



DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE



Reading Room, Upper Heyford
(see page 19)



Launch of the first rural Linkpoint
machine at Cropredy Bridge Stores
-23 March 2009 (see page 12)

**Partnership Scrutiny:
Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
Volume 1**

**Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board
March 2010**

Membership of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board

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- Philip Newbould, Oxfordshire Community Transport and Accessibility Officer, Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
- Jane Barker, Village Shops Development Worker, Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
- Bloxham Parish Council
- Claydon with Clattercot Parish Council
- Cropredy Parish Council
- Upper Heyford Parish Council
- Councillor Ken Atack, Ward Member for Cropredy
- Councillor Nigel Morris, Portfolio Holder Community Safety, Street Scene and Rural
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- Claire Taylor, Head of Community and Corporate Planning
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Volume 2:

Appendices All of the background materials and evidence gathered throughout the review is contained in Volume 2.

Glossary

ACRE	Action with Communities in Rural England
CDC	Cherwell District Council
OCC	Oxfordshire County Council
OCTAP	Oxfordshire Community Transport and Accessibility Partnership
ORCC	Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
RCAN	Rural Community Action Network
RCC	Rural Community Council
R&PSB	Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board

1 Executive Summary

“[Partnerships] are essential to deliver improvements in people’s quality of life [...and they can...] bring significant benefits. [Partnerships can] provide flexibility, innovation and additional financial and human resources to help solve problems.”¹

Partnerships bring together key agencies, policy makers and community leaders to address major policy issues and to plan for the future. Partnership working brings many benefits including sharing knowledge and information, sharing and securing resources, developing new initiatives and policy, and providing services in a more unified and effective way to the people who live in an area.

Recent legislative changes require Local Authorities to assess the effectiveness of the partnerships of which the Council is a member and to carry out the scrutiny of Partnerships. Cherwell District Council’s Constitution delegates responsibility for the scrutiny of partnerships to the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board. As part of our annual work programme we will scrutinise at least one partnership per year.

Partnership working in Cherwell is well established and the Council is involved in numerous partnerships, many of which include elected Member representation.

At the start of the review we participated in a very useful and informative introductory briefing on partnership working and the Council’s partnerships. With this knowledge we decided to undertake a review of the Council’s partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council as the partnership supports the Council in delivering services for our rural communities and we hoped we could add value to the partnership through an evaluation of the exact nature of the relationship and the benefits it provides. As part of our review we recognised that work is currently underway to review and strengthen the support to elected Members appointed to outside bodies and partnerships.

We would like to express our thanks to those who took the time to contribute to this review which has been very interesting and rewarding. We hope that our recommendations will be taken on board to the benefit of the partnership, and the residents of Cherwell’s rural communities who receive the many services that are developed and improved through the partnership.

**Cllr Colin Clarke, Chairman
Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board
April 2010**

¹ Audit Commission, “Governing Partnerships”, October 2005

2 Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

That it be noted that the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council is an important partnership which should continue and be regarded as critical to the delivery of the rural agenda.

Recommendation 2:

That a Service Level Agreement for the rural community development and community transport elements of the partnership be adopted.

Recommendation 3:

That an annual programme of aims/objectives (aligned to the Rural Strategy Action Plan and the Council's corporate priorities) be agreed with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and regularly reviewed and monitored by officers, the elected Member representative from a rural ward and reported to the Portfolio Holder.

Recommendation 4:

That the role and involvement of elected Members (the representative from a rural ward and the Portfolio Holder) in the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council be clarified and strengthened.

Recommendation 5:

That the elected Member representative from a rural ward should work closely with rural community development officers and community transport officers to provide overall steer and direction for the partnership.

Recommendation 6:

That the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board should monitor progress against each of the above recommendations and review the situation, initially in September 2010.

3 Introduction

3.1 Objectives of the Review

“Working successfully in partnership with public, private and voluntary sector bodies in and beyond Cherwell is critical to the delivery of the Council’s four Strategic Priorities. The successful delivery of a number of our Corporate Targets is also dependent on partnership working. Furthermore, partnership working is itself a potential mechanism for making significant improvements to the value for money achieved by ourselves and other public sector bodies, both individually and collectively.”²

Cherwell District Council’s Constitution delegates responsibility for the scrutiny of partnerships to the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board. As part of its annual work programme the Board will scrutinise at least one partnership per year.

The Resources and Performance Scrutiny decided to focus their first partnership scrutiny review on the Council’s partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, a ‘medium priority’ partnership.³

The Council’s partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council covers three service areas: housing; rural community development; and, community transport. As the housing element of the partnership had been the subject of a scrutiny review early in 2009,⁴ the Board agreed that they would consider rural community development and community transport.

