council office space requirements and plan for the future use of these assets.
- Improve communication and enforcement of Covid-19 safeguarding requirements with the resident and business community and visitors to the District.

Finance Aims

- Identify opportunities for increased income generation and, where there is scope, reduce expenditure in response to longer term budget shortfalls forecast in the medium term financial strategy.
- Identify, evaluate and pursue investments that will align with Council priorities, as set out the Council Plan and the Recovery Plan, that deliver future revenue streams to secure the Council's long term ability to serve the district.
- Identify and secure external grant funding to enable the Council to deliver additional services to the District without reliance on the availability of Council budget.

Council, Service Delivery and Finance – Covid-19 Recovery Delivery and Investment

The Council, in recognition of the importance of ensuring that as a democratically elected organisation it can best serve West Oxfordshire through the recovery and beyond, is committed to financing two work streams which will respond to the aims outlined above:

- Fund a programme of investment appraisals in order to identify, generate, evaluate and pursue investment opportunities (including further exploring the opportunity to promote and expand our 'charged for' services). This will enable us to provide long term income streams with the purpose of closing the Council's longer term budget gap and enabling the Council to pursue delivery of its ambitions.
- Pursue available external grants to deliver projects that benefit the District – these may be Covid-19 recovery related and/or those which will deliver on the Council Plan. By investing resources to prepare and submit business cases to external grant funds the Council will be able to deliver 'more for less' by securing revenue which would not be available from within existing constrained budgets.

Appendix I – Covid-19 Recovery Delivery and Project Investment Schedule

The Council committed funds from its 19/20 surplus to meeting the aims of this Recovery Plan. As noted, Councillor engagement has given a recommended priority ranking and identified nine funded fixed term roles which will bring the required activity to fruition:

Role/Project

Market Towns Officer (2 yrs)

Network of Wellbeing Hubs (project)

Economic Development Assistant (2 yrs)

Specialist Business Case Developer (2 yrs)

Climate Change Manager extension (2 yrs)

Carbon Action Plan Officer (2 yrs)

Biodiversity/Countryside Land Management Officer (2 yrs)

Development Management Sustainability Specialist (1 yr)

Active Lives Role (1 yr)

A further six initiatives are endorsed and will be pursued when further finance can be assembled or future opportunities arise to recognise these areas of ambition:

Role/Project

Dedicated youth support analysis (2 yrs)

Organisational Development for local groups (1 yr)

Economic Development Projects fund (2 yrs)

Homelessness Prevention Role (2 yrs)

Community Builder pilots (2 yrs)

Grants Review Cross Departmental Role (2 yrs)