

# Interim Performance Report

South Oxfordshire District Council

Corporate Plan 2020-24

May 2021

## **How performance is measured**

The council's activities are guided by our four-year corporate plan for 2020-2024, and by fulfilling our statutory responsibilities. Key measures will be reviewed and reported via quarterly and annual corporate plan performance reports. The reports will be subject to an input and approval process by the council's senior management team, Scrutiny Committee, Climate Emergency Advisory Committee and Cabinet, and then published on the council's website. It should be noted that:

- The new corporate plan came into effect on 30 October 2020;
- Some of the themes in the new corporate plan relate to new priorities;
- The updates used in this document will not necessarily be the same as will appear in the quarterly corporate plan performance reports; and
- The corporate approach to performance management is currently being redesigned.

Many of our services are provided through contractors, and the performance of our five major contractors will be monitored through an annual review and report to the council's Joint (with Vale of White Horse District Council) Scrutiny Committee.

## **Corporate Plan 2020-24**

The Council's Corporate Plan 2020-2024 contains six strategic themes:

- Protect and restore our natural world
- Openness and accountability
- Action on the Climate Emergency
- Improved economic and community wellbeing
- Homes and infrastructure that meet local needs
- Investment and innovation that rebuilds our financial viability

The South Oxfordshire District Council Corporate Plan for 2020-2024, sets out what we hope to achieve for South Oxfordshire over the next four years. Following a successful engagement with residents, we reviewed hundreds of responses which have informed the priorities that the council will deliver. The plan was adopted at a full council meeting in October 2020.

Feedback from residents and partners was that the Council needed to focus on new priorities such as protecting the environment, mitigating the Climate Emergency and ensuring effective transparency and accountability.

Although work is underway on these new themes, we are continuing to explore how best we can effectively invest, resource and deliver these. During the development of the Plan, there was much uncertainty about the future of local government, both in terms of its structure and its financing, this uncertainty remains, and we are working to position ourselves to respond to the changing landscape we operate within. This has meant we have had to prioritise what we want to deliver. Some of the Corporate Plan projects have now been included in our budget for the year ahead, whilst others require more detailed scoping and consideration.

The Plan was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic and reflects the need to focus on a sustainable recovery that prioritises community well-being and resilience as well as economic prosperity so we will include an update going forward on our work to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic as we monitor the performance of the Plan.

This report provides a summary of activity since the Plan was adopted in October 2020.

### **Covid-19 – Community Hub and roadmap**

The continuing impact of the pandemic on the Council's performance can be seen in this report. The majority of councillors and officers continue to work from home, other than those whose work requires otherwise, in those cases the appropriate risk assessments are taken and government guidelines are followed. We are proud of the quick and efficient response delivered by our services to support our communities during this time.

We are continuing to help residents and businesses. The Community Hub puts residents in touch with a network of volunteer groups and organisations to help with food, medicine and friendly phone calls. In urgent cases, support is available for food and prescription deliveries. A total of 397 food parcels have been delivered to residents since the start of the pandemic, and 498 medicine collections took place across both South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse. This builds on a range of information and advice available for the public and businesses on our website, such as how to book a vaccine and how to obtain financial support.

As well as dedicating significant officer resource to the pandemic, including community testing, the council have also made its buildings available. Since Cornerstone Arts Centre closed its doors to the public in March last year, it has been home to the council's food distribution service, helping to ensure hundreds of families received urgent food parcels.

We're working with our partners at the county and district councils, local GPs and the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group on a COVID-19 vaccination outreach scheme. There are a range of reasons why people might not have responded to their invitation to arrange a vaccination - from difficulties in booking an appointment or arranging transport, to hesitancy or misunderstandings about the vaccine. Our officers, will be providing the people they speak to with help to book an appointment, arrange transport, or simply offering information and advice in a format agreed with our NHS colleagues. We are using the feedback we're getting from residents and the

outcomes of visits to help build up a detailed picture of why people may be not taking up the opportunity of vaccination.