The Board decided to focus their review on the following issues:

- To establish an understanding of the work of Rural Community Councils
- To receive information on the structure and organisation of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
- To establish a better understanding of the relationship between Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
- To review and understand the funding arrangements from Cherwell District Council to Oxfordshire Rural Community Council
- To determine whether the partnership provides value for money for Cherwell and meets the goals of both partners
- To determine the extent to which the partnership meets the needs of the residents, businesses and parish councils in the rural areas

² ‘Partnership Working Framework’ Report to Executive, 03.03.08

³ Cherwell District Council Partnership Register 2009

⁴ ‘Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites’, Overview and Scrutiny Committee, April 2009

3.2 Gathering the Evidence

The review was conducted on a committee basis as the members of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board felt that this approach was more appropriate than a Task & Finish Group study. As this was the first formal scrutiny of a partnership that the Board had undertaken there was a “learning and training” aspect to the review. Prior to undertaking the scrutiny review, Board members participated in a partnership scrutiny workshop in April 2009.

The Board met in July 2009 for an initial briefing and to review background documents. This was followed by a further briefing session in September 2009. A “witness” session to gather evidence was held in October 2009.

The Board invited the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and Cherwell District Council’s Portfolio Holder Community Safety, Street Scene and Rural and the Strategic Director Environment and Community to give evidence at the Board meeting on 20 October 2009.

The briefing and witness sessions were supplemented by site visits. Members of the Board participated in 3 site visits to meet with Parish Council representatives to obtain their views and experience of working with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council.

- Cropredy and Claydon with Clattercot Parish Councils
- Upper Heyford Parish Council
- Bloxham Parish Council

Representatives from Oxfordshire Rural Community Council also joined each of the site visits.

All of the background materials and evidence gathered throughout the review is contained in Volume 2.

4 Context

4.1 Partnerships

“Work in partnership with others whenever this will enable us to better deliver our objectives, meet community needs, and achieve economies of scale”⁵

The Government expects improved outcomes for local people by the public, private and voluntary sectors working in partnership. Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) puts a much sharper focus on partnership working expecting the delivery of services to be seamless and more efficient because duplication of effort is avoided. The Council has a democratic mandate and a general power to improve economic, social and environmental well being which are much better achieved through partnership working.⁶

Working successfully in partnership with public, private and voluntary sector bodies in and beyond Cherwell is critical to the delivery of the Council's four Strategic Priorities. The Council has, as a key corporate objective, the desire to work in partnership to deliver outcomes which are for the good of the community living, working, and visiting in the district. Furthermore, partnership working is itself a potential mechanism for making significant improvements to the value for money achieved by the Council and other public sector bodies, both individually and collectively⁷.

Cherwell District Council first adopted a Partnership Protocol in April 2006. In 2008, the Council adopted a new Protocol and a comprehensive partnership working framework. The 2008 Protocol replaced and built on the principles set out in the 2006 Protocol providing greater detail on the way Cherwell will act, and will expect partners to act, within any partnership arrangement. The 2008 Protocol also revised the definition of a partnership:

“Partnerships are arrangements with one or more organisations, from any sector, who share the responsibility for agreeing and/or then delivering a set of planned actions or outcomes.

Most such partnerships will share risks and resources to some extent, and their work will have an identifiable impact on the Council's services and corporate.”⁸

A partnerships register records the partnerships that the Council is engaged with. The register ranks the Council's partnerships into three categories: significant, medium priority and low priority. Categorising of the partnerships was done broadly in accordance with the scorecard recommended by the Audit Commission 'Checklist' and Cipfa/Solace 'Partnerships; suggested

⁵ Cherwell District Council Corporate Plan and Improvement Strategy 2007 – 2012, Improvement Strategy

⁶ 'Partnership Working Framework', Report to Executive, 03.03.08

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

Approach and Determination'. Seventeen partnerships have been identified as high significant partnerships and are monitored through the Performance Management Framework and reported to Executive⁹. Oxfordshire Rural Community Council has been categorised a 'medium priority' partnership.

4.2 Partnership Scrutiny

"Scrutiny [has a] defined role in monitoring performance, and partnership working"¹⁰

The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 sets out the requirements for Local Authorities to assess the effectiveness of partnerships of which the Council is a member and to carry out the scrutiny of Partnerships.

