

Climate and Ecological Emergency Advisory Committee briefing paper

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Date: 06/01/23

Domestic retrofit – options for South Oxfordshire/Vale of White Horse

Purpose of paper

1. South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils are committed to accelerating the number of homes being retrofitted in the districts. This paper reviews the existing work in this area and explores a range of future options that may be available to the councils to accelerate this work. The options listed in this report aim to cover the full spectrum available solutions, and some will not be suitable for our districts.
2. The options include a series of 'quick wins' which the councils could take forward immediately as well as a list of longer-term options for the councils to consider which would require more significant investment.
3. CEAC/CEEAC are asked to discuss the options detailed below and provide a steer to the cabinet member and officers on which options should be prioritised for further detailed investigation.

Background

4. Retrofitting involves making changes to existing homes to improve energy efficiency, remove fossil fuel heat sources and replace with low carbon alternatives, and generate renewable energy onsite. Retrofitting is a critical part of achieving net zero and a major programme for retrofitting existing homes is required to reach net zero in our districts as:
 - 28.9% of carbon emissions in South Oxfordshire come from residential buildings
 - 24.8% of carbon emissions in Vale of White Horse comes from residential buildings.
5. Our Climate Action Plans set out how as councils we will reduce our carbon emissions to be carbon neutral councils, but a major programme of retrofit for

existing homes is required to reach our net zero targets. The Oxfordshire Energy Strategy (2019) recommended that 4000 deep retrofits need to take place each year in Oxfordshire to halve emissions by 2030. There are other benefits to retrofitting homes which include improving the wellbeing of residents who live in homes that are warmer and drier in the winter, and financial savings from greater energy efficiency. Nationally, poorly insulated homes leak £6.3bn of energy every year. Homes with an EPC D rating or lower will have an average of £488 of heat per year escaping out of poorly insulated doors, windows, roofs and walls¹.

6. The councils are committed to delivering on our net zero goals:
 - a. Our Corporate Plans -
 - South Oxfordshire - Achieve our own zero carbon target by 2025 and support others to achieve the district target of zero carbon by 2030.
 - South Oxfordshire – Support and encouragement for the retrofit of our existing housing stock for low-carbon performance and to eliminate fuel poverty (in homes and infrastructure that meets local needs theme).
 - The Vale of White Horse has committed to being a carbon neutral district by 2045, with a 75 per cent reduction in carbon emissions by 2030
 - The Vale of White Horse – To work with local partners and Government to encourage retrofitting houses with sustainable energy schemes; help residents take advantage of schemes that come along to help with costs (in tackling the climate emergency theme).
 - b. Our Climate Action Plans -
 - Action OP5: With our partners, support the development of a coordinated retrofit programme for Oxfordshire through our role in the Environment Advisory Group of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership.
 - Action OP6: Support Registered Social Landlords in applying for retrofit funding, such as Social Housing Decarbonisation Funding.
 - c. Our role within the Future Oxfordshire Partnership -
 - The draft Oxfordshire Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan sets out priority actions to reach net zero to be delivered through collaboration across the county. This has been overseen by the Environment Advisory Group and will be considered by the Future Oxfordshire Partnership in March 2023. Several of the proposed actions focus on retrofit, including:
 - Action 1 – expand and scale-up retrofit delivery
 - Action 2 – scale up programmes to address the retrofit skills gap
 - Action 3 – develop a collective purchasing approach that supports the widespread deployment of rooftop solar on existing buildings

¹ <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lack-action-leaky-homes-will-cost-taxpayers-billions-new-lga-analysis>

Existing Retrofit Activity

7. There is work already going on across Oxfordshire and at the councils which is contributing towards meeting our retrofit goals. However, this is nowhere near the scale that is required to ensure that we meet our net zero goals which will require a radical shift. The current slow rate of progress is making the future challenge even harder to achieve.

Table 1 below outlines work on retrofit that is already under way in Oxfordshire.