We hope this outreach programme will be a valuable tool in ensuring that everyone who wants the vaccine can be supported to get it and that nobody gets left behind in the rollout of Oxfordshire's vaccination programme. The outreach scheme has been recognised by Oxfordshire CCG and the NHS regional team as an exemplar piece of novel work that has increased uptake within our communities.

We have also visited 268 people across South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse who the NHS test and trace national system has been unable to reach. The employment of 2 Government funded COVID-19 Compliance Marshals has enabled us to encourage and support businesses to trade in a 'COVID-19 secure' manner, and to provide further advice to the public. So far, £41.3 million have been paid in financial support to businesses in South Oxfordshire, through a range of HM Government grant schemes.

As part of the council's initial response to the pandemic, each councillor was provided with £2,000 for them to spend directly to support communities trying to respond to the crisis.

As the COVID-19 vaccination programme continues to progress well, our frame of thinking is moving to the medium/longer-term. The Oxfordshire Economic Recovery Plan has been developed and we will soon be developing the councils plan, that will provide a route map for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact it has had on our residents, the council and businesses.

### Theme 1: Protect and restore our natural world

In February 2021, an Ecological Emergency was declared by the Council to add further weight to its commitment to protect and restore the natural world. The declaration includes:

- Changing the name of the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee (CEAC) to the Climate and Ecological emergencies Advisory Committee (CEEAC).
- Setting up a Biodiversity Working Group to identify and prioritise new nature protection and restoration initiatives across the council, including COVID-19 recovery projects.
- Appointing two Councillors as Tree Champions.

An officer working group is developing a Tree Policy for consideration by council in July 2021 and we are undertaking engagement on plans to set up a county wide Local Nature Partnership to explore to further opportunities to enhance and restore our natural world.

South Oxfordshire District Council has also agreed to take action to try and minimise light pollution in the district, a motion put forward set out the harmful impacts of light pollution on human health and sleep, biodiversity and carbon emissions. It highlighted the need to provide infrastructure that ensures dark skies are possible and limits light pollution. The Council recognises the importance of the issue and has welcomed the work being undertaken by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Dark

Skies – including its ten policy recommendations for HM Government and is lobbying for them to be implemented.

At this years’ Town and Parish Forum, we will be holding a workshop on the natural environment and a biodiversity talk from a local organisation who will share their advice on engaging with communities on protecting nature. The theme of the forum is called: ‘Climate Action – how can we take action together’ and the aim is to gain feedback on our forthcoming climate action plan and explore joint working opportunities.

### Theme 2: Climate Emergency

In April 2019 the Council declared a Climate Emergency which was followed by a pledge to become a carbon neutral council by 2025 and a carbon neutral district by 2030. A Climate Action Plan for 2021-24 has been developed and annual climate action work programme approved. We have completed baseline reviews and scenario modelling to enable the development of a robust climate action plan.

While the Covid-19 pandemic created many challenges in 2020/21, there were also some positive outcomes, including a reduction in the Council’s carbon emissions. The table below shows the key operational areas in which emissions reductions were made in the first three quarters of 2020/21

South Oxfordshire CO <sub>2</sub> emissions (tonnes) Quarter 1 to Quarter 3 2020/21				
	2019/20	2020/21	Change on 2019/20	% change on 2019/20
Leisure Centres	923	363	-560	-60.67%
Council offices	67	50	-17	-25.37%
Cornerstone	78	49	-29	-37.18%
Staff mileage	24	11	-13	-54.17%

The leisure centre reductions can be attributed exclusively to closures due to Covid-19 related closures and restricted access. We know that sustained reductions will only be achieved through the implementation of decarbonisation projects.

For office and staff related emissions there is an opportunity to consolidate some of the emissions reductions into longer term adjustments to working arrangements. Though it should be noted that carbon emission savings from the council buildings will have transferred to some extent to individual officer’s homes.