The Council's Partnership Protocol and comprehensive Partnership Working Framework outlines the monitoring and reporting arrangements to Executive including the production of an annual partnerships report, focusing on the Council's seventeen significant partnerships. In addition, it details the important role of scrutiny in monitoring the performance of Cherwell's partnerships. The Partnership Working Framework and the Council's Constitution describe partnership reviews as being part of the remit of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board.

In preparation for this role, at the Board's meeting on 23 April 2009 Members participated in a workshop about the importance of partnerships to modern councils and the role that scrutiny should play in monitoring the effectiveness of partners. Board members considered the Council's Partnership Register (excluding the seventeen significant partnerships as these are monitored through the Performance Management Framework and reported to Executive) and identified a number of possible partners for scrutiny.

At the Board's meeting on 23 June 2009 Resources and Performance Scrutiny Members considered the nine short-listed partnerships and resolved to undertake a scrutiny review of the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. Members agreed that the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council was a suitable topic for scrutiny as they acknowledged that the Council has a small rural development and countryside team and by necessity, support for rural communities is delivered largely through other organisations, most notably Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. However, Members felt that the Council's partnership arrangements with ORCC was confusing and felt value could be added to the partnership through an evaluation of the exact nature of the relationship and the benefits it provides.

⁹ Cherwell District Council Partnership Protocol 2008

¹⁰ Partnership Working Framework', Report to Executive, 03.03.08

4.3 Cherwell District Council Corporate Priorities

Partnership Working

Improved partnership working has been identified as a high priority area in the Council's Corporate Plan to 2012.

Corporate Plan and Improvement Strategy 2007 – 2012

Improvement Strategy

Aim: Work in partnership with others whenever this will enable us to better deliver our objectives, meet community needs and achieve economies of scale.

Target:

- We will fully have fully exploited the opportunities for partnership working (on whatever scale)
- We will have governance and performance management regimes that ensure partnerships are working effectively
- We will have fully exploited the opportunities for shared service delivery to deliver economies of scale and improve performance for the Council

4.4 Rural Services

The land area of Cherwell is predominately rural in character. Its landscape is varied and of high quality in a mainly agricultural setting. Two thirds of the district's population live in the urban centres of Banbury, Bicester and Kidlington. The remaining third (about 44,000 people) live in Cherwell's 73 rural parishes. Rural settlements range in size from the six smallest, totalling under 500 residents between them, to the six largest, with over 2,000 each. Two thirds of Cherwell's villages have populations of less than 500.

Theme 8 of the Cherwell Community Plan, written in 2005/06, addresses the need to preserve and enhance the quality of rural life. Improving local services and opportunities in rural areas is identified as a corporate priority in the Council's Corporate Plan and Improvement Strategy 2007 – 2012. Of the three actions within this priority, two relate to the work that is undertaken in partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. These are 1) Establish improved support initiatives for existing rural services to assist ongoing viability; and 2) Encourage the creation of new services to rural areas to meet established demand and gaps in provision.

More recently, Cherwell District Council's Rural Strategy, was published on 1 April 2009. The objectives and aims in the Rural Strategy cover the period 2009 – 2014. Each year a delivery plan sets out specific actions to achieve the objectives and aims. Oxfordshire Rural Community Council fulfils a facilitating and enabling role which allows Cherwell District Council to meet many of the specific actions in the Rural Strategy.

4.5 Rural Community Councils

Rural Community Councils

Rural Community Councils are charitable local development agencies, which support and enable initiatives in rural communities. They act as a strategic voice for rural communities, allowing grassroots issues to be championed and solutions worked out in partnership between statutory, voluntary and private sector providers. Rural Community Councils provide a local support network for rural community groups, including dedicated expertise in arenas such as transport, housing, the management of community-owned facilities, social enterprise and rural services.

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC)

“To improve the quality of life for those who live or work in a sustainable rural Oxfordshire”¹¹

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council was founded in 1920, the first Rural Community Council in England. It is a company limited by guarantee and registered as a charity. The Board of Trustees administers the charity and appoints a Chief Executive to manage the day-to day operations of the charity. The Chief Executive has delegated authority, within terms of delegation approved by the Trustees, for operational matters, including finance and human resources¹². All employed and voluntary staff are based at ORCC's Jericho Farm offices just outside Yarnton.

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council works to improve the quality of life for those who live and work in rural Oxfordshire. It currently has just over 500 members, which includes both individuals and organisations. ORCC works in partnership with the District Councils, the County Council and a wide range of voluntary organisations and community groups.