TABLE 1 - EXISTING ACTIVITY IN OXFORDSHIRE				
Action	Description	Cost	Delivered by	Timescales
Grant funding through Sustainable Warmth Fund	Oxfordshire County Council was awarded grant funding from the government's Sustainable Warmth Fund to provide a range of energy efficiency improvements to low income/poor performing homes in Oxfordshire. There are different schemes with varying funding levels available, depending on how the home is heated (connected or not connected to the mains gas grid).	n/a	Oxfordshire County Council	Ongoing until March 2023
Countywide retrofit collaboration	Oxfordshire County Council are currently in the process of developing a collaborative approach to deliver retrofit work across the county, working with the district and city councils and the Low Carbon Hub. This is in the early stages and is likely to be a developing area of work.	n/a	Oxfordshire County Council, with input from stakeholders	Ongoing
Cosy Homes Oxfordshire	Cosy Homes Oxfordshire, established by Low Carbon Hub and RetrofitWorks, it is a paid for scheme that offers a one-stop-shop on home retrofitting. In this scheme a Retrofit Coordinator first assesses a home and identifies appropriate energy efficiency measures, creates a tailored whole house improvement plans and then supports the contractors and installers throughout the improvements	n/a	Low Carbon Hub	Ongoing

	works by ensuring technical requirements and standards are met.			
Better Housing Better Health	Better Housing Better Health is a National Energy Foundation scheme which provides home energy checks and grants for energy efficiency improvements for homes in fuel poverty or with poor energy efficiency levels, or where someone's health is being impacted by living in a cold or damp house in Oxfordshire.	n/a	National Energy Foundation	Ongoing

Table 2 below identifies work on retrofit that is already underway at the councils.

TABLE 2 - EXISTING ACTIVITY AT SOUTH OXFORDSHIRE AND VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCILS				
Action	Description	Cost	Delivered by	Status
Addition of resources and information to the councils' websites	<p>A new webpage is being created which will provide information on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potential domestic retrofit solutions that households may wish to consider. • existing financial support available to households who are looking to install retrofit measures and guidance on how to access this, including the government's boiler upgrade scheme. • Links to other sections of the council website for existing retrofit schemes and registered retrofit installers in Oxfordshire, including Better Housing Better Health and Cosy Homes Oxfordshire. 	Staff time	Climate Comms Officer, supported by Climate and Biodiversity Team	Webpage now live.
Development of policies in the emerging Joint Local	The Planning Policy Team are actively developing draft policies for the emerging Joint Local Plan 2041 and are exploring options which will encourage the retrofitting of	Staff time	Planning Policy Officer, Policy and	In progress

Plan 2041 which will encourage retrofitting of buildings	<p>homes. This includes consideration of policies for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sensitive retrofitting of listed/historic buildings. The team are exploring the option to include a stand-alone policy similar to the 'Heritage Assets and Adapting to Climate Change' policy adopted in the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan (2018). • The circular economy. This topic was picked up in the Issues Consultation which ran in 2022. The emerging Joint Local Plan offers an opportunity to introduce planning policies that promote the circular economy to encourage more retrofitting rather than demolition and rebuild. 		Programmes	
Loan of thermal imaging cameras to community groups	<p>The councils own two thermal imaging cameras which are offered for loan to community groups to use on public buildings and houses in their communities. These are used to provide an initial assessment of where retrofitting activities might be best focused for each building.</p>	Staff time	Climate and Biodiversity Team or Private Sector Housing Team	In progress

Options for Consideration by CEAC/CEEAC

Table 3 - Future options for delivery – this section outlines actions that the councils could consider in driving forward the retrofitting of homes in the districts. For completeness, this list aims to outline all possible options to deliver our retrofit agenda, and these have been grouped into five themes based on the type of intervention proposed. We recognise that not all of these actions will be appropriate for delivery by the councils, and some would require substantial new investment or substantial changes to the way we work. Please note, the ‘delivered by’ column is just an initial assessment of who may be involved (service teams have not yet been consulted at this early stage).

TABLE 3 – FUTURE OPTIONS TO UPSCALE RETROFIT OF HOMES				
THEME 1 – SHARE INFORMATION ON RETROFIT				
Action	Description	Cost	Delivered by	Timescales
A - Deliver a social media campaign	<p>Deliver an ongoing social media campaign, encouraging residents to consider retrofitting their homes. This could include promoting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the council’s retrofit webpages, and other useful external resources; the work of community groups and other organisations across the district; collective bulk-buying schemes that exist across the districts, for example Solar Streets. support available in Oxfordshire for households looking to retrofit their homes. advice on certification schemes for products, architects and contractors (e.g. TrustMark offers an overview of local skilled certified tradespeople). The Housing Delivery Strategy commits to developing a database of local installers based on national accreditation for retrofit. 	Staff time	Climate Comms Officer	Quick win, ongoing