We have secured county wide funding from Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery Scheme in February 2021. At least 150 homes across Oxfordshire will be made more energy efficient because of the successful county-wide bid for £1.5 million of government funding. The county council will be working together with expected delivery partner the National Energy Foundation (NEF) to help less well-off

households retrofit their homes with energy saving equipment – cutting families' fuel bills while at the same time helping to reduce the county's carbon footprint.

NEF, a registered charity with expertise in energy efficiency and fuel poverty, will work with the county's five city and district councils (Cherwell, Oxford City, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire) to identify properties that fit the criteria.

Following feedback from the review into their operations, The Oxfordshire Growth Board has established an Environment Advisory Group to complement their work. This group will advise (i.e. non decision making) and provide strategic oversight of Growth Board work, provide a read across and challenge to ensure synergies between Oxfordshire strategies and develop proposals for addressing these strategic gaps lobbying for and gaining HM Government support for addressing environmentally issues for Oxfordshire at scale. The Leader of South Oxfordshire will Chair the advisory group and South Oxfordshire will also have a Cabinet Member representative on the group. It is anticipated that this group will join up with the Oxford Cambridge arc leaders group and its Senior Responsible Officer will be involved in the arc environment working group ensuring effective collaboration on both strategic programmes in Oxfordshire.

Cabinet has endorsed the Oxfordshire Electric Vehicle (EV) Infrastructure Strategy to ensure that anyone wishing to buy an EV will have access to convenient charging facilities. A Park and Charge project will install EV chargers in 5 public car parks this year.

The residents in South Oxfordshire are the second-best recyclers in England. South Oxfordshire recycles 64 per cent of its waste, this puts the district above the national recycling rate of 45.5 per cent and means that we have consistently been in the top ten in the past five years.

New website content on Climate Action has been launched to promote and raise awareness of the climate emergency and provide advice and support to residents and businesses. We have amended our decision-making templates to include climate and ecological implications to embed the Climate Emergency at the heart of our decision-making. This year's Town & Parish Council Forum is titled 'Climate Action – how can we take action together' and will discuss how to work together on making the district carbon neutral by 2030.

### **Theme 3: Openness and accountability**

The Council are developing a new Performance Management Framework to further enhance residents and partners ability to see progress on implementing our priorities set out in the Corporate Plan 2020-24 and recognise cross-departmental working ensuring that council departments work collaboratively to deliver best outcomes for residents.

We have completely rebuilt and relaunched our websites to make them easier to use for everyone, including those who are new to interacting with the councils online and those who have accessibility challenges, like visual impairments. We have used direct and effective communications tools to keep all of our communities, staff, councillors, partner organisations and volunteer groups well-informed on a daily

basis during the height of the pandemic. We used highly engaging digital communications to get across complex messages to both inform, educate and reassure the general public and other customers about the Covid-19 pandemic.

We have also had around 11,300 views of our committee meetings for South Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council since they started online at the beginning of the pandemic. The High Court have now ruled on whether or not virtual committee meetings could continue, and the news is that 'primary legislation' is required to continue with this approach.

This means the council will be returning to face-to-face committee meetings after the elections in May. The councils have been planning for this outcome for some time and need to finalise and implement the necessary arrangements.

We'll have further information on the arrangements for this during the month of May, particularly around how it will work for staff who need to attend committee meetings and residents that would like to participate.

HM Government are consulting on whether to legislate for virtual meetings in the future, having acknowledged the increased participation overall and the environmental benefits of this approach.

We also used innovative communication methods to educate residents about day-to-day council work, including providing an online educational recycling quiz, which more than 2,000 people took part in.

We have put a new post in place for a senior officer to lead the improvement of our online and digital communication and engagement to ensure the councils don't stand still, but continually innovate and develop how our communities interact with us.

We've carried out 55 consultations, surveys and other engagement projects. This includes 24 statutory consultations, and 12 pieces of internal engagement with staff and councillors.

Over 1,700 people responded to our public consultation on the Corporate Plan proposals for both South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse District Councils, which helped shape the councils' key priorities for the next four years, by far the most responses we've had to a Corporate Plan consultation for at least 10 years. Our consultation and engagement work helped shape and ratify updated and amended council policies, including statutory documents like our Off-Street Parking Orders and our Statement of Community Involvement for Planning.