In 2008 the ORCC was awarded the Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)¹³ Level 2 Quality Standards accreditation following an external review of all its activities. The accreditation indicates to funders and service users that ORCC is a high-quality organisation delivering a well planned and well managed service that meets the needs of communities in rural Oxfordshire. The review identified three areas of excellence:-

- The interface with communities through the Village Shops Development Worker and the direct support given to communities, social enterprise and independent shops was excellent.
- The Village of the Year competition had analysed results from the entries received for the competition to provide in depth information of those

¹¹ 'Overall aim' of Oxfordshire of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council

¹² Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, Financial Statements For the year ended 31 March 2008, <http://www.oxonrcc.org.uk//media/Annual%20report%202008.pdf>

¹³ Action with Communities in Rural England is the national umbrella body of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), which operates at national, regional and local level in support of rural communities across the country., www.acre.org.uk

villages, which has potential to enrich the data held about rural communities in Oxfordshire.

- The Rural Housing Enablers had good and direct links with local authorities, named housing associations and also spoke about an active interface with parish plans.

4.6 Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and Cherwell District Council: Overview of the Partnership

Cherwell District Council's involvement with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council is via three distinct service areas: rural community development; community transport; and, housing services. Each service area has its own distinct funding and working arrangement with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council:

Rural Community Development

Staff at Oxfordshire Rural Community Council contribute to the delivery of Cherwell District Council's rural objectives in three main areas of activity through the provision of specialist, professional support, advice and guidance:

- Parish Plans: support to parishes and communities to develop, publish and implement parish plan. Parish plan work is overseen by a countywide reference group involving ORCC, the four district councils, Oxfordshire County Council and the Primary Care Trust.
- Village Halls: advice on legislation, grant applications, licensing etc
- Village Shops: support to maintain viability of village shops. Specific work in 2008/09 includes work with Cherwell District Council officers to install Cherwell District Council pay point kiosks. The lower photo on the front cover shows the launch of the first rural Linkpoint machine at Cropredy Bridge Stores on 23 March 2009. Village shops work is overseen by a countywide steering group involving ORCC, the four district councils, Oxfordshire County Council and shopkeepers.

Community Transport

The Oxfordshire Rural Transport Partnership is a joint project hosted by the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council bringing together the rural District Councils, County Council and other interested parties (e.g. Age Concern, PCT). The partnership aims to promote social inclusion in rural Oxfordshire by promoting the accessibility and use of public or community transport services giving priority to the needs of individuals or groups who currently lack adequate transport. The partnership can also advise on grants and make funds available for projects in the parishes.

Housing Services

Housing Services does not have an independent partnership arrangement with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, rather it is a commissioning arrangement which is based on a service level agreement. This in turn operates through a wider Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership involving Registered Social Landlords and the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership.

Partnership Scrutiny: Oxfordshire Rural Community Council

Housing Services usually contribute a grant which is solely for the Rural Housing Enabler who works with the Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership (ORHP) to advise and support village communities that want affordable housing. The funding support for the Rural Housing Enabler was approximately £12,000 in 2008/09 which is double what it has been in previous years. This was because a central government grant from DEFRA was withdrawn.

The Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board chose not to include this service area as part of their review of the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council as the role and contribution of ORCC and Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership was examined in some depth as part of the Overview and Scrutiny review into rural affordable housing and exception sites in spring 2009.

5 Evidence

5.1 Oxfordshire Rural Community Council's Relationship with Cherwell District Council

Cherwell District Council's involvement with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council is via three service areas, however this review focuses on two services only: rural community development and community transport¹⁴. As a result, from the outset of the review the Board was keen to explore these two strands and the arrangements they each had in place with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council.

The Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board held a question and answer session with the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council in October 2009¹⁵.

During the course of the discussion, the Board learnt that Oxfordshire Rural Community Council perceives the partnership to be an informal mutually beneficial relationship with Cherwell District Council officers and Members. The two organisations have a long relationship and the Board noted that Oxfordshire Rural Community Council had willingly cooperated with the Audit Commission during its inspection of Cherwell District Council as part of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council Work Streams, Work Programming and Performance Monitoring

The Board was keen to learn how Oxfordshire Rural Community Council set and monitored its work programme, particularly in terms of equity of support to villages in the district in contrast to the three other rural districts in the county.

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council's Chief Executive explained that each of the ORCC work streams had a steering group which held informal meetings to monitor direction and delivery. ORCC also held regular but infrequent meetings with all local authorities in the partnership to discuss and agree funding. She explained that ORCC believed it had built up a productive partnership which could focus on supporting rural communities and felt fortunate to have such a positive relationship.

