

This report is public	
Oxfordshire Councils Charter	
Committee	Executive
Date of Committee	10 June 2024
Portfolio Holder presenting the report	Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services, Councillor Chris Brant
Date Portfolio Holder agreed report	29 May 2024
Report of	Assistant Director Law & Governance, Shiraz Sheikh

Purpose of report

To brief Executive on the Oxfordshire Councils Charter ('Parish Charter')

1. Recommendations

The Executive resolves:

- 1.1 To endorse the Oxfordshire Councils Charter and agree that Cherwell District Council become a signatory to it.
- 1.2 To instruct Officers to bring a follow-up report in July 2025 assessing the impact of the charter.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Cherwell District Council has been working in partnership with Oxfordshire County Council, the Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils (OALC), the other district and city councils, town and parish councils, and parish meetings to strengthen partnership working across local councils in Oxfordshire.
 - 2.2 Through a multi-organisational working group, we have worked collaboratively to develop an Oxfordshire Councils Charter (Appendix 1) which sets out principles and commitments to achieve two aims: stronger partnership working and enhancing local democracy.
 - 2.3 The charter has been developed through an extensive three-stage engagement process in which 135 (nearly half) of Oxfordshire's local councils have engaged.
 - 2.4 A number of themes emerged from the engagement process, which have been translated into a flexible framework. The charter will remain a 'living document' that enables councils to work to the principles and commitments in a way that aligns with their own ways of working and priorities [see Charter document, Appendix 1]
 - 2.6 The Charter was endorsed by OCC at its Cabinet meeting of 14 May 2024. The charter is being taken through the individual democratic processes in all five district
- Cherwell District Council

and city councils in June 2024. It will be formally launched at OALC's AGM on 1 July 2024, when all Oxfordshire councils (County, Districts, City & Parishes) will be invited to become signatories to the charter.

- 2.7 Amongst Oxfordshire's principal authorities CDC is regarded as an exemplar of good practice in communicating and consulting with its parish authorities. Twice a year (November and June) we organise a Parish Liaison Meeting (PLM) which all Parishes are invited to attend.

Implications & Impact Assessments

Implications	Commentary			
Finance	<p>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. This also applies to commitments that may be made at the PLM. 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.</p> <p>Michael Furness, Assistant Director of Finance (S151 Officer), 7 May 2024</p>			
Legal	<p>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. The PLM is not a formally constituted partnership and does not have decision making powers.</p> <p>Shiraz Sheikh, Assistant Director Law & Governance (Monitoring Officer), 7 May 2024</p>			
Risk Management	<p>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.</p> <p>Shiraz Sheikh, Assistant Director Law & Governance (Monitoring , 7 May 2024</p>			
Impact Assessments	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equality Impact	X			<p>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</p>

				areas so there is an anticipated positive impact on rural communities.
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?	Y			
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?	Y			No negative impacts are anticipated towards protected groups.
Climate & Environmental Impact				N/A
ICT & Digital Impact				N/A
Data Impact				N/A
Procurement & subsidy				N/A
Council Priorities	Healthy, Resilient & Engaged Communities – Support community & cultural development; Work towards our commitment to equalities, diversity & inclusion			
Human Resources	N/A			
Property	N/A			
Consultation & Engagement	See paragraphs 4.1 to 4.7			

Supporting Information

3. Background

- 3.1 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.

- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 Cherwell has 66 Parish Councils, 2 town councils and 11 Parish Meetings, they are all invited to send representatives to the PLM. The PLM has been running for at least twenty years. The Agendas reflect current issues and new initiatives of interest to parish authorities and rural communities.

4. Details

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 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.
- 4.3 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.
- 4.4 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 OCC's consultation and engagement platform 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.
- 4.5 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.
- 4.6 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.

- 4.7 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.
- 4.8 The Charter is one of the proposed presentation items for the 12 June PLM. The PLM presentation will enable CDC to encourage parishes to follow its lead in endorsing the charter (or alternatively, if Executive Committee has not endorsed the charter it will be an opportunity to explain why).

5. Alternative Options and Reasons for Rejection

- 5.1 The following alternative options have been identified and rejected for the reasons as set out below.

Option 1: Develop a CDC/Parishes charter as an alternative to the Oxfordshire Councils Charter. This is not recommended because at the earliest stages of Charter development CDC was the prime mover in securing partnership involvement of the district and city councils on the Oxfordshire Charter.

Option 2: Propose substantial pre-launch changes to the content of the Oxfordshire Councils Charter. This is not recommended because the Charter principles were developed through an extensive consultation process.

6 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations

- 6.1 Endorsement of the Charter will be an additional assurance to Cherwell parishes that CDC remains committed to communicating and working collaboratively with them. It will encourage Cherwell parishes to become signatories and adopt the Charter principles. The Cherwell Parish Liaison Meeting is a demonstration of CDC's commitment to the charter principles.

Decision Information

Key Decision	Yes
Subject to Call in	Yes
If not, why not subject to call in	N/A
Ward(s) Affected	All

Document Information

Appendices	
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Appendix 1	Oxfordshire Councils Charter
Background Papers	None
Reference Papers	None
Report Author	Kevin Larner, Information Governance & Localism Manager
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