We are using feedback to help shape the some of the councils' response to Covid-19 too, by carrying out a Lockdown Lifestyle survey with our Active Communities team, in which nearly 1,800 respondents told us how the first lockdown affected their physical and mental health.

Furthermore, we have are continuing to use technology to engage with partners including through Didcot Garden Town Parish Councils Sounding Board to and a Town and Parish Council virtual tour and climate change session.

The Council has also introduced external consultation tracking mechanisms earlier this year as a part of our aim to give greater strategic oversight and make sure we are having as much influence as we can. The council responds to consultations on proposed changes in policy and operations from a number of different sources.

Adding increased co-ordination and tracking to this work will ensure the council can best make their voice heard, whether we can strengthen our voice by exploring joint submissions or working more closely with the Local Government Association and District Council Network where they are preparing a submission and help us to decide whether there is adequate value in responding to some consultations at all.

We have responded to 9 non statutory consultations across a range of issues, including the National Planning Policy Framework and National Model Design Code, Local Transport Connectivity Plan and the future of the New Homes Bonus funding consultation.

We are also currently developing a Grants Policy to support the corporate plan and encourage diversification of funding streams for voluntary and community sector groups.

#### **Theme 4: Improved economic and community wellbeing**

South Oxfordshire has a large number of small and micro businesses and is well placed to adapt to changes in the economy, but support will be needed for it to remain a healthy and vibrant place to live and work. The pandemic has shown the strength of the community but there are areas of isolation and deprivation in our district, and the benefits of access to culture, leisure and community for all has been made clear.

Didcot and the Science Vale area (including part of neighbouring Vale of White Horse District) have been a focus for a significant amount of housing and business growth as we work to attract high-tech and design-based business into the area, and to support our Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to grow. Our first enterprise zone, EZ1, covering Milton Park and Harwell, is performing strongly. Our second Enterprise Zone, EZ2, covers a number of sites in South Oxfordshire, including a portion of the former Didcot power station site and the Southmead sites. It has been in place since 2016, and is seeing some early wins in terms of inward investment and some large businesses moving in. Although very few of these sites are in South Oxfordshire, they form part of the wider Science Vale and Didcot growth areas and bring jobs and infrastructure improvements to the local economy. Improvements to infrastructure which are partially funded by the Enterprise Zones, such as the Milton Interchange, bring benefits directly to South Oxfordshire residents.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, our COVID -19 response has been integral to supporting businesses and communities in the district. The Community Hub has supported hundreds of residents across the district whilst also encouraging patients who have been invited for a vaccine and not accepted the offer. So far, a total of £40.4 million have been paid in financial support to businesses in South Oxfordshire, through a range of HM Government grant schemes. The work on the Oxfordshire and local Economic Recovery Plan will provide an economic route map for recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Work has commenced on the concept of healthy place-shaping to create sustainable well-designed communities where healthy behaviours are the norm. We will develop a collaborative policy and influencing framework to wrap around and support local



areas and continue to attend the Oxfordshire Health Improvement Board and Oxfordshire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee to ensure the council aligns and contributes to health and wellbeing in its broader sense.

Our Didcot Garden Town Team have implemented a range of activity to promote healthy living, including an arts and culture map trail project, Science Vale Cycle Network (SVCN) improvements making connectivity easier between the surrounding employment centres and key urban areas, a Pop Up spaces project and the introduction of Street Tag - a fun, free smartphone app that offers rewards for exercise. Through our Active Communities Team, we offered out-reach to promote activity across the district, for example organising health walks, when Covid-19 restrictions have allowed.

Following government advice that leisure centres can start to reopen South Oxfordshire and their leisure contractor GLL, which runs the Better leisure centres across the districts, have agreed on a phased approach to re-opening. The councils' have already resumed some of their outdoor sessions, such as Nordic Walking, and these are also following strict Covid-19 rules. In line with the government restrictions the council will also take a phased approach to re-opening their outdoor pool, at Riverside in Wallingford. Last year both pools remained shut as a result of the lockdown restrictions. The current plan is to open the pools for the summer season. This is subject to continued progress towards the government's roadmap out of lockdown.