In terms of performance monitoring, including quantifying the service that Oxfordshire Rural Community Council provides to Cherwell, the Board acknowledged that in terms of staff time, due to the way ORCC works, activity levels do inevitably vary across the districts and over time. The Board was assured by ORCC's Chief Executive that the organisation regularly monitors performance and is aware of the level of activities throughout the county.

¹⁴ The Housing element of the partnership was examined as part of the Overview and Scrutiny review into rural affordable housing and exception sites in spring 2009.

¹⁵ Cherwell District Council's Portfolio Holder Community Safety, Street Scene and Rural and Strategic Director Environment and Community were also present at the question and answer session

Rural Community Development

During the course of the review, the Portfolio Holder Community Safety, Street Scene and Rural, the Strategic Director Environment and Community and rural community development officers regularly attended meetings of the Board to discuss and brief Members on the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council from an urban and rural perspective.

The Board learnt that Oxfordshire Rural Community Council staff support rural parishes by providing specialist, professional advice in three main areas of activity:

- i. Parish Plans: support to parishes and communities to develop, publish and implement a parish plan.
- ii. Village Halls: advice on legislation, grant applications, licensing etc)
- iii. Village Shops: support to maintain viability of village shops. Specific work in 2008/09 includes work with Cherwell District Council officers to install Cherwell District Council pay point kiosks.¹⁶

The partnership delivers tangible outcomes in the district. Through the partnership, outcomes in 2008/09 in Cherwell included the publication of a parish plan by three parish Councils; support and assistance to parishes in the process of developing a parish plan; advice to villages regarding village halls; and, the Village Shops Development Worker assisted with the introduction of kiosks and paypoints into village shops.

A number of the Councils delivery objectives within the Rural Strategy Delivery Plan 2009/2010 identify Oxfordshire Rural Community Council as a delivery partner, thus Oxfordshire Rural Community Council fulfils a facilitating/enabling role which allows Cherwell District Council to meet many of these specific targets in the Rural Strategy. Without the help of the specialist support of ORCC, Cherwell District Council may be unable or may have to seek alternative means to fulfil these objectives as the Council's resources and skill base is not as extensive.

Village shop meetings, Parish plan meetings and rural forum meetings are each held quarterly. The meetings are run by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and include the four rural districts and Oxfordshire County Council. Cherwell District Council is represented by the Rural Development and Countryside Manager at all of the meetings. Elected Members do not attend any of the meetings but, when necessary, officers brief the appropriate Portfolio Holder or Ward Member after meetings.

Community Transport

From a community transport perspective the Board learnt that the Council's arrangement with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council is based on an informal arrangement with no pre-determined specific objectives or tasks. The Portfolio Holder Community Safety, Street Scene and Rural acknowledged that in recent years the Oxfordshire Community Transport and

¹⁶ The lower photo on the front cover shows the launch of the first rural Linkpoint machine at Cropredy Bridge Stores on 23 March 2009

Accessibility Partnership (OCTAP) had not delivered any specific services for Cherwell District Council, which was mainly due to the Council not asking for, or requiring, any specific support. The Board agreed that ORCC service provision was demand led so if support was not requested there would be no service delivery.

The Board learnt that as a result of the Overview and Scrutiny review of Concessionary Travel in spring/summer 2009, the Portfolio Holder Community Safety, Street Scene and Rural had commissioned research into the feasibility of introducing alternative community transport schemes in those parts of the district where residents do not benefit from the concessionary bus pass, national travel tokens or dial-a-ride service. The research was undertaken by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council.¹⁷

Board Members were assured that this piece of work was an example of the move towards a more proactive role that the Council is taking in the partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council.

The Oxfordshire Rural Community Council based Oxfordshire Community Transport and Accessibility Partnership Officer advised Members that the organisation endeavoured to ensure parishes were aware of the services ORCC and OCTAP offers. It is, for example, proactive in contacting Parish Councils in which Oxfordshire County Council has scheduled a transport review to advise of the support that ORCC/OCTAP can offer throughout the process. The Board acknowledged that it was ultimately the choice of a Parish Council to accept the support.

The Oxfordshire Community Transport and Accessibility Partnership Officer Rural Transport Partnership Officer organises and chairs quarterly meetings. The Cherwell District Council lead Officer is the Head of Safer Communities and Development. In the past the Portfolio Holder has not attended meetings but received regular briefings. An annual report is also prepared by the Oxfordshire Community Transport and Accessibility Partnership Officer.

The Board noted that the partnership played a significant role in supporting and maintaining vital services for the rural villages in the district and was critical to the delivery of the Council's rural agenda.

