ANNUAL REPORT 2022

To progress the Council’s aim to **protect and restore our natural world**, work commenced on exploring ways in which improvements can be made to enhance the biodiversity of our parks and open spaces, such as increasing the number of wildflower areas and increasing tree coverage where appropriate.

to further the Council’s commitment to recognising and supporting the vital role of farming, officers have been working with representatives of Good Food Oxfordshire to develop the initial plans for a Food Strategy for Oxfordshire.

work has continued on improving access to green spaces in and around our towns. Officers have worked with a housing developer in Didcot to expedite the transfer of the first tranche of open spaces on Great Western Park to the council, as part of the Council’s aim to reinforce access to nature as a priority for community wellbeing.

strong foundations are in place to take forward the work of the **Local Nature Partnership** (LNP) for Oxfordshire. This quarter, a decision regarding the hosting of the Board was made, in addition to an agreement being reached regarding its provisional budget. This will help to take forward its aims of an ambitious nature recovery programme.

as part of the council’s commitment to maintaining and improving the services it provides, the new **Customer Services Strategy** sets out an ambitious programme of work, for all of the council’s departments to work together to create a single customer experience

we livestream 100 per cent of public council meetings for a greater degree of accessibility for residents, but also allowed them an insight into the Council’s decision- making processes.

an initial working draft of the Council’s Diversity and Inclusion Strategy has been developed. This will aim to ensure that the Council is doing everything it can to be inclusive to all in its staff recruitment, representation and service provision. A draft diversity calendar was produced to reflect both South Oxfordshire’s corporate priorities and the heterogeneous nature of the district.

This quarter, to progress the Council’s aim to develop and implement a climate change programme to make the council net carbon neutral by 2025 the Climate Action Plan (CAP) was created. To further our aim of being carbon neutral in our own operations, council officers have worked to identify government grant schemes which could support work to reduce carbon emissions from the Council’s leisure centres – these being responsible for almost half of the council’s total Carbon emissions, a significant proportion.

Moreover, to progress towards our aspiration for South Oxfordshire to be a carbon neutral district by 2030, engagement with the business community is key. During November and December, the Council ran a ‘Digital Carbon Footprint Reduction Campaign’ which included a launch webinar and the publication of a step-by-step guide for businesses. To increase its effectiveness, a case study is being prepared showcasing the impact of the campaign, highlighting the actions of local businesses and learning for future campaigns.

December saw the publication of South Oxfordshire’s official recycling rate for 2020/21, which was 63.6 per cent. Positively, this percentage makes South Oxfordshire the second-best performing district in England for recycling, and thus contributes towards the Council’s aim of promoting waste minimisation.

the Council continued to provide professional advice to local businesses, especially with regards to business space, employment schemes and the availability of support grants. To support small, independent businesses that were hit hard by the COVID-19 restrictions and encourage economic recovery, the Council helped to deliver the Winter Support Grant scheme. This is a local scheme funded through the Additional Restrictions Grant fund.

The Council also launched two virtual ‘Networking in South and Vale’ events in November that were attended by 86 people. These events were designed to support businesses to build agility and resilience at a difficult time for trade and giving them direct access to economic development officers.

As part of the Council’s aspiration to use planning powers to preserve green spaces in South Oxfordshire for the benefit of local communities, so far in 2021/22 the Council have encouraged and overseen the adoption of eight neighbourhood plans. Six of these designate a combined total of fifteen Local Green Spaces, which are granted the highest level of protection possible by planning policy. Access to green spaces will continue to support resident’s health and mental wellbeing.

To make sure that Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds are maximised and achieve the best possible outcomes for the community, this quarter the Council established a member/officer working group. This group ensured there are strong foundations in place for making recommendations on the allocation of CIL funds in the 2022/23 provisional capital programme.