Though by carrying out a Lockdown Lifestyle survey with our Active Communities team, in which nearly 1,800 respondents told us how the first lockdown affected their physical and mental health we know the way residents want to keep active has changed and we will be working to incorporate this feedback.

Work is also underway with local partners to transfer civil parking enforcement responsibility from Thames Valley Police to the district.

We have also opened all of our community centres on Great Western Park. The Northern, District and Southern centres, two of which are brand new buildings, and are now available for residents and groups to hire with priority bookings given to groups helping to support Covid-19 responses.

Last year, the district councils took over the District and Southern centres from Taylor Wimpey and, during lockdown, have modified them to ensure they comply with health and safety regulations, and work has been carried out on all three centres to introduce all the necessary Covid-19 safety measures.

We have also made changes to the way the council spends Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds which will mean that money secured from housing developments in the district will be released for projects that make a significant difference to communities and help fulfil the strategies outlined in the corporate plan 2020-24.

As part of our commitments to help the districts become carbon neutral, we have struck up a new partnership to help local businesses reduce their carbon footprint. We're aiming for an ambitious net-zero target in South Oxfordshire, and our businesses have an important role to play in achieving this goal. As strategic partners, the council will be working with Oxfordshire Greentech to help connect

businesses with specialist suppliers, customers and support organisations, and access funding streams and networking opportunities to help them minimise their emissions and impact on the environment. The councils' South and Vale Business Support team will be partnering with the countywide network organisation to host events to show businesses how they can recycle more and reduce waste, how to incorporate sustainable procurement in their processes and to build in sustainability training.

We have a long history of supporting communities to help themselves through grant funding for projects.

### Theme 5: Homes and infrastructure that meet local needs

Because of the high demand for housing, the attractive and accessible nature of our district, and the high house prices, our key challenge on housing is to facilitate the delivery of new housing and achieve an appropriate mix of housing to meet local need.

Following the submission of our *Local Plan 2034* in March 2019, the new administration (May 2019) sought to review it. However, the Secretary of State imposed a Direction on the council in March 2020 to progress the *Local Plan 2034* through the examination process to adoption by December 2020.

During the year, 1300 new homes have been built in the district, compared to 1,326 in 2019/20; completion of affordable homes is down in 2020/1 to 217 compared to 517 in 2019/20

Going forward, South Oxfordshire have agreed to develop a future joint Local Plan for the area to reduce costs and help the councils' meet their ambitious targets for making the two districts carbon neutral.

Local Plans are used to help determine planning applications and set out how and where new housing developments should take place, along with identifying the infrastructure needed to support them. They also set out policies on what kind of housing is appropriate and acceptable; what the local requirements for affordable housing are; and can even set requirements on the energy-efficiency levels of new developments.

Both councils have committed to do everything they can to address the climate and ecological emergency, and officers advised that the consensus on these issues makes this a rare opportunity to create a joint Local Plan.

The advantages include the planning issues in the two districts are quite similar, like the need for carbon reduction, affordable housing and new and improved infrastructure, and so a joint plan would be able to address these issues in a co-ordinated way.

There will also be cost savings by producing one plan for both districts because there would be one set of evidence studies, one local plan examination and one Planning Inspector not two.

After the first two years we have seen good progress towards the targets in all parts of the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal, though the COVID-19 pandemic is

having a significant impact on growth and development which prompted a review of all areas of activity. It is still anticipated that the Oxford to Cambridge Arc will be a major government focus for economic recovery.

In March 2021, South Oxfordshire building control service were awarded the quality mark ISO 9001 for their provision of public sector building control and public protection services.

Building control is a service that checks that structures and buildings are constructed or modified to meet Building Regulations standards to make sure that the minimum standards to protect people's safety, health and welfare in and around buildings can be achieved.