Recommendation 1:

That it be noted that the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council is an important partnership which should continue and be regarded as critical to the delivery of the rural agenda.

¹⁷ See Volume 2: Evidence - Chapter 19

5.2 Cherwell District Council Funding

The Board learnt that there was no dedicated cost centre for the Cherwell District Council's funding to Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, rather each service has its own arrangements in place. The Strategic Director Environment and Community and Portfolio Holder Community Safety, Street Scene and Rural advised Board Members that Council had decided to increase the funding for the housing element of ORCC services when central government funding was withdrawn.

With regard to the funding for the community transport and rural community development provision, the level of activity and the cost of the service varies from year to year and needed to incorporate a degree of flexibility as different issues could arise in the course of different years.

The funding by service area over the past five years is outlined below:

	Rural Community Development	Community Transport	Housing	Total
2009/10	23,550	11,500	11,250	46,300
2008/09	23,550	11,500	6,500	41,550
2007/08	22,900	11,500	6,370	40,770
2006/07	19,085	11,500	6,180	36,765
2005/06	18,745	11,500	6,000	36,245
Total	107,830	57,500	36,300	

Rural Community Development

The Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board learnt that even within this service area there was no dedicated cost centre for the rural community development element of funding to Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. Historically the financial contribution from Cherwell District Council has been discussed and agreed by the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council Chief Executive, the Portfolio Holder and Strategic Director on the basis of the historic spend and the budget available. There was no formal agreement in place regarding the funding arrangements.

The Board was advised that the 2008/09 urban and rural services grant of £23,550 contributed to Oxfordshire Rural Community Council costs for employing specialist staff: Community Development Workers; a Village Halls Advisor; Village Shops Worker; and, Community Transport Advisor, to whom the Council and villages in the district have access.

Community Transport

The Board learnt that the community transport funding element is based on "matched funding" with Oxfordshire County Council providing 50% of the total

funding and each of the four rural districts¹⁸ matching this amount between them. The funding essentially pays for the services of the Rural Transport Partnership Officer to whom the Council and villages in the district have access. As with the urban and rural services funding, the Council has been in a reactive position with regard to its financial contribution. Similarly, there is no formal agreement in place regarding funding arrangements.

Rural Funding

During the course of the October 2009 question and answer session, the Strategic Director Environment and Community advised the Board that Cherwell District Council's total contribution to Oxfordshire Rural Community Council of around £46k per annum to support rural areas and communities represented only a quarter of 1% of the overall net services budget of the Council. He explained that 35% of the district's population live in rural areas and this was the sole dedicated rural budget. The budget reflected the support to rural communities and was linked to the delivery of the Cherwell Rural Strategy.

During the review the Board considered alternative delivery methods for the services delivered through the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. Based on the information presented Members agreed that the best option was to maintain the partnership. The Board noted that as demand for services varied each year the partnership offered a higher degree of flexibility through access to a wider range of skills and experience than an in-house service could offer and consequently represented value for money.

However, Members believed that a more formal arrangement for the funding of the partnership should be developed. This could be achieved through the adoption of a Service Level Agreement for the rural community development and community transport elements of the partnership. The service level agreement would underpin service delivery and funding for the partnership, facilitating the monitoring and management of the money that is spent and the outcomes delivered

Recommendation 2:

That a Service Level Agreement for the rural community development and community transport elements of the partnership be adopted.

5.3 Oxfordshire Rural Community Council's Working Relationship with Parish Councils

From the outset of the review, the Board wished to obtain the views of rural villages in the district of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, particularly in terms of the support received and work undertaken with ORCC.

¹⁸ Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council

In the course of discussion with Cherwell District Council Officers and the Chief Executive of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, the Board became aware that work with parish councils varied depending upon the nature and context of the work.

The Chief Executive of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council advised the Board that ORCC supports all villages irrespective of their size. The organisation actively contacts all parish councils sending regular newsletters and other PR material. ORCC also uses the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, Parish magazines and local newsletters to disseminate information as widely as possible. The Board noted that ORCC officers also work in a proactive manner and contact parishes directly to offer support and information, for example, when a national or regional initiative was announced which had a bearing on a particular village or community. However, as noted in the previous section, provision of support is dependent upon acceptance by the Parish Council.

Site Visits

The three site visits undertaken during the review provided a useful opportunity for Members to meet with Parish Council representatives to obtain their views and experience of working with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. Representatives from Cherwell District Council urban and rural services and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council also attended each site visit¹⁹.