B - Improve information on Oxfordshire Climate Action website	The Oxfordshire Climate Action website is a resource for residents, community groups and businesses in Oxfordshire that is owned and hosted by Oxfordshire County Council. There is already information on the site, but it can be improved and more added and officers are being actively encouraged to work with OCC to add further information and develop the content.	Staff time	Climate Comms Officer	Quick win, ongoing
C - Highlight case studies of homes that have been retrofitted	Produce a series of case studies of houses in the districts that have undergone retrofit measures to feature on the councils websites. If feasible, support the organisation of, or promote existing, 'open-house' events so that residents can see how measures work in practice (similar to this 'visit a heat pump' initiative). Green Open Homes is a national network that organise events where people who have made energy saving improvements open up their homes to share their experiences; they held an event in Oxford earlier in 2022.	Staff time for production of case studies. Potential events would cost ~£2000 to organise.	Climate and Biodiversity Team	Medium term
D - Provide information to households via printed material	Leaflets with information about how people can retrofit their homes could be included in household council tax letters. Leaflets could also be available in council offices and leisure centres, and on noticeboards in community centres. Banners could also be produced and displayed. This would help to provide information to hard-to-reach groups who don't use social media or the internet.	Staff time and printing costs.	Climate and Biodiversity Team and Climate Comms Officer	Medium term
E - Provide guidance on whether different retrofit measures would require planning permission	Most retrofit measures do not require planning permission, but this can depend on the type of property. Currently the councils' websites link to the national planning portal's list of common home improvements but it is not easy to find the right information. New, clear guidance written specifically for the councils (similar to this document from Bath & North East Somerset Council) would make this information simpler for residents to find. It could also cover houses in a historic environment.	Staff time	Planning Specialist Team/Conservation Team/Planning Policy	Sort Term (could be delivered by Q2 2023/24)

F - Brief members and colleagues on available home improvement grants	Members frequently interact with residents and could help signpost households to information about retrofit and the home improvement grants that are available. Officers could produce a short briefing for members which outlines the support that is currently available. This information could also be used by front-line teams who visit homes across the district (for example, Environmental Health and Planning).	Staff time	Climate and Biodiversity Team	Quick win
G - Encourage members and officers to retrofit their own homes	Provide information to staff members about retrofit measures that they can implement in their own homes, and the support that is available in Oxfordshire. This could include inviting an external speaker to talk at a 'lunch and learn' webinar.	Possible small speaker fee for webinar.	Climate and Biodiversity Team	Quick win
H - Develop monitoring and reporting methods for tracking progress on retrofit.	In order to track our progress on our net zero targets, the councils would need to monitor the progress being made in the districts, by recording the number of retrofit projects completed per year. There is currently no systematic recording of the numbers of homes being retrofitted and there is no obvious way of obtaining the data. This work stream would involve working with our partners to find ways to effectively monitor uptake of retrofit. It should be noted that there may not be a simple solution to this issue that is within the councils' powers to implement.	Staff time. Budget may be needed for expert advice.	Climate and Biodiversity Team and external partners (EAG members etc)	Medium term

THEME 2 – SUPPORT ACTION BEING TAKEN BY OTHERS ACROSS THE DISTRICTS

Action	Description	Cost	Delivered by	Status
A - Support community groups	Support community groups who are working to deliver energy-related advice and retrofit initiatives in their neighbourhoods, including, if possible, providing training or grants to increase their capacity. This could be achieved by:	Staff time, plus budget for event if required	Climate and Biodiversity Team, supported	Quick win

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging community groups to apply for existing grant schemes (the councillor grants in South Oxfordshire and Climate Action Fund in the Vale). • Advertising our thermal imaging camera loaning process (see above). • Organising training or another alternative event for community groups on retrofit solutions and the opportunities available. 		by Climate Communications Officer	
B - Engagement with housing associations	<p>The main engagement that the Affordable Housing Team currently have with Registered Providers relates to new build properties. Further support could be provided on the retrofitting of existing housing stock to help residents to lower energy consumption.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research what action housing associations are taking (the Housing Delivery Strategy commits to contacting Registered Providers to request retrofit plans to understand their plans to decarbonise social housing stock) • Scope out what ability the councils have to influence housing associations and support associations to retrofit existing properties 	Staff time	Housing Delivery Team	Medium term
THEME 3 – ADDRESS RETROFIT SKILLS AND SUPPLY ISSUES				
Action	Description	Cost	Delivered by	Timescales
A - Establish a retrofit skills and supply partnership to support the growth of local skills and	Delivering a large retrofit programme will require a highly skilled, dedicated workforce. The current supply chain does not have the capacity to deliver domestic retrofit on the scale required. Even at the current levels of activity there are long waiting times for products and a lack of accredited, specialist project managers and installers to meet the demand, which is limiting the ability to accelerate the retrofitting of homes.	n/a	Future Oxfordshire Partnership	Long term