This quarter, the Council has continued to deliver a range of work to eliminate homelessness and rough sleeping across South Oxfordshire. For example, the number of rough sleepers recorded in South Oxfordshire on 31 December 2021 was **zero**. This is the first time since 2013 that no rough sleepers were recorded. Also, at 87% this quarter, the homeless prevention rate continues to be above our 80% target. Targeted prevention and early intervention measures used by council officers help residents at risk, avoid homelessness.

A key challenge for South Oxfordshire in terms of housing, is providing new homes that people can afford to live in. Year to date, **242 affordable homes** have been delivered, leaving the Council just 38 properties short of our target for the year 2021/22. Major sites currently under construction include Great Western Park (Didcot), Benson, Henley, Rotherfield Greys and land west of Wallingford.

the Council’s involvement in Oxfordshire’s Meanwhile Project is helping to bring empty properties back into use. We are currently supporting the project to deliver commercial units and are looking to secure the lease for a demo unit within South Oxfordshire. If successful, this could attract six figure refurbishment funding for a vacant building within the district. Despite major barriers, such as rising building costs, the demand for vacant commercial units remains strong. The Strategic Property Review also highlighted possible sites in council ownership which may be suitable for residential development. Further work is now being undertaken to investigate and assess these options, which will continue into the next quarter.

Work has also continued this quarter on the development of the new Joint Design Guide (JDG) Supplementary Planning Document, which incorporates new guidance on zero and low carbon construction. The JDG is due to commence its public consultation at the beginning of next quarter. This document will help to support our aim that new homes and infrastructure in South Oxfordshire meets local needs, is sustainable, zero carbon in their build and operation and high quality in design. It will also build on and complement the progress made with the publication of a DES10 (Carbon Reduction) Guidance Note.

In addition, this quarter the Council commenced work on purchasing temporary accommodation. Plans have also been initiated evaluating the potential for a Council delivery vehicle for affordable homes, these projects will also help progress the Council’s aim to ensure that new homes and infrastructure in South Oxfordshire meet local needs.

as part of a project to increase sustainable transport solutions, the Council are enhancing Electric Vehicle capacity in order to help reduce car dependency and air pollution. This quarter, we entered a contract with ‘EZ-Charge’ to provide electric vehicle charging points in five car parks across the District, which are expected to be in use by the end of next quarter.

The Council continues to work with partners to ensure that development is appropriate for our communities and to influence the development of such opportunities. For more effectively embedding public health, wellbeing and sustainability in spatial planning, we responded to the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Regulation 18 (2) consultation this quarter. The consultation document set out a range of policy options on health, wellbeing and sustainability.

To invest, save and act responsibly and ethically with our financial resources, the Council undertook a revenue base budget challenge exercise this quarter. This helped to identify transformation delivery programmes and priorities for the next 12 to 18 months which have now been incorporated into South Oxfordshire’s 2022-23 budget.

the Council approved the Strategic Property Review in October. Subsequently, work can now commence on the next stage of this project: a review of the Council’s future property requirements. In addition, the first meeting of South’s Asset Management Group

was held in December 2021. The Group intends to assess the council’s land ownerships in a holistic manner and consider opportunities for their development, usage or disposal.

Masterplanning for the Didcot Gateway project, work on the detailed design of the Council’s new office accommodation and assessments of the scheme’s viability and financing arrangements, progressed this quarter. The proposed new building will help the Council make significant strides to becoming carbon neutral, and the long-term rental income from the commercial offices will also help put the council on a stronger financial footing in a time where ongoing finances for councils are filled with uncertainty. Located opposite Didcot train station, the site will be more accessible than the current offices at Milton Park and will, therefore also help to encourage sustainable commuting.

In order to maximise external funding opportunities to support the Council’s services and to enrich the district’s leisure, sporting and community activities, a job description for an External Funding Lead was produced this quarter. This role is currently being advertised and will be subject to recruitment next quarter. This post will look to support teams across the organisation in the preparation of new bids whilst also horizon scanning for new funding opportunities and grant schemes as they appear.