It was evident to Members who participated in the site visits that Oxfordshire Rural Community Council provides a valuable service to parishes in the district. Cropredy, Upper Heyford and Bloxham Parish Councils have each received support and assistance from Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and believed that Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council provided excellent support to Parish Councils and community both on specific projects and in response to particular queries.

The staff at Oxfordshire Rural Community Council have specialist knowledge and provide specialist support to rural communities. Cropredy Parish Councillors reported that they had received considerable support and advice from ORCC throughout all stages of the development of their Parish Plan. This included help in developing the consultation material and questionnaire for residents. The Bloxham Parish Councillors also reported that without the support of ORCC, and in particular the Community Development Worker, they would not have made progress towards developing a Parish Plan.

During the site visit to Upper Heyford, the Chairman of Upper Heyford Parish Council informed Members that they generally contacted Oxfordshire Rural Community Council in the first instance for any parish related issue. The Parish Council has received support and advice in relation to the village hall

¹⁹ The Village Shops Worker, the Oxfordshire Community Transport and Accessibility Partnership Officer and the Community Development Worker each attended one site visit

and the renovation of the Reading Room²⁰ from ORCC's Village Hall's Advisor.

Parish Councils that have not Worked with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council

Each of the site visits undertaken were to Parish Councils that had received support from Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. The Board were interested to learn that 17 Parish Councils had not worked with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and had hoped to explore the reasons for this.

However, a site visit to and/or a detailed discussion with a Parish Council that had not worked with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council was not possible during the course of the review. The inference drawn by the Board was that the lack of contact was due to a lack of need rather than any intrinsic hostility to Oxfordshire Rural Community Council.

Members of the Board had however met with representatives from Claydon with Clattercott Parish Council who had attended the Cropredy Parish Council site visit. In the course of the visit, the Claydon with Clattercott Parish Councillors had explained that while they had not used Oxfordshire Rural Community Council for support on recent projects, they were confident that they knew who to contact at Oxfordshire Rural Community Council when necessary.

The inference drawn by the Board was that the lack of contact was due to a lack of need for, rather than any lack of awareness of, the services provided by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council.

The comments of the Claydon Parish Councillors and the assurance provided by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council staff, who had explained to the Board that they worked proactively confirmed to the Board that much of their direction and workload content comes from the Parish Councils in the district.

Although it was evident to the Board that the work of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council is critical to the delivery of the Council's rural agenda and provides a valuable service to parishes in the district, Members agreed that a more formal approach should be adopted through a service level agreement. In addition Members felt that this should be supported by an annual programme of aims and objectives aligned to the Council's Corporate Priorities and Rural Strategy Action Plan. These would be jointly agreed by Cherwell District Council officers, the Portfolio Holder/elected Member representative (who would be from a rural ward) and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and regularly reviewed and monitored.

Recommendation 3:

That an annual programme of aims/objectives (aligned to the Rural Strategy Action Plan and the Council's corporate priorities) be agreed with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and regularly reviewed and monitored by officers, the elected Member representative from a rural ward and reported to the Portfolio Holder.

²⁰ A picture of the Reading Room at Upper Heyford is on the front cover of this report.

5.4 Elected Member Involvement in the Partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council

The Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board was interested in the role of elected Members in the partnership. The Board learnt that the involvement of Members seemed to be more 'in theory' than 'in practice'.

The Portfolio Holder has a role within the partnership due to the remit of the role and the Council appoints an elected Member to Oxfordshire Rural Community Council as a representative. However, elected Members do not attend the meetings with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. Rather the relevant Portfolio Holder and/or Ward Member is briefed as appropriate by Cherwell District Council officers on topical or sensitive issues.

The Board felt very strongly that the Council should be represented by elected Members on partnerships and discussed in great detail whether the representative to Oxfordshire Rural Community Council should be the Portfolio Holder, or a Member from a rural ward. Ultimately the Board felt that the Portfolio Holder should maintain a role in the partnership but an elected Member from a rural ward, who would have knowledge of the issues facing rural villages in the district, should be appointed as the Council's elected Member representative.

The Board acknowledged that this did not represent a change to the current elected Member representation, however the Board was confident that the review of outside bodies²¹ would lead to improved support for Members who represent the Council on outside bodies and partnerships, including a defined role and responsibilities and a designated Officer contact.

The Board agreed that the roles of both the elected Member from a rural ward and the Portfolio Holder should be clarified and strengthened and take account of recommendation 3 that identifies the need for an annual programme of aims/objectives (aligned to the Rural Strategy Action Plan and the Council's corporate priorities) which would be jointly agreed by Cherwell District Council officers, the Portfolio Holder/elected Member representative and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and regularly reviewed and monitored.