<p>supply chain</p>	<p>The establishment of a retrofit skills and supply partnership is likely to be an agreed action in the final Oxfordshire Net Zero Action Plan and Route Map (currently draft).</p> <p>The partnership would include local authorities, construction firms, suppliers, housing associations, research institutions, community groups and OxLEP. The initial role would be to review the retrofit skills and capacity that are currently available within Oxfordshire, identifying the barriers to expansion.</p> <p>It would then support the expansion or creation of a retrofit training programme in Oxfordshire, both to encourage additional people to become accredited retrofit providers, and to encourage existing contractors to understand the challenge and upskill to be able to install the latest retrofit measures to a high standard. At this time, it is unclear whether the councils will have a direct role in this work, but it will be important for us to actively participate in the partnership.</p>			
<p>B - Support the establishment/expansion of a one-stop-shop retrofit service</p>	<p>A one-stop-shop retrofit service offers trusted advice to customers and provides recommendations for accredited suppliers and help with grants and other incentives. It could deliver a 'whole house' plan to assess homes and provide homeowners with a bespoke plan – giving them information about how their home's energy performance can be upgraded, what needs to be done and how to sequence measures.</p> <p>Cosy Homes Oxfordshire is already providing a one-stop-shop service for Oxfordshire, focused at the 'able to pay' market. This service is currently very limited in scale and capacity and is oversubscribed with a long waiting list.</p> <p>One option would be to collaborate with Cosy Homes Oxfordshire to</p>	<p>Significant funding and resources for an officer or team to manage the programme. Does have long-term potential to generate income.</p>	<p>TBC</p>	<p>Long term</p>

	<p>facilitate the retrofit of a larger number of houses across the districts. This relies on Cosy Homes Oxfordshire being interested in partnering with the councils, and on their willingness and ability to scale up their programmes to retrofit a larger number of homes.</p> <p>Alternatively, the councils could consider establishing a one-stop-shop retrofit service for the districts, either employed directly by the councils' or through working with another external provider. If done directly through the councils it may have the potential to generate income.</p>			
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THEME 4 – USE OUR STATUTORY POWERS AND INTRODUCE POLICIES TO INCENTIVISE RETROFIT

Action	Description	Cost	Delivered by	Timescales
<p>A - Use enforcement powers to improve energy efficiency standards in private rented homes</p>	<p>Local authorities are responsible for enforcing the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards* for England and Wales and can impose financial penalties on landlords that fail to comply. The councils could undertake an engagement and enforcement campaign with landlords in targeted areas with the worst EPC ratings, and more generally to encourage landlords to go above the minimum legal standards. Liverpool City Council, with £70K support funding from BEIS, has set up a new landlord licensing scheme which will be used to drive up standards and deal with poor property conditions (more details here).</p> <p>The councils have previously considered recruiting a post to be responsible for enforcing MEES. In December 2019 it was proposed that a new Investigation Officer be created to identify and enforce against private landlords that are non-compliant with MEES. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic this was never implemented but could be re-visited if resources can be identified.</p> <p><i>*It is possible that the Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards for England and Wales will be</i></p>	TBC	Private Sector Housing Team	Medium term

	<i>changed so that all new tenancies would need an EPC rating of C or above by 2025 (this is being considered as part of the Minimum Energy Performance of Buildings Bill currently making its way through parliament).</i>			
THEME 5 – FUNDING INCENTIVES FOR RETROFITTING				
Action	Description	Cost	Delivered by	Timescales
A - Explore the potential of establishing a green loan system for installing energy efficiency measures	<p>It may be feasible to establish a loan system which would allow householders to borrow money at a low rate of interest to make their homes more energy efficient. Mendip District Council have partnered with Lendology CIC* so homeowners and landlords can apply for a loan to pay for property improvements including renewable energy installations. Wakefield Council have partnered with Leeds City Credit Union to offer Energy Savers Loans, an interest free loan that eligible home-owners can use to help pay for insulation, heating and microgeneration work.</p> <p><i>*Lendology CIC are a Social Enterprise lender working in partnership with councils to provide homeowners with access to low cost, responsible finance.</i></p>	TBC	Finance Team and Private Sector Housing Team	Long term
B - Incentivise households to improve EPC rating of home	The councils could offer owner-occupied homes with higher EPC ratings a reduction in their rate of council tax. This would encourage residents to make improvements to their homes which would result in a higher EPC rating. Desk-based research has not identified any other local authorities in England that have implemented a scheme like this although it has been raised as an idea – however, it is not likely to be the most cost-efficient way of helping the most vulnerable households as it would essentially penalise the fuel-poor.	Loss of income from council tax	TBC	Long term
C - Incentivise staff to retrofit homes	It may be possible to introduce a salary sacrifice scheme for staff to make home improvements. The Centre for Research into Energy Demand Solutions (CREDS) have developed a Retrofit Salary	TBC	TBC	Long term