An important part of their work is to help improve energy efficiency, protect and enhance the environment and promote sustainable development.

This quality mark is a fantastic achievement for our building control team and demonstrates our commitment to providing a quality service for residents. Ensuring the safety of all building work, whether on our homes, public buildings or commercial properties is a vital role for the communities we serve.

Our Planning Service are also reviewing our adopted design guide (2016). This will help further improve the quality of new development and to mitigate climate change. The Climate Emergency Advisory Committee are involved in this project and have provided some recommendations to officers.

We have done this by proactively engaging with customers at the earliest point and through positive partnerships with other agencies. These include Citizens Advice Bureau and Connection Floating Support, who provide debt and welfare advice to enable customers to remain in their own homes. We also use Enhanced Housing Options – an online assessment tool to help customers address their housing issues. Customers who do not have access to a computer are able to telephone a member of the housing team who will guide them through the process.

As of 31 March 2021 we had 4 households in emergency temporary accommodation; the rolling six-month average of households in emergency temporary accommodation was 5.7. The rolling six-month average length of stay for households in emergency temporary accommodation was 50 days compared to a central government ceiling target of 42 days.

We have also made good progress on developing our council homes delivery vehicle and have undertaken an appraisal of options that sets out the specific levers and characteristics that may be available to us.

### **Theme 6: Investment and innovation that rebuilds our financial viability**

At the time of developing the Corporate Plan 2020-24 the pandemic has cost, and lost, the council money. Many years of austerity before that, as well as a failure to increase council tax in line with growing costs, makes it hard to balance the books.

Over a number of years, the council has made significant savings through joint working, especially with our close partner the Vale of White Horse District Council, with whom we have saved costs on staffing, contracts and office accommodation.

This type of innovative joint working, along with sound financial management, has helped to keep costs down and meant that we are able to keep the cost of council tax to our residents low.

In recent years the level of council tax has been kept low, from £123 for a band 'D' property in 2011/12 to £131.24 2021/22. This is the eighth lowest of all shire district councils.

We measure a number of key income streams, to ensure that we are both maximising income and understanding early where external factors might impact on budgets. During 2020/21:

- Planning income totalled £2.13million against a budget of £1.96 million, this compared to income of £1.54 million in 2019/20.
- Land charges income totalled £315k compared to £281k in the previous year.
- Car parking income totalled £545k compared to £965k in the previous year.
- The New Homes Bonus paid to the council for 2021/22 will be £2.55million, compared to an average of £1.11 million, putting us eighteenth out of all 181 shire district councils.

Our Council Tax collection rate of 98.28 per cent put us joint 57th with two other councils when ranked against all 188 shire district councils existing at end March 2020 (the latest national data available).

The development of our innovative Transformation Strategy will diversify our revenue streams, improve effectiveness and secure our on-going viability. We are exploring scope for improved IT systems including for finance, accounting and payment solutions. These will improve efficiencies, leverage digital opportunities and meet requirements for modern government and planning processes. Our ResolvIS project will provide further automation of the revenues & benefits service and greater self-service for customers and improve operational efficiency and user experience. We are also exploring new revenue streams including for renewable energy and other land projects, such as exploring revenue generation opportunities from a Wind Solar Farm.

The councils new corporate focus on securing external funding will be implemented through the further development of our External Funding Framework. This framework builds on our track record of partnership working to successfully secure external funding such as the £218 million of Housing Infrastructure Funding (HIF) which is being used to improve local transport links.

Our Strategic Property Review, development of an enhanced property and asset records and databases, along with our One Public Estate project will embed strong stewardship of all council assets including property and financial investments. The Strategic Property Review has taken longer than anticipated as our surveyors have been reviewing all of our assets thoroughly and also looking for any opportunities for environmental upgrades.

We are also developing a new Procurement Strategy which will provide additional opportunities for savings and efficiencies. This will be reviewed by Cabinet in the Summer.

This report presents an interim summary of actions towards the priorities in the Corporate Plan 2020-24.