Recommendation 4:

That the role and involvement of elected Members (the representative from a rural ward and the Portfolio Holder) in the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council be clarified and strengthened.

It is important to note that a more defined role for elected Members would be welcomed by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. During the question and answer session the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council representatives

²¹ Full details of the review are in paragraph 5.6 on page 23

had commented that they would welcome more involvement with elected Members particularly as this linked into community led planning. They also commented on the important role that district councillors could play in supporting parish councils.

Recommendation 5:

That the elected Member representative from a rural ward should work closely with rural community development officers and community transport officers to provide overall steer and direction for the partnership.

5.5 Service Provision in the Absence of the Partnership

Throughout the course of the review it was evident to the Board that Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council have a shared vision of rural community development and community transport provision. Oxfordshire Rural Community Council delivers this with support from Cherwell District Council. A final area for consideration was delivery of these services in the absence of partnership.

During the question and answer session the Strategic Director Environment and Community had explained that there is trust between the Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council which results in a “complementary arrangement”. The work of ORCC is complementary to the Council’s resources to support its rural communities. Cherwell District Council Officers have responsibility for coordinating the Councils policies and strategies while the delivery of specific actions in rural communities rests with ORCC due to the specialist skills and expertise within the organisation.

The Board noted that Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council both buy into the same vision of rural development. ORCC, with funding and support from Cherwell District Council, delivers services that work towards achieving this vision. Furthermore, ORCC provides a platform for networking, sharing knowledge and sharing resources. In the absence of the partnership, it would cost the Council significantly more to deliver the same services and maintain the same levels of expertise and specialism.

From the perspective of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, the Board noted that without the partnership ORCC would still be able to deliver services but it would not be in such a coordinated manner. For example, at present, ORCC advises Oxfordshire County Council on the distribution of grants, it liaises with officers and parish councils over the statutory responsibilities of the district and supports community led planning, however without strategic and officer support from both partners the delivery of these services would not work as well as at present and could result in duplication.

In terms of removing funding to ORCC and the impact this would have on service delivery, during the question and answer session the ORCC representatives explained that as much of the funding from the districts is based on matched funding to the county's contribution so if one were to drop out the whole organisation would be affected, including the delivery of services.

The consideration of this aspect further substantiates recommendation 2.

5.6 Partnerships and Outside Bodies

Although this review focussed on the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, it flagged up some general issues about the role and responsibilities of elected Members who represent the Council on partnerships and outside bodies.

In Spring 2009 the Executive had requested further information setting out how the Council would effectively support member representatives on partnerships and outside bodies, including providing appropriate training, strengthening staff support for Members, advice on the Council's policy with regard to issues within the remit of partnerships and outside bodies and providing feedback mechanisms from issues raised on partnerships and outside bodies.

The Board learnt that a project group had been formed in autumn 2009 to address the issues raised by Executive these areas. In addition, the Board learnt that, in advance of 2010/11, the Leader of the Council had commissioned a review on the current councillor representation on outside bodies to establish if this is an appropriate level of commitment and a good use of resources.

Board Members agreed that it was important for there to be a defined role for elected Members who represent the Council on partnerships and outside bodies and that the responsibilities for this role should be defined and strengthened. This should include: a designated Officer contact to ensure the Council's objectives are agreed and developed through a regular two way reporting line; internal training for Members appointed to partnerships/outside bodies; guidelines for partners and outside bodies.

6 Conclusions

“Cherwell District Council wishes to ensure that all partnerships that it is a part of are underpinned by a common vision that is understood and agreed on by all the participating bodies [...] All parties must share the vision of what they want to achieve in partnership. This will need to be expressed in clear, shared objectives so that actions and outcomes can be measured against agreed targets.”²²

This scrutiny review has given the members of the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board, some of whom only had a limited knowledge of partnerships and rural affairs, a valuable insight into issues affecting rural communities in the district and the contribution of the Council’s partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council in supporting these communities.

The Board observed that the Council and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council have a shared vision of rural community development and community transport provision which is delivered by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council with support from Cherwell District Council.

The partnership plays a significant role in the delivery of services to rural communities across Cherwell district and must remain fundamental to the achievement of the Council’s priorities and aims to deliver the Rural Strategy. Nonetheless, the Board feels that there is scope for the Council to improve its role in the partnership. The recommendations and much of the body of this report focus on the actions Cherwell District Council can take to improve the partnership, which the Board feels can only add value to the partnership.

²² Cherwell District Council Partnership Protocol 2008