	Sacrifice scheme which allows employees to invest in a whole house assessment and retrofit planning to improve their home-work environment which is repaid via gross salary contributions.			
D - Lobby central government	The councils, in partnership with other local authorities across Oxfordshire, need to lobby central government to roll-out a long-term, large-scale scheme of financial support for households to retrofit their homes. It would be most effective to take a coordinated approach and push hard on the agreed messages. It is likely that this action will be carried out through the Future Oxfordshire Partnership.	Staff time, working with Future Oxfordshire Partnership	Future Oxfordshire Partnership	Medium term, ongoing

Financial Implications

8. The climate and biodiversity team currently has 1.6 FTE permanent staff and 1 FT staff member on 2-year fixed term contract. In addition, 1.8 FTE staff are funded on a 1-year fixed term contract by South Oxfordshire District Council specifically to accelerate delivery of the climate agenda. The current staffing structure is at full capacity in delivering the councils' commitments.
9. Actions identified as quick wins can be delivered within the current staff resources however, any further commitments would need to be matched by an appropriate level of longer-term staff resourcing.
10. This paper presents a number of options that will have differing financial impacts. Some options can be achieved within existing resources, but many would require a significant investment by the councils that is currently not within budget proposals that will go forward in February 2023 or the Medium-Term Financial Plans.
11. More detailed financial implications will be considered once a refined list of options has been identified.

Questions for CEAC/CEEAC

12. CEAC/CEEAC is asked to consider the options presented in Table 3 above and to provide a steer to the cabinet member and officers on the options they believe be prioritised for more detailed appraisals.
13. To help in this process, the options from Table 3 have been summarised into three categories below; 1) options that have been identified as 'quick wins'; 2) options that would require additional resources, and 3) options that are likely to be delivered as part of a wider partnership involving the councils.
14. **Quick Wins** - these are activities that officers could start work on in the short term. CEAC/CEEAC are asked to discuss the options presented and provide a steer on amendments or additions that cabinet member and officers can take away for further consideration.
 - 1A - Deliver a social media campaign
 - 1B - Improve information on Oxfordshire Climate Action website
 - 1E - Provide guidance on whether different retrofit measures would require planning permission
 - 1F - Brief members and officers on available home improvement grants
 - 1G - Encourage members and colleagues to retrofit their own homes
 - 2A - Support community groups
15. There are additional actions which we believe are deliverable by the councils but will require **additional resources** as there is no current resource to take these forward. CEEAC is asked to discuss which options could be prioritised for

further work or, if there are any amendments or additions that cabinet members and officers could consider?

- 1C - Highlight case studies of homes that have been retrofitted
 - 1D - Provide information to households via printed materials
 - 1H - Scope out monitoring and reporting methods
 - 2B - Engagement with housing associations
 - 4A - Use enforcement powers to improve energy efficiency standards in private rented homes
 - 5A - Explore the potential of establishing a green loan system for installing energy efficiency measures
 - 5B – Incentivise households to improve EPC rating of home
 - 5C - Incentivise staff to retrofit homes
16. Options that would need to be delivered as part of a **wider partnership** with the other authorities and external stakeholders, most likely as part of our role in the delivery of the Oxfordshire Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan (currently in draft form, to be considered by the Future Oxfordshire Partnership in March 2023). Do members of CEAC/CEEAC have any further suggestions?
- 3A – Establish a retrofit skills and supply partnership to support the growth of local skills and supply chain
 - 3B – Support the establishment/expansion of a one-stop-shop retrofit service
 - 5D – Lobby central government

Next steps

17. Officers will take forward the actions identified as '**quick-wins**' and give consideration to any comments made by CEAC/CEEAC.
18. Actions where **additional resources** are required will be taken away for further investigation by cabinet members and officers and more detailed work done to identify the costs and benefits of each. The results of this work will come back to future meetings for discussion.
19. Officers will continue to work with external organisations to develop the actions that are to be delivered by a **wider partnership**. Regular updates on this work will be provided at future